

# MP-IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# Israel-Hamas War 2023: Beyond IDF's Military Operations Lie Israel's Intractable Challenges

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## **S***ummary*

Israel set itself five goals in the aftermath of the 7 October Hamas terrorist strikes. These included re-establishing domestic political solidarity, re-establishing control over territories overrun by Hamas fighters, preventing war escalation, preserving and expanding international support for securing freedom of action in the war and launching a military offensive to destroy Hamas.

Hamas is a movement dedicated to destruction of Israel. On 7 October 2023, Hamas fighters breached Israeli border defence, attacked military installations, massacred innocent civilians, and seized hostages. The failure of the Israeli intelligence to detect planning and preparations by Hamas that would have gone to launch an operation of this magnitude, is unprecedented in Israeli history. Over 1,200 Israelis, civilians and soldiers including some foreigners were killed and over 200 taken hostage.<sup>1</sup> Drawing parallels with the other epic intelligence failure in Israel's history, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, in which 2,656 were killed and 9,000 wounded, the Egyptian and Syrian armies never penetrated the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) defences on the border<sup>2</sup> and neither were Israeli citizens hunted, murdered and brutalised. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that Israel “will crush and destroy Hamas”.<sup>3</sup>

The IDF ordered immediate mobilisation and launched operations. The preparatory stage for the ground operations lasted from 8 to 27 October, wherein Hamas fighters inside Israeli territory were neutralised and airstrikes and ground operations were launched to destroy and soften<sup>4</sup> the military targets in Gaza. The IDF ‘ground expansion’ operations began on 27 October and the IDF isolated northern Gaza including Gaza City and captured the Gaza Harbour.<sup>5</sup> The operations are presently underway to rescue hostages, search and destroy underground Hamas command and control centres and neutralise Hamas commanders and fighters. In the coming days, the IDF is likely to expand its area of operations to include southern Gaza.

Israel occupied the Gaza Strip following the victory in Six Day War in 1967. Ever since it is engaged in a struggle with the Palestinians which led to First Intifada from 1987 to 1993. Hamas emerged in the aftermath of the First Intifada and subsequent decline of Fatah and PLO. The 1993 Oslo Accords ended the First Intifada—creating the Palestinian Authority (PA) as the governing body of the

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<sup>1</sup> [\*\*“Israel's Dead: The Names of Those Killed in Hamas Attacks, Massacres and the Israel-Hamas War”\*\*](#), *Haaretz*, 19 October 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, [\*\*“Israel's 9/11? How Hamas Terrorist Attacks Will Change the Middle East”\*\*](#), *War on the Rocks*, 10 October 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Satloff, Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, [\*\*“Israel's War Aims and the Principles of a Post-Hamas Administration in Gaza”\*\*](#), The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 17 October 2023.

<sup>4</sup> In the first six days of preparatory phase of war, the IAF had dropped 6,000 bombs on targets in Gaza. For comparison, during the air campaign against ISIS in 2014–19, the US-led coalition dropped 2,000–5,000 munitions per month across all of Iraq and Syria. US monthly bomb drops only exceeded 4,000 during the 2017 destruction of Raqqa. Wesley Morgan, [\*\*“6,000 bombs into Gaza in 6 days...”\*\*](#), X (formerly Twitter), 12 October 2023. -

<sup>5</sup> Steve Hendrix, Louisa Loveluck, Fenit Nirappil and Adam Taylor, [\*\*“Israel Expands Ground Operations in Gaza War Amid U.S. Calls for Restraint”\*\*](#), *The Washington Post*, 27 October 2023.

Palestinian people. However, non-implementation of the provisions of Oslo Accord led to Second Intifada in 2000.<sup>6</sup>

Israel withdrew from Gaza Strip and Northern Samaria in August 2005 and by 22 September 2005, Israel's withdrawal from the entire Gaza Strip to the 1967 Green Line, and the eviction of the four settlements in Samaria, was completed. In the internecine war between Palestinians, Hamas took over the Gaza Strip from the PA in 2007.<sup>7</sup> Thereafter, the hostilities between Hamas and Israel led to the First Gaza War and to Operation Cast Lead in December 2008, a short war that ended with Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in late January 2009.

In November 2012, following Hamas's rocket and mortar attacks, Israel launched Operation Pillar of Defence, resulting in targeted killing of Hamas military chief Ahmed Jabari. This was followed by a period of relative calm which was disturbed in 2014 with the launch of Operation Protective Edge on 8 July 2014 by the IDF. During the operation, Israel attempted to destroy Hamas's tunnel network with limited success. Another round of violence took place in 2021 following tensions in East Jerusalem and clashes between Palestinians and Israeli police. It involved airstrikes from Israel and rocket attacks from Hamas, resulting in casualties and significant damage on both sides.

Before the 7 October attack, Israel's strategy of 'mowing the grass' was directed to keep the Hamas violence within manageable limits.<sup>8</sup> IDF retaliated all of Hamas's rocket and mortar attacks and ground incursions with an aim to degrade Hamas's military capacity and restore a sense of deterrence to the Israel–Gaza border region. In pursuance of this objective in all its operations, the IDF attempted destruction of Hamas's rocket factories, tunnel network and leadership through aerial means. The ground operations were always limited with the longest Israeli ground campaign, during Operation Protective Edge, lasting about three weeks.<sup>9</sup>

This Brief will attempt to prognosticate the outcome of ongoing war by analysing Israel's politico-military objectives with special attention to military destruction of Hamas. The Brief will also analyse two intractable challenges for Israel—ideological underpinnings of Hamas and complexities involved in controlling its sources of funds.

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<sup>6</sup> Raphael S. Cohen, David E. Johnson, David E. Thaler, Brenna Allen, Elizabeth M. Bartels, James Cahill and Shira Efron, [“Lessons from Israel's Wars in Gaza”](#), *RAND Corporation*, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> [“Israel's Disengagement from Gaza and North Samaria \(2005\)”](#), Israeli Missions Around the World.

<sup>8</sup> Raphael S. Cohen et al., [“Lessons from Israel's Wars in Gaza”](#), no. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel R. DePetris, [“Israel's Gaza Problem”](#), *RUSI*, 1 November 2023.

## The Five Goals

On 9 October, when the IDF was still involved in mopping up operations to neutralise Hamas fighters within Israel, Netanyahu delivered a televised address and announced five goals.<sup>10</sup> They include the following:

- To re-establish political solidarity within the country.
- To re-establish control over territories overrun by Hamas fighters.
- To prevent war from escalating on other fronts.
- To preserve and expand international support for Israel securing freedom of action in the war.
- To launch offensive to destroy Hamas.

In addition, Israel is working to secure the release of over 200 hostages taken by Hamas. The following sections primarily examine issues relating to the status of the military operations against Hamas in the light of the goals set by the Israeli prime minister.

### ***Domestic Political Solidarity***

Since the beginning of 2023, Israel was rocked by protests against Netanyahu’s proposed judicial reforms which the opposition felt will severely undermine the country’s democracy by weakening the judicial system. The protestors were supported by Netanyahu’s political rivals, former senior military, and security services officials, former chief justices, and legal figures and business leaders. The protests had severe security implications for Israel since hundreds of military reservists, including air force pilots, had threatened to refuse to report for service.<sup>11</sup>

Following the 7 October attack, the principal political parties set their differences aside and Netanyahu and National Camp leader Benny Gantz announced the formation of an emergency government and a war cabinet to manage the ongoing war. Netanyahu, his defence minister, Yoav Galant, Benny Gantz and leader of opposition Yair Lapid are members of the ‘War Cabinet’. The cabinet also has a member of the National Camp, the former Chief of Staff of the Israeli Army, Gadi Eisenkot, and the Minister of Strategic Affairs, Ron Dermer, as observers.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> [“Netanyahu Outlines Five Goals of Counterattack on Hamas”](#), *FDD*, 9 October 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Raffi Berg, [“Israel Judicial Reform Explained: What is the Crisis About?”](#), *BBC News*, 11 September 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Petra, [“Netanyahu and Gantz Announce the Formation of an Emergency government and a War Cabinet in Israel”](#), *TeNews*, 11 October 2022.

Despite efforts to present a united front during this national emergency, Netanyahu’s political standing among the Israeli citizens is low<sup>13</sup> and there have been calls to unseat him.<sup>14</sup> It is possible that Netanyahu may remain prime minister during war but his political future is uncertain.

### ***Re-establish Control***

On 10 October, 72 hours after Hamas fighters breached Israeli defences and committed horrific crimes, the IDF announced that it had re-established control over its border with the Gaza Strip. Over 1,500 Hamas fighters were neutralised in southern Israel. The IDF strengthened the defences at the border by reinforcing with troops and surveillance equipment and mining areas around breaches to prevent further incursions.<sup>15</sup> In relative terms, re-establishing control over the breaches on the border and neutralisation of Hamas fighters, was easier compared to more complex and difficult ground operation which was to follow.

### ***Escalation Management***

It is in Israel’s interest that the war is restricted to Gaza strip and the situation on the borders with Lebanon and West Bank do not divert the attention and resources from primary objective of destroying Hamas in Gaza. Following the 7 October attack, the IDF summoned approximately 3,60,000 reservists to join the fight against Hamas, the largest mobilisation since the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when 4,00,000 reservists were mobilised.<sup>16</sup> Many of the reservists have been deployed on the border with Lebanon to thwart any attack by Hezbollah.<sup>17</sup> In addition to troop deployment, Israel launched pre-emptive airstrikes in Syria, Lebanon and launched ground operations in West Bank to deter Iran and its proxies from escalating the war beyond Gaza.<sup>18</sup>

The US diplomacy and military deployment in the region have also played a significant role to deter ‘Axis of Resistance’ from joining the war. By 10 October, US carrier strike group, led by the USS Gerald R. Ford, was deployed off the coast of

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<sup>13</sup> Less than 4 per cent of Jewish Israelis report that they trust Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as the most reliable source of information on the war against Hamas, a new survey shows. Haaretz.com, [“Less than 4 percent of Jewish Israelis...”](#), X (formerly Twitter), 15 November 2023.

<sup>14</sup> [“Benny Gantz Opposes Move to Unseat Netanyahu During War – Report”](#), *The Jerusalem Post*, 13 November 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Emanuel Fabian, TOI Staff and Agencies, [“IDF Says Gaza Border Finally Sealed, Bodies of 1,500 Terrorists Found Inside Israel”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 10 October 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Hassan and Adam Taylor, [“Israel’s Massive Mobilization of 360,000 Reservists Upends Lives”](#), *The Washington Post*, 10 October 2023.

<sup>17</sup> [“Israel’s New Plan to Encircle Hamas”](#), *The Economist*, 28 October 2023.

<sup>18</sup> [“Syria Says Israeli Missiles hit Damascus, Aleppo Airports”](#), *Reuters*, 12 October 2023.

Israel. By the third week of October, the Pentagon deployed a second carrier strike group led by USS Dwight D. Eisenhower. US Air Force has deployed F-15E fighter jets and A-10 ground-attack jets to the region.<sup>19</sup>

Additional forces including Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery, Patriot battalions and the 26<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit, a rapid reaction force capable of conducting special operations composed of 2,000 Marines and sailors have been deployed in the region.<sup>20</sup> On 5 November, an Ohio-class submarine was also reported in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility.<sup>21</sup> The Biden administration has made it clear that US forces in the region are to deter war from escalating and not for participating in combat activities on behalf of Israel.

By 23 November, IDF’s counteroffensive had killed almost 13,000 people, including more than 5,300 children, while 1.7 million have been displaced.<sup>22</sup> A large part of northern Gaza has become uninhabitable, the medical services have collapsed and regular supply of daily needs has been disrupted. Yet, despite the human catastrophe and outrage around the world, the prospect of multifront war seems to have subsided and deterrence is prevailing for the moment.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Destroy Hamas’s Military and Governing Capabilities***

The Israeli government’s stated objective, “is to achieve the destruction of the military and governing capabilities of Hamas and Islamic Jihad (IJ) in a way that will preclude their ability and willingness to threaten and attack the citizens of Israel for many years.”<sup>24</sup> In order to achieve the objective, the Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant on 20 October, in a meeting of the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, announced a three-phase plan for Gaza offensive. It included, first, airstrikes and other measures intended to kill Hamas leadership

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<sup>19</sup> Oren Liebermann, Natasha Bertrand and Brad Lendon, [“US Sending Second Carrier Strike Group, Fighter Jets to Region as Israel Prepares to Expand Gaza Operations”](#), *CNN*, 15 October 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Aileen Graef, [“Defense Secretary Austin Says US is ‘Concerned about Potential Escalation’ in Middle East”](#), *CNN*, 22 October 2023.

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Central Command, [“On November 5, 2023, an Ohio-class submarine...”](#), X (formerly Twitter), 6 November 2023.

<sup>22</sup> James Shotter in Jerusalem and John Paul Rathbone, [“Military Briefing: Has Israel Achieved its War Aims in Gaza?”](#), *Financial Times*, 23 November 2023.

<sup>23</sup> In his 3 November televised address, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah stopped short of announcing that Hezbollah would fully enter the war. Nasrallah's speech had been widely anticipated throughout the region as an indication of whether the Israel–Hamas conflict would spiral into a regional war. He confirmed that Hezbollah's strategy was to divert Israeli resources from Gaza. [“Lebanon's Militant Hezbollah Leader Taunts Israel in First Speech Since War Started”](#), Associated Press 3 November 2023.

<sup>24</sup> [“Security Cabinet Convenes and Makes Series of Operational Decisions”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Israel, 8 October 2023.



and destroy the infrastructure; followed by “lower intensity” operations “with the objective of eliminating ‘pockets of resistance’”; and, finally, Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza Strip, and the establishment of a new security system for the citizens of Israel.<sup>25</sup>

The objective necessitates the following:

- Capture or kill Hamas’s political and military leadership and as many fighters as possible.
- Destroy Hamas command and control capability.
- Destroy logistics and ‘Gaza Metro’.

#### *Neutralisation of Hamas’s Political and Military Leadership*

Ever since 7 October, the IDF in conjunction with Mossad, and Shin Bet has been targeting Hamas leadership. To do so, the Israeli agencies are attempting to gather precise intelligence to identify locations of these leaders and conduct targeted military operations to neutralise them. The intelligence agencies are employing all available resources—HUMINT, ELINT and other covert means to gather actionable intelligence. Targeted airstrikes and Special Forces ground operations have been launched to capture and eliminate designated leaders.

On 21 November, Hamas informed Lebanese media that the deputy commander of the Lebanese branch of its al-Qassam Brigades, Khalil al-Kharaz, was killed in an Israeli airstrike in southern Lebanon. Israel has also announced elimination of many Hamas leaders in its operations in Gaza. Speaking to reporters on 22 November, Netanyahu informed that the Mossad has been instructed to act against Hamas leaders wherever they are. It is assessed that Israel could target them outside of Gaza also, including in Qatar.<sup>26</sup>

Targeting of leadership may significantly weaken Hamas, disrupt its operations, and undermine its ability to coordinate and strategise. However, targeting leadership is not sufficient condition for complete destruction of an organisation like Hamas. Terrorist organisations are normally resilient and adapt to loss of leadership. Often, new leadership emerges with time and the operations are resumed as before. Ideological underpinnings persist beyond the elimination of specific leaders which continue to attract members and organisations survive.

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<sup>25</sup> Shira Rubin, William Booth and Ilan Ben Zion, “[Early Stages of Israeli Ground Assault in Gaza Shrouded in Secrecy](#)”, *The Washington Post*, 29 October 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Tovah Lazaroff, “[Netanyahu: I Instructed the Mossad to Act Against Hamas](#)”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 23 November 2023.

### *Destruction of Command and Control Capability*

Destruction of Hamas’s command and control capability involves disrupting its ability to communicate, coordinate operations, and make decisions. Israel will have to undertake kinetic operations and employ technological means to achieve this objective. The IDF may use electronic warfare techniques to jam or disrupt Hamas's communication systems, employ cyber capabilities to infiltrate and disable Hamas's digital infrastructure and conduct targeted kinetic operations on facilities associated with Hamas's command and control, such as communication centres and headquarters.

The challenges associated with destruction of command and control capability of Hamas was abundantly demonstrated in IDF’s operations in al Shifa Hospital. IDF intelligence claimed Shifa Hospital was the centre of Hamas’s intelligence and operational activities where 200 members were present after 7 October attack on Israel.<sup>27</sup> The US, using multiple sources of information independently confirmed that al Shifa was used by Hamas as a command node.<sup>28</sup>

By 15 November, the IDF did not arrest any Hamas member and five were neutralised just outside the hospital, but none inside—not even a single gunfight.<sup>29</sup> Later, in a video released by Israel, IDF spokesperson Jonathan Conricus pointed to security cameras that he said had been covered over, and AK47 rifles hidden behind MRI scanners as evidence of al Shifa being Hamas’s operational command centre.<sup>30</sup> Subsequently, IDF reportedly breached a blast door at the end of a reinforced tunnel underneath Shifa Hospital<sup>31</sup> which led to a bathroom, kitchen and an air conditioned room that it said had served as a command post for Hamas fighters.<sup>32</sup> For all its work, the IDF has presented a weak evidence and has resultantly suffered bad press coverage internationally.

It may quite be possible that Hamas indeed had an operational command and control centre in al Shifa Hospital. However, it could have moved communication devices

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<sup>27</sup> Yonah Jeremy Bob, [\*\*“Shifa Hospital Anticlimax – 200 Hamas Forces Evaporate Into Thin Air? - Analysis”\*\*](#), *The Jerusalem Post*, 15 November 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Ashka Jhaveri, Andie Parry, Annika Ganzeveld, Peter Mills, Kathryn Tyson, Brian Carter and Nicholas Carl, [\*\*“Iran Update, November 16, 2023”\*\*](#), *Iran Update*, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 16 November 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Yonah Jeremy Bob, [\*\*“Shifa Hospital Anticlimax – 200 Hamas Forces Evaporate Into Thin Air? - Analysis”\*\*](#), no. 27.

<sup>30</sup> Sam Hancock, [\*\*“Al-Shifa: What We Know About Israel's Raid on Gaza's Main Hospital”\*\*](#), *BBC News*, 15 November 2023.

<sup>31</sup> Emanuel Fabian, [\*\*“IDF Breaches Blast Door in Hamas Tunnel under Shifa Hospital in Gaza City”\*\*](#), *The Times of Israel*, 21 November 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Ronen Zvulun, [\*\*“Israeli Army Displays Tunnel Beneath Al Shifa It Says Served as Hamas Hideout”\*\*](#), *Reuters*, 23 November 2023.



and other assets before the IDF could physically intercept them. These are operational challenges the IDF will have to be mindful of.

#### *Destruction of Logistics and ‘Gaza Metro’*

Disrupting Hamas's logistics involves targeting the systems and infrastructure that support the group's supply chains and resource management. Hamas has limited capability of assembling and almost nil capacity to produce sophisticated military hardware and warlike stores in Gaza. A large percentage of weapons and equipment are sourced from Iran, Syria and Hezbollah and are smuggled into Gaza using sea route and tunnels connecting to Egypt.<sup>33</sup> Both routes are extremely difficult to intercept.

Hamas is reported to have begun digging tunnels in the mid-1990s, when Israel granted Yasser Arafat's PLO some degree of self-rule in Gaza. Tunnelling became easier in 2005 when Israel withdrew from Gaza, and later when Hamas won power in a 2006 election. Except in the narrow belt along the coast where the soil is sandy and unsuitable for digging, the rest of Gaza's earth is clay-rich, easy to dig and can do without complex supports.<sup>34</sup> By 2021, Hamas had created an extensive network of tunnels allowing Yahya Sinwar to claim that Hamas has 500 km of tunnels in Gaza.<sup>35</sup> The Hamas allegedly uses ‘Gaza Metro’ for warfighting, storing and transporting much of its weapons and personnel. ‘Gaza Metro’ is the hub of Hamas's operations and supply chain management and has been assessed as its centre of gravity.<sup>36</sup>

In the ongoing war, the IDF has reportedly destroyed many tunnels and shafts. However, as the war progresses and IDF launches operations in south Gaza, it is expected that it will begin facing Hamas resistance. The Metro is extremely difficult to detect and map accurately either from earth or space. They are narrow and deep inside the earth where fighting is difficult to conduct. Moreover, Hamas is expected to booby trap and mine them to cause casualties to IDF. The IDF is reportedly using seawater<sup>37</sup>, ‘exploding gel’<sup>38</sup> and other classified technology to clear the tunnels.

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<sup>33</sup> [“The Hamas Tunnel City Beneath Gaza - A Hidden Frontline for Israel”](#), *The Jerusalem Post*, 27 October 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Zoran Kusovac, [“How Would Israel Fare in Gaza's Tunnels?”](#), *Aljazeera*, 8 November 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Tzvi Joffe, [“Hamas's Sinwar: We have 500 km of tunnels in Gaza, only 5% were damaged”](#), *The Jerusalem Post*, 27 May 2021.

<sup>36</sup> [“What's the Endgame of an Israeli Ground Assault in Gaza?”](#), *NPR*, 17 October 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Mario Nawfal, [“Just In: IDF Deploys Seawater to Clear Gaza Tunnels Ahead of Ceasefire...”](#), X (formerly Twitter), 23 November 2023.

<sup>38</sup> [“With Mapping Robots and Blast Gel, Israel Wages War on Hamas Tunnels”](#), *The Jerusalem Post*, 16 November 2023.

Notwithstanding the above, it is extremely difficult operation and fraught with risk to human lives.

## Israel’s Intractable Challenges

Beyond the military destruction of Hamas, Israel faces two intractable challenges—control of the source of funds and elimination of Hamas’s ideological underpinnings.

Hamas’s estimated annual income is more than US\$ 1 billion furnished through money laundering, dabbling in crypto currencies, mining business, etc. Approximately US\$ 360 million each year is received as import taxes on goods brought into Gaza from the West Bank or Egypt and US\$ 750 million per year comes from friendly governments, viz. Iran and others.<sup>39</sup> Destroying Hamas for good requires dismantling its financial base and since much of it lies outside Gaza, it is extremely difficult.

Israel’s challenge in Gaza gets multiplied further because Hamas is deeply embedded in the fabric of the enclave since 2007 and today it represents an ideology as much as a political and military entity.<sup>40</sup> Total destruction of a terrorist group is difficult even though it is not impossible. A 2008 RAND Corporation study suggests 43 per cent of the terrorist groups ended their activities when they transited to political process while only 7 per cent of terrorist groups were terminated using military means.<sup>41</sup>

As discussed elsewhere in this brief, Israel is determined to destroy Hamas by neutralising its political and military leadership. Terrorist groups are known to survive the loss of their leaders and members. It is quite likely that even if Israel destroys Hamas’s military wing, the idea of Hamas may survive.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> [“Inside Hamas’s Sprawling Financial Empire”](#), *The Economist*, 20 November 2023.

<sup>40</sup> James Shotter in Jerusalem and John Paul Rathbone, [“Military Briefing: Has Israel Achieved its War Aims in Gaza?”](#), no. 22.

<sup>41</sup> Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libick, [“How Terrorist Groups End Lessons for Countering al Qa’ida”](#), Monograph, *RAND Corporation*, 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel R. DePetris, [“Israel’s Gaza Problem”](#), no. 9.

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