

Countering Hamas's Shadow Governance in Gaza

by [Devorah Margolin \(/experts/devorah-margolin\)](/experts/devorah-margolin), [Neomi Neumann \(/experts/neomi-neumann\)](/experts/neomi-neumann)

Oct 25, 2024

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Devorah Margolin \(/experts/devorah-margolin\)](/experts/devorah-margolin)

Devorah Margolin is the Blumenstein-Rosenbloom Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute.



[Neomi Neumann \(/experts/neomi-neumann\)](/experts/neomi-neumann)

Neomi Neumann is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Palestinian affairs. She formerly served as head of the research unit at the Israel Security Agency, or Shin Bet, and with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Neumann recently began her doctoral studies at Tel Aviv University.



Brief Analysis

Hamas is well aware that sustaining its grip on civilian spaces is crucial to preserving its dominance in the Palestinian arena after the war, so the international community must urgently lay the groundwork for an alternative governance structure.

Since Israeli forces began their campaign against Hamas last year, most of the group's military capabilities have been damaged or completely destroyed (<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/capitalizing-on-decimation-of-hamas-and-hezbollah-by-dennis-ross-2024-10>). Yet despite the most intensive fighting in Gaza ending several months ago, the war is not over, and Hamas has not surrendered yet. While Israel continues to focus on maintaining a buffer zone and carrying out raids in order to prevent Hamas from rehabilitating militarily, it has not directed enough attention toward the movement's shadow governance.

For months now, Hamas has been investing great efforts to regain civilian control across Gaza, with an emphasis on areas where Israeli forces no longer operate. It has managed to maintain effective governance across different parts of the territory, mainly in the center but also in parts of the south and north. The movement understands that this shadow governance is critical to preserving its status as a dominant force in the Palestinian arena after the war. Indeed, Hamas cadres appear to be playing the waiting game—as they see it, in order for the movement to survive, they need only wait until the international community forces Israel to stop fighting and leave Gaza. Like other “shadow governing” groups (

governance-eastern-syria-fall-baghu) before it, Hamas is biding its time to fully reemerge when circumstances are more favorable.

This cannot be allowed to happen. The death of Hamas's top leadership, especially military commander Yahya al-Sinwar, should be used as an opportunity to urgently lay the groundwork for a different governance structure that provides Palestinians in Gaza with a viable alternative.

Gaza One Year Later

To understand how Hamas has sustained governance in various areas a year into the war, it is worth considering Gaza's current humanitarian situation and the state of its civilian infrastructure. International estimates suggest that approximately **45-75% of Gaza's civilian infrastructure** (<https://www.npr.org/2024/10/09/g-s1-27175/israel-hamas-war-gaza-map>) has been destroyed. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), only **seventeen of Gaza's thirty-six hospitals** ([https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-update-221-gaza-strip#:~:text=The%20World%20Health%20Organization%20\(WHO,Care%20Unit%20\(ICU\)%20beds.\)](https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-update-221-gaza-strip#:~:text=The%20World%20Health%20Organization%20(WHO,Care%20Unit%20(ICU)%20beds.))) are still functioning, while the UN reports that **87 percent of schools** (<https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-update-226-gaza-strip>) have been damaged. The economy is in shambles, with **unemployment reaching 80 percent** (<https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/war-propels-unemployment-close-80-cent-and-shrinks-gdp-835-cent-gaza-strip>). What remains is a flourishing black market (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/07/08/israel-gaza-cigarette-smuggling-aid/>). Amid this breakdown, Hamas has employed various methods to demonstrate a presence on the ground, provide essential emergency services to the people, and—most important—prevent any other potential players from stepping into its shoes.

Hamas's Shadow Governance

On the eve of the war (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/retreating-legitimacy-hamass-engagement-and-disengagement-governance>), Hamas's government apparatus numbered thousands of managers, employees, and officials spread across **numerous ministries** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/10/gaza-hamas-reshuffle-ministers-consensus-government.html>): foreign, interior, justice, finance, economy, energy, transport, information, education, tourism, agriculture, youth, public works, land authority, and local government. Although only a small proportion of these individuals were involved in terrorist activity, this bureaucracy was crucial to maintaining the movement's grip on Gaza.

Today, Hamas is a shadow of what it once was, and most of its ministries are now defunct. Those that remain are more focused on promoting propaganda and disinformation than performing their actual duties, such as the Ministry of Information (which **spreads** (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/10/18/hamas-social-media-terror/>) most of its disinformation via Telegram (https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2024/09/29/telegram-limits-hamas-accounts/5971727626641/)), the Ministry of Economy (which **focuses** (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/07/23/gaza-hamas-government-israel-netanyahu/>) on price controls and collecting taxes), the Ministry of Health (which releases near-daily data on **death tolls** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/heres-real-problem-uns-revised-gaza-death-toll>)), and the Ministry of Finance (which occasionally gives small cash handouts).

Despite the collapse of much of its bureaucracy, however, Hamas continues to use its personnel to maintain control over local populations. In areas with semi-functional Hamas municipalities, **workers** (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/07/23/gaza-hamas-government-israel-netanyahu/>) have attempted to continue trash pickup and renovate vital infrastructure (e.g., water, sewage, electricity, roads). In other areas, the movement has implemented **emergency committees** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy->

analysis/how-hamas-trying-shape-day-after-gaza) to replace local government that may have collapsed, even sending in emergency response teams after airstrikes. Officials have also continued educational efforts among displaced populations, ensuring that what little schooling is on offer aligns with Hamas's agenda .

The September **polio vaccination campaign**

([https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/09/1154311#:~:text=Around%20560%2C000%20children%20under%20ten,\(WHO\)%20reported%20on%20Friday](https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/09/1154311#:~:text=Around%20560%2C000%20children%20under%20ten,(WHO)%20reported%20on%20Friday)) in Gaza epitomized the movement's continued ability to organize—not to mention its aptitude for self-promotion. The internationally led operation was exploited by Hamas Health Ministry officials, who sent text messages to local populations announcing the campaign and essentially taking credit for organizing it. Hamas officials, in parallel with personnel from the WHO and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), **helped vaccinate (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/01/world/middleeast/gaza-polio-vaccine.html>)** approximately 550,000 Gazans within twelve days, showing impressive efficiency.

In addition to more formal governance, Hamas uses criminal elements to ensure its control. With the movement's approval, **crime families (<https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-814117>)** in Gaza have been collecting taxes and enforcing order. In return, Hamas allows them to divert respectable chunks of humanitarian aid, among other benefits.

At the same time, Hamas has sought to suppress any attempt to establish governance alternatives in Gaza. For example, armed Hamas representatives have threatened the heads of several clans that tried to operate independently and reportedly **murdered the head of the Dughmush clan (<https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-792203>)**. The movement has also countered members of Fatah and the Palestinian Authority when they seek control over aid distribution. As Fatah spokesman Munzer al-Hayek put it in a recent **interview (<https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/hamass-feud-with-palestinian-rivals-adds-to-doubts-over-gazas-postwar-future-a364b468>)**, Hamas is “trying to eliminate any control on the ground in Gaza outside of its own.”

Controlling Aid, Controlling the Narrative

In this context, Hamas's taxation and distribution of humanitarian aid serves as an important resource that ensures its continued status as the strongest force in Gaza. Such aid undergoes a **complex journey into Gaza (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/destruction-lawlessness-red-tape-hobble-aid-gazans-go-hungry-2024-03-25/>)** involving Israel, Egypt, and international organizations. In the early days of the war, **uniformed Hamas police officers (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/07/23/gaza-hamas-government-israel-netanyahu/>)** guarded the convoys once they entered Gaza, but they retreated after being targeted by Israeli forces. Today, Hamas continues to use operatives **to attack the convoys (<https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-814117>)**. In some places, this tactic has led to widespread chaos and looting where neither Hamas nor Israel is in control; in other areas, Hamas maintains control using **plainclothes officers (<https://www.cnbc.com/2024/02/03/hamas-deploys-police-distributes-funds-in-sign-of-resurgence-in-gaza-areas-israeli-troops-have-left.html>)**. Overall, Hamas's widespread control of aid has made many Gazans feel that much still depends on the movement.

Hamas has reinforced this impression by carrying out propaganda activities that convey three key messages: Israel is the only enemy to blame for the ongoing chaos; the public is still required to comply with Hamas directives; and Hamas is here to stay after the war. The movement likely deems such activities even more important given revelations about popular opinion in Gaza. For example, a document created by Hamas's general security apparatus was recently uncovered showing the **manipulation (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/seized-hamas-documents-show-terror-group-inflated-its-support-rates-idf-says/>)** of data released by top Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaki, with the intention of inflating the movement's public favorability ratings. Notably, a July-August poll by **Zogby Research (<https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/tbi-comment-new-polling-by-zogby->**

research-services-reveals-palestinian) concluded that only 7 percent of Gazans wanted Hamas to govern the territory after the war.

What Needs to Be Done?

The death of Hamas's top leadership—particularly Sinwar, whose hardline politics and continued presence in Gaza made dislodging the movement nearly impossible—could be the change needed to bring about a new order. To complete the process of toppling Hamas—which includes replacing its (often effective) civil control over large parts of Gaza and convincing locals that the movement will not be in control postwar—the international community must lay the necessary groundwork. This entails formulating a powerful and independent governmental alternative and then taking steps to implement it. To reach this goal, the following steps are essential:

- **Highlight Hamas shadow governance.** As described above, the movement has kept its grip on many parts of Gaza in part by maintaining effective governance. Policymakers and the public need to understand that Hamas seeks to retain this civilian control after the war, using its current combination of effective service provision, violent intimidation, collaboration with criminal gangs, and other tactics. Steps need to be taken now to prevent this outcome.
- **Undermine Hamas propaganda and disinformation.** The movement is taking advantage of the current chaos by using its remaining bureaucracy to spread propaganda and project power. This disinformation helps sustain its status among Gazans, who see no other viable alternative and likely prefer the semblance of order Hamas provides in some areas over the complete chaos of undergoverned spaces. Yet recent polls suggest that Hamas's influence campaign may be floundering, so the current environment could be fertile ground for an alternative to emerge.
- **Do not let Hamas control humanitarian aid.** In conflicts and post-conflict environments, aid becomes a source of power. Accordingly, steps need to be taken—such as providing armed protection—to ensure that once aid enters Gaza, it is safeguarded until it reaches its intended recipients. What is certain is that humanitarian aid must be provided, and it must not be linked to Hamas at any point during its delivery.
- **Keep the Gaza bureaucracy.** Not every Hamas bureaucrat in Gaza is a Hamas fighter. To facilitate a new governance entity and avoid a [humanitarian disaster \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/surge-gaza-violence-increases-famine-risk-monitor-says-2024-10-17/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/surge-gaza-violence-increases-famine-risk-monitor-says-2024-10-17/), many of those who previously worked in Gaza's administration will need to be incorporated into the next one so that essential services can be provided to the people efficiently. Again, this must be done without relinquishing local control to Hamas.

Devorah Margolin is the Blumenstein-Rosenbloom Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute. Neomi Neumann is a visiting fellow at the Institute and former head of the research unit at the Israel Security Agency. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

A Partnership Worth Preserving

Oct 24, 2024

◆
Reuven Rivlin,
Jawad al-Anani,
Robert Satloff

(/policy-analysis/partnership-worth-preserving)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Oman Seeks to Improve Its Coastal Security

Oct 23, 2024

◆
Jonathan Campbell-James

(/policy-analysis/oman-seeks-improve-its-coastal-security)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

How Blinken Can Seize Opportunity After the Deaths of Sinwar and Nasrallah

Oct 22, 2024

◆
David Makovsky

(/policy-analysis/how-blinken-can-seize-opportunity-after-deaths-sinwar-and-nasrallah)

TOPICS

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)