



What Was Hamas Thinking?

October 12, 2023 **James S. Robbins** *The National Interest*

Related Categories: Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Israel; Middle East

It must be dawning on Hamas that it has made a serious mistake. A senior Hamas official said the group was open to discussing a truce with Israel, having “achieved its targets.” What he meant was that the terrorists desperately want a ceasefire since they are now the targets of Israeli strikes. Israel’s Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, responded succinctly to the truce offer: “every member of Hamas is a dead man.”

The international community is rightly disgusted by the brutal Hamas terror attacks in Israel. The images over the weekend were beyond revolting: Families were slaughtered in their homes, elderly people massacred at a bus stop, and hundreds of young revelers at a peace festival hunted down and shot. Not to mention the scores of people kidnapped—including Americans—and the sight of screaming young women being hauled away by Hamas thugs to suffer unspeakable acts.

Amid this nightmare, it is fair to ask: What was Hamas thinking?

Sure, the group rolled out its usual talking points. Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh praised the attackers and the scenes of heroic deeds, sacrifices, courage, and pride. Hamas politburo member Moussa Abu Marzouk denied that the terrorists had purposefully targeted civilians. Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei lauded Hamas while also saying Iran was uninvolved. (Meanwhile, Iranian citizens booed the Palestinian flag at a soccer match.) Hamas fellow traveler groups, like those at Harvard, rushed out implausible statements blaming Israel for the bloodshed. Progressives in Congress demanded an immediate ceasefire, backing the Hamas line, and now face calls they be expelled.

The bipartisan response of most Americans was outrage. Former President Barack Obama spoke for many when he said we must “stand squarely alongside our ally, Israel, as it dismantles Hamas.” Note his use of the word “dismantle.” This is the same language the United States has used concerning terror groups like ISIS and al Qaeda. Hamas is not just to be defeated but taken apart, eradicated, and ended.

Hamas’ “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood” can well be compared to Al Qaeda’s “Operation Holy Tuesday,” the September 11, 2001 attacks. Both actions came as a surprise, were technically well executed, and resulted in unprecedented deaths. And in both cases, the terrorists miscalculated the depth and severity of the reaction they would face.

9/11 dramatically changed American attitudes regarding how to combat terrorism. The U.S. government was authorized, morally, legally, and politically, to hunt down terrorists by any means necessary. Activities that in previous decades would have been undertaken cautiously, after long internal debate, became mostly routine. Global covert action was unleashed. Extraordinary renditions became ordinary. Americans cheered the assassinations of terror leaders. Such strikes are now so non-controversial that when al-Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri was droned last July, President Biden barely got any credit.

Israel has now been issued the same type of global hunting license to take out Hamas and any of its co-conspirators. Whether in Gaza or elsewhere, Hamas leaders are in the target group for a “Wrath of God” style response. The expected IDF push into Gaza will eject Hamas from power and end its use of the strip as a launching pad for Iranian rockets.

So, what did Hamas hope to achieve? One notion is that they struck to split Israel’s divided polity further, hit them when they were distracted by politics and the High Holy Days. But, like 9/11, the attack had the opposite effect and created instant political unity.

Maybe they planned to draw Israel into a bloody stalemate in Gaza. Yes, when the IDF ground invasion comes, it will be bloody, as urban warfare always is. But no, it will not be a stalemate. Hamas will be driven from power.

Maybe Hamas thinks they can attract international sympathy by hyping Palestinian civilian casualties. Hamas uses civilians as human shields precisely for this purpose—it benefits from high body counts. But Israel seeks to minimize needless deaths, and the world knows it.

Plus, Hamas has already provided a stark contrast. There will be no scenes of Israeli troops dragging elderly people from their cars for summary execution, no IDF soldiers loading Palestinian women into trucks to rape and murder them, and no children being held hostage with the threat of death hanging over them. There is no moral relativism here. The Israelis are the good guys. Hamas is a clear and present evil.

Hamas felt that it could disrupt Arab-Israeli rapprochement. Ismail Haniyeh explicitly denounced the normalization efforts. But the rulers in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other countries in the region have no use for the kind of radicalism Hamas preaches and the chaos it creates. Hamas is not their idea of the face of the Arab future. They also recognize that Hamas is a creature of Shiite Iran, an enduring adversary of the Sunni Arab states. So, Israel needs to convince Arab states to actively participate in the Gaza reconstruction effort once Hamas is eliminated. Let them build Gaza into a model Palestinian society, bolstered by tourism and trade instead of UN handouts and Iranian weapons.

Maybe Hamas thinks it can spark a wider war, with Hezbollah attacking in the north, perhaps a West Bank uprising, maybe even Iran intervening directly. This is all possible, but given the international reaction, it is unlikely. Any terror group that joins the fighting will suffer the same consequences as Hamas. If Iran seeks to intervene, the war could escalate to the point where it draws in the United States, NATO, or other proponents of the rules-based international order.

So, whatever Hamas intended by Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, it has failed. Unlike its previous encounters with Israel, the terror organization may have unleashed an unlimited war that would culminate in the group's utter destruction. There will be no international pressure on Israel to limit its objectives until Hamas is driven from Gaza. And even then, Hamas leaders will be hunted relentlessly for years to come.

Maybe the people of Gaza will discover how much better life can be when freed from living under the thumb of violent extremist overlords and given a chance to develop their society in peace and freedom. Maybe then "land for peace" can become a reality.

James S. Robbins is a senior fellow for National Security Affairs at the American Foreign Policy Council and Dean of Academics at the Institute of World Politics.