

What's Next in Gaza

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A ground invasion seems all but certain—but then what?

By [Hanna Rosin](#)



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Just as there are stages of grief, there are stages of war. Not yet two weeks after Hamas's surprise attack, Israel is still in a raw, early stage. My colleague Graeme Wood, who arrived in Jerusalem this week, described it to me this way: "Israel is still reeling from the trauma of the attack on October 7. That manifests in a number of ways. And one is that there's a certain amount of Israeli policy that is driven right now by wrath."

Israeli officials insist that they are targeting Hamas, not Gazan citizens. But the situation on the ground for Gazan citizens is dire—a humanitarian crisis of catastrophic proportions, according to the United Nations and other agencies. Wood told me that, among many of the Israelis he's interviewed, the prevailing attitude is a dangerous if understandable combination of anger, fear, and mourning.

The atrocities committed against Israeli citizens on October 7 were especially inhumane. And, as one Israeli I talked to put it, this society's worst nightmare is vulnerability. What happens when a nation makes crucial wartime decisions while still processing the shock and

anger over what they've experienced?

In today's episode, we discuss the state of Israel with Wood, who frequently reports from the Middle East. I spoke with him shortly after a devastating explosion at a hospital in Gaza, and amid the widespread expectation that Israel will soon send ground troops into Gaza.

Listen to the conversation here:

The following is a transcript of the episode:

[MUSIC]

Hanna Rosin: Just as there are stages of grief there are stages of war. And Israel is in an early one.

[TAPE]

Graeme Wood: Israel is still reeling from the trauma of the attack of October 7, that manifests in a number of ways. And one is that there's a certain amount of Israeli policy that is driven right now by wrath.

Rosin: Wrath. A combination of anger, fear, mourning and revenge. Which, given the circumstances, seems like a dangerous place to be.

This is *Radio Atlantic*. I'm Hanna Rosin. Today, as war in the Middle East is getting more intense, we look at what happens when a nation makes critical wartime decisions in this state of mind. And how they move from there, to step two, a stage that's more strategic, more practical, maybe even conciliatory?

As President Joe Biden was on his way to visit Israel, I spoke with Graeme Wood, an *Atlantic* staff writer who has been reporting in the Middle East in recent months. We reached him in Jerusalem on Tuesday.

[MUSIC]

Rosin: Graeme, you have landed in Israel. Can you just talk about some of the things that you've seen and encountered this week?

Wood: Well, I actually landed in Jordan, so the first thing that I noticed was it was difficult to get to Israel. There were so many rockets that were coming out of Gaza that airlines understandably pulled back. So I flew into Jordan, landed there, and then went by land into an Israel that was very different from the one that I left last time I was here, just a month ago.

Rosin: And what do you mean, it's different? What were some of the things that you noticed immediately?

Wood: First of all, getting to Jerusalem, which is a city that's usually filled with pilgrims, filled with tourists. It is eerily quiet in a lot of places that I've only known to be absolutely chock-full of people.

The other thing that's really amazing to note compared to a month ago is, a month ago, it seems like ancient history, but we're talking about convulsions of politics and huge rifts in Israeli society that were playing out in the streets, mostly of Tel Aviv, over the efforts of the government to remake how Israeli politics work. And there's an unsettling consensus that has replaced that unsettling division where it went from totally divided to a unity that is really weird to feel in this place. And it happened in the snap of the fingers.

Rosin: And what is the mood of that unity?

Wood: So there are aspects of rah-rah patriotism. There's also an ongoing sense of trauma. I mean, the number of people who died, the grisly fashion in which they died. It's something that every Israeli has been seeing, and has really understood it.

I mean, it is so shocking to the conscience, and so close to the lives of so many people here that I think it's gonna be a while before people have processed this tragedy, this atrocity at that second level.

What you do have, though, is a political consensus and a military consensus that I think appeared relatively quickly after October 7 when Hamas broke through the Gaza wall and killed over a thousand people. And that consensus is that, whatever else is true, Hamas cannot exist.

And I haven't found, I think, almost any Israelis, except for extreme doves, who disagree with that point.

And as a corollary to that, they also agree that that requires going into Gaza, and depending on who you ask, rooting out Hamas, killing its leaders, or possibly just leveling the whole place, which is something that I've heard a number of Israelis say.

Rosin: Okay. So that right there is incredibly complicated, like those distinctions are important. When people say "rooting out Hamas," what do you hear?

Wood: Yeah, so "rooting out Hamas" means rooting out the ruling structures of Gaza. You know, Gaza was abandoned by Israel to the fate of being ruled by Hamas 15-plus years ago. And so getting rid of Hamas means getting rid of the government of this occupied territory. So it's a huge undertaking. And given how much Hamas has dug in, militarily—Hamas itself says there's 500 kilometers of tunnels that it controls under the Gaza Strip.

Those tunnels—filled with weapons; they're smuggling routes—they may have as many as 200 Israeli hostages in them right now. It's simply impossible to root out Hamas, whatever that phrase means, without actually going into the Gaza Strip, which Israel has been

extremely reluctant to do and now it's understood by everybody that, yeah, that's going to happen. And it's going to be bloody on both sides.

Rosin: By going in, you're talking about a ground invasion.

Wood: That's what's expected. Yes. And there's every indication that Israel is planning to do exactly that. What I think most surprising to most people is that it hasn't happened yet.

Rosin: So far there have been a lot of airstrikes and thousands of Gazans killed. What is Israel's goal in that phase of the attack?

Wood: Israel's goal right now seems to be to do what can be done before the invasion takes place. That is, first, the clearing out of a civilian population from the northern part of the Gaza Strip, specifically Gaza City, which they've been calling up people's cellphones, dropping leaflets. And in both cases, the message is: We're coming in. And we're going to kill the leaders of Hamas. We're going to destroy Hamas.

So, what's already happened is horrible beyond belief, and what's coming next will probably be worse.

Rosin: Always in these situations, there seems to be just this gap between the rhetoric and what happens on the ground. If you tell civilians to flee, where do they actually go?

Wood: Yeah. And when I said before that Israel is still reeling from the trauma of the attack of October 7, that manifests in a number of ways. And one is that there's a certain amount of Israeli policy that is driven right now by wrath.

It's vengeance. It's an understanding that *we have to do something. We have to get rid of Hamas.* And the phases of that operation, an operation that will almost certainly last months, maybe years. The reckoning of what those phases are going to be, is incomplete. And if you ask Israeli officials: "Who's going to run the Gaza Strip once you've gone into it? Are you simply going to be the governing authority there with your boots on the ground forever?"

The answer that you get is something like: "We don't know. Don't ask that question. We're at the stage right now of just realizing we had to go in against our wishes. We didn't want to have to go in, but we have to go in." And questions about what happens next, it's some version of: *It's unpatriotic to ask. It's untoward to ask.* But they themselves kind of admit that we're not really sure about that. *All we know is that we have to go in and the operations of Hamas on October 7 have forced us to do that.*

Rosin: So there is, as far as you can say, no step two. There's just step one: Root out Hamas in whatever way we have to do that. That's as far as we've gone.

Wood: I mean, I'm sure within Israeli planning, there are different ideas about how to proceed. but it's not something that Israel has come out and said, *We know how this is going to look. All they've said is, We know where it ends. It ends with the total annihilation of Hamas and, possibly for years to come, the hunting down of every single person who was involved in these atrocities.*

Rosin: You use the word *wrath*. Why do you use that word?

Wood: I think that there is no other word for it other than *wrath*. I mean, there is a belief that the response has to be maybe proportionate, maybe even disproportionate.

The other day, I was in Sderot, which is one of the fairly large communities that was attacked. There were 30, 000 people in it as of a week and a half ago. Right now. They've all been transferred elsewhere. The Israeli government has let some journalists in and has brought out politicians, members of these communities. And there was one guy, who was from Kibbutz Be'eri, which lost on the order of 100 people, I think. And seemed like a nice guy. He described himself as being in favor of peace. He described his community as being one that welcomed cooperation with Gazans before, and he said, "I'm still in favor of peace, but that place needs to be leveled."

He used the word *leveled*. That's a view that I think is not uncommon. And it's very hard to hear, because the view that Israel is going to annihilate Gaza is different from the one that the Israeli government wants to put out there. The Israeli government wants to say that *we are going to annihilate Hamas, and in so doing, we will actually liberate the people of Gaza who have been under the thumb of, Hamas.* And yet there are Israelis all over—not just the ones who are directly affected by the destruction of their communities along the Gaza border—who use language that is annihilationist.

Rosin: So what do you make of that? I mean, that feels like it has big implications if someone who describes himself as previously believing in peace is now more extreme than his own government.

Wood: Yeah, I think, we're still in a phase where this mode of wrath is the dominant one. There is also a phase that will have to come that is more practical—more practical and more moral, too. I mean, the flattening of Gaza would be an unspeakable tragedy and crime.

So, I think what happens next is, surely an invasion, but after that, a kind of, reengagement of Israel's reality principle, which means understanding that Gaza, in the end, unless terrible crime is committed against it, is going to still be a place that is Muslim. It's going to be Palestinian, and it's going to have to have some kind of modus vivendi with its neighbor, Israel.

Right now that thought, it's unthinkable, I think, for a lot of Israelis, because of the anger that they feel, the pain that they feel. I don't know when that shift is going to happen, but it's going to have to coincide with the realities of a military mission—remember that Israel was in Gaza. There were settlements there until more than 15 years ago and Israel left because it decided that it was not good for the continued health of Israel as a Jewish state. So that reality will not have changed, but at the moment, most Israelis I speak to, including government officials, don't want to imagine that moment.

They are saying simply that: *There's one sole objective right now, which is to destroy Hamas and then whatever comes after that, well, we'll figure it out once that moment comes. But Hamas's destruction is the only thing we're going to think about until then, monomaniacally.*

Rosin: Yeah. Wow. So Israel has no step two at the moment. Does Hamas? That's after the break.

[MUSIC]

Rosin: I want to switch to talking about Hamas. When the Hamas militants bulldozed through the fence, puncturing the myth that the Israeli military is invincible. That's what happened initially. Do you have a sense, on Hamas's side, if there was a step two, what that step two would be? What did they expect out of all of this?

Wood: Yeah, when the attack initially happened, when you see this incredibly well-planned, stealthily planned operation unfold, you wonder where it all leads. And so it started off with trained Hamas fighters breaking through the fence and, with startling ease, taking over military outposts of Israel. It ended with ordinary citizens of Gaza coming through and looting Israeli towns on that border. So we're talking about not a disciplined military force, but people coming through and stealing children's bicycles and solar panels and stuff from Israelis' houses after those Israelis have been murdered or burned alive.

It's still not clear exactly how much of this was planned or which aspects of it were planned or what was expected by Hamas, but it seems quite possible that Hamas was just way more successful than it expected to be and that its people—and those who joined in once the fence was down—were way more savage than they expected to be.

Rosin: What about the hostages? Because that seems like a strategy. I don't know if it's an intentional strategy, but it's certainly become important as this all unfolds.

Wood: Yeah, the state of the hostages is probably the aspect of this that Israel has least come to terms with. When I spoke earlier of the fact that there is still this traumatic stage that the country was in, everybody in Israel remembers the very long period years ago when Gilad Shalit was captive by Hamas in Gaza. This is an Israeli conscript who was kidnapped

from the Kerem Shalom border post, and then kept in some horrible dungeon for years while there was an effort to negotiate his freedom. Which came at the cost of freeing over 1,000 Palestinian prisoners.

This galvanized the whole country. I mean, you'd see images of Gilad Shalit on the street in Jerusalem. And then there was one guy, it was one guy who for years, was one of the major political causes in Israel. And now we've got almost 200 Israelis—and not all of them, not even most of them, I believe, soldiers—who have disappeared into Gaza. And the idea of there being 199 Gilad Shalits is inconceivable.

Hamas already said that if civilian dwellings are destroyed without warning by Israel, then they will kill hostages. They will kill them on camera. So Hamas, of course, considers them valuable. And, again, the processing is still going on. I think, on the Israeli side, I haven't heard too much about exactly what the calculation is going to be.

Releasing 1,000 prisoners per hostage release is not sustainable. I have no idea how Israel is going to make this calculation and proceed. And I have no idea how Hamas is either.

Rosin: You mentioned that before this there was a raging debate over the soul of Israel, sort of internal civil war, *would they remain a democracy?* Now it sounds like what we hear from inside is that the current government of Benjamin Netanyahu is collapsing, or its support is collapsing. What does that mean, or what could that mean?

Wood: Yeah, so if you asked Israelis a month ago what's the biggest issue, then everybody knew that it was the question of judicial reform and the follow-on effects of that. Whether the right-wing government led by Benjamin Netanyahu, would be able to change the Israeli political system so it would be less constrained by the results of a far more liberal judiciary. And everybody knew that that was important.

So what the effects of the Hamas attack on October 7 are, are simply cataclysmic for the country's politics. First of all, nobody cares about judicial reform anymore. That is simply on the back burner. It will not be taken up until the war is finished. Second of all, the hatred of the Israeli government, and maybe even more than that, the Israeli state, is very difficult to exaggerate. And I'm talking about people who were once knee-jerk supporters of Netanyahu, very eager to watch him succeed in the judicial overhaul, feel like they were just betrayed. Netanyahu had—for a long time, one of his value propositions to the Israeli people was that he had presided over a period of peace.

And the failure of Israel to secure its citizens on October 7 has left people absolutely livid. There were Israelis who, rather than getting the response of an [Israel Defense Forces] commando unit coming to their homes and freeing them within minutes or even an hour, were waiting 10 hours. Ten hours! You can drive back and forth, top to bottom in this country in 10 hours. And somehow these people were left at the mercy of terrorists who burned them to death.

And for Israelis who thought that, *At least we have safety; at least we're in a country where the lives of Jews are taken seriously, protected*—apparently the government can't even do that. And what was it doing in the meantime?

They're furious to think that there was political bickering taking place, there was safeguarding of political reputations, while Israelis were left defenseless, simply defenseless. And the anger is just indescribable from all sides at this government. Their reputations are toast.

Rosin: So we just don't know where that will lead, but we know that for now. What about the future leadership of Palestinians?

Wood: If Israel's threat is followed through, and I have a little doubt that they will do this, then the leadership of Hamas will be hunted. They're already hunted. And Israel will make it impossible for them to govern Gaza. The rest of the Palestinian leadership, of course, in the West Bank of the Palestinian Authority, led by Abu Mazen, who's in his 80s.

The Palestinian Authority is, of course, an enemy of Hamas. They lost the power struggle with Hamas, and they will be the sort of last Palestinian power structure that's standing if Hamas is dismantled, as Israel promises. But first of all, the Palestinian Authority has many enemies within the Israeli state and within Israel, to say the least, and it's not clear that they could stand up to control Gaza, given that they had lost the power struggle there before. So there's a great big power vacuum. This is part of the mess that Israel has not publicly reckoned with because it is so convinced that nothing else matters other than getting rid of Hamas. Whatever could come next, whatever mess we have, it can't be worse than having a government on the border with an armed military unit that will do what it just did again. So, yeah, finding out the future of Palestinian leadership is one of those cans that Israel seems to be kicking down the road.

Rosin: Before this, there were reports of Israel moving closer to Saudi Arabia, glimmers of a realignment in the Middle East. Where is that now, and how does this change that realignment?

Wood: Israel had normalized relations with a number of Arab states—UAE, Bahrain, Morocco—and there was talk of Saudi Arabia being the next, more than talk. I mean, Saudi Arabia and Israel have quietly had this security relationship that has actually been pretty cordial. They share as an enemy the Islamic Republic of Iran. And there is some question about whether Israel would make peace with diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia.

And the possibility of that normalization, which was set to be one of the great achievements of the Netanyahu government, it's absolutely impossible right now. There's no way that that could happen, simply because there's hundreds, thousands of Palestinians who are being killed.

And the only reason that Saudi Arabia could have contemplated normalization with Israel was that the last 10 years have been relatively quiet. I mean, there hasn't been the mass production of horrible images of Arab death in Gaza and the West Bank. Now there is, which means that any Arab country that was contemplating joining the crew of Arab countries that are friendly to Israel has to step back or risk incurring the wrath of their own people, which could mean the change of the regime in some of these countries, Saudi Arabia being one. Even some of the countries that are already at peace with Israel, such as Egypt. Egypt and Jordan have to wonder what the price might be of that peace if the war continues to be as horrible as it looks like it will be.

Rosin: Well, that for Hamas maybe counts as an accomplishment. I mean, watching Israel move towards Saudi Arabia, even if the immediate on-the-ground strategy seems nihilistic, maybe there's a broader strategy that makes sense.

Wood: Yeah, I've even heard Israeli government officials say that Saudi Arabia has changed so much in its posture toward jihadism, formerly winking at it, being associated with intolerant versions of Sunni Islam. And now Israeli officials will say, *We were about to make peace with a moderate Muslim country called Saudi Arabia, and Hamas tried to destroy that.*

So it's a sentence that I never expected to hear. But that is, in fact, one of the effects of the October 7 attacks and their aftermath, is that Israel's attempts to make peace with countries like Saudi Arabia just are going to be put on hold, as Hamas would prefer.

Rosin: Graeme, thank you so much for joining us from there, and good luck.

Wood: Thanks, Hanna.

[MUSIC]

Rosin: This episode of *Radio Atlantic* was produced by Kevin Townsend. It was engineered by Rob Smeirciak. The executive producer of Atlantic Audio is Claudine Ebeid, and our managing editor is Andrea Valdez. I'm Hanna Rosin. We'll be back with new episodes every Thursday.