6-2025

How Gaza Sees the 2023-2025 War and the Future of the Israel-Palestine Conflict

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Abstract

In political science and international relations, as in foreign policy and military circles, a debate is ongoing between "realists" and "moralists" regarding the importance of material factors (territory, economy, security, etc.) versus value-laden factors (justice, ideals, identity, etc.) in motivating, sustaining, and ending wars. An early 2025 representative survey of Gaza's population considers both sets of factors in how Gazans perceive the present and future states of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Comparisons with our previous studies in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe aim to extend this survey's relevance beyond the current Israel-Palestine theater. The survey suggests that after waging many months of 'total war,' Israel may be further from pacifying Gaza than ever before. The war has hardened Gazans' maximalist political goals for elimination of Israel, while offering virtually no backing for a binational democratic state "from the river to the sea" as advocated by Western pro-Palestinian activists. Although Hamas's popular support has declined significantly, political alternatives draw even less support, allowing Hamas to maintain outsize influence over Gaza. Perhaps most important for the long term, Gazans retain strong core values related to national and religious identity and attachment to the land, values they indicate their intention to uphold even at great personal sacrifice. However, the survey also reveals what movement toward peace might involve, such as humanizing an enemy as a predictor of willingness to sacrifice for peace in wartime. A final overview of historical developments within and between Hamas and Israel's Likud highlights their roles as peace spoilers.

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A Wartime Survey: What Gazans Want

Following the collapse of Israel's January 2025 ceasefire and hostages-for-prisoners deal with Hamas, and after many months of pulverizing and pitiless war, the issue of what should happen to Gaza and its 2.1 million people seems to have become ever more intractable. Given that the region is suffused with fragile and failing states, and with competing powers seeking to play this anarchic situation for their profit, stabilization by outside forces appears remote. Donald Trump has floated chimerical ideas about an eventual US "takeover" of Gaza emptied of Palestinians, but the world community is set against it, except for Israel's far-right government.

Oddly missing from this debate have been Gazans themselves: what they want for their future, how they see their land, who they think should be their rulers, and what they consider to be the most plausible pathways to peace. Given the horrendous price paid for Hamas's actions on October 7, 2023, Gazans might be expected to reject the group for different leadership and to be more likely to compromise on larger political aspirations in favor of more urgent material needs.

In fact, a survey we conducted in Gaza in early January, shortly before the ceasefire came into effect, tells a more complicated story. The representative survey was formulated by the research group Artis International and Oxford University's Changing Character of War Centre and carried out by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR).[1] Using census data and sampling people in shelters based on the locations of their original homes, the survey comprised 500 face-to-face interviews with Gazans—248 women and 252 men—ranging in age from 18 to 83. Respondents were assured anonymity and interviewed outside others' earshot.

Interviewers were trained to recognize insincere responses, then courteously keep short the few interviews where insincerity was suspected and later discard them. The margin of error was plus or minus 4 percentage points. All correlations, interactions, and associations reported below are statistically significant, with no major gender differences.

This was not a general survey aimed at attitudes or opinions. Rather, the survey was designed to examine the interplay between the psycho-social components of 'will to fight.'[2] With support from the US Department of Defense Minerva Initiative and the European Research Council, the survey's integrative structure and interactive measures were developed through fieldwork and in prior surveys, and under experimental conditions manipulated to observe effects of particular variables. These studies were conducted in many countries and contexts (in North and Central America, Western and Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and Southeast Asia). Basic research design and measures were validated previously through a standard science peer-review process.[3] These studies reveal a powerful common message: Thoughtful, well-informed people make fateful decisions based on moral grounds that entail great personal and community risks. They look for leaders who appear to embody those concerns. These profound commitments can empower them to prevail against opponents with far greater resources or suffer grievous losses in sacred struggles.

The survey found that although Hamas's appeal declined precipitously since the war's early months, political alternatives drew even less support, which has opened the way for Hamas to regain its influence over Gaza. The war has also hardened rather than softened Gazans' maximalist political goals, while eroding support for a negotiated solution and offering virtually no backing for the dissolution of Israel into a binational democratic state of Arabs and Jews "from the [Jordan] River to the [Mediterranean] Sea" of the sort advocated by Western pro-Palestinian activists. Perhaps most tellingly, the survey showed that the people of Gaza continue to retain strong core

values related to their national and religious identity and their attachment to the land, values that they intend to uphold even at a cost of great personal sacrifice.

Profound commitments to core values can empower people to prevail against opponents with far greater resources or suffer grievous losses in sacred struggles. Gazans are no exception. What our survey reveals about their deep concerns may portend how the conflict will unfold and the options, if any, for peace, in the coming years and decades. The survey findings suggest that no movement toward peace with Israel is likely that fails to address Gazans' core values, at least to some mutually tolerable degree.

In the fields of political science and international relations, as in foreign policy and military circles, there is an ongoing dispute between "realists" and "moralists" regarding the relative importance of material factors (territory, economy, physical security, balance of power, etc.) versus value-laden factors (justice, ideals, principles of right and wrong, identity, etc.) in motivating, sustaining and ending wars.[4] This survey investigates contributions from both sets of factors in how Gazans perceive their present condition and the future end state of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The survey represents only one moment, however critical, in this long-standing dispute and seemingly intractable conflict. Nevertheless, comparisons with our previous studies elsewhere in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe may help to extend this survey's relevance beyond the current Israel-Palestine theater.

What Does "Peace" Look Like?

In one of the primary questions in the survey, respondents were asked to select which of several possible resolutions to the Israel-Palestine conflict they viewed as both acceptable and realistic. Before the war in Gaza began, research showed that a clear majority of Palestinians in Gaza supported a two-state solution whereas just 20 percent supported a military solution that could result in the destruction of the state of Israel.[5] In our January survey, less than half, or 48 percent, still preferred a two-state solution, while nearly as many, 47 percent, preferred the dissolution of Israel. A mere 5 percent viewed a democratic, binational state with equal rights for Arabs and Jews as acceptable and realistic.

Moreover, although partition was deemed acceptable and realistic by 48 percent, just 20 percent supported a two-state solution conforming to United Nations resolutions based on the 1967 borders. The rest of those supporting a partition favored two-state solutions that either required "right of return" of the descendants of Palestinian refugees to homes in Israel (17 percent) or reverting to the 1947 UN partition plan for Palestine (11 percent). Of the 47 percent who favored Israel's dissolution, a majority opted for a single state under sharia law that would tolerate a Jewish presence but allow Jews less than full rights (27 percent), followed by a smaller group that sought the transfer of Jewish immigrants and their descendants—but not Jews whose ancestors lived in the region before Zionism—from Israel proper and the Palestinian territories (20 percent).

To assess how Gazans now see the chances for peace in the future, the survey assessed their expectations about scenarios endorsed in the past by Palestinian leaders, including Hamas officials. Years before the October 7, 2023 attack, Scott Atran, one of the present authors, conducted several interviews with Hamas leaders: in 2006 then-Gaza Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, who later served as politburo chairman until his assassination by Israel last year; then-politburo chairman Khaled Meshaal in Damascus in 2009; and deputy chairman Mousa Abu Marzouk in Cairo in 2013. In each case, the leaders indicated an openness to a long-term truce or even peace with Israel.[6] Our January survey reminded respondents of these statements, noting that those leaders generally conditioned a truce or a longer peace on Israel's return to 1967 borders, an internationally

backed "balance of power" with Israel, and the recognition of the right of return. The survey then asked which of three outcomes—truce (*hudna*), peace (*salaam*), or more war (*harb*)—seemed most likely for the next generation of Palestinians.

Recall that the public, when asked about its preference among outcomes, was almost evenly divided regarding the solution it views as the most realistic, one that Palestinians can accept, partition versus elimination. Here however, the question about the three possible outcomes is about expectation. About half of the respondents said they expected peace, 44 percent expected a long-term truce, and 7 percent expected more war (Fig. 1). Of the roughly half that anticipated peace, however, two groups emerged, almost equal in size: those who expect peace as a negotiated outcome (24 percent) and those who expect peace to arise from Israel's dissolution (25 percent). Respondents who expected a provisional truce or war believe that Israelis and Palestinians will not reach a permanent peace, either because the concessions needed are spurned by the opposing side or are too painful to contemplate by one or both sides.

What do Gazans see as the most likely outcome of the conflict with Israel?
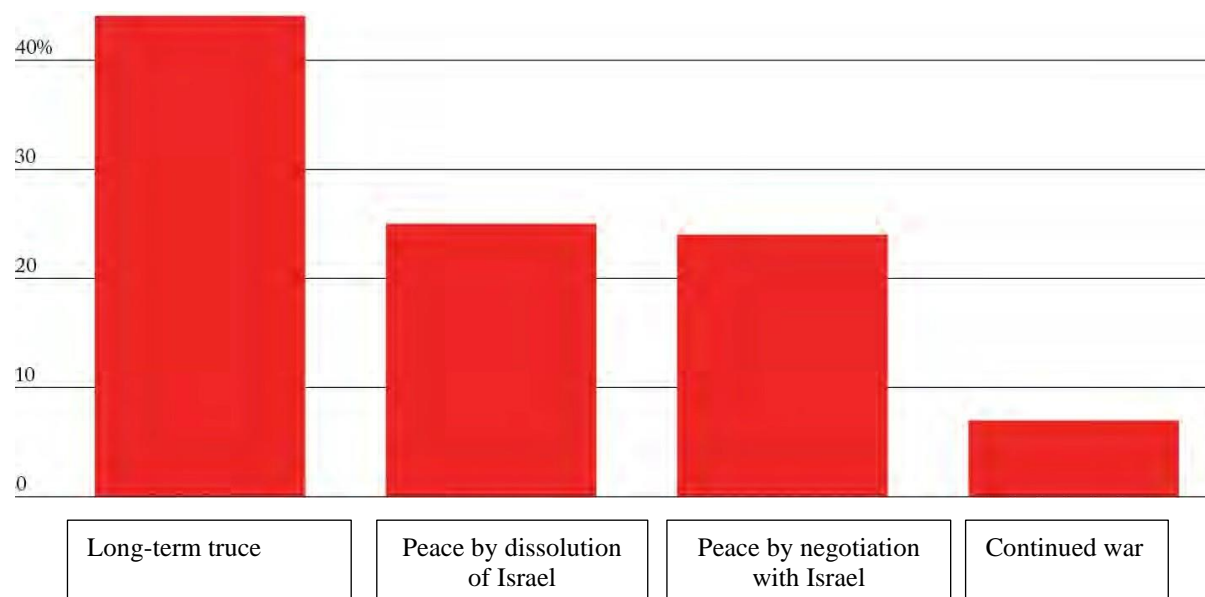

Figure 1. Comparison of Gazans' expectations of permanent peace, interim armistice, and continued war. Data source: January 2025 opinion survey in Gaza by Artis International, the Changing Character of War Centre, and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research.

In brief, only about one-fourth of Gaza's population anticipates a peace *between* a sovereign Palestine and Israel. Compared to those who expect Israel's elimination, two-state partition supporters judge themselves to be less religious; more likely to believe in a diplomatic end to the conflict and to humanize Israelis; less fused with Palestine and less willing to sacrifice for Palestine, right of return, national sovereignty, and sharia; and less considerate of balance of power, right of return, and sharia as "essential to the future of Palestine." This 'peace camp' is decidedly less committed to Palestinian nationalism and its core values than are most Gazans.

A Leadership Crisis

The survey also showed how Gazans' views of Hamas have changed. Before October 7, 2023, when the Gaza Strip was still intact, polls showed popular support for Hamas had been withering for some time. The decline resulted from a variety of factors, including stagnant living conditions and a lack of movement on Hamas's promise of armed resistance against Israel and toward the creation of a Palestinian state. As PSR's director, Khalil Shikaki, has argued, the October attack might be viewed as an attempt by Hamas to break out of a politically intolerable status quo.

During the initial months of war, Gazans' attitudes toward Hamas improved. In March 2024, a PSR poll of Gazans found that support for Hamas's control of the strip had increased to more than 50 percent, a 14-point rise from before the October 7, 2023, attack.[7] At the time, most Gazans believed that Hamas would continue to control the territory and that it was winning the war against Israel. By January 2025, however, after the decimation of the group's top leadership and further destruction of Gaza, that surge of support had eroded again.

Our January 2025 survey found that Hamas retained the support of only a fifth of Gaza's population—a steep decline from the March 2024 poll (Fig. 2). Yet support for other political groups was even lower. In fact, when asked to select from among the current options for Palestinian leadership, Gazans' most frequent response was that none of them truly represented the people. Indeed, Gazans believe that Israel's leadership does a much better job of representing Israelis than Palestinian leadership does representing Palestinians.
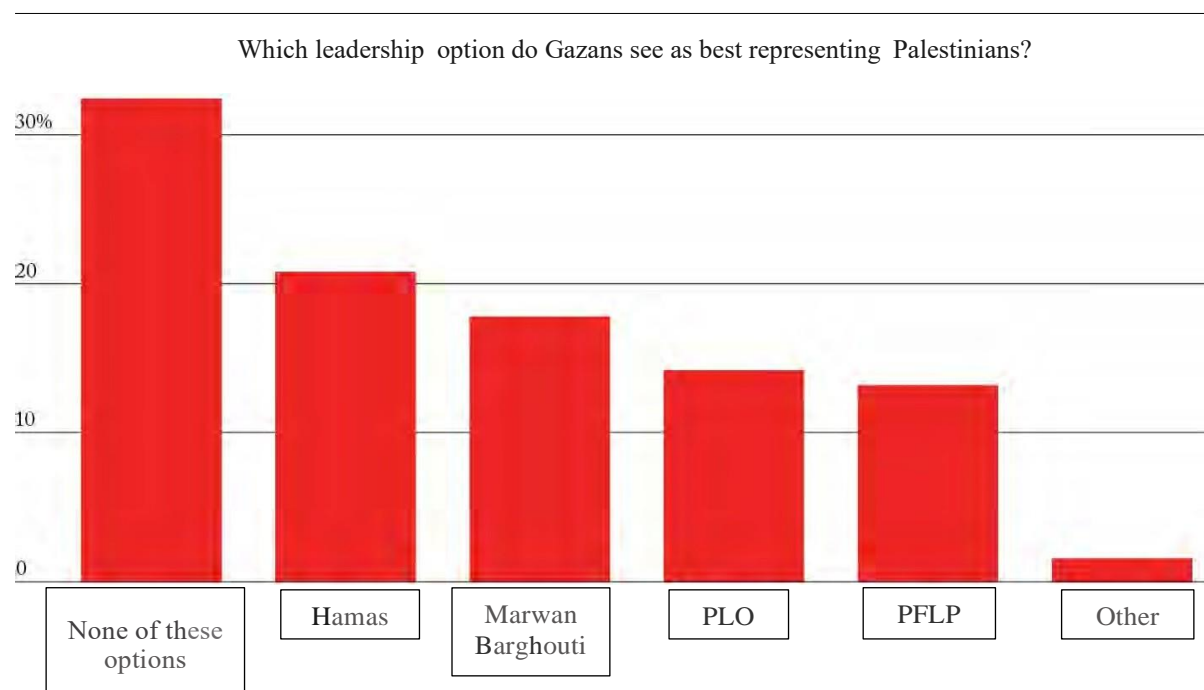

Figure 2. Ratings of forces that best represent Palestinians. None, Hamas, Marwan Barghouti (popular political personality, former PLO legislator, and peace negotiator imprisoned for life in Israel for authorizing terrorist bombings in the Second Intifada in 2000), the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO, main component of the West Bank's Palestinian Authority), Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP, a secular Marxist-Leninist organization), and Other. Data

source: January 2025 opinion survey in Gaza by Artis International, the Changing Character of War Centre, and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research.

In short, the survey reveals a Palestinian leadership vacuum that Hamas, as degraded as it is, is rapidly working to fill. As some analysts have observed, the organization's reassertion of power has been aided by the absence of a viable alternative plan for Palestinian governance from Israel or the United States and by the Trump administration's talk of a proposal long championed by the Israeli far right: population "transfer" (Hebrew: *ha'avarah*). According to Shikaki, most Gazans do not believe that Hamas has won the war. "Nonetheless," he adds, "they do not seem to find a better alternative." [8]

Devoted Actors and the Will to Fight

The lack of strong support for Hamas may obscure a larger reality about the role the group plays in Gaza. As our survey results indicate, despite Gazans' perceptions of a crisis in Palestinian political leadership, a majority of the population continues to be committed to Hamas's political ideals, such as sharia as the law of the land, the right of Palestinian refugees and their descendants to return to the homes they lost in Israel's creation in 1948, and the quest for national sovereignty for Palestinians. For each of these core values, the more that respondents are prepared to make costly sacrifices for them, the less willing they were to make peace with Israel.
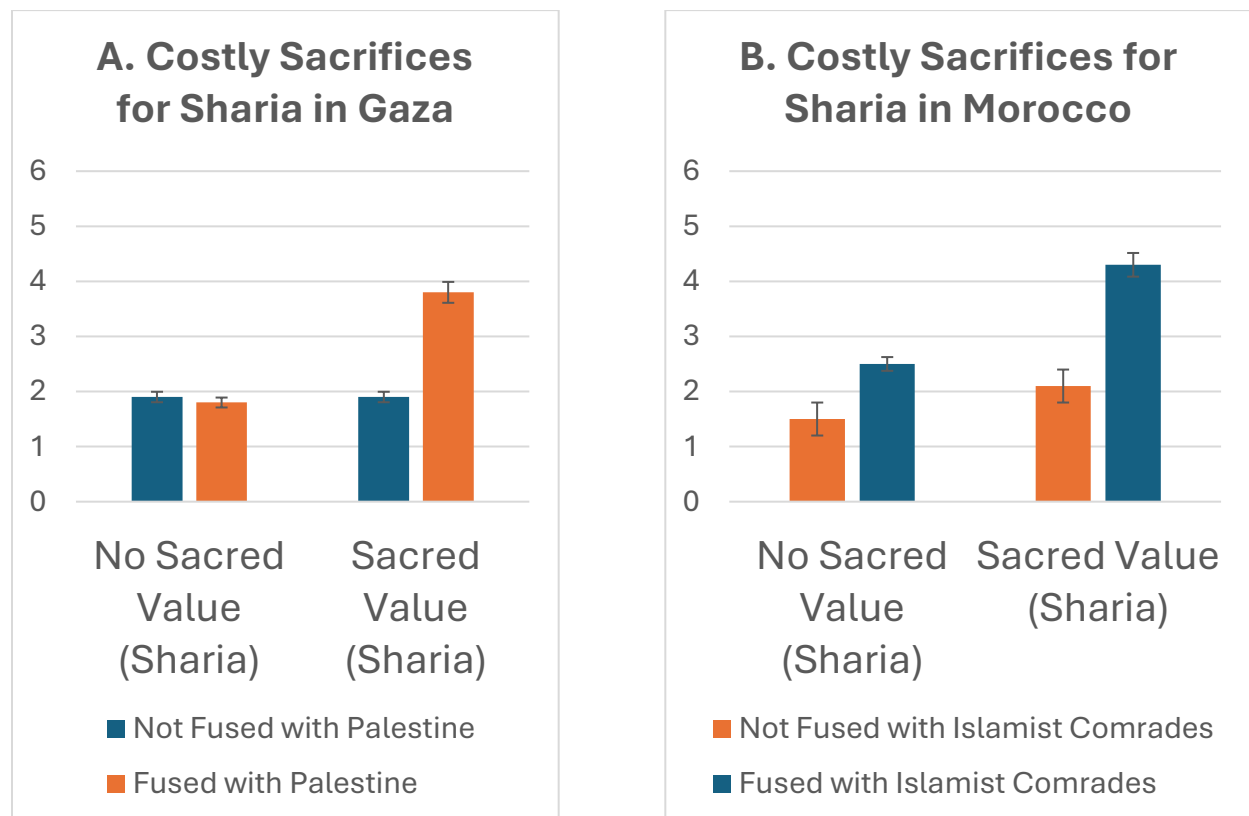
The current situation with Hamas is reminiscent of what our research team found in camps for displaced persons in Iraq soon after the defeat of the Islamic State in Mosul.[9] Most Sunni Arabs interviewed had initially welcomed ISIS as the "revolution" (*thawra*) but judged ISIS rule as more brutal, corrupt, and hypocritical over time. Nevertheless, they remained committed to ISIS ideals of sharia rule in a transnational Islamic Caliphate, thoroughly rejecting democracy, as well as a unified Iraq as the tyranny of a Shia majority imposed on them by the US and Iran. Today, ISIS survives in the shadows because is still able to enlist such people.

We measure such commitment by first asking participants to drag a small circle ("Me") to a position that best affirms their relationship to a large circle representing a value or a group. They are considered "fused" with the value or group when they place themselves in the very center of the large circle. Findings from prior studies, from the battlefields of Libya and Ukraine to the US and Europe's culture wars, suggest that those who show total fusion see the value or group as a visceral and inseparable part of their identity.[10]

Fusion is one reliable predictor of willingness to make sacrifices for a group or greater cause. Another predictor of self-sacrifice is when the group cause becomes a nonnegotiable "sacred value." In real-world conflict and battlefield conditions, we find actual (not merely stated) willingness to fight, die, and sacrifice even family and friends for sacred values, whether religious or secular, like God or nation, holy land or right to arms.[11] Although much more is known about economic decision-making than value-driven behavior, the features of sacred values that we have validated are the following: immunity to material trade-offs, insensitivity to temporal and spatial discounting, blindness to exit strategies however reasonable or rewarding, privileged link to emotions, distinct brain signatures (in neural imaging), and actions dissociated from calculated risks, rewards, costs, or consequences.[12] Core cultural values can be sacralized or desacralized over time through major societal shifts, such as from war to peace (as with prewar vs. postwar Germany and Japan).

When fusion and sacred values operate in tandem they produce 'devoted actors' willing to sacrifice all, including their lives and loved ones: the totality of their self-interests. Between 2015 to 2017, for example, we conducted a series of studies in Iraq of groups—the Islamic State, or ISIS; the militant Kurdish separatists of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); and the Kurdish peshmerga, or military forces of Iraqi Kurdistan—that kept fighting despite high numbers of casualties.[13] We found that members of these fused groups tended to show a high degree of willingness to sacrifice themselves for values they held sacred, a characteristic that gave these groups a spiritual strength that significantly outweighed their physical or material resources, such as firepower, manpower, logistical support, or training time.

In Gaza, this kind of interaction happens when individuals view Palestine as an inseparable part of their core identity (fusion) and regard sharia law as a sacred value. Gazans who show both qualities tend to have a greater willingness to make costly sacrifices for sharia than either fusion or belief in sharia could account for (Fig. 3A). The Gaza survey indicates that one-fifth (20 percent) of the population consists of devoted actors who fuse with Palestine, hold sharia to be sacred, and maximize costly sacrifices for their sacred value. The pattern closely parallels what we found in a 2016 study of jihadi sympathizers in urban neighborhoods in Morocco associated with previous terrorist bombing campaigns against the Moroccan state, attacks in Spain, and recruitment to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (Fig. 3B).[14] (It is also an evident pattern, albeit to a lesser degree, among the minority in Gaza who hold peace as a sacred value, as it was among a kin-like group of Spaniards devoted to democracy as their sacred value, Fig. 3C).
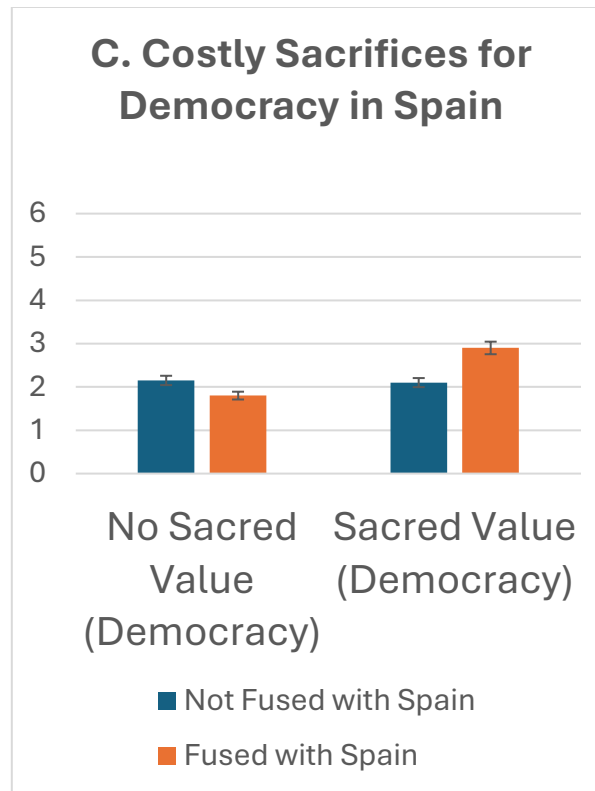

A. Costly Sacrifices for Sharia in Gaza

■ Not Fused with Palestine
■ Fused with Palestine

B. Costly Sacrifices for Sharia in Morocco

■ Not Fused with Islamist Comrades
■ Fused with Islamist Comrades

C. Costly Sacrifices for Democracy in Spain

Figure 3. Costly sacrifices maximized via interaction of sacred values and identity fusion (self-reported on a Likert scale from 0 = not at all to 6 = completely).[15] (**A**) Among a representative sample of Gazans after fifteen months of war, those who considered sharia rule over the land to be a sacred value, and whose identities were fused with Palestine, expressed the most willingness to sacrifice, including fighting and dying. Only Gazans who considered sharia to be a sacred value and whose identities were fused with Palestine were above the midpoint in measures of willingness to make costly sacrifices. (**B**) In jihadi-supporting Moroccan neighborhoods, people who viewed strict imposition of Islamic law, or sharia, as a sacred value and who identified closely with a kin-like group (i.e., were fused with the group) expressed the most willingness to sacrifice for sharia, including fighting and dying. Only those who considered sharia to be a sacred value and were fused with a family-like group of comrades were above the midpoint (i.e., more willing than not to make costly sacrifices). (**C**) Spaniards reported a willingness to make costly sacrifices for democracy as a sacred value, but below midpoint and only under explicit threat priming.

To measure how Gazans view their physical and spiritual strength relative to other national groups, the survey used an approach that has previously been used in surveys of Iraqis, Ukrainians, and US armed forces, among others.[16] Respondents are shown a pair of semi-nude bodies side by side with national flags attached to their heads, which can be increased or decreased in size and musculature using a slider. They are then told to move the slider to assess the relative "physical" and "spiritual" strength of each national group. The measure of formidability was originally based on an evolutionary principle regarding perception of an intruder's body size and muscle power as a signal to fight or flee (or in the case of some primates, to negotiate).[17] But when we presented the measure to ISIS and PKK fighters, they literally threw their tablets down and declared that material strength is irrelevant and that only spiritual strength (in both Arabic and Kurdish, *ruhi bi*

ghiyrat) was important. In our survey, Gazans were asked to compare themselves with Israelis, Americans, and Iranians. The respondents considered Palestinians to be far stronger spiritually than they are physically. This was the opposite of how they perceived Israel, the United States, and even their own putative ally Iran, which they viewed as much stronger physically than spiritually (Fig. 4).
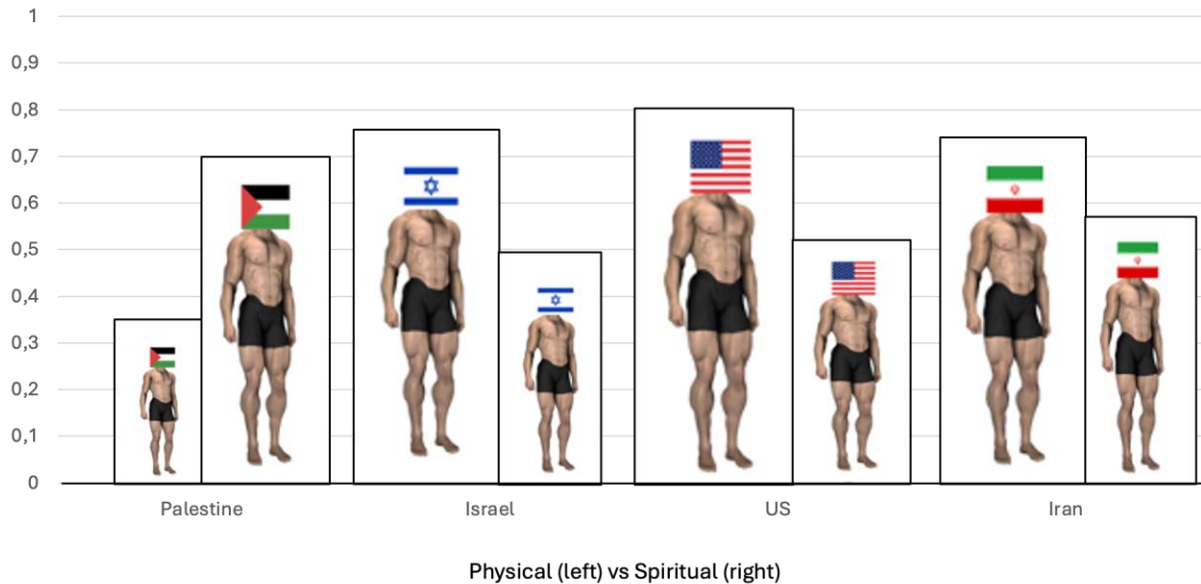

Figure 4. Gazans' mean ratings of relative physical vs. spiritual formidability of four national groups. Zero and one on the vertical axis represent the smallest and largest possible size to which participants could adjust the image. Data source: January 2025 opinion survey in Gaza by Artis International, the Changing Character of War Centre, and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research.

In similar studies conducted elsewhere, groups that perceive themselves as relatively weak physically but strong spiritually tend to be those that are more militant or radicalized and willing to continue fighting, even against a far more powerful foe. They perceive their readiness for self-sacrifice as an advantage over their adversaries. This is a common trait among extremist groups, such as fighters and supporters of ISIS or the Kurdish PKK (but also among others who may be just as devoted and willing to sacrifice themselves for democracy or peace).

Gazans also show a marked tendency to view the conflict with Israel in religious rather than political terms: as a conflict to liberate Muslims from Jewish oppression. But Palestinians' religious belief does not necessarily imply intolerance of other groups. For example, in a 2016 survey of Palestinian Muslim youths, we and colleagues found that many were disposed to place much greater value on the lives of Palestinians than on those of Jewish Israelis. Yet when they were asked to take the viewpoint of Allah (God), they valued the two more equally.[18] Their belief in God appeared to promote a more universal valuation of human life, attributing moral worthiness to Muslims and non-Muslims alike even amid prolonged conflict.

Nevertheless, when religion becomes identified with an assertive sociopolitical agenda ostensibly sanctified by God or a "party of God," opponents to that agenda and party become enemies of God who are easier to vilify and kill. In the January survey, barely 1 percent of Gazans

considered themselves "not religious," whereas 67 percent identified themselves as "somewhat religious" and 31 percent as truly "religious." Those who considered themselves somewhat and truly religious generally considered Israelis significantly less "human" than Palestinians on a visual scale ranging from an ape-like figure through stages of semi-erectness to a fully upright human, with lower ratings indicating moral degeneracy and a violent nature. Studies from China, Europe, India, North America, and elsewhere indicate that the less human the chosen figure, the more respondents associate the adversary with moral degeneracy and violent threats and actions, and the greater their own impetus for violence against that adversary.[19] Respondents identifying themselves as truly religious were the most committed to Palestinian sovereignty and the right of return and the most willing to make major sacrifices, including fighting and dying, for those outcomes. This segment also was the most likely to support sharia and Hamas's leadership.

It is important to note that for most Gazans, religious and political commitments are not all-determining. Although most Gazans consider the core values associated with being Palestinian as central to their identity, only smaller minorities consider these to be 'sacred' and nonnegotiable: just 30 percent of Gazans view the right of return as immune to any trade-off for peace; 20 percent view sharia that way; and 15 percent, national sovereignty. Nonetheless, the great majority (82 percent) judged that even the cause of national sovereignty was significantly more important than family safety and security. This finding parallels our survey results from the most committed combatants for and against ISIS in Iraq in 2015–17, whereas in ongoing survey work in Taiwan, for example, we find much greater concern for family security than sovereignty.[20]

Failure to understand the commitment of devoted actors to exertions dissociated from material costs and consequences also results in failure to comprehend the outsize effect of devoted actors on an entire population's will to fight. As Darwin noted in *The Descent of Man*, there is an evolutionary logic to such commitment that enables low-power groups to survive the predations of the strong—a commitment to what he deemed "highly esteemed, even sacred" spiritual and moral values that "give an immense advantage" to one group over another when possessed by devoted actors who "by their example excite… in a high degree the spirit" in others to sacrifice for cause and comrades, for ill or good.[21]

Why Still War?

Paradoxically, the continued strength of Gazans' commitments to the Palestinian cause may point to forms of compromise that have until now been overlooked. For example, it is no secret that Hamas is committed to a sovereign Palestinian state, the right of return, and sharia law—all of which the elimination of Israel as a state would accomplish. Yet Hamas leaders have in the past suggested to us in public attribution for *The New York Times* that they do not consider a sovereign Palestine "from the river to the sea" and the dissolution of Israel as nonnegotiable, sacred values.[22]

Studies we conducted from 2006 to 2013 indicated that even the right of return, though held to be sacred, can be reframed so as to remain nonnegotiable in principle but negotiable in practice.[23] Such an accommodation might require, for example, meaningful symbolic gestures from the other side, such as a sincere Israeli apology for the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and lands, Israel's acceptance of the return of a limited number of refugees and their descendants, and some form of *diya*, or financial compensation to victims or the heirs of victims of the Nakba, the mass displacement of Palestinians during Israel's founding in 1948, as a form of historic reparations. But our research also shows that material offers—whether proposed by Israelis, the US, or international actors—such as economic incentives or sanctions that aim to

compel Palestinians (or Israelis) to forsake their core values only backfire, increasing resistance to peace deals and support for violence.[24]

Of course, Hamas leaders making such statements may have been engaging in insincere posturing aimed at relieving Israeli military pressure, as Israeli leaders have claimed. Nevertheless, there is evident willingness among Gaza's population as a whole to countenance an outcome that falls short of what they consider to be most acceptable and realistic should certain conditions be met, such as "balance of power" and "right of return." Balance of power, a negotiable material good, would ensure physical security. Right of return, a nonnegotiable but re-interpretable sacred value, would provide a measure of ontological security, that is, of having a place in the world: a respectful recognition of what Palestinians often cite as the conflict's central issue, *al-'Ard hiya al-Ard*, "Land is [family and community] Honor." To voluntarily cede the land, as US President Donald Trump proposes Gazans do, would mean they cease *to be* Palestinian, to exist in their own right. It would only add to generations of displaced Palestinians, unassimilated through a combination of willful choice and unwillingness of host nations to fully accept them, longing to return to the land much as diaspora Jews longed for Zion.

To be sure, public sentiments in the heat of war tend to be very militant. For example, there were marked differences between militancy levels during the second intifada (2000–2005) and the periods before and after.[25] But a failure to recognize the strength of commitment to values that Palestinians believe essential to *being* Palestinian, or even to recognize them at all—as when Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich declared a few months before the Gaza war began that there is "no such thing" as a Palestinian people[26]—likely guarantees further extreme actions on their behalf whatever the costs. In fact, identity fusion with Palestine and belief in the sanctity of right of return, national sovereignty, and sharia are all associated with extreme actions to protect and defend Palestine but negatively correlated with sacrifices people are willing to make for peace between Palestine and Israel. Previous behavioral and brain studies with colleagues further indicate that continuing to threaten or marginalize people because of the group they belong to instigates sacralization of important but hitherto non-sacred values, generating wider willingness to make costly sacrifices for them.[27]

Even if there were an attempt to win over "hearts and minds" with offers of economic or social benefit, these likely would come to naught and may well backfire, as they have in the past, if there is disregard of the values that Palestinians hold dear and are willing to defend. This does not entail that Israel should accede to these values; however, even symbolic gestures of respect toward them that carry no initial promise of payoff, if considered sincere, appear to lessen will to violence and open possibilities for peace.[28]

Absent an Israeli willingness to make some concessions on Palestinian core values and absent the international community's willingness to enforce the terms of such an agreement, the survey suggests that Gazans will fight on—at least if the committed minority of devoted actors are still able to inspire people to take on unfathomable odds to seek to eliminate Israel. And Israelis would assuredly respond with incomparably greater destructive force.

After waging many months of 'total war' and achieving many of its declared (material) objectives, Israel may be further from pacifying Gaza than ever before. This is not just because Israel has offered nothing resembling a political strategy or plan for a Palestinian future, while further radicalizing Palestinians to seek revenge for relatives killed and homes lost. (Our survey shows a positive association between having experienced family displacement and preferring a military over a diplomatic end to the conflict.) It is also because Gazans, at least the most committed among them, believe that their identity and place in the world are more imperiled than

ever: a sentiment not unlike the one that inspired the establishment of the Jewish state and fostered its people's intense will to fight.

Possible Pathways to Peace

What might the psycho-components of a change toward the path to peace look like? Experienced and successful negotiators in other once-seemingly-intractable conflicts, as between Catholic independentists and Protestant loyalists in Northern Ireland, suggest that genuine peacebuilding requires humanization or re-humanization of the adversary.[29] (Of course, developments in the 1990s that encouraged and facilitated humanization, including leadership committed to peace and the cooperative framework of the European Union, helped to improve prospects for peace in Northern Ireland. No such peace-nurturing framework or leadership presently exists in the Israel-Palestine context; however, there are ongoing efforts by several nations to help provide such a framework should an Israeli or Palestinian leadership emerge that sincerely is interested in peace between the two peoples.)

The Gaza survey allowed us to test whether humanizing an enemy in fact predicts willingness to make costly sacrifices for peace in times of war. It also enabled us to examine the role of three psychosocial factors that might help produce and predict the positive association between humanization of the enemy and sacrifices for peace. First, our previous work disentangling the transcultural pathways to the will to fight from populations as diverse as US military cadets, Ukrainian freedom fighters, and jihadis revealed that trust in a group, a leader, or a value is a potential mechanism that fosters costly sacrifices for the target of trust.[30] Second, the research has consistently shown that sacralization of a target is a potent predictor of willingness to fight, die, and make other costly sacrifices for the target. And third, more than a half-century of investigation has consistently demonstrated that sustained, positive contact between individuals in adversarial groups can significantly improve group relations.[31]

Our goal in formulating part of the survey design, then, was to test whether Gazans suffering brutal war are able to humanize their Israeli enemy and whether humanization might encourage willingness to make costly sacrifices for peace between the two parties. Statistical analyses reveal that 10 percent of Gazans humanize Israelis beyond the midpoint of the humanization scale (compared to 70 percent who humanize Palestinians beyond the midpoint). Although many proactive initiatives would be needed to increase the humanization profile of Israelis among Palestinians, perhaps through material and symbolic concessions of the sort described above, once the threshold of humanization is achieved (beyond midpoint on the ape-to-human scale), we find it to be positively associated with costly sacrifices to achieve peace. A mediation model generated from the survey results indicates that humanization of Israelis predicts willingness to make costly sacrifices for peace via specific pathways that could separately or (better) collectively involve: (1) increasing trust in Israelis, (2) desire for positive interaction with Israelis, and (3) sacralization of the value of peace between Israel and Palestine (Fig. 5). (This result was independent of fusion or sacralization of Palestine, right of return, national sovereignty, or sharia.)
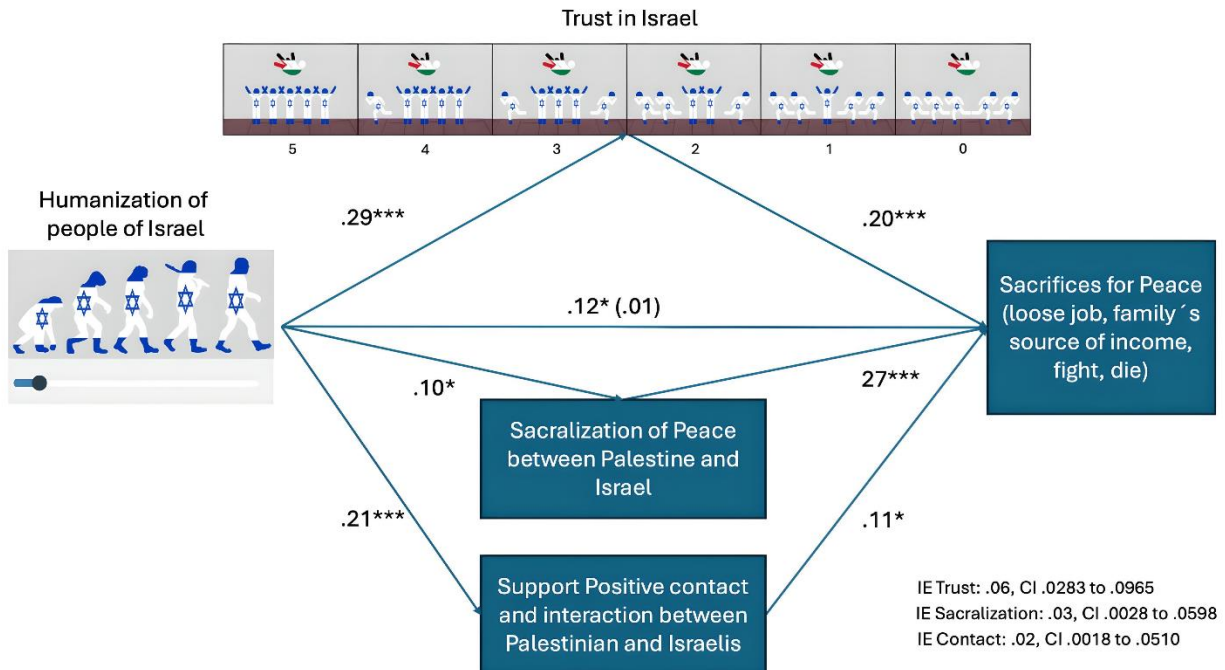
Figure 5. Mediation model showing that Gazans' humanization of Israelis predicts their willingness to make costly sacrifices for peace via increasing trust and desire for positive interaction with Israelis and sacralization of the value of peace between Israel and Palestine. Data source: January 2025 opinion survey in Gaza by Artis International, the Changing Character of War Centre, and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research.

In sum, the survey data suggest that initiatives toward reciprocal humanization through positive contacts, demonstrations of trust, and sanctifying peace as an ultimate value could help foster commitment to peace if accompanied by sincere symbolic concessions that open the way to material negotiation and mutual concession.[32] In the absence of such initiatives, either from a grassroots push or leadership pull, maximalist attempts to destroy one another will likely persist.

Conclusion: the Limits of Realism

According to realist bargaining theories, informational clarity about relative material force and credible commitment to a peace deal should lead to termination of conflict.[33] But when apparently indivisible and nonnegotiable 'sacred values' are in play, we find cross-cultural evidence from long-standing and seemingly intractable conflicts, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, the nuclear standoff with Iran, and the fight with the Islamic State, that no deals are acceptable if they require abandoning such values (often perceived as wholly incompatible with the other side's core values).[34]

As Harvard's Stephen Walt acknowledges with respect to the recent war in Gaza: "framing this conflict in moral terms makes it harder to reach a peace settlement, because anything short of total victory inevitably invites a powerful backlash from critics fearing that these critical values are being sacrificed."[35] Yet rather than offering plausible approaches to deal with conflicting values in mutually tolerable ways, for example by creative conceptual reframing, Walt argues that conflicting sides should simply set aside disputes over "indivisible" moral values in favor of

compromise over divisible goods (territory, resources, balance of power, etc.) based on realism and rationality. As our Gaza survey and other studies show, however, cherished moral values can become inextricably bound to personal and collective identity, to 'who I am, and what we are,' and inseparable from the very meaning of one's life and physical existence. Moreover, directly engaging instead of averting such cherished moral values could well open up, rather than block, realistic negotiations on material issues in this, and possibly other, hitherto intractable conflicts.

Epilogue: the Hamas-Likud Dialectic; a Brief History of Spoilers

Hamas's rhetoric and actions over the years arguably owe as much to the internal dynamics of political competition among Palestinian forces as to the struggle with Israel—a state of affairs made clear some years ago by then-Gaza Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, who asked in an interview with Atran: "Why has the United States and Israel insisted on dealing only with the PLO, when the people support us?" In response, Atran asked why Israel should deal with Hamas when its charter calls for the destruction of the Jewish state, which it justifies with antisemitic tropes like the Czarist forgery, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion.* Haniyeh responded, on the record, that should the United States and Israel begin political negotiations with Hamas, then they will find Hamas ready to deal: "We have no problem with a sovereign Palestinian state over all our lands within the 1967 borders, living in calm. But we need the West as a partner to help us through."[36] (Of all external powers, including Iran and members of the Arab League, Gazans indicate in our survey that the US "is most likely to help put an end to Palestinian suffering.")

Successive American and Israeli governments were well apprised of attempts at outreach from several quarters but shunned any form of political (as opposed to ceasefire and hostage) negotiations with Hamas so long as Hamas publicly insisted on the destruction of Israel. When in Damascus, Atran asked then-politburo chairman Khalid Meshaal why, on the one hand, Hamas signals it wants to deal but, on the other hand, continues to insist on Israel's destruction and the truth of the fake *Protocols* tract, Meshaal responded: "Why should Palestinians always be first to concede. Look at what it got [PLO Chairman Yasser] Arafat at Oslo, nothing. Let Israel make a first move for a change, then they will see that our actions are stronger than words today."[37]

Likud, the dominant party in Israel's ruling coalition today, emerged from a pre-state paramilitary movement whose objective was the establishment of a Jewish state on both banks of the Jordan River (including present day Jordan). The movement's founder, Ze'ev Jabotinsky (1880–1940), recognized that the Arabs of Palestine should have equal rights of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. The right to national self-determination, however, would be for the Jewish population alone because only a Jewish-governed homeland, with ample territory protected by a strong military, could offer world Jewry safety from the often deadly and spiritually debilitating scourge of antisemitism.[38] By contrast, many Arab nations could take in Arabs from Palestine.

Following the 1967 war, the parties of the left that had governed Israel since its inception, under the tenuous assumption that a socialist state led by a Jewish vanguard could sustain a worker's democracy with equal rights for Jews and Arabs alike, embarked on a program of "settlements as security." The program initially established some thirty scattered settlements, most originally army outposts. Likud, however, sought to colonize the Occupied Palestinian Territory from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea in partial fulfillment of its pre-state ambition. The 1977 election of Likud and its leader Menachem Begin as prime minister instituted a program of accelerated settlement in an open effort to prevent establishment of a Palestinian state. A "magic number" of 100,000 settlers was proffered as a point of no return for permanent occupation. This was achieved during the second government of Yitzhak Shamir, Begin's successor (1986–1992).

Likud leadership has always considered the PLO (and the Palestinian Authority it dominates) to be a far more serious candidate than Hamas for international recognition and hence a grave threat to its project of (re)settling the biblical Greater Israel (*Erez Yisrael Hashleimah*). That is why successive Likud-dominated governments, including Benjamin Netanyahu's prior to October 2023, have selectively provided funds to Hamas to undercut the PLO, and then the Palestinian Authority that the PLO came to dominate. For example, in 1987, when Atran was researching the pre-state land system of Palestine as a visiting professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, the assistants who the university helped him find included Muslim Brothers (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*). They were then in the process of forming Hamas, welding together those rump parts of the Jordanian and Egyptian chapters of the Muslim Brotherhood resulting from Israel's conquest of the West Bank and Gaza. But Atran was still surprised when the assistants openly declared their intention to destroy the Israeli state funding them.

Ever since Hamas's creation, its bellicose rhetoric and actions against Israel have been tuned to its competition with the PLO and Palestinian Authority. Excluded from the Oslo Accords, Hamas's suicide bombing campaign following Yitzhak Rabin's assassination in 1995 by an Israeli ultranationalist helped scuttle the accords and sway Israeli voters to narrowly choose the first Netanyahu government, which then endeavored to further undermine the Oslo agreement. In 2005, Likud leader Ariel Sharon engineered Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip to enhance Israeli security and its international status—a move Netanyahu opposed, forcing a vote for Likud leadership that Sharon only narrowly won. When Sharon suffered a massive stroke in 2006, Likud leadership passed to Netanyahu, who became opposition leader in parliament. In a bloody military takeover in 2007, Hamas wrested control of Gaza from the Palestinian Authority, which retained power in the West Bank. Upon return to power in 2009, the Netanyahu government's ploy to "divide and conquer" undercut attempts to reconcile the PLO and Hamas and prevent a unified Palestinian government from forming that might better make the case for statehood.

Hamas was left with three main options: build a successful mini-state in Gaza, reunify with the West Bank, and become the dominant force within the Palestinian Authority and the push for statehood or, failing these two options, re-engage in armed struggle with Israel to force a change in an intolerable status quo (stagnant living conditions in Gaza were eating away at Hamas's popular support). But the Netanyahu government sought to maintain the status quo by offering nominal economic incentives: providing Gazans some 20,000 permits to work in nearby Israeli towns and farms while allowing Qatar and Iran to fund Hamas's limited economic initiatives and administrative operations.

Israel's intelligence services were aware that some funds were earmarked for tunnels that could protect Hamas fighters and house light arms and primitive rockets filled with explosives made from agricultural fertilizer and sugar. But Israel's government and military were confident their tactics were working, and that the military threat from Hamas and its allies was minimal. This wishful assessment allowed Israel to shift military forces and intelligence gathering to the West Bank to support the strategic mission of plodding annexation through settlements. Hamas saw the blind spot as an opportunity to attack and rupture the status quo; however, Hamas was likely unprepared for the magnitude of the attack's initial success and gruesome horrors, much less the Israeli firestorm that would engulf Gaza, dubiously justified as a necessary defense against another Jewish Holocaust.

In Cairo, during the Muslim Brotherhood's short rule in Egypt in 2012, Marzouk (then-deputy politburo chairman of Hamas) said "no" to any trade-off for peace without granting a right of

return. He became angry when the idea of substantial American aid for rebuilding was added: "We do not sell ourselves for any amount." But when offered a potential Israeli apology for 1948, he conceded: "Yes, an apology is important, as a beginning. It's not enough because our houses and land were taken from us and something has to be done about that."[39] A similar response came from Meshaal. "Words matter," he said, "but then there must be concrete actions." When asked what actions he meant, he offered to make a public pronouncement that he was willing to accept a settlement along the 1967 borders that could conceivably turn into true peace (*salaam*), not just a truce (*hudna*), should the Palestinian people so decide by referendum against Hamas's preference and steadfast opposition and preference for war (*harb*) from other members of the Hamas politburo and military wing. But there would have to be a "balance of forces," an international—especially American—commitment to guarantee compliance, and Israel's apology for "taking away our homes."[40] Shortly after start of the January 2025 ceasefire, Marzouk, still a top Hamas politburo leader, again attempted to reach out to the new US administration with an offer of dialogue on "achieving understanding of everything"—an offer more plaintive than practical.[41]

Until leaders and their peoples find the strength within, or outside forces compel them, to confront and reimagine spoiler attachments to a grievance-driven spirituality of opposed absolutes, there may be no realistic pathway to peace.

Notes

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