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Peace in Gaza?

<https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-2026-3008>

Abstract: This paper identifies five normal pre-requisites for ending a war by a formal peace agreement and argues that none of the five conditions is satisfied by both sides in the war between Israel and Hamas. Each side must be a valid interlocutor ('interlocuteur valable') and must recognize the other side as a valid interlocutor. There must be a degree of mutual trust and a willingness to compromise on both sides. Finally, there must be mechanisms for enforcing the agreement. Hamas's conduct on 7 October 2023 placed it beyond the pale of dialogue and negotiation. Governments should be willing to negotiate with some terrorists but not others. Hamas in its current form belongs in the latter category. An alternative to negotiating with Hamas is to crush it with massive military force. Although some terrorist groups have been defeated in this way, Hamas is unlikely to be one of them. A more realistic objective is to continue to degrade it with a view to rendering it politically and militarily impotent. It remains to be seen whether there is any level of military pressure that would induce it to change its approach and compromise for the sake of peace.

Keywords: compromise; horrorism; interlocuteur valable; maximalism; October 7

1 Theoretical Considerations

Can there be a peace agreement to bring a permanent end to the war in Gaza? Who would be the parties to such an agreement and how likely is it to endure? More generally, what are the conditions for concluding a formal peace agreement to end a war? For present purposes, peace agreements are "documents produced after discussion with some or all of the conflict's protagonists, that address militarily violent conflict with a view to ending it" (Bell 2008, 53). My claim is that few, if any, of the normal pre-requisites for ending a war by an agreement between the warring

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parties are present in Gaza and that, as things stand, the prospects of an enduring peace are poor even if a formal peace agreement were to be signed by the parties to the conflict.

I begin by listing the following five normal pre-requisites for ending a war by a formal agreement:

1. *Interlocuteur valable*: each party is a valid interlocutor that has the *authority* to negotiate a peace agreement and is *willing* to negotiate such an agreement.¹
2. *Recognition*: each party recognizes the other as an *interlocuteur valable* with whom a peace agreement can be negotiated.
3. *Mutual trust*: each party trusts the other to negotiate in good faith and not to use the period of negotiation as a time to rearm and prepare for the resumption of war.
4. *Willingness to compromise*: each side is willing to make concessions for the sake of peace.
5. *Third party enforcement*: there are mechanisms for enforcing the agreement and for imposing sanctions for gross violations of its terms.

In calling the five conditions *normal* pre-requisites, I leave open the possibility that the parties only satisfy some of the conditions or only satisfy them to some degree. My claim is not that it is impossible for there to be a peace treaty between parties that do not satisfy all five conditions but that it will not normally be possible to bring a permanent end to hostilities by a formal agreement when the warring parties do not satisfy them at least to some degree. Any agreement between such parties is unlikely result in a lasting peace. The normal pre-requisites are *practically* rather than conceptually necessary conditions. The war in Gaza that began after the October 7 massacre is primarily a war between Israel and Hamas, even though other parties such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad have been involved. Assuming that the two main combatants are Hamas and the state of Israel, my thesis is this: *none* of the five conditions is satisfied by *both* parties.

Where does this leave us? If, as I will argue, the main obstacle to a peace agreement is Hamas then it would be natural to look for a way to bypass it in the search for peace. One way to do that would be for Israel to negotiate with a third party such as the Palestinian Authority (PA). However, it is questionable whether the PA is properly empowered to negotiate and ratify a peace treaty on behalf of the people of Gaza.² If there can no peace agreement with Hamas, and no agreement without it, then it follows that there can be no peace agreement. However, this assumes that Hamas has not been crushed and remains, at least to some degree, a viable fighting

1 On the concept of an *interlocuteur valable*, see Horne 2006, 37.

2 The expression 'properly empowered' is from Fabre 2016, 89.

force. Things might look very different if it can no longer fight and can be brought by military pressure to see that it has no choice but to give up.

The deeper question raised by my pessimistic assessment of the chances of a negotiated peace agreement between Israel and Hamas is this: should Israel, or indeed any government, be talking to terrorists in the first place? According to Jonathan Powell, the United Kingdom's National Security Advisor at the time of writing, "it is always right to talk to terrorists, even if it may not be the right moment to embark on a negotiation" (Powell 2014, 41). At the opposite extreme is the view that we should never talk to terrorists because by doing so we are rewarding their behaviour and submitting to blackmail. Instead of talking to terrorists, we should place them "beyond the pale of dialogue and negotiation" (Dershowitz 2002, 24–5). The correct view, I believe, is that governments should be willing to negotiate with some terrorists but not others, and that Hamas in its current form belongs in the latter category.

Negotiating with terrorists is one of eight counterterrorism strategies identified by the terrorism scholar Daniel Byman (2019). His full list is: (1) crushing terrorist groups directly with massive force; (2) targeting terrorist leaders for death and arrest; (3) relying on allies to strike terrorist groups; (4) containing the terrorist group to limit its effectiveness and encourage internal divisions; (5) improving defences against terrorism; (6) delegitimizing the group's cause; (7) conciliating terrorists; (8) going after root causes (Byman 2019, 623). Negotiating with terrorists is a component of (7), which also requires making concessions to terrorists. I will conclude with some reflections about the merits, or otherwise, of these counterterrorism strategies in Gaza. 'Counterterrorism' refers to "efforts by the state to combat, thwart, pre-empt, limit, contain, defeat, or eradicate non-state terrorism" (English 2024, 8).

Before proceeding to my main argument, I should explain and justify my insistence on classifying Hamas as a terrorist group. Some commentators, such as Judith Butler, maintain that the "uprising of October 7" was "not a terrorist attack" but "an act of armed resistance".³ On my analysis, 'terrorism' is serious violence against a person or serious damage to property that is:

- (1) designed to influence the government or intimidate a section of the public *and*
- (2) has the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial, or ideological cause.⁴

³ The source of these quotations is Duggan 2024. To be fair to Butler, she did describe October 7 as a "terrifying and revolting massacre" (Butler 2023).

⁴ This analysis is based on the definition of terrorism in Section 1 of the United Kingdom's Terrorism Act 2000. For a defence of this approach to defining terrorism, see Cassam and English 2026, chapter 2.

The massacre at the Nova music festival on 7 October 2023 was an act of terrorism by this definition: it was designed to intimidate the Israeli public, and it had the purpose of advancing a political cause, that of Palestinian statehood. A terrorist is someone who commits, prepares, or instigates an act of terrorism. Since the October 7 atrocity was an act of terrorism, it follows that Hamas members and others who planned or perpetrated the massacre were terrorists.

Two features of this approach should be noted. First, what Butler calls an “act of armed resistance” could be at the same time an act of terrorism. There is no incompatibility between the two. Second, the analysis I have offered does not stipulate that only non-state actors can be described as terrorists. This might prompt some readers to ask why, if October 7 was terrorism, Israel’s military response should not also be described as terrorism. At least part of the answer to this question is that Israel’s response was not primarily designed to influence a government or intimidate a section of the public.⁵ It was primarily designed to destroy its enemy, namely Hamas. In this regard it had more in common with regular warfare than terrorism. Warfare and terrorism are not incompatible, but not all warfare is terrorism. The pertinent question about Israel’s war against Hamas is not whether it amounted to state terrorism but whether it violated international humanitarian law. I will return to this issue below.

2 Interlocuteur Valable

The concept of an *interlocuteur valable* will be familiar to students of the Algerian war of independence.⁶ In that conflict (1954–1962), the French lamented the difficulty of finding an *interlocuteur valable*, that is, a legitimate representative of the Muslim population of Algeria with whom it might be possible to negotiate a peace agreement (Horne 2006, 37). The policy of the FLN – Front de Libération Nationale – was to liquidate potential *interlocuteurs valables* and thereby ensure the continuation of the war until it had achieved its strategic objective – Algerian independence. The question in Gaza is whether either side is an *interlocuteur valable*, and it is not possible to answer this question without identifying the qualifications and disqualifications for having this status.

The first qualification is authority: parties who negotiate an agreement must have the authority to do so. This means that they must represent the people on

⁵ This answer assumes that ‘designed’ in clause (1) of the terrorism definition means *primarily* designed. In the same way, clause (2) is to be understood as stipulating that the *primary* purpose of terrorism is to advance a political, religious, racial, or ideological cause. An act with this purpose can also have other, secondary purposes.

⁶ Horne 2006 is the classic English language account of this war.

behalf on whom they have been fighting and are now negotiating. Authority can be *de jure* or *de facto*. A government has *de jure* authority to negotiate peace agreements regardless of whether it is democratically elected, though the authority of democratically elected governments is stronger than that of governments that have come to power by other means. Terrorist groups can have *de facto* authority regardless of whether they have *de jure* authority. In the present case, the government of Israel has the authority to negotiate a peace agreement. Hamas' position is more complicated. It came to power in Gaza by winning an election in 2006 but has not submitted itself to an election since then and has murdered its political opponents in Gaza. Nevertheless, it retains significant levels of popular support, and it is hard to make the case that it lacks the authority (*de jure* or *de facto*) to negotiate.

A second qualification for *interlocuteur valable* status is a willingness to negotiate. As things stand, Hamas lacks this qualification since one of its core doctrines is that the only way to attain its strategic objective is by force. Article 13 of its 1988 founding Covenant states that "there is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad" and that "initiatives, and so-called peaceful solutions and international conferences, are in contradiction to the principles of the Islamic Resistance Movement".⁷ This makes sense given the nature of Hamas' strategic objective: the obliteration of the state of Israel and its replacement by an Islamic Palestinian state 'from the river to the sea'. This is certainly an objective that could not possibly be attained by negotiation.

Hamas's unwillingness to negotiate also has two other plausible explanations. One is that its organizational mindset is a "militant extremist mindset" (Stankov et al. 2010). A component of this mindset is 'pro-violence', which can be understood as a preference for violence as a means of attaining political or ideological objectives and an aversion to more conciliatory approaches. Relatedly, as Powell notes, "When groups do not make the transition from being primarily military to primarily political, peace is not possible" (2014, 256). Hamas has yet to make this transition despite the enormous losses it has suffered. It remains committed to armed struggle and has yet to question the utility of violence. If this were to change at some point in the future, it might become more receptive to the idea of a negotiated settlement. Until then, it cannot be an *interlocuteur valable*.

Is Israel willing to negotiate with Hamas? Israel has in the past negotiated peace deals with enemies but has refused to negotiate directly with Hamas given that it is a terrorist group committed to its obliteration. In 1979, Israel made peace with Egypt but only after President Sadat signalled his willingness to recognize Israel's right to exist. Expecting Israel to negotiate with Hamas is, in one sense, as unrealistic as

⁷ See The Avalon Project: Hamas Covenant 1988. All quotations from the Covenant are from this version.

expecting the United States to negotiate with al-Qaeda in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. There is, though, one significant difference: whereas no other country was in a position to pressurize the US to talk to al-Qaeda, America *could* press Israel to talk to Hamas. It seems unlikely that the current US administration will want to exert such pressure. Furthermore, negotiating under external pressure is unlikely to produce a lasting peace.

As well as qualifications for being a negotiating partner, there are also disqualifications. Were Hamas's actions on 7 October 2023 such as to place it beyond the pale of dialogue and negotiation and render it an *interlocuteur non valable*? Consider this account from a UN report on sexual violence on October 7:

Across the various locations of the 7 October attacks, the mission team found that several fully naked or partially naked bodies from the waist down were recovered – mostly women – with hands tied and shot multiple times, often in the head ... At the Nova music festival and its surroundings, there are reasonable grounds to believe that multiple incidents of sexual violence took place with victims being subjected to rape and/or gang rape and then killed or killed while being raped.⁸

On one view, there is a compelling moral case for regarding such conduct as disqualifying as far as *interlocuteur valable* status is concerned. It is a case in which “the acts carried out by a belligerent are such as to vitiate the latter’s standing” to negotiate a peace agreement (Fabre 2016, 109). A contrary view is that no mode of conduct, however abhorrent, makes a terrorist group an *interlocuteur non valable* as long as it continues to enjoy significant political support. I endorse the first view. However, even if one were to endorse pragmatism of the second view, it would be unsurprising if a government whose citizens have been raped and butchered by a terrorist group does not *regard* it as a valid interlocutor.

In defence of Hamas's tactics on October 7, it might be argued that it had no choice but to resort to extreme measures in view of the power imbalance between it and Israel. This line of thinking might explain Hamas's reliance on *terrorism* to advance its political objectives, but it does not explain its decision to plan and commit acts of *horrorism* on October 7. ‘Horrorism’ is Adriana Cavarero's label for acts of violence that go beyond mere killing because “killing would be too little” (Cavarero 2009, 8). It consists in rape, mutilation, and other ‘ontological crimes’ that dehumanize and sully the victim's body. In employing these tactics on October 7, Hamas followed in the footsteps of the FLN and ISIS. In its tactical manual, *The Management of Savagery*, ISIS makes a case for beheading and burning alive on

⁸ This quotation is from paragraphs 12 and 13 of a UN report on sexual violence on October 7. See 20240304-Israel-oWB-CRSV-report.pdf. See, also, the 7 October Parliamentary Commission Report, second edition. The Commission was chaired by the historian Andrew (now Lord) Roberts.

the grounds that “one who has previously engaged in jihad knows that it is naught but violence, crudeness, terrorism, frightening and massacring” (Naji 2006). Those who engage in such barbaric conduct should not be accepted as negotiating partners in a peace process. In these cases, the description of terrorists as having put themselves beyond the pale of dialogue and negotiation is entirely apt.

If Hamas’s conduct on October 7 made it an *interlocuteur non valable*, doesn’t Israel’s conduct since October 7 make it an *interlocuteur non valable* from a Palestinian perspective? The issue with Israel is not whether it raped Hamas terrorists but whether its wartime conduct breached the laws of armed conflict. McMahan has argued in this journal that it violated the principles of proportionality and necessity in the Gaza war (McMahan 2024). I disagree, for the reasons given by Daniel Statman in his response to McMahan’s arguments (Statman 2025). A full discussion of the questions raised by the exchange between McMahan and Statman is well beyond the scope of this paper. It is also unnecessary since, from a practical point of view, what matters is not whether Israel’s conduct has *actually* made it an *interlocuteur non valable* but whether it is *regarded* as such by Hamas. As long as this is the case, the prospects of a lasting peace agreement between Israel and Hamas are dim.

Given the questions that have been raised about Hamas’ willingness to negotiate with Israel, it would be natural to wonder whether there is any way to bypass it in a peace process. If the Palestinian Authority, which controls the West Bank, were willing to serve as an interlocutor for negotiations about Gaza, might this not be the way forward? The difficulty with this suggestion is that, as Fabre notes, parties who negotiate a peace agreement must be “properly authorized to act” (2016, 104). In the present case, the PA cannot be regarded as properly authorized to act unless it satisfies two conditions: there is concrete evidence that it is regarded by Gazans as their representatives and it has the coercive authority necessary to ensure compliance with any agreement. As things stand, it does not appear that the Palestinian Authority satisfies either of these conditions, from which it follows that it cannot be regarded as an *interlocuteur valable*, however desirable it might be to bypass Hamas. It is worth adding that by not unambiguously distancing itself from Hamas and condemning the October 7 atrocity the PA has arguably also placed itself beyond the pale of dialogue and negotiation.

3 Mutual Recognition

For there to be a peace agreement to bring a permanent end to the war in Gaza, it is not enough that each side is an *interlocuteur valable*. It is also necessary that each side *recognizes* the other as an *interlocuteur valable*. Indeed, it is arguably more

important that each side sees the other as an *interlocuteur valable*, than that it satisfies the objective conditions for being an *interlocuteur valable*, even supposing that such conditions can be identified and agreed. I have already indicated that in the war between Israel and Hamas neither side regards the other as an *interlocuteur valable*, but it would be worth reflecting further on the preconditions for mutual recognition. Among the preconditions, the most straightforward is the following: to recognize the other side as an *interlocuteur valable*, one must at a bare minimum recognize its right to exist. If “terrorists truly reject the other side’s very right to exist to exist ... talks are unlikely to do much other than allow the terrorists breathing space” (Byman 2006, 409–10).

Hamas evidently does not recognize Israel’s right to exist. Its 1988 Covenant begins with a quotation from Hassan al-Banna: “Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it”. It later attributes the following saying to the Prophet: “The Day of Judgement will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Moslems, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him”. This and other such passages are evidence that Hamas’s ideology is genocidal (Hoffman 2023). In case anyone thinks that the 1988 Covenant is outdated, there are many more recent statements that point in the same direction and indicate that the 7 October attack was carried out with genocidal intent. For example, in 2019, Fathi Hamad, a member of Hamas’s political bureau, stated:

We have come to tell the Zionist enemy – including its people, its army, its government, and the Israeli Parliament – leave us, *for the day of your slaughter, extermination, and annihilation is near*. Each one of you should search for a place for yourself in Europe, or in any kind of stronghold, or in hell, or in the sea, or in the ocean, or in the Bermuda Triangle. You have no place in Palestine. You have no place on the land of Jerusalem. You have no place in the Al-Aqsa Mosque plazas, or in Jaffa, or in Haifa, or in Acre, or anywhere ... leave us, for the day of your annihilation is near. (quoted in Shalev 2025, 24)

Such statements indicate not only that Hamas does not recognize Israel’s right to exist but also that its ideology is a form of ‘eliminationist anti-Semitism’ (Goldhagen 1997).

Does Israel recognize Hamas’s right to exist? Given that Hamas is a terrorist group that is committed to Israel’s annihilation, it would be unsurprising if Israel recognizes no such right. A more pertinent question is whether Israel recognizes that the Palestinian people have a right to their own state. It is arguable the Israel’s current political leadership is determined to obstruct the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, but it was not always so. At the Camp David summit in 2000, a Palestinian state was on the table in the negotiations between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat. As Benbaji notes, “Barak presented

numerous offers for a Palestinian state in exchange for peace, including a compromise on Jerusalem. Arafat consistently rejected these proposals without presenting any counteroffers” (2024, 351). At the end of 2000, President Clinton issued his parameters for a Palestinian state. These were accepted with reservations by Barak but rejected by Arafat. This was effectively the final nail in the coffin of a two-state solution to the Palestinian issue (see Ben-Ami 2022). One hypothesis is that Arafat was reluctant to sign up to this approach because he knew that Hamas was opposed and was concerned about being outflanked if not assassinated by Hamas. For its part, Hamas responded to the collapse of the peace process by launching a suicide bombing campaign that was designed to ensure that there could be no peace with Israel.

4 Mutual Trust

This issue need not detain us for very long since it is plain that neither side trusts the other to negotiate in good faith. A common tactic of terrorist groups when they are under severe military or political pressure is to play for time. One way to do that is to enter into prolonged peace negotiations while continuing their armed struggle. In such cases, terrorists “can decide to negotiate in order to conceal their true intentions, to gain enough time to recover from past exertions, to prepare for an upcoming attack, or mask a temporary weakness” (Duyvesteyn and Schuurman 2011, 680). Thus far, Hamas’s negotiations with Israel have been indirect and have concerned temporary ceasefires and the release of Israeli hostages in exchange for Palestinian prisoners. Even if it were to sign a peace agreement with Israel, it would be reasonable for the Israeli side not to trust Hamas to abide by the agreement.

One reason for Israel not to trust Hamas is that Hamas spokesmen have unashamedly declared their intention to repeat the October 7 massacre. Describing the massacre as the ‘Al-Aqsa flood’, Gazi Hamad, a senior Hamas figure, told a Lebanese TV station in 2024 that “we will do this again and again”.⁹ Changes of mind are possible, but Hamas has not altered its basic stance since its foundation. The inadequacy of Israel’s defences on October 7 was due in large part to its mistaken assumption that once Hamas came to power, it would be too preoccupied with running Gaza to pose a serious threat to Israel. As things turned out, Hamas continued to prioritize the obliteration of Israel and dedicated itself to the construction of a vast terrorist infrastructure for use on and after 7 October 2023. Against this background, the notion that Israel will ever trust Hamas to abide by a peace agreement

⁹ See the report in *Haartez* on 1 November 2023 (Hamas Official: We Will Repeat October 7 Attacks Until Israel Is Annihilated - Israel News).

is fanciful. Knowing this, Hamas may feel that it cannot trust Israel. However, this whole discussion is academic. To ask whether the two sides will trust each other to abide by the terms of a peace agreement is to presuppose the existence of such an agreement. There is every reason to believe that there will be no lasting peace agreement between Israel and Hamas as presently constituted.

5 Compromise

Peace agreements are signed after a process of negotiation, and this implies a degree of give and take. As Byman notes, some terrorist groups “might be satisfied with half a loaf”, but others are “maximalist” and “will not settle for part of a loaf” (2019, 632). Instead, they will simply use any lull in the fighting to better arm themselves and resume fighting when it suits them to do so. Settling for part of a loaf requires a willingness to compromise, that is, to make concessions for the sake of peace even at the expense of justice. This *sine qua non* for a peace agreement is notably absent in the present case. Hamas is a maximalist terrorist group whose *raison d'être* is that it does not compromise. Its maximalism is demonstrated by its opposition to a two-state solution to the conflict with Israel and its insistence that nothing less than the obliteration of Israel and its replacement by an Islamic Palestinian state will do.

Maximalism is not confined to the Palestinian side in the conflict with Israel. Benbaji notes that Zionism has always had influential maximalist factions committed to establishing a Jewish majority state encompassing both sides of the Jordan (Benbaji 2024, 346–7). Israel’s military achievements in the 1967 war “transformed many Israeli intellectuals and leaders into maximalists” (348), and the second intifada increased support for a maximalist agenda. Confronted by maximalist Arab opponents who were committed to the destruction of the state of Israel, many Israelis opted to meet Palestinian maximalism with their own form of maximalism. The idea of a compromise for peace with the Palestinians lost much of its credibility when it became clear that Hamas and its allies had no interest in a lasting peace with Israel. On this reading, Israeli maximalism was to considerable extent a response to Palestinian maximalism and has in turn strengthened the hand of Palestinian maximalists. At least since 1967, maximalists on both sides have used the other side’s maximalism to justify their own maximalism.

In his account, Avishai Margalit distinguishes three types of compromise. An *anemic* compromise is an agreement “within the bargaining range” (2010, 39). A *sanguine* compromise is an anemic compromise that also involves recognizing the other side’s point of view. It may be an expression of such recognition and “confers legitimacy on the point of view of the other side” (2010, 41). Sanguine compromises “may even involve a measure of sacrifice from the strong side, not driving as hard a

bargain as it could to get what it desires” (2010, 41). They “must be based on mutual concessions: on splitting the difference” (2010, 48). Crucially, sanguine compromises require both sides to “to give up on their ‘dreams’ so that what remains to negotiate is a range of possible agreements” (2010, 46). Lastly, a *rotten* compromise is “an agreement to establish or maintain an inhuman regime, a regime of cruelty and humiliation, that is, a regime that does not treat humans as humans” (2010, 2). Rotten compromises should be avoided “*come what may*” (2010, 90). They may be excused but they are “never *justified*” (2010, 4).

An aversion to compromise is a central component of the extremist mindset.¹⁰ When there is a conflict or tension between peace and justice, extremists invariably opt for justice as they see it and reject any suggestion that they should be willing to compromise for the sake of peace. What I call ‘extremism’ is roughly equivalent to what Margalit calls ‘sectarianism’. They are in the grip of what Margalit calls a religious picture of politics, and they share the following state of mind:

The state of mind is that of keeping your principled position uncompromised, come what may. Sectarianism is a disposition to view any compromise as a rotten compromise... [The sectarian] finds compromise a capitulation, a betrayal of the cause.... There is more to the sectarian cast of mind than just a negative attitude to compromise. But in my view the refusal to compromise is its main feature. (Margalit 2010, 148–9)

Whereas sanguine compromise involves a willingness to compromise on a dream, extremists regard their dreams as non-negotiable and sacred. It is their belief that they can ‘have it all’ that “encourages the view that compromise is surrender” (Margalit 2010, 47).

This is certainly Hamas’s attitude. It does not regard Israel’s point of view as having *any* legitimacy and it is not in the business of splitting the difference with Israel or sacrificing what it sees as justice for the sake of peace. Indeed, Hamas’s attitude towards its Palestinian rivals is no less uncompromising. In the 2007 Battle of Gaza, Hamas took control of Gaza from the Palestinian Authority after several days of vicious fighting between Hamas’s military wing – the Izz el-Deen al-Qassam brigades – and fighters loyal to the PA. Both sides were accused of war crimes, including summary executions of captives and killing of civilians not engaged in hostilities. Throwing prisoners off high-rise apartment buildings was one of the methods of execution favoured by Hamas, which also engaged in torture of detainees. The fact that Hamas treated fellow Palestinians in this way is a clear indication of its unwillingness to give an inch to anyone, let alone to Israel.

In his book, Powell refers to a distinction between ‘reconcilable’ and ‘irreconcilable’ terrorists. It might seem pointless negotiating with irreconcilable

¹⁰ As argued in Cassam 2022, chapter 4.

terrorists, but Powell argues that “you can’t know who is irreconcilable and who is reconcilable until you have talked to them” (2014, 31). Hamas is a counterexample to this claim. Based on its conduct, ideology, and public statements, it is possible to know that Hamas is irreconcilable. Powell also claims that “no group is irreconcilable forever” (2014, 31), but the theoretical possibility that Hamas might one day change its spots does not make it a viable negotiating partner today. Insofar as apparently irreconcilable terrorists become reconcilable, this is often the result of military pressure. Thus, even from the standpoint of those who believe that Hamas might one day become reconciled to peace with Israel, there is a strong case for continuing to subject it to military pressure.

It is an interesting question why some terrorists are willing to compromise while others are not. A rule of thumb is that terrorist groups whose objectives are primarily territorial are more likely to be open to compromise than those whose objectives are religious. Hamas has territorial objectives, but they are framed in religious terms:

The Islamic Resistance Movement believes that the land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf consecrated for future Moslem generations until Judgement Day. It, or any part of it, should not be squandered: it, or any part of it, should not be given up. Neither a single Arab country nor all Arab countries, neither any king or president, nor all the kings and presidents, neither any organization nor all of them, be they Palestinian or Arab, possess the right to do that. Palestine is an Islamic Waqf land consecrated for Moslem generations until Judgement Day. This being so, who could claim to have the right to represent Moslem generations till Judgement Day? This is the law governing the land of Palestine in the Islamic Sharia (law) and the same goes for any land the Moslems have conquered by force, because during the times of (Islamic) conquests, the Moslems consecrated these lands to Moslem generations till the Day of Judgement. (*Hamas Covenant* article 11)

If Palestine is indeed a divinely ordained inalienable Muslim endowment (‘Waqf’), then giving up any part of it in pursuit of peace would be contrary to God’s will. No such transgression or betrayal can be contemplated. Hamas’s dream of an Islamic Palestinian state is non-negotiable because there can be no negotiating with the will of God. However many Palestinians are killed, it does not matter to Hamas because, to quote Gazi Hamad once again, Palestine is ‘a nation of martyrs’.

In 2017, Hamas published a revised charter that is apparently more conciliatory. It states in article 20 that:

Hamas rejects any alternative to the full and complete liberation of Palestine, from the river to the sea. However, without compromising its rejection of the Zionist entity and without relinquishing any Palestinian rights, Hamas considers the establishment of a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital along the lines of the 4th of

June 1967, with the return of the refugees and the displaced to their homes from which they were expelled, to be a formula of national consensus.¹¹

An independent Palestinian state “along the lines of 4th June 1967” would not stretch “from the river to the sea” and would not require the obliteration of the state of Israel. However, article 2 states that Palestine “extends from the River Jordan in the east to the Mediterranean in the west and from Ras al-Naqrurah in the north to Umm al-Rashrash in the south” and is an “integral territorial unit”. According to article 10, Jerusalem is “the capital of Palestine” and “its Islamic and Christian holy places belong exclusively to the Palestinian people and to the Arab and Islamic Ummah. Not one stone of Jerusalem can be surrendered or relinquished”. This is not the language of compromise, and it is hard not to view the willingness to accept a Palestinian state along the lines of 4th June 1967 as a short-term tactical manoeuvre. On all the key points, “the new document differs little from its predecessor” (Hoffman 2023).

What should Israel’s attitude be? How much should it be willing to sacrifice? It makes little sense for one side to compromise for the sake of peace unless its opponent is also willing to compromise. Given Hamas’s rejection of any compromise and its rejection of a two-state solution, the question whether Israel should be willing to compromise is entirely academic. It is instructive to compare Israel’s position with that of the United Kingdom in its negotiations with the Provisional IRA (PIRA) in the 1990s. PIRA’s strategic goal was the realization of Irish national self-determination through the achievement of a united and fully independent Irish republic. Since PIRA did not question the United Kingdom’s right to exist and was not committed to its obliteration, the two sides had something to discuss. There was room for compromise, and the peace process culminated in the Provisional IRA’s declaration in 2005 that it would henceforth pursue its aims by purely political and democratic means. It is unthinkable that Hamas would be willing to make such a declaration in the foreseeable future. When one side is committed to the non-existence of the other, there is nothing to discuss. There can be no compromise with an opponent that is committed to one’s extermination.

6 Third Party Enforcement

The question of third-party enforcement only arises if there is a peace agreement to be enforced. Since the general tenor of my discussion is that there is no prospect of an agreement between Israel and Hamas, it might seem utterly pointless to go

¹¹ Hamas in 2017: The document in full | Middle East Eye.

into the question of how such an agreement might be enforced. However, such a dismissal is too quick. It is helpful to distinguish two questions:

1. What are the prospects of a peace agreement between Israel and Hamas?
2. What are the prospects of a peace agreement between Israel and Hamas to bring a permanent end to the war in Gaza?

It is not inconceivable that the two sides might one day be compelled to sign an agreement. As I have noted, Israel might one day be pressured by the United States to do a deal with Hamas. It is easy to imagine that a future Democratic President might take this line. On the Hamas side, military losses might force it to agree to a notionally permanent ceasefire, if only to give it time to recover and plan its next assault. From the fact that no peace agreement is likely to bring a *permanent* end to the war, it does not follow that no agreement is possible.

Who would be in a position to enforce a peace agreement? The United States is unlikely to be acceptable to Hamas and may be reluctant to supply the necessary ground troops. An alternative might be an international body such as the United Nations, but its track record in the region does not inspire much confidence. This leaves one more option: the job of enforcing a peace agreement will be taken on by nations other than the US. However, it is hard to imagine other nations being willing to sacrifice the lives of their soldiers for the sake of peace in Gaza if either Hamas or Israel breaches the terms of the agreement. The likeliest outcome is that, like UNIFIL in Lebanon, third party enforcers will rapidly discover that they are out of their depth in an exceptionally tough neighbourhood and will be forced to pull out as soon as the fighting resumes, as it almost certainly will.

7 What Next?

The discussion here has painted an exceptionally bleak picture of the prospects for a peace agreement to end the war in Gaza. I've argued that Hamas has placed itself beyond the pale of dialogue and negotiation, has no interest in a lasting peace with Israel, and is unwilling to compromise for the sake of peace. It remains committed to armed struggle and to the total annihilation of the state of Israel. It might agree to a temporary cessation of hostilities, but the sole purpose would be to give it the necessary breathing space to recuperate and rearm. In that case, what is the alternative? And is there any chance that Hamas will one day change its stance and make itself into an *interlocuteur valable*? These two questions are related. In assessing the alternatives to negotiating with Hamas, it would make sense to consider whether any of them could have the effect of inducing it to abandon its current approach

and reinvent itself as an organization that *is* willing to compromise for the sake of peace.

Of the eight counterterrorism strategies listed by Byman, strategy (2) – killing terrorist leaders – is ineffective because those who are killed are quickly replaced by others who are just as fanatical. Strategy (3) – relying on allies to strike the terrorists – is irrelevant in the present context. Numbers (4) and (5) – containment and defensive measures – have already been tried and failed catastrophically on 7 October. It might be argued that this only goes to show that Israel made a mess of containment and defence and that it should deal with Hamas in future by more effectively containing and defending against the threat. However, there is a limit to what Israel can do to protect its borders against a determined enemy. Furthermore, containment and defence will do nothing to deter Hamas or incentivize it to change its approach. Strategy (6) – delegitimizing Hamas’s cause – has not worked because of Hamas’s skill in deflecting attention away from the fact that its objective is not just a Palestinian state but also the annihilation of the state of Israel. Going after root causes – Byman’s number (8) – sounds promising but much depends on what the root causes are in the present case. From Hamas’s perspective, the root cause of its conflict with Israel is the latter’s existence, and ‘going after root causes’ is what it thought it was doing on 7 October. Whatever concessions Israel makes, Hamas will not be satisfied as long as Israel exists.

That leaves Byman’s first counterterrorism strategy – crushing Hamas militarily, with massive force. It might seem that this has already been tried and has not succeeded; Hamas has been seriously weakened but hasn’t been crushed. Powell refers to the “near-impossibility of defeating terrorist groups by purely military means” (2014, 35) and rejects the idea that using massive force against terrorists can make it unnecessary to talk to them. As he puts it:

If you accept that you cannot kill them all – and that in attempting to do so you will create more martyrs and more recruits for the cause – then, at some stage, you will have to talk, and however long you continue fighting, you always arrive back, sooner or later, at that same point. (2014, 13)

For Powell, not even ISIL is beyond the pale of dialogue and negotiation. Sooner or later, he argues, we will have to talk to them, as long as they enjoy serious political support. This is even truer of Hamas, which does enjoy serious political support – much more so than ISIL.

In fact, there *are* examples of terrorist groups that have been crushed or nearly crushed by massive force, and it would be worth examining a couple of examples for the light they cast on the options for dealing with Hamas.

Case 1: the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) carried out acts of terrorism for over thirty years from the 1970s onwards in pursuit of its objective of an independent Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka. In May 2009, the LTTE fought a climactic battle with the Sri Lankan army and the outcome was unambiguous: the LTTE was crushed.¹² It admitted defeat and its leader was killed. The architect of operation against the LTTE was Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who is credited with inventing what has come to be known as the Rajapaksa Model. As described by Powell, its central elements are: “unwavering political will; disregard for international opinion; no negotiations; control information; absence of political intervention; complete operational freedom for the security forces; and an accent on young commanders” (Powell 2014, 36–7). Rajapaksa “accepted there would be civilian casualties as a result of the army’s actions and made it clear he was personally ready to take the blame” (2014, 37). Tens of thousands of civilians died, and Powell quotes the Norwegian diplomat Erik Solheim as saying that “the government won so comprehensively because it was able to use methods that would not be regarded as acceptable in other parts of the world”. (2014, 37)

Case 2: Inherent Resolve was the operation against ISIL in its so-called ‘caliphate’ in 2016–7.¹³ Its instigator was President Obama, who stated: “Our objective is clear: We will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy”. This would be achieved by conducting a campaign of airstrikes and providing several hundred American military personnel to support Iraqi and Kurdish forces that would do most of the fighting. The operation, which was continued by President Trump, degraded ISIL but did not destroy it. It was defeated in the Battle of Mosul (2016–17), lost its ability to function as a quasi-state, and its military capabilities were significantly reduced. In addition, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, its leader, died in a US military operation in 2019. ISIL still exists as a decentralized transnational jihadist movement but not as a territorial caliphate that threatens the region.

Israel’s military response to Hamas cannot and should not follow the Rajapaksa Model. It is already facing accusations of war crimes and genocide even though its military has arguably behaved with greater restraint than the Sri Lankan military in its war with the LTTE. Unlike Hamas, Israel regards itself as bound by international humanitarian law, even if it is at odds with international opinion about how it applies in specific cases. Israel cannot disregard international opinion in the manner recommended by Rajapaksa and cannot control the flow of information from Gaza in the era of Tik Tok and other social media that didn’t exist in 2009. International opinion cared little about civilian deaths in Sri Lanka but cares a great deal about civilian deaths in Gaza. As far as the world is concerned, not all lives are equal, and this is the reality with which the Israeli military has to contend. As a result, using the civilian population of Gaza as *de facto* human shields has become Hamas’s

¹² See Moorcraft 2012 for an account of the battle.

¹³ Gordon 2022 is a superb account of *Inherent Resolve*.

military and political strategy because it recognizes the propaganda value of civilian casualties. As Walzer notes “every dead civilian is a political asset for Hamas, and this probably accounts for its failure to build civilian shelters (in contrast to the tunnels that protect only fighters)” (Walzer 2023).

If Hamas cannot be destroyed in the way that the LTTE was destroyed, this still leaves the option of continuing to degrade it by massive military force if and when hostilities resume. In an ideal world, Hamas would cease to exist in its current form, but degrading it is still a worthwhile exercise even if cannot be eliminated. There are several arguments for continuing to degrade Hamas. The first is that a degraded Hamas is less of a threat to Israel than one that retains the means to continue its military campaign. The objective of a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy against Hamas should be to defang it, that is, to render it militarily impotent. Even if there is a theoretical difference between degrading and destroying Hamas, rendering it militarily impotent *amounts* to ‘crushing’ it in Byman’s terms. It does not greatly matter if the group continues to exist in some form after it has been defanged. As the example of the campaign against ISIL shows, it matters more that terrorist groups are rendered impotent than that they cease to exist.

A further rationale for the crushing strategy is hinted at by Powell: using massive military force against terrorist groups can play a role in making them more amenable to negotiation and compromise. For “unless the position of the armed group is rendered uncomfortable there is no reason for them to talk, especially if they still think that can win” (2014, 13). Thus, Byman’s first counterterrorism strategy can work in two ways: by reducing a terrorist’s group’s capacity to wage war and teaching it that it cannot win. However, much depends on what counts as ‘winning’. For Hamas, simply surviving and retaining its political power in Gaza counts as winning. In this sense, it may well continue to believe that it *can* win or even that it *is* ‘winning’ even if, by any objective measure, it has already lost the war. To put it another way, Hamas’s position is not yet so uncomfortable as to make it amenable to negotiation and compromise. This reflects the fact that it is Palestinian civilians who have borne the brunt of the war. Hamas has also suffered heavy losses but has prioritized its own survival and well-being over the well-being and survival of the people on behalf of whom it is supposedly fighting.

This points to the most single important lesson of the war in Gaza, as well as the Rajapaksa model and Inherent Resolve: the heaviest price of attempts to crush terrorist groups is always paid by civilians. It is unknown how many civilians died when the Rajapaksa Model was implemented in the war against the LTTE, but it is safe to say that it was a large number. In the Battle of Mosul, at least half of those killed were civilians. In Gaza, estimates of the percentage of civilian deaths range

from 50 % to 80 %.¹⁴ Whatever the actual figure, it is clear that thousands of civilians have died.

Can civilian casualties at this level be morally justified? Suppose that one frames the debate about the morality of the crushing strategy in Gaza in terms of its proportionality and agrees with McMahan's view that "proportionality in the resort to or continuation of war is the requirement that the bad effects of the war not be excessive in relation to the war's good effects" (2024, 389). Insofar as good effects of the war include the defanging of Hamas, it is arguable that its bad effects are not excessive. Given that, as Statman points out, Hamas is a "Nazi-like or ISIS-like organization" (2025, 183) that not only threatens Israel but viciously oppresses its own people, it is reasonable to attach a very high value to destroying or disabling it – high enough to outweigh the war's bad effects, to which Hamas has made a major contribution by its tactic of "deliberately putting the entire civilian population in harm's way" (Walzer 2023). However, this paper is not the place for a detailed discussion of this issue.

As far as the future is concerned, a key question is whether Powell is right that no group is irreconcilable for ever. It is instructive to revisit the period after Hamas's 2006 election win. In an article published a year later, Peter Neumann wrote as follows about Hamas:

Having won the Palestinian parliamentary elections in early 2006, it has a real incentive to make politics work. At the same time, elements of the leadership do not seem ready to do so. If it wants to capitalize on the enormous political opportunities that its strong electoral performance has created, Hamas must now forge a strong internal consensus for starting negotiations with Israel. (2007, 137–8)

The leadership of Hamas did not take Neumann's advice in 2007 and continued to believe in the utility of violence. Why would it have any more interest now or in the future in making the transition from being primarily military to primary political? One possibility is that Hamas has an extremely high pain threshold and has not yet suffered enough to force a change of heart. On this analysis, there is *some* level of military pressure that would induce it to change its approach, but the pressure exerted so far has been insufficient. This would be a reason for continuing a campaign of military pressure until Hamas buckles.

To put it another way, Hamas must be given a reason to talk seriously and realistically about peace – a reason that even it can understand. Since the only language in which it is fluent is that of violence, the resumption of hostilities with Israel would

¹⁴ The 50 % figure is defended in Spencer 2024. In contrast, Action on Armed Violence estimated in October 2024 that at least 74 % of Gazan fatalities were civilians (Civilian casualties in Gaza: Israel's claims don't add up - AOA). Most scholarly estimates are at the higher end of this range.

not necessarily be a bad thing. For it would be another opportunity for Hamas to learn that it cannot win and that one day it is going to have to be satisfied with half a loaf. At that point, however, it will effectively cease to exist in its present form. A Hamas that is serious about peace would not be Hamas as we know it. Hamas *as presently constituted* is beyond the pale of dialogue and negotiation. A successor organization with the same name might not be beyond the pale, but only on the strict condition that it is committed to peace and that there is a proper accounting for the atrocities of 7 October 2023.

There is, however, another possibility: that *no* amount of military pressure will have the desired effect. As I have noted, its *raison d'être* is that it does not compromise and the official stance of its leadership is that they would rather be martyred than give in. This form of fanaticism is by no means unique to Hamas. It is also the attitude of the leadership of Hamas's main state sponsor, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in its current conflict with the United States and Israel. Operation Epic Fury – a joint military campaign by the United States and Israel against Iran – assumes that there is *some* level of pain to which the United States and Israel can subject the IRGC that would induce its leadership to give up. What if there is *no* such level? What if Hamas and the IRGC have the same message for their American and Israeli opponents: to defeat us, you are going to have to destroy us, and if we go down, we will take our civilian populations and, in the case of Iran, our neighbours with us?

These are questions to which there are, at present, no satisfactory answers. Until now, wars have largely been fought on the assumption that: (a) it is possible to lose militarily without being totally annihilated; (b) in such cases, the losing side recognizes that it has lost and gives up because it recognizes that it has lost; and (c) there are limits to how much pain and suffering each side is willing to tolerate before it sues for peace. Even the Japanese surrendered at the end of the Second World War once the United States deployed nuclear weapons. In contrast, Hamas and Iran like to give the impression that they are fanatics who will not accept that they have lost as long as they are still standing and do not care at all about the well-being of their own people. They want their fight with Israel and America to be a fight to the death, or at least for people to believe that it is a fight to the death.¹⁵

The only way to find out whether someone is a fanatic in this sense and would genuinely rather be annihilated than submit is to continue to pressurize them and see if they crack. True fanatics exist, but they are rarer than is often supposed, and there is something to be said for calling the bluff of those who present themselves as

¹⁵ On the relationship between fanaticism and terrorism, see Cassam 2024.

immune to the usual incentives to give up. There is, however, an obvious flaw with this approach, and it is one that is exploited by Hamas in Gaza and the IRGC in Iran: it relies on the fact that there are limits to what their opponents are prepared to do to them. As long the level of pain that Hamas and the IRGC are willing to *endure* is higher than the level of pain that America and Israel are prepared to *inflict*, the odds are that, for all their military superiority, America and Israel will stop fighting before Hamas and the IRGC have been crushed.

I noted above that Israel cannot ignore international opinion in the manner advocated by the Rajapaksa model, but Hamas can. So can the IRGC, and it is this fundamental asymmetry that gives Hamas and the IRGC a psychological edge. However, a psychological edge is not a military edge and doesn't alter the facts on the ground. Hamas and the IRGC are still standing but they have been substantially degraded. I have argued that there is a case for continuing to degrade Hamas, and the same goes for the IRGC. If the problem with Hamas and the IRGC is that they don't know when they are losing, progressive American commentators on the war sometimes have the opposite problem: they don't know when they are winning.¹⁶

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¹⁶ In writing the concluding paragraphs of this essay in late March 2026, I am acutely aware that the situation in the Middle East is extremely fluid, and that there is a high risk that my brief remarks about Epic Fury will look ill-advised and far from prescient by the time this paper is published. However, I was invited by the editor to conclude my discussion with some reflections on the situation in Iran and I found this invitation hard to resist. If I am right about *bien pensant* American commentators finding it hard to acknowledge American military achievements in Epic Fury, it is an interesting question why this is. No doubt part of the answer is that these commentators are reluctant to give any credit to President Trump for finally grasping the Iranian nettle. Some even seem to find it hard to think of the American side in the war with Iran as 'their' side at all.

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