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No hope for peace. Six months of the war in Gaza

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During the war against Hamas, which has been ongoing since 7 October, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) have been conducting their operations in most of the Gaza Strip. So far, the area around the town of Rafah near the border with Egypt has been excluded from Israeli ground operations, though it has been targeted by airstrikes. This area covers 65 square kilometres and is now home to some 1.5 million people, mostly refugees. The IDF has not maintained a permanent presence in the other parts of the Gaza Strip, but it has retained operational freedom because, contrary to Israeli claims of exercising effective control, hostilities are still ongoing there, albeit at a lower intensity. Four to five Israeli brigades are currently operating in Gaza, compared to around 20 at the peak of operations. They are stationed in the town of Khan Yunis and in the corridor that intersects the Strip and isolates its northern part.

Since the start of the operation, the IDF has lost 250 soldiers and killed 32,000 Palestinians, including both civilians and combatants. The ratio between these two groups of Palestinian casualties remains unknown, but at least 9,000 women (data from UN Women) and more than 13,000 children (UNICEF) are among those killed. These figures do not include people buried under the rubble, a significant number as more than 150,000 buildings, or about half of the Strip's pre-war total, have been damaged or destroyed.

Since the war began, the humanitarian situation in Gaza has been extremely difficult, with constant shortages of electricity, water, medicine and food. According to assessments by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), some 500,000 people in Gaza are currently on the brink of starvation; UNICEF has reported cases of child deaths from malnutrition. The situation is particularly bad in the Strip's northern part, where 30% of children are suffering from 'acute malnutrition' (UNICEF). UN agencies (UNICEF, UNRWA), human rights organisations (such as Human Rights Watch and Oxfam) and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, have all blamed Israel for blocking aid convoys to northern Gaza, something that Israel has denied.

Commentary

- The operation in Gaza is Israel's longest conflict since the First Israeli-Arab War in 1948–49. It has also had a dramatic impact on the Gaza Strip. This refers not only to the number of deaths and the extent of material damage, but also to the fact that this area, which previously had territorial integrity, has now been split in two by the aforementioned corridor south of Gaza City. In addition, the northern part has seen extensive depopulation as a result of the evacuation of its residents to the south in the early days

of the war. Israel will probably seek to maintain this situation even after its operations come to an end as this makes it easier to exercise control of the Strip.

- While Israel has been steadily turning the military situation in Gaza to its advantage, it has so far failed to achieve anything that could be considered a political success. Hamas has retained its operational ability while Israel has been unable to retrieve the hostages. This and domestic political determinants mean that, despite mounting international pressure, Israel will press ahead with its operation and is likely to launch a ground invasion of Rafah.
- Public opinion polls conducted in Israel, for example by the Israel Democracy Institute, have consistently shown that the majority of respondents are against ending the war at this stage. This attitude has bolstered Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his coalition, whose popularity plummeted after the attack on 7 October. From Netanyahu's perspective, a drawn-out military operation puts off the moment of political reckoning, offers him a chance to regain support and makes it possible to retain control over domestic politics. Benny Gantz, the opposition leader who has joined the special 'war cabinet', has topped all the recent polls and also enjoys the clear support of the US, but his influence on the situation is limited.
- Although a definitive end to the conflict currently seems unlikely, the two sides could agree a temporary ceasefire during which some hostages would be exchanged for Palestinians held in Israeli prisons and detention centres. Negotiations on this issue have been taking place for many weeks in Qatar and Egypt with US support. Their success depends on whether Hamas will drop its demand for a permanent end to Israeli military operations as the Israeli government has insisted that it will not agree to any formula that restricts its long-term ability to conduct such operations. Meanwhile, domestic pressure to prioritise the return of the hostages is yet to reach a scale that would force the Israeli government to change its position.
- The progress of the Israeli operation to date, particularly Netanyahu's announcement on 17 March that the IDF would launch a ground invasion of Rafah, has made it absolutely clear that Western countries have limited leverage over Israel. In view of the rising death toll and the increasingly dire humanitarian situation in Gaza, in recent weeks officials from the UK, Germany, the US and other countries have been urging Israel to agree to an immediate ceasefire and authorise greater supplies of food and medicine. However, Netanyahu has dismissed these calls as interference in Israel's internal affairs. This has put the US administration in a particularly difficult position: since the war began, it has provided Israel with material and political support without which its ally would not be able to fight this war, but it has failed to gain a proportionate influence over the situation in return. On the other hand, Israel's ability to shape public opinion in the United States and Netanyahu's personal popularity among part of the US electorate mean that the White House has few ways to discipline Israel without running the risk that this could become the subject of domestic political debate in the US and expose the administration to criticism. This would be particularly problematic for Joe Biden in his campaign for re-election this year.
- The northern part of the Gaza Strip is experiencing the worst humanitarian situation. In addition to malnutrition among children, UN agencies have also reported dehydration,

malnutrition and stress among pregnant women, which has led to a spike in miscarriages and higher infant mortality rates. Aid can only reach the north with the permission of Israel, which has only allowed limited supplies to enter the area. According to OCHA, out of the 224 shipments of humanitarian aid that were planned in February, 88 were halted and 25 were delayed. This situation makes it necessary to step up airdrops of humanitarian supplies, which is a more expensive and inadequate solution. Israel's conduct has prompted the US to start work on installing a floating dock off the coast of the Gaza Strip (which does not have a seaport) for aid deliveries by sea.