

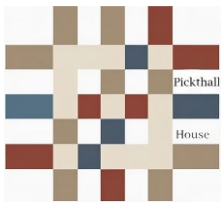
Israel's Military Priorities, Population Transfers, and the Hostage Crisis

Pickthall House argues Israel prioritises extending the conflict over hostage recovery and peace

Introduction

On October 7, 2023, the Gaza-based militant group Hamas launched a large-scale attack on Israel, resulting in the deaths of approximately 1,200 people and the capture of around 250 hostages taken into Gaza. In response, Israel initiated a major military offensive against the Gaza Strip with the stated goal of dismantling Hamas. The fates of the hostages became a central issue, both from a humanitarian and political standpoint, as Israel's offensive quickly escalated. International mediators, particularly Qatar, Egypt, and the United States, sought to negotiate ceasefires contingent on hostage and prisoner exchanges.

In this report, Pickthall House examines Israel's conduct and motivations during ceasefire and hostage negotiations from October 2023 to the present, analysing whether Israel subordinated the return of the hostages to its broader strategic objective of altering the demographic and political status of Gaza. The analysis seeks to understand if Israel's



handling of ceasefires and hostage exchanges reveals a prioritisation of continued military objectives, even at the expense of delayed hostage recovery.

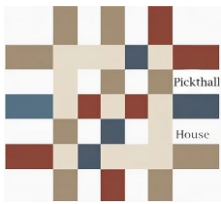
Through a review of open-source materials, including news reports, official statements, human rights investigations, and international analyses, this report identifies key events and cross-references them to assess Israel's actions. The report also considers statements by Israeli officials, public protests by hostage families, and reports from human rights organisations and foreign governments to provide context of events.

Building on Pickthall House's [previous analysis](#), which identified forced population transfer as a likely strategic objective, this white paper examines Israel's negotiation strategy. Pickthall House finds a pattern of alleged violations of ceasefire agreements, delays in hostage negotiations, and the rejection of proposed resolutions, particularly in contrast to mediation efforts by third-party actors. Pickthall House concludes that population transfer of Gazans is a key objective of the Israeli military.

Why population transfer is the likely objective

The issue of population transfer (the use of military action to [displace Palestinian populations](#)) has been a central point of contention throughout the ongoing conflict. While this issue remains controversial, there is a [growing body of evidence](#) to suggest that population transfer was not only a latent aim but may have been actively pursued as part of Israel's broader strategic goals. The military operations, with their focus on dismantling Hamas and reshaping Gaza, continue to cause [significant displacement of Palestinian civilians](#). The Israeli state claims that the forced displacement of Palestinians is justified due to security concerns and that steps have been taken to safeguard civilians. Yet, Human Rights Watch, among other organisations, has used satellite imagery, videos and photos of attacks on designated safe zones, the targeting of humanitarian infrastructure, and interviews with refugees, to demonstrate that Israeli officials are ["instead committing the war crime of forcible transfer, a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions and a crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court."](#) Such a strategy would align with [Israel's broader goals of weakening Hamas and facilitating Gaza's political transformation or depopulation.](#)

The complexities surrounding this issue are compounded by the Israeli government's [rhetoric](#), which often minimises the importance of humanitarian considerations for Gazan civilians and Israeli hostage recovery, and dehumanises people in Gaza. For instance, Israeli military and political leaders have used inflammatory language like ["Fighting human animals," making Gaza a "slaughterhouse," and "Erasing the Gaza Strip from the face of the earth."](#) Instead, the military focus remained on achieving long-term strategic



objectives, which has been at the expense of both the Israeli hostages and the Gazans' humanitarian needs.

Hostage Families Ignored as War Takes Priority

Despite the Israeli government's repeated assertions that recovering hostages is a top priority, the actions of both [political leaders and the military](#) suggest otherwise. [Families of hostages, and released hostages themselves](#), have staged [mass protests, demanded greater transparency in negotiations, and urged the government to accept ceasefire deals](#) that would facilitate their loved ones' release. Yet these pleas have been met with [indifference, deflection, or outright hostility](#). Instead of prioritizing diplomatic solutions that could secure hostage freedom, the Israeli leadership has used their plight to justify further military escalation. Public statements by government officials have frequently framed military operations as necessary to ["pressure" Hamas into releasing hostages](#), yet each escalation has only reduced the likelihood of their safe return. Recently, IDF senior leaders have warned of a potential [50% fall in the rate of reservists reporting for duty](#), caused by Israel's violation of the hostage deal. One reservist, Alon Gur, explained his frustration with the military's prioritisation of continuing the war over saving the hostages: ["The line was crossed when the country again knowingly abandoned its citizens in broad daylight."](#)

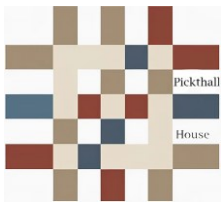
Reports indicate that [key ceasefire proposals \(including those brokered by international mediators like Qatar\) were dismissed outright](#), even when they included pathways for hostage release. Meanwhile, military offensives have resulted in the [deaths of hostages in Israeli airstrikes](#), further underscoring the reality that their rescue is secondary to the [broader objective of devastating Gaza](#). By sidelining hostage families and rejecting diplomatic efforts, Israel's government has demonstrated that the hostages serve as a pretext for war rather than a true concern.

Timeline of Ceasefire and Hostage Negotiation Proposals

This timeline details key moments in Israel's military operations and ceasefire negotiations, illustrating how its actions have repeatedly prolonged the conflict. It highlights instances where military escalation and strategic decisions undermined opportunities for de-escalation and hostage recovery.

October–November 2023: War onset and initial hostage exchanges

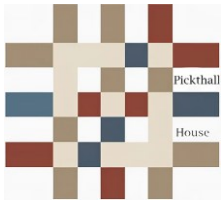
- **Oct 7, 2023** – Hamas-led fighters attacked Israeli communities, [killing approximately 1,200 people and abducting 251 hostages](#) (Israeli and foreign nationals). In retaliation, Israel launched a [full military campaign in Gaza](#), intending to eradicate Hamas.



- **Oct 13, 2023** – Israel informs residents of Gaza City to [evacuate](#) and move south.
- **Oct 17, 2023** – Attack on the [al Ahli hospital in Gaza City](#) triggers outrage, and sets the precedent for future attacks on key infrastructure.
- **Oct 20 and 23, 2023** – Hamas released [four hostages via Qatari mediation](#). These goodwill gestures were limited, and heavy fighting continued.
- **Oct 27, 2023** – [UN General Assembly Resolution](#) calling for an immediate truce was passed with 121 nations in favor, highlighting broad international support for a ceasefire, which Israel and the US opposed.
- **Oct 29, 2023** – Hamas propose an ["everyone for everyone"](#) swap, offering to exchange all hostages for all Palestinian prisoners in Israel. Israeli officials rejected this proposal, with [Defense Minister Yoav Gallant insisting on a military solution for hostage recovery](#), despite pleas from hostage families for the exchange. Gallant said ["We are fighting against animals, not people"](#) and that ["returning the hostages"](#) would be part of the ["victory."](#)
- **Oct 30, 2023** – Israeli special forces conducted a raid in Gaza, [rescuing one Israeli soldier](#). Such operations demonstrated Israel's preference for military solutions, despite risks to hostages.
- **Nov 14, 2023** – IDF enters the [largest Gazan hospital, al Shifa](#). In the following weeks, all hospitals in northern Gaza were destroyed.
- **Nov 21, 2023** – Hamas and Israeli officials agree to a [7-day truce](#) for the exchange of hostages and prisoners.
- **Nov 24-30** – Implementation of 7-day truce. [Hamas released 105 hostages, and Israel freed 240 Palestinian prisoners](#). Israel insisted the war would resume once the agreed hostage releases were exhausted.
- **Dec 1, 2023** – [The truce ended, and Israel resumed its military campaign](#), with a major ground assault on southern Gaza in Khan Younis. Israeli negotiators stated they wanted only *temporary pauses* to free hostages, while Hamas insisted remaining hostages would only be freed as part of a *permanent ceasefire* ending the war.

December 2023–April 2024: Failed ceasefire attempts and military escalation

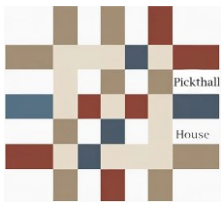
- **Dec 6, 2023** – [Jabalia refugee camp](#) targeted in Northern Gaza.
- **Dec 8, 2023** – The [US vetoes the UN Security Council's demand for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire](#). The UK abstains.



- **Dec 15, 2023** – Israeli troops mistakenly killed [three Israeli hostages waving white flags during a firefight in Gaza](#), an incident that provoked sharp criticism within Israel.
- **Dec 20, 2023** – Israel proposed a one-week ceasefire in exchange for the release of 40 additional hostages. [Hamas rejected the offer, demanding a full ceasefire before any further hostage releases](#). Israel, in turn, rejected Hamas's condition, unwilling to halt military operations without the immediate hostages' return. This deadlock highlighted the contrasting positions: Israel sought short pauses, while Hamas linked the hostages' fate to a comprehensive end to hostilities. The stalemate deepened frustrations among hostage families and international mediators. Notably, [Prime Minister Al Thani of Qatar later stated that the ceasefire deal reached in January 2025](#) was essentially the same as the plan proposed in December 2023.
- **Jan 11, 2024** – [The US and UK launch airstrikes on Yemen](#) in retaliation for Houthi rebels attacking ships bound to Israel in the Red Sea.
- **Jan 22, 2024** – [24 IDF soldiers killed in central Gaza](#), marking the deadliest day for IDF forces since October 7th.
- **Feb 2024** – The U.S. pressured [Israel to adopt a truce during Ramadan](#), but Israeli officials insisted on continuing military operations.
- **March–April 2024** – [Reports surfaced of worsening humanitarian conditions in Gaza](#). Hostage families [intensified protests](#) in Israel.
- **Apr 1, 2024** – [7 humanitarian workers from the World Central Kitchen are killed](#), including 3 British nationals. [An Israeli inquiry has determined](#) that the deaths were caused by erroneous assumptions and breaches of the rules of engagement.
- **Apr 1, 2024** – Israeli airstrike on the [Iranian consulate in Damascus](#), Syria, kills several Iranian officers.

May–August 2024: U.S. push for a ceasefire amidst growing Israeli protests

- **May 6, 2024** – [Hamas accepted a three-phase ceasefire plan, including a 42-day truce and partial Israeli withdrawal](#). The draft agreement outlines an initial 42-day truce with partial Israeli withdrawal and the release of 33 Israeli hostages in exchange for approximately 2,000 Palestinian prisoners. This is followed by another 42 days of “sustainable calm,” culminating in the release of all remaining Israeli hostages for additional prisoners and full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. The final



stage addresses body exchanges and long-term reconstruction of Gaza, including ending the siege. However, an [Israeli official calls this ceasefire plan a “ruse.”](#)

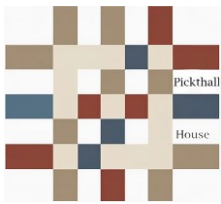
- **May 6, 2024** – The [IDF strikes Rafah](#), despite the ceasefire plan.
- **May 31, 2024** – [U.S. President Joe Biden publicly endorsed the plan](#), increasing diplomatic pressure.
- **July 2024** – [Israel intensified attacks in Gaza](#), rejecting Hamas’s demand for a full withdrawal.
- **July 19, 2024** – ICJ rules Israel’s settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories are a [breach of international law](#).
- **July 25, 2024** – [Netanyahu visits the US](#), but faces criticism from the Biden administration for the humanitarian crisis.
- **July 31, 2024** – Hamas leader [Ismail Haniyeh killed in Iran](#).
- **Aug 31, 2024** – Israeli forces discovered [six killed hostages in a Gaza tunnel](#), prompting mass protests in Israel.

September–December 2024: Stalemate and international condemnation

- **Sep 17, 2024** – [Mass explosion of handheld pagers](#) in Lebanon targeting Hezbollah members.
- **Sept–Nov 2024** – Israel faced [increasing international criticism over Palestinian civilian casualties](#), especially the high number of killed children.
- **Sep 30, 2024** – [Israel begins ground invasion of southern Lebanon](#).
- **Nov 22, 2024** – ICC issues arrest warrants for [Netanyahu, Gallant and key Hamas leader Ibrahim al Masri](#).
- **Dec 10, 2024** – Netanyahu begins a corruption trial in Tel Aviv, facing what he labels as [‘absurd’ charges](#).

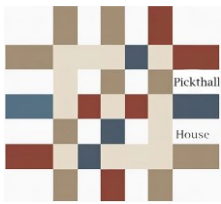
January– April 2025: Ongoing negotiations and political crisis

- **Jan 2025** – Secret negotiations resumed, mediated by Qatar and Egypt.
- **19 Jan, 2025** – Comprehensive ceasefire agreement took effect. In [Phase 1 \(six weeks\)](#), Hamas was to release 33 Israeli hostages – prioritising women, children, the elderly, and the medically fragile – and hand over the remains of some deceased captives. Israel, in turn, would release nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners, including hundreds serving life terms. Concurrently, Israeli forces would pull back from much



of Gaza's populated area, withdrawing to a 0.7 km perimeter zone inside Gaza's border, [effectively ending active combat operations](#). Both sides agreed that negotiations for Phase 2 (the remaining hostages and a permanent truce) would commence during the ceasefire and that the ceasefire *would continue as long as those talks progressed*.

- **Jan 27, 2025** – [Some Palestinians return to destroyed homes in Northern Gaza](#).
- **Feb 23 2025** – Israel halted the scheduled release of [620 Palestinian detainees, accusing Hamas of violating protocol by holding "humiliating" victory ceremonies during hostage handovers](#). Footage of freed hostages being paraded by armed Hamas fighters and cheering crowds led Israel to demand that Hamas stop celebratory displays before resuming the release. Hamas criticised Israel's delay as a breach of the ceasefire agreement, with international mediators intervening to resolve the dispute. Eventually, under U.S. and Qatari pressure, Hamas agreed to more discreet handovers, though the delay cost valuable time and trust in the negotiation process.
- **Feb 2024** – The US began increasing pressure on Israel to adopt a truce, reflecting a shift in diplomatic stance as the humanitarian situation worsened and international condemnation grew.
- **Mar 2024** – [Humanitarian agencies, including the UNHCR, reported worsening conditions in Gaza](#), intensifying global calls for a ceasefire and contributing to growing international pressure on Israel.
- **March 1, 2025** – As Phase 1 neared completion, [Israel attempted to renegotiate the terms for Phase 2](#), which was supposed to include a lasting truce, [final hostage releases as a full Israeli withdrawal](#).
- **March 13, 2025** – [Prime Minister Netanyahu's government introduced a new proposal through U.S. envoy Steven Witkoff](#), demanding the immediate release of half of Hamas's remaining hostages in exchange for only a short ceasefire extension and vague promises for future negotiations. This proposal excluded further Palestinian prisoner releases, a key component of the original deal. Hamas rejected the offer, insisting that hostages would only be released in exchange for a full ceasefire and Israeli withdrawal. Mediators expressed frustration with Israel's attempt to undermine the framework, while Israel used the pause to regroup militarily, drawing criticism from international observers.



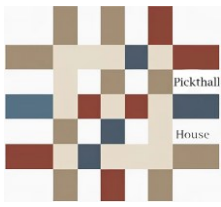
- **March 2025** – Talks stalled over Israeli conditions regarding Hamas disarmament. Public pressure in Israel and the U.S. mounted, with families of hostages demanding action.
- **March 17, 2025** – [Israel ends ceasefire](#) and resumes relentless bombing of Gaza. The [surprise attack coincides with Netanyahu's scheduled court appearance](#), effectively postponing his testimony in his ongoing corruption trial. His push to extend the war is not only a strategic move but also a political necessity, as his fragile coalition risks collapse if he agrees to a full ceasefire. Additionally, the ongoing conflict diverts attention from his legal troubles, delaying proceedings while keeping national security at the forefront of public discourse.
- **March 17, 2025** – For the first time, the [UK government releases a statement saying that Israel has broken international law](#) over its blockade of aid to Gaza, though [this statement is later walked back](#).
- **April 15, 2025** – [Hamas rejects an Israeli proposal for a 6 week ceasefire](#). The deal would require Hamas to disarm, without requiring Israel to commit to disarmament.

Implications for regional stability

The implications of Israel's approach to the Gaza conflict extend far beyond the borders of Gaza itself, with potentially [destabilising effects on the broader Middle East](#). The prolonged military operations, mass displacement of Gazans, and failure to resolve the crisis quickly have exacerbated the [humanitarian disaster](#) and [escalated tensions with neighboring countries](#). As a result, regional stability has been severely undermined, with countries like [Egypt](#), [Lebanon](#), and [Jordan](#) finding themselves drawn into the political and humanitarian consequences of the war.

In short, the displacement of Palestinian populations threatens to exacerbate the refugee crisis, creating [new pressures on neighboring countries](#) and increasing the potential for spillover violence.

Furthermore, the focus on [military objectives over humanitarian concerns risks alienating key international actors](#), particularly those who view Israel's actions as an obstacle to peace. If Israel's strategy in Gaza leads to the destabilisation of neighboring states or further alienates regional powers, it could provoke a broader conflict, making it even more challenging to achieve long-term peace and stability in the region.



Policy recommendations for the UK

By taking the following steps, Pickthall House believes the UK can demonstrate its commitment to a values-based foreign policy that prioritises humanitarian law, peace, and accountability.

1. Demand Accountability and Enforce Consequences for Ceasefire Violations

The UK should explicitly condemn violations of ceasefire agreements by all parties, including Israeli breaches, as documented in recent reports. However, condemnation alone is insufficient. Britain must actively push for independent investigations into the military tactics that have led to mass civilian casualties, the deliberate collapse of ceasefire negotiations, and potential breaches of international humanitarian law.

To prevent further abuses, the UK should advocate for mechanisms that ensure the enforcement of ceasefire agreements, including international monitoring of truce violations. Britain must also support concrete measures, such as diplomatic sanctions or conditional military aid suspensions, against any actors who systematically undermine negotiations, thereby prolonging the conflict.

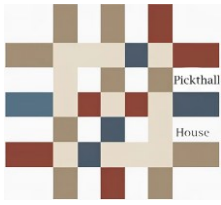
2. Shift Diplomatic Focus Toward a Sustainable Political Resolution

The UK must take a leadership role in shifting international diplomacy away from military escalation and toward a long-term political solution. Given that Israel's actions suggest an attempt to create new facts on the ground rather than pursue a negotiated peace, Britain should call for an urgent international peace conference to prevent the forced displacement of Gaza's population under the guise of war.

Any diplomatic process must ensure the inclusion of Palestinian representatives with decision-making authority, rather than reinforcing unilateral Israeli-imposed solutions. Additionally, Britain should push for the development of an internationally backed post-conflict governance structure in Gaza (whether through an interim administration, international trusteeship, or another model) to prevent a security vacuum and deter further conflict.

3. Reassess Arms Exports and Impose Strict Conditions on Military Support

In light of Israel's repeated breaches of ceasefire agreements and its use of military operations to delay hostage recovery, the UK must conduct a full review of its arms exports to Israel. Given the documented use of British-supplied weapons in attacks that have disproportionately harmed civilians, Britain must enforce strict conditionality on future arms sales. This should include an immediate halt to arms exports if Israel continues



military operations that violate international humanitarian law or uses weapons to facilitate the mass displacement of Palestinian civilians.

4. Prevent the Forced Displacement of Gaza's Population

The UK must publicly acknowledge and actively oppose efforts to use the war as a pretext for large-scale population transfer. The evidence suggests that Israel's prolonged military campaign is designed to make Gaza uninhabitable, forcing mass displacement under the guise of humanitarian evacuation. Britain must take a firm stance by:

- **Condemning** any efforts to forcibly displace Palestinians from Gaza.
- **Advocating for UN mechanisms** that prevent forced population transfer and ensure displaced Palestinians have the right to return.
- **Pushing for international legal action** against any state actors who facilitate ethnic displacement under the cover of war.

The UK should also lead diplomatic efforts to provide guarantees that humanitarian corridors will not be exploited as a tool for permanent population removal. International legal frameworks exist to prevent ethnic cleansing, and the UK must ensure these are enforced.

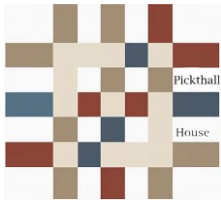
5. Immediately Recognise the State of Palestine and Build a European Coalition for a Two-State Solution

The UK should take a decisive step by officially recognising the State of Palestine, sending a clear signal that Palestinian statehood is not conditional on Israeli approval but a legitimate and overdue right under international law. Recognition would restore credibility to Britain's long-standing commitment to a two-state solution and demonstrate a values-based foreign policy that upholds the rights of both peoples to live in peace and dignity.

This move aligns with [recent remarks by French President Emmanuel Macron](#), who reiterated the importance of Palestinian statehood as a foundation for lasting peace. The UK and France should take joint leadership in building a coalition of like-minded European states to press for a diplomatic breakthrough. This coalition must advocate for a future in which Israel's security is guaranteed within internationally recognised borders and the Palestinian people are granted full sovereignty, territorial integrity, and self-determination.

Conclusion

Israel's handling of ceasefire negotiations reveals a clear strategic preference for prolonging the war over securing the safe return of hostages. By repeatedly undermining mediation efforts and setting conditions designed for rejection, the Israeli government has



demonstrated that its primary objective is not de-escalation but rather reshaping the realities on the ground.

The continuation of military operations, despite i.e., mounting international pressure, suggests a broader agenda, one that aligns with previous indications that forced displacement of Gaza's population is a central, albeit unstated, objective. As Pickthall House first argued in [*Peace in the Middle East is a Choice*](#), the war is being leveraged to render Palestinian presence in Gaza untenable, making transfer the only viable outcome. This approach not only prolongs suffering but fundamentally reshapes the region's geopolitical landscape, with long-term consequences for both Israelis and Palestinians.