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Hamas and the October 7 Attack: Causes and Consequences of its Greatest Strategic Mistake

Introduction

In 2007, researcher Nassim Nicholas Taleb developed his "black swan theory" as a framework for interpreting certain events. This theory is based on a 17th-century historical belief in which Europeans thought all swans were white until explorations in Australian lands discovered a variety previously considered non-existent: the black swan. Applied to economics, history, and international relations, Taleb uses this metaphor to establish unknown and unpredictable events with transformative social, political, and economic consequences. Following these elements, the October 7, 2023 attack launched by Hamas fits the description.

One of the characteristics of a "black swan" is the attempt to rationalize *a posteriori* the reasons that motivated events that were as unpredictable as they were transformative. Since the attacks, there have been many attempts to explain what led Hamas to decide to act as it did. The truth is that, in a retrospective look at Hamas's history, it might seem shocking that the organization made this decision. Since its inception, Hamas's decisions have attempted to find a balance between terrorist actions that position it at the forefront of the fight against Israel, and the protection of the movement itself. In other words, avoiding a reaction so massive that it could destroy the movement. This calculation, with varying degrees of success, has been a constant throughout its history.

For this reason, we consider it worthwhile to attempt to find the causes and analyze the consequences that motivated the organization to trigger a paradigm shift as massive as the one brought about by the October 7 attack. These causes are influenced by several factors: the internal and external context, the influence of Hamas's history, and the organization's decision-making process.

The Internal and External Context

By October 2023, the social and economic situation in the Gaza Strip was at a breaking point. Decades of blockade had left 80% of the population dependent on international aid. Between 2006 and 2022, GDP per capita contracted by 37%. According to the United Nations, a year before the attack, that same GDP was "11.7% below the 2019 level and close to its lowest level since 1994". Poverty was endemic, and the decline in foreign aid combined with rising public debt cornered the population. This difficult economic situation

had become a threat to Hamas's administrative capacity and was eroding its popularity.¹ According to a poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) just before the conflict, 72% of the Palestinian population believed there was corruption in Hamas-controlled institutions. Although only very slightly, the popularity of Fatah was growing while Hamas's remained at low levels.²

The international context added more pressure on Hamas. The Abraham Accords—peace treaties signed starting in September 2020 between Israel and several Arab countries—threatened to establish a new paradigm in the region. The United Arab Emirates was the first country to sign, and Sudan, Bahrain, and Morocco soon joined. These countries joined Egypt and Jordan, which had already normalized relations with the Hebrew State in 1979 and 1994, respectively.

In 2023, one of the region's major powers, Saudi Arabia, was in advanced negotiations to join the group of signatories. On September 21, 2023, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated in an interview with Fox News that normalization between Riyadh and Tel Aviv was "getting closer every day" and expressed hope that negotiations would lead to "a place that will ease the life of the Palestinians and get Israel as a player in the Middle East".³

From Hamas's perspective, the *status quo* was leading to a dead end both internally and externally. And, according to internal documents seized by Israel, the possibility of Saudi Arabia becoming one of the signatories of the accords influenced their conviction that they needed a plot twist.⁴ Their reaction would be to greenlight a plan they had developed for years. The operation was risky, and Israel's reaction would be massive, but past experiences also influenced Hamas's strategic calculations.

¹ UN Trade & Development (UNCTAD): "Prior to current crisis, decades-long blockade hollowed Gaza's economy, leaving 80% of population dependent on international aid", UNCTAD/PRESS/PR/2023/025. <<https://unctad.org/press-material/prior-current-crisis-decades-long-blockade-hollowed-gazas-economy-leaving-80>>. Retrieved on May 12, 2026

² Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR): "Public Opinion Poll, N° 89", 6-9 September 2023. Disponible en <<https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/955>>. Retrieved on May 12, 2026.

³ <<https://the arabweekly.com/saudi-crown-prince-sees-israel-normalisation-closer-wants-solution-palestinian-issue-iran-nuclear>>

⁴ BERGMAN, Ronen, RASGON, Adam and KINGSLEY, Patrick: "Secret Documents Show Hamas Tried to Persuade Iran to Join Its Oct. 7 Attack", The New York Times, 12 de octubre de 2024, Online edition, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/12/world/middleeast/hamas-israel-war.html>>. Retrieved on May 9, 2026.

The "Shalit Effect"

Since emerging as a political, social, and armed movement, there have been two moments in its history that Hamas has interpreted as strategic victories. Both were preceded by audacious actions, yielded beneficial medium-term results, and significantly shaped how the situation was read in 2023.

The Marj al-Zohour Exile

On February 16 and May 3, 1989, Hamas undertook its first armed operation: the kidnapping and murder of Israeli soldiers Avi Sasportas and Ilan Saadon. On May 7, Sasportas's body was found, triggering a massive Israeli crackdown. On June 15, Israel arrested Sheikh and Hamas co-founder Ahmed Yassin, who would not be released from prison until 1997. During that crackdown, virtually the entire leadership structure of the organization was arrested, from the highest echelons down to the mid and local levels. According to Mousa Abu Marzouk, one of its historical leaders, it was one of the most critical moments in its history:

"None of the movement's organs were still functioning: none of the mass mobilization structures, military operations, security, organizational development, media, or political action. The entire institutional machinery of Hamas was rendered useless."⁵

The organization responded with a new kidnapping, that of border soldier Nissim Toledano in December 1992. They demanded the release of Yassin in exchange for his freedom, and when Israel refused, they killed Toledano. Tel Aviv's government, then led by Labor's Yitzhak Rabin, made an unprecedented decision: to deport those it considered closely linked to Palestinian groups. This included 415 members of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, who were deported to Lebanon, near the border in lands close to the village of Marj al-Zohour.

The objective was to dismantle Hamas by deporting its most prominent leaders, hoping they would scatter. However, that did not happen; the deportees organized a camp that became a focus of international attention. Consequently, the decision had major

⁵ HUSSEIN, Ahmed Qasem. "The Evolution of the Military Action of the Izz Al-Din al-Qassam Brigades: How Hamas Established Its Army in Gaza". Al-Muntaqa, vol. 4, n. 1. (2021), p. 86.

implications—some favorable for Hamas and others detrimental to Israel.

Hamas became a movement of transnational projection, making itself known to the world and, above all, to the Arab audience, before whom it presented itself as an Islamic alternative to the PLO. In the camp, named "Jerusalem—The Return," the organization received delegations from other groups and nations, deepening communication channels and bonds of collaboration with countries like Iran or Syria. Its connections with Hezbollah were particularly significant. Furthermore, Hamas's top leaders were in the camp, allowing them to meet continuously without fear of capture. This freedom, along with contacts and advice from other organizations, allowed them to assess what was not working within Hamas and find ways to reform it. The camp was, in other words, the arena where Hamas began to mature politically.⁶

For Israel, it was a diplomatic blow. The country's image had already deteriorated due to its reaction during the First Intifada, and the unilateral decision to deport hundreds of Palestinians worsened it. On December 18, just one day after the deportation, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 799, which "strongly condemned" the deportation and expressed its "firm opposition to any such deportation". It was one of the clearest condemnations to date.

The return of the deportees, which took place in several phases, was interpreted in the local political arena as a strategic victory, especially for Hamas sympathizers. What began with a series of audacious armed actions ended up boosting the organization's popularity both inside and outside the Palestinian territories—a lesson Hamas's leadership would never forget.

The Kidnapping of Gilad Shalit

In its propaganda narrative, published more than a year after the October 7 attack, Hamas notes that "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on October 7 targeted Israeli military positions and sought to arrest enemy soldiers to pressure Israeli authorities to release the thousands of Palestinians held in Israeli jails through a prisoner exchange".⁷ This document basically reflects what Tareq Baconi describes as the "Shalit effect" —that is, the strategic influence

⁶ CARETTI ORIA, Gonzalo. "Hamás y su influencia en la causa palestina: orígenes, fundación y consolidación del Movimiento de Resistencia Islámica (1968-2004)". Doctoral dissertation, School of Geography and History, Complutense University of Madrid, 2025. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14352/125755>

⁷ HAMAS, "Our narrative ... Operation Al-Aqsa Flood", pag. 7

of the kidnapping and release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.⁸ Few elements could have influenced Hamas's decision to launch its plan more than this.

On June 25, 2006, Hamas militants used a tunnel near the Kerem Shalom crossing to attack an Israeli tank. In the operation, they killed two soldiers, wounded four others, and captured a 19-year-old, Gilad Shalit. They took Shalit to the Gaza Strip through the same tunnel. His captivity lasted more than five years, during which Hamas kept Shalit in a secret location completely cut off from the outside world. Throughout this time, the organization intermittently released proof of life, including a letter in 2006, an audio recording in 2007, and a video in 2009, in which he appeared visibly thin.

The kidnapping had occurred during the government of Ehud Olmert. Practically from the beginning, a negotiation process involving other countries began to secure his release. Egypt emerged as the main mediator, and Germany also intervened in 2009. These negotiations took place over more than 120 rounds, and an agreement was finally reached and signed by Olmert's successor, Benjamin Netanyahu. The deal involved the release of Shalit in exchange for the phased release of 1,027 Palestinian prisoners considered "high security" by Israel. Among them were high-level Hamas figures such as Yahya Sinwar, Zaher Jabarin, or Rawhi Mushtaha.

All of them were welcomed in Gaza as heroes and soon joined the Hamas structures governing the Strip. Sinwar himself quickly became the top Hamas figure in Gaza. Thus, the "Shalit effect" consists of the strategic reading derived from this experience. Hamas managed to free not only a large number of Palestinian prisoners—including many from the organization—but also a good portion of them who were high-ranking internal leaders. It also allowed Hamas to improve its popularity ratings, projecting itself as the "only effective defender of the Palestinian cause" and as a competent and effective actor compared to the failures experienced through Fatah's diplomatic route.

Some of those leaders from October 7, starting with the mastermind of the attack, Yahya Sinwar, were among those released, and this experience undoubtedly influenced their strategic calculations. Therefore, Hamas's objective was mass kidnapping, hoping to achieve goals as significant as those reached through that agreement, or even much greater goals, since, after all, they would have more hostages to use as bargaining chips.

⁸ BACONI, Tareq: *Hamás: auge y pacificación de la resistencia palestina*, Madrid, Capitán Swing Libros, (2024), p.362

Hamas's Miscalculations

By 2023, Hamas had concluded that it needed to shatter the *status quo* with a major blow, just as it had in the case of the Marj al-Zohour deportation and the kidnapping of soldier Shalit. However, in its calculations, Hamas committed a chain of severe errors.

The Chaos of the Attack

Hamis designed the operation to be carried out by multiple groups in three waves. The bulk of the invasion was executed by the "Nukhba Force," the elite forces of the Al-Qassam Brigades, while internal battalions launched 1,406 rockets in 31 minutes. The first objective of the incursion was the Headquarters of the Israeli Army's Gaza Division, successfully taking control of it and cutting off communications with the rest of the Army. In the second wave, starting at 7:00 AM, 600 new militants from the "Nukhba Force" entered Israel with the goal of seizing control of communities to kidnap as many soldiers and civilians as possible. At that moment, the other prongs of the attack joined in: paratrooper operations and the failed seaborne incursion, whose objective was the Zikim naval base. However, during this second invasion, it was not only Hamas militants who entered; fighters from Islamic Jihad, as well as Palestinians linked to armed clans, such as the Doghmush Clan, and other individuals also crossed over.

In the third wave of the invasion, which began at 9:00 AM, in addition to about 435 new militants from the "Nukhba Force," more militants unaffiliated with Hamas entered, acting on their own accord. Across these waves, more than a dozen military bases and outposts were attacked, as well as 20 kibbutzim—including some of the most prominent like Be'eri, Nir Oz, and Kerem Shalom—and an electronic music festival. Particularly during the second and third waves, the attackers belonged to a variety of forces: from Hamas and Islamic Jihad battalions to independent Palestinians or clan members.

This was perhaps one of Hamas's greatest miscalculations. The organization could control its formal divisions to ensure they focused on the strategy: kidnapping. But by breaching the borders and dismantling the Israeli army's military resistance, Hamas also opened the door to other organizations, not to mention private individuals, who had their own interests. This opened the door to chaos and, as the organization itself acknowledged in a propaganda bulletin, they only controlled part of the operation:

"We reiterate that the Palestinian resistance remained fully disciplined and committed to Islamic values during the operation, and that Palestinian fighters

only targeted occupation soldiers and those who bore arms against our people. (...) Perhaps some faults occurred during the implementation of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood due to the rapid collapse of the Israeli military and security system and the chaos generated in the border areas with Gaza." ⁹

Hamas's complete version should not be taken at face value either, as amid that chaos, many of its own militants were responsible for massive atrocities. In any case, not all the hostages ended up in the organization's hands. What does seem logical is that the objective of this attack was to secure many hostages to use in a future negotiation with Israel. ¹⁰

This operation resulted in the deadliest terrorist attack in Israel's history: 1,200 people died, the majority of them civilians, and another 251 were kidnapped. The government handling the reaction to such an attack would be very different from that of Yitzhak Rabin or Ehud Olmert.

The Nature of the Israeli Government

Hamas committed another miscalculation in its assessment of Israel. According to its documents, the organization's leadership believed that the Israeli "internal situation" was one of the reasons they felt "compelled to move toward a strategic battle". ¹¹

This "internal situation" was an apparent reference to the social and political unrest Israel was experiencing due to Netanyahu's plans to overhaul the judiciary. Certainly, those judicial reforms triggered a wave of protests between January and October 2023 that kept the country divided.

However, Hamas failed to correctly assess two factors: the personal situation of the Prime Minister and the political and ideological nature of his governing coalition. Both would ensure that Israel's response was unprecedented and distinct from previous wars.

At the time, Netanyahu was facing three criminal cases in Israeli courts—the so-called

⁹ HAMAS, "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood...", pag. 7-8

¹⁰ The fact that the primary objective was kidnapping is also evident in documents seized by Israel and published by Israeli sources. According to Israel Hayom, hours before the attack, the commander of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades in Gaza, Abu Saheeb al-Hadad—one of Hamas's most senior military commanders—summoned his battalions and handed them a written document bearing the official seal. In it, he communicated the movement's decision to launch the operation and established its primary objective: "To capture a large number of soldiers in the early stages and send them to the Gaza Strip." ILNAY, Itai and PIATOV, Filipp. "Like sadistic Nazis: Secret Hamas papers reveal step-by-step action plan for Oct. 7", Israel Hayom, 28-06-2024, Online edition. <<https://www.israelhayom.com/2024/06/28/like-sadistic-nazis-secret-hamas-papers-reveal-step-by-step-action-plan-for-oct-7/>> Retrieved on May 11, 2026.

¹¹ BERGMAN, Ronen, RASGON, Adam and KINGSLEY, Patrick: "Secret Documents Show Hamas Tried..."

"Case 1000," "Case 2000," and "Case 4000"—for fraud, bribery, and breach of trust. If found guilty, he could face up to 13 years in prison, and his alleged involvement in these cases was placing immense pressure on his government. In March 2023, his coalition passed what became known as the "Incapacitation Law," which prevented the Supreme Court or the Attorney General from declaring him unfit due to his legal cases, effectively allowing him to continue governing even as the trial progressed.

Hamas was also mistaken in evaluating the political nature of the Israeli government. During the kidnapping of soldier Shalit, the Israeli government was led by Ehud Olmert, a traditional right-wing politician whose decisions aligned with standard Israeli classical right-wing patterns. The soldier was released under an agreement endorsed by the subsequent government, also led by Netanyahu, but it is interesting to analyze the political components of that coalition and compare them with the executive in power on October 7, 2023.

In October 2011, besides Likud, the coalition included Yisrael Beiteinu (nationalist party), Shas (Sephardic ultra-Orthodox party), Atzmaut (a center-right faction split from the Labor Party), and Habayit Hayehudi (a right-wing religious Zionist party). However, the real political weight in the coalition was held by Likud, with 27 seats, and Atzmaut, with 5. The more extreme options were outweighed by the sum of both, providing the Israeli government with a greater capacity for a more restrained response.

The current Israeli government has a much more extreme political nature, in which supremacist and far-right formations carry significant weight. The coalition consists of 6 parties, at least three of which are far-right. Between four of them, they command 25 seats, and 36 if they add the remaining 11, giving leaders like Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich substantial leverage in decision-making. The difference in reaction between one government and the other, combined with Netanyahu's personal situation, would mean the response would bear no resemblance to the one that led to the agreement for soldier Shalit's release.

The Consequences for Hamas

The third major miscalculation is, without a doubt, the evaluation of its military capabilities to face an inevitable confrontation with Israeli forces. The experience accumulated in previous wars involved massive bombardment and clashes with troops in areas adjacent to the border, but not a total invasion and a prolonged campaign.

According to a study by Brian Carter, in December 2023, Al-Qassam was composed of 5 brigades: the Northern Brigade and Gaza Brigade, each with 6 battalions, and the Central, Khan Younis, and Rafah Brigades, each with 5 battalions. All of them were decentralized across various towns in each region.¹² The tunnel network connected them, and it was estimated that the group had between 20,000 and 30,000 militants. This structure had become increasingly sophisticated, expanding its capabilities based on military lessons learned from other confrontations. But the war that erupted far exceeded the dimensions of previous ones.

Hamas was also seeking external support for an operation that was planned for years, trying to drag its regional allies into it. According to internal documents of the organization, Sinwar spent years trying to convince Iran and Hezbollah to become more actively involved in the plan, though that commitment was never fully solid.¹³

The consequences have been devastating for the organization itself as well. The war has decimated its leadership, both political and military. Political leaders like Ismail Haniyeh, Abdel Fattah Al-Dukhan, Yahya Sinwar, and Saleh al-Arouri have been killed, alongside many other mid-level figures in the chain of command. On the armed front, historical figures like Mohammed Deif, Muhammad Sinwar, and Marwan Issa have also fallen, along with much of the local command.¹⁴

It seems unlikely that Hamas did not expect a furious reaction, and there are even reasonable doubts about whether the movement's entire leadership unanimously accepted this strategic decision. As Baconi suggests, "the magnitude of the attack, its implications for the Palestinian people, and the surprise expressed by political leaders and allies of Hamas suggest that the military wing acted on its own". In other words, the decision to execute the plan was taken by "the military wing in Gaza under the direction

¹² CARTER, Brian: "The Order of Battle of Hamas' Izz al Din al Qassem Brigades (Updated)", Institute for the Study of War, 22 de diciembre de 2023, on line. <<https://understandingwar.org/research/middle-east/the-order-of-battle-of-hamas-izz-al-din/>>, Retrieved on May 8, 2026.

¹³ The documents note that "Hamas felt confident of the general support of its allies, but concluded that it might need to proceed without their full participation." However, that perception of support may have been mistaken. This is demonstrated by the subsequent reaction of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, who took a month to respond to the attack. Although he expressed his support for the Palestinian cause, Nasrallah emphasized that "the operation was 100% Palestinian" and that "those responsible kept it hidden from everyone." BERGMAN, Ronen, RASGON, Adam and KINGSLEY, Patrick: "Secret Documents Show Hamas Tried to Persuade ..."

¹⁴ Israel believes it has already killed the top military commanders involved in the October 7 attack. The last remaining one, Abu Saheeb al-Haddad, died last May; he was considered the last major leader of the attack. See ZBOUN, Kifah: "Ezzedine al-Haddad: The Last Surviving Hamas Commander of the Oct. 7 Attack," Ashraq Al Awsat, September 1, 2025. Online edition. <<https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5181396-ezzedine-al-haddad-last-surviving-hamas-commander-oct-7-attack>> Accessed May 11, 2026.

of Yahya Sinwar, with a degree of secrecy that caught most of Hamas's political leaders by surprise".¹⁵

Whatever the case, the internal impact has been transformative. Following the assassination of Haniyeh, the organization elected Sinwar—a hawk—to govern the movement. However, the wartime situation forced him to hide and direct the fighting, which posed a problem for managing the rest of the organization's structures. To resolve this issue, Hamas created a provisional committee of five leaders to manage Hamas while Sinwar was fighting. Following Sinwar's death, a direct replacement was not immediately elected; instead, this provisional committee has taken charge of making strategic decisions while postponing the process of electing a new leader.

On the operational level, the invasion has caused two things: first, Hamas has lost most of its military structure in terms of personnel, infrastructure, and arsenal, leaving its combat capacity severely reduced.¹⁶ Second, Hamas has lost nearly its entire charitable and social structure, which allowed it not only to influence the population—thereby gaining political leverage—but also to organize a dynamic of asymmetric warfare. This structure, built during the 1970s and 1980s, was what turned Hamas into the organization it became.

Embarked on a reconstruction process, the organization is currently prioritizing its civil governance capacity, waiting for an Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Its strategic priority is not armed operations—for which, on the other hand, it lacks the real capacity to engage—but rather preserving or rebuilding its administrative power. The price it has paid following the attack has also modified internal balances, at least temporarily: the leadership in exile, which is more political and pragmatic, remains virtually intact, while the Gaza or military leadership, traditionally more prominent within the Political Bureau, has been decimated.

Conclusions

The October 7 attack was, as Taleb would say, a "black swan"—difficult to predict, carrying terrible human consequences, and possessing a disruptive dimension.

¹⁵ BACONI, Tareq: *Hamás: auge ...*, Madrid, Capitán Swing Libros, (2024), p.17

¹⁶ "Sources told Asharq Al-Awsat that Khaled Meshaal contacted factions in Gaza to discuss the fate of their weapons," Asharq Al-Awsat, March 19, 2026. Online edition. Available at <<https://is.gd/faccionesGaza>>. Retrieved on May 11, 2026.

According to this analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- **1.** Hamas's economic and political situation led the organization to conclude that it had to break the *status quo* to protect its share of governance and power. The economic crisis in the Strip, combined with the risk of a paradigm shift in the Middle East due to the Abraham Accords, drove the process.
- **2.** The so-called "Shalit effect" was key to their calculations, as they thought they could repeat the success of that experience. Securing a large number of hostages made them believe they could extract concessions that they could not achieve through other means.
- **3.** Hamas made a chain of errors, both tactical and political, which have led the organization into its greatest existential crisis since its formation. These errors include the military design of the operation, the interpretation of Israel's response and its internal situation.
- **4.** Although its main allies, Iran and Hezbollah, had generic knowledge of its intentions, Hamas launched the attack without structurally coordinating with them.
- **5.** Currently, Hamas is seeking the survival of the movement and will try to avoid direct confrontations with Israel that could further weaken the organization. The consequences have also caused a shift in the internal balance among the movement's power centers, leaving the Gaza branch heavily weakened. Although difficult to certify, it is highly probable that the decision to launch the attack was made by a very small number of leaders within the Gaza leadership.

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