



Kent Academic Repository

Voller, Yaniv (2025) *Israel's Clan Strategy in Gaza: Using Disorder to Create Order?* The Middle East Journal, 78 (4). pp. 429-436. ISSN 0026-3141.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/112752/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.3751/78.4.16>

This document version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives)

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal**, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

Israel's Clan Strategy in Gaza: Using Disorder to Create Order?

Yaniv Voller¹

In June 2025, members of the self-declared Popular Forces (*al-Quwat al-Sha'biyya*) appeared in the Gazan city of Rafah sporting AK-47s and equipment supplied by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The commander was Yasser Abu-Shabab, a member of the Tarabin Bedouin tribe. Abu-Shabab had been imprisoned by Hamas for drug trafficking and was implicated in looting aid convoys in Gaza in the spring of 2024. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other Israeli authorities spoke glowing about these forces, sometimes referred to as Anti-Terrorism troops. These forces “saves the lives of IDF soldiers,” said Netanyahu on social media. A senior policy official (possibly Netanyahu himself) elaborated that the purpose of the Popular Forces was to “undermine Hamas’s authority... The [Gazan] public is afraid of rising against it [Hamas] because they think it is the only power in town. Now they see that there are other forces. Now there are alternative powers.”² Israel’s General Security Services (Shabak) agents followed up, noting that “This is a move that saves the lives of IDF soldiers... This is a planned, managed move, and it is in our interest for it to be successful.”³ For his part, Abu-Shabab openly spoke about receiving weapons and logistical support from the IDF as well as the Palestinian Authority (PA). He threatened to take back Khan Younis

¹ Yaniv Voller is a Senior Lecture in Middle East Politics at the University of Kent. His most recent book is *Second-Generation Liberation Wars: Rethinking Colonialism in Iraqi Kurdistan and Southern Sudan* (Cambridge, 2022). In 2023, he won the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation Distinguished Scholar Award to carry out research on pro-government militias.

² Yossi Yesoshua and Itamar Eichner, “‘נתניהו: הפעלנו חמולות שמתנגדות לחמאס. מה רע בזה? זה רק טוב,’” Ynet, June 5, 2025, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/hy6wcqj7lx>.

³ Ibid.

hospital complex from Hamas control.⁴ He insisted that his was a force of “popular legitimacy... Palestinians from Palestine” fighting against Hamas’s aggressions.⁵

Since the beginning of the Gaza war in October 2023, Israel has sought ways to break Hamas’ monopoly of control in the Gaza Strip. Many in the international community hope that the war would allow the PA, based in Ramallah, to reassert its control in Gaza, leading to a more comprehensive and unified Palestinian political entity. But Israeli leaders have been wary of empowering the PA almost as much as they are of Hamas. Instead, Israel has turned to locally-based tribal networks in Gaza that are willing and able to contest Hamas’ control. As early as 2023, Hamas fighters clashed with influential clans in the south of the Strip. Speculations emerged as some of these clans appeared to be unusually well-armed. Some took control over the routes of aid convoys, leading to looting and racketeering. The emergence of groups such as Abu-Shabab’s further shows how Israel actively recruited clans and tribes. They would serve, in a sense, as Israeli proxies in managing Gaza while Hamas was liquidated.

Israeli strategists have long sought out on Arab tribes as alternatives sources of rule, a kind of counterweight to nationalism and Islamist cadres. The pattern of outsourcing violence to such kinship- and territory-based groups has undoubtedly affected Israeli security chiefs in locating partners from among the Gaza clans. Reliance on clan-based militias as proxies may offer Israel short-term tactical advantages, such as hindering Hamas’s ability to operate on the ground and facilitating the passage of aid convoys. But in the longer run forces deepens instability, obstruct the resolution of the conflict.

⁴ Makan, “أبو شهاب: سواصل قتال حماس حتى بعد التهدئة,” July 6, 2025, <https://www.makan.org.il/content/news/makan-news/p-11693/928393/>.

⁵ Ibid.

Ruling By Tribe

Successive rulers in the Middle East, from the Ottomans fighting the Arab Revolt during the World War I, the French maintaining their control in Syria in the 1920s, to Americans recruiting “awakening forces” in Iraq in the 201s, relied on the engaging and manipulating the politics of extended families, clans, and even larger tribes to secure their rule. The traditional role of the clan and the extended family has been the provision of security and order, primarily setting conflict resolution mechanisms.

For Israel, cooptation of clans and tribal forces is almost a tactical repertoire, repeated and rehearsed in multiple settings and across multiple decades. Even before the foundation of the Israeli state, Jewish leaders tried to build ties to Druze and Bedouin tribes that would serve as allies against nascent Palestinian nationalism. Some particularly loyal tribes were even inducted as auxiliaries in the nascent Zionist security force, the Haganah.⁶ The logic was not just to find allies, but divide and rule. In the late 1970s, Israeli military and civilian leaders in the West Bank developed the idea of turning responsibility for running the occupied territories to specific trust clans. This led to the formation of several Village Leagues. The guiding logic behind this policy was that the Palestinians in the countryside, who are still organized around the traditional institutions of land and family and often had ties of patronage of particularly great families, could be used as a bulwark against the PLO. Hence, the system’s architects viewed the Village Leagues as a potential alternative to Palestinian nationalism.⁷ To be sure, Israel never intended the Village Leagues to be a military force. But as appointed heads of the Village Leagues faced threats of from

⁶ Muhammad Suwaed, “Cooperation between the Galilee Bedouins and the Yishuv during the 1948 War,” *Israel Affairs* 26, no. 2 (2020): 213–23, doi:10.1080/13537121.2020.1720113; Randall S. Geller, *Minorities in the Israeli Military, 1948-1958* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 150–51.

⁷ Yehuda Litani, “‘Village Leagues’: What Kind of Carrot?,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 11, no. 3 (1982): 174–78.

Palestinian nationalist, protection became necessary. Israeli allowed the League to set up what could be called militias.

The Leagues never met Israeli hopes to provide an alternative—and more pliant—leadership in the West Bank. For one thing, their leaders were unable to withstand protest and resistance from among the West Bank Palestinian population, who deemed the clan leaders as Quislings and collaborators. For another thing, Israeli leaders themselves never fully trusted the Village Leagues. There were always concerns that clan leaders diverted Israeli military resources toward private vendetta. Moreover, for right-wing members of the Likud factions, the League seemed an obstruction from the goal of extending Israeli settlements and eventually sovereignty. By 1984, amidst the First Intifadah, Israel effectively confiscated the League's weapons and cut their connections with the Israeli authorities.

Israel took a similar approach in Lebanon in the mid-1980s in supporting the South Lebanese Army (SLA). As early as the 1970s, Israel had identified Shi'a residents of southern Lebanon, who had been terrorized and displaced by PLO fighters, as potential allies. IDF officers handed weapons to local self-defense groups in Shi'a villages, organized around a local strongman. The arrival of Christian officers who had defected from the Lebanese army during the civil war added an organization backbone to the SLA, even though Shi'is formed the rank-and-file.⁸ Israeli intelligence officers worked adeptly to convince southern clan leaders to join the SLA ranks, using a mix of financial incentives but also playing off local rivalries.⁹ As Ahmad Beydoun observed, "If a clan was induced to allow one or more of its members to join the SLA, rival clans would feel threatened and stripped of protection."

⁸ Ferdinand Smit, *The Battle for South Lebanon: The Radicalisation of Lebanon's Shi'ites 1982-1985* (Amsterdam: Bulaaq, 2000), 174-5, 223.

⁹ Yaniv Voller, "Progovernment Militias, Identity Leadership, and Ethnic Defection: Evidence from Israel's Recruitment of the South Lebanese Army," *Political Psychology*, March 6, 2024, doi:10.1111/pops.12963, p. 781.

Given the delicate local balance of power, “it was enough for a few members of one clan to join the SLA for other clans to encourage a few elements of their own to join as well.”¹⁰

One may point out the SLA’s dire fate as a cause for considering the implications of proxy fighting. In May 2000, the IDF withdrew from the security zone following a government decision. The IDF’s plan was for the SLA to take over the vacated stronghold and maintain the security zone. However, this strategy collapsed almost immediately amid Hezbollah’s combined assault on the SLA’s posts. Fearing Hezbollah’s retaliation, members of the SLA and their families fled toward Israel, where many have remained as asylum seekers, with a small minority returning to Lebanon after being amnestied by Hezbollah. The SLA, then, did not survive the IDF’s withdrawal.¹¹ Nonetheless, one cannot deny that for about 15 years, the SLA had served Israel’s control over the security zone and protected Israel’s border from Hezbollah’s attack. The formation and sustaining of the SLA, in turn, could not have been achieved without some engagement with the clan structure of the Shi‘i society in the south.

Israel’s history of engagement with tribes shows that they can be effective but not decisive against mutual enemies. But problems of management, support, and supervision remain. Israel leadership, themselves, have questioned the utility of Arab partners, whether on military or political grounds. Over the long term, any group that maintains an open alliance with Israel is bound to be tarred as a collaborator and thus be excluded from any genuine grassroots political solution. Yet the possibility of outsource responsibility to such actors remains strongly attractive. It is no surprise, then, that the idea of collaboration

¹⁰ Ahmad Beydoun, “The South Lebanon Border Zone: A Local Perspective,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 21, no. 3 (1992): 45.

¹¹ Brendan Sozer, “Development of Proxy Relationships: A Case Study of the Lebanese Civil War,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 4 (July 3, 2016): 636–58, doi:10.1080/09592318.2016.1189495.

between the Israeli authorities and clans in the Gaza Strip against Hamas resurfaced with the eruption of the Gaza War.

The Gaza Tribal Awakening

When Hamas launched its attack on October 7, 2023, there was no telling how far the violence would unfold. Israel's massive military assault on Gaza has not much more than Hamas' military operations. It has pulverized Hamas as Gaza's *de facto* government. The result has been a vacuum of authority and responsibility as to who could provide Gazans basic services, notably a sense of order and security.¹²

Surprisingly, even as Israeli leaders declared Hamas' ouster their goal, they seemed to be undecided about what they wanted in its place. The pro-settlement bloc within the coalition led by Netanyahu's Likud Party pushed for outright reoccupation of Gaza. This would seemingly inevitably entail ethnically cleanse it from the majority of its Palestinian population, and the return of the Jewish settlements which had been evacuated in 2005¹³ Other elements, led by the Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant and much of the IDF senior leadership warned that reoccupation was unfeasible and unadvisable. Still, Netanyahu and his Likud companions dismissed the possibility of allowing the Palestinian Authority (PA) to enter the Strip, fearing this would bolster the PA's claim to sovereignty and call for independence.¹⁴

¹² Benedetta Berti, "Non-State Actors as Providers of Governance: The Hamas Government in Gaza between Effective Sovereignty, Centralized Authority, and Resistance," *The Middle East Journal* 69, no. 1 (January 15, 2015): 9–31, doi:10.3751/69.1.11.

¹³ Louis Imbert, "Recolonizing Gaza, the Messianic Vision of Part of Israel's Government," *Le Monde*, January 29, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/01/29/the-recolonization-of-gaza-the-messianic-vision-for-part-of-the-israeli-government_6475707_4.html.

¹⁴ Moran Azulay and Einav Halabi, "נתניהו: הרשות הפלסטינית לא תשלוט בעזה; סמוטריץ': לכבוש 10% מהרצועה," *Ynet*, February 17, 2025, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/bjnn2ixq1x>.

The clans, it seemed, offered an immediate alternative that was neither Hamas nor PA. Public discussion of the possibility of integrating clan elders in the governance of Gaza emerged in first months of the war. On December 28, 2023, after a visit to Gaza, Netanyahu reportedly instructed the security forces to search for “local power brokers,” referring to local clans.¹⁵ These power brokers, Netanyahu suggested, would run the affairs of their respected territories.¹⁶ Responding to these calls, the IDF presented to the cabinet a plan that divided the Strip to different districts, with the dominant clan in each sub-district responsible for the distribution of humanitarian aid to the local population and run civilian affairs.¹⁷ Following up on this plan, Major General Ghassan Alian, the head of the Israeli Civil Administration in the West Bank, as well as United Nations representatives, met with clan representatives to present them with the plan. UN representatives followed suit.¹⁸ The clan representatives, however, publicly rejected the suggestion to replace Hamas’s security apparatus and police.

Israel’s apparent courtship of tribes in Gaza only exacerbated the distrust between Hamas and the clans. Hamas, much like its rival PLO, had long regarded clans as atavistic and socially regressive. Following Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, Hamas saw local tribes as substantial rivals. Most notable of these were the Doghmush family, which controlled some of the area’s most lucrative smuggling routes, as well as the Hilles clan, whose members remained associated with the Fatah and the PA’s Security Services. Hamas eventually won out, but also made sure to find some accommodation with the clans.¹⁹

¹⁵ Nadav Eyal, “נתניהו למערכת הביטחון: בדקו שיתוף פעולה עם חמולות וגורמים מקומיים בעזה,” Ynet, December 29, 2023, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/sylslcip6>.

¹⁶ Ariel Kahana, “חמולות ובעלי השפעה מקומית: ישראל מחפשת כתובת בעזה ליום שאחר,” Israel Ha-Yom, December 28, 2023, <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/defense/article/15020309>.

¹⁷ Suleiman Maswadeh and Amichai Stein, “חמולות מוכרות ישלטו על אזורים בעזה - ויחלקו את,” Kan11, January 1, 2024, <https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan-news/politic/667279/>.

¹⁸ Osama Al-Saeed and Elie Youssef, “«إسرائيل تختبر العشائر لـ«حكم غزة»,” Al-Sharq al-Awsat, March 3, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/52bxey54>.

¹⁹ International Crisis Group, *Inside Gaza: The Challenge of Clans and Families*, Middle East Report, December 20, 2007, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/71-inside-gaza-the-challenge-of-clans-and-families.pdf>; Tuastad, “Hamas and the Clans: From Islamisation of Tribalism to Tribalization of Islamism?”

Facing Israel's overwhelming military pressure, Hamas blamed clan leaders for collaborating with the IDF. The Doghmush clan was a prominent scape goat. The Doghmush armed wing, Jaysh al-Islam (the Army of Islam), had served as a subcontractor of Hamas in terrorist operations, including the kidnapping of the soldier Gilad Shalit in 2006. But the Doghmush refused to submit and at times fought against Hamas. Israeli intelligence agents reportedly contacted the family and offered them protection in Gaza in return for fighting Hamas.²⁰ In May 2024, Hamas forces raided the stronghold of the Doghmush clan in the Sabra neighborhood of Gaza City. After a gunfight, Hamas activists beheaded the family mukhtar, Hajj Salem Ashour Doghmush, along with other dignitaries.²¹ In the days following the event, the Doghmush family, via its Facebook page, denied that Hamas killed its leaders, instead blaming Israel for bombing the family's compound. Its leaders then declared their loyalty to Hamas and vowed to fight the Israeli occupation.²² Abu Salman al-Maghni, the head of the Supreme Committee of Clans in Gaza, declared that the Gaza clans "refuse to be an alternative government. Their [the clans'] responsibility is to support and assist the government."²³

Other clans took advantage of Hamas' absence to expand their territory. Claiming to operate with the aim of restoring law and order, the clans seized aid convoys and looted trucks. Some allegedly racketeered the aid products and sold them on the black market. Competition over control of the aid products coming into Gaza resulted in what locals described as "gang fights" between the local clans.²⁴ But areas that were firmly under clan

²⁰ Dean Shmuel Elmas, "ההמולה מעזה שהייתה אמורה להיות הפתרון ל"יום שאחרי" והסתבכה עם חמאס," Globes, June 3, 2024, <https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001480411>.

²¹ Melanie Swan, "Israel Wanted Gazan Clan to Take over after War – but Hamas Beheaded It," *The Telegraph*, June 1, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/59rw9jhb>.

²² Aljazeera, "من القاتل الحقيقي لمختار عائلة دغشمش في غزة؟," March 17, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2024/3/17/1210>.

²³ Anadolu Ajansı, "عشائر غزة: نرفض أن نكون بديلا عن الحكومة," March 15, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/2fdysk3p>.

²⁴ Jason Burke and Malak A Tantesh, "Fears Grow That Gaza Could Become 'Mogadishu on the Mediterranean,'" *The Guardian*, April 1, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/01/gaza-israel-hamas-war-armed-gangs-mogadishu-on-the-mediterranean>.

control also saw remarkable stability. In Deir al-Balah, Zeitoun, and Jabaliyya, large and middle-sized clans have enabled the distribution of aid and become providers of a semblance of order.²⁵ When spontaneous anti-Hamas protests broke out across the Gaza Strip in March and April 2025, the Gathering of the Palestinian Tribes, Clans, and Families (*Tajamu al-Qabail wa-l-Asha'ir wa-l-A'ilat al-Falastiniyya*), another body representing Palestinian clans and tribes, announced its support for the popular resistance (*muqawama*) against Hamas, a charged word in the context of the Palestinian struggle.

The conflict between Hamas and clans worsened. Reports emerged in July 2025 of clashes between Hamas and members of the Barbakh clan around Nasser Hospital, blamed for looting aid trucks.²⁶ At the same time, forces associated with the Hilles family, whose association with Fattah and the PA, began raiding Hamas facilities in Gaza's Saja'iyya district, in coordination with the PA's Security Services.²⁷ The clans took pains to deny any connection with Israel. Khanideq uploaded a video onto one of the Barbakh clan's (self-proclaimed) official Facebook pages, in which he denied not only cooperation with Israel, but also any rivalry with Hamas.²⁸

The clans' attempts to deflect attention for possible Israeli ties really only made their relationship more obvious, however. The acknowledgement of the Abu Shabab militia in June 2025 offered more concrete evidence of Israeli's intention to rely on tribes and clans. Clearly, though, the clans see any relationships with Israel as being at once advantage but also a liability.

²⁵ Jackie Houry, "חמאס נפגע, הרשות הפלסטינית מודרת, וחמולות תופסות שליטה ברצועה," Haaretz, June 30, 2025, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/magazine/2025-06-30/ty-article-magazine/.premium/00000197-b557-dd94-addf-b757645d0000>.

²⁶ Jackie Houry, "מקורות רפואיים ברצועה: לפחות 74 הרוגים מאש צה"ל; עימותים פרצו בין חמאס לחמולה חמושה," Haaretz, June 27, 2025, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/2025-06-27/ty-article/.premium/00000197-b0ca-df21-a1df-f5ca9e490000>.

²⁷ Einav Halabi, "לא רק אבו שבאב: ישראל מסייעת לשתי מיליציות נוספות ברצועה," Ynet, July 2, 2025, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/bk00gpxqble>.

²⁸ A'ilat Barbakh wa-Afra'iyah, "توضيح للرأي العام," Facebook, July 3, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2s3vj3zx>.

The Benefits and Risks of Clan Rule in Gza

Many have been quick to reach for historical analogies to discredit Israel's the ventures with the Gaza clans. Said Zeedani, a Palestinian philosopher, declared "just as the Palestinians overcame the Village Leagues during the 1980s, so they will be able to overcome them today."²⁹ Brigadier General Yousef al-Helou of the PA's Security Services this an "old-new scheme to replace the PLO."³⁰ On the Israeli side, Michael Milshtein, a retired IDF colonel with extensive experience in the Palestinian arena, described the idea of contracting local clans as "the revival of an old fantasy about the nurturing of old local stakeholders – clannish, tribal, or peripheral – instead of centralized Palestinian governance. This axis is central to the Israeli desire to reduce the conflict from a political and territorial conflict to a localized one."³¹ Elsewhere, Milshtein compared the situation to that of the SLA and other similar experiences, in his perception, which Israel had in developing proxies: "We learned nothing from our history... The experience of the Village Leagues in the West Bank, the Phalanges [Lebanese Forces] in Lebanon, the SLA's collapse, and even the birth of Hamas, which Israel enabled amid its perception as a rival to the PLO."³²

But these dismissals overlook the both the immediate benefits that the clans now empowered. First, it is undeniable that that clans serve as military asset for Israel. They help Israel in preventing Hamas from operating on the ground or reasserting control and influence over the local population. Hamas has grown militarily weaker and its remaining forces have

²⁹ Said Zeedani, "מי ישלוט ומי לא ישלוט ברצועת עזה ביום שאחרי?", *Sicha Mekomit*, August 13, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/ykijnwnd>.

³⁰ Mohammed Yousef Al-Helou, "روابط القرى عملاء الاحتلال بمسميات شتى وهو المشروع القديم الحديث ليكونوا بديل عن م ت ف", *Wikalat Ma'an*, February 9, 2025, <https://www.maannews.net/articles/2134140.html>.

³¹ Michael Milstein, "שלטון חמולות? עזה דורשת פתרון רציני, אך נתניהו דבק בפנטזיות", *Haaretz*, January 10, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/the-edge/2024-01-10/ty-article/.highlight/0000018c-f31b-d2f9-a3ef-f77f5f630000>.

³² Uriel Levy, "אופציית החמולות בעזה: 'הפנטזיה על גורם בלי אינטרס לאומי עולה מאז קום המדינה ונכשלת תמיד'", *Davar*, July 25, 2025, <https://www.davar1.co.il/616087/>.

resorted to guerrilla operations, often from the tunnels the group has dug throughout the Strip.³³ Having a presence of local proxies means not only local forces with an interest and historical incentives to prevent Hamas from resurfacing, but also the infrastructure to recruit local fighters and hinder any attempt by Hamas to restore its influence. Israel's experience with the SLA in South Lebanon demonstrates that as long as Israel supported the militia, it served the goal of fending off Hezbollah and controlling the belt. A similar lesson can be drawn from other cases in which governments relied on local militias in counter-insurgency, for example the case of the Sons of Iraq tribal militias, which assisted the Iraqi government and the coalition forces in defeating al-Qa'eda in Iraq in the mid-2000.³⁴ Unlike in Iraq, where the US looked for an exit, Israel's strategy today calls for a long term—indeed, indefinite—domination of Gaza. As long as Israel remains committed to the clans, they will remain militarily potent auxiliary.

More troubling is the clans' role in Gaza's humanitarian catastrophe. Here, clan militias can both assume blame for looting convoys of essential foods and medicines but also serving to defend these convoys and assure them safe passage.³⁵ This is classic extortion, whereby the protector is also the predator. It is an exchange familiar to many observers of militias and warlords.³⁶ Indeed, even without Israeli support, clans that had prospered in the business of smuggling were likely to see humanitarian distribution networks as an easy target. Still, it is hard to aver that clans' divergence of aid resources is more severe and malevolent than Hamas' manipulation of the aid economy to support its own activities. Even where

³³ Oren Liebermann and Dana Karni, "Battered but Not Beaten, Hamas Embraces Guerrilla Tactics with Deadly Force," *CNN*, July 12, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/07/12/middleeast/hamas-guerrilla-tactics-gaza-attack-intl>.

³⁴ Myriam Benraad, "Iraq's Tribal 'Sahwa': Its Rise and Fall," *Middle East Policy* 18, no. 1 (2011): 121–31.

³⁵ Ibrahim Dahman, Eyad Kourdi, and Ivana Kottasová, "Under Attack from All Sides, Armed Clans Try to Protect Aid Coming into Gaza," *CNN*, August 1, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/07/31/middleeast/gaza-aid-clan-protection>.

³⁶ Mohammed Ibrahim Shire, "Protection or Predation? Understanding the Behavior of Community-Created Self-Defense Militias during Civil Wars," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 33, no. 3 (April 3, 2022): 467–98, doi:10.1080/09592318.2021.1937806.

militias have indeed participated in looting, aid has still been secured. In some cases, the food has found its way to local markets, to be sold to the local population. In other cases, clans have distributed the food themselves, as a way to secure their local influence, with the IDF's tacit consent. For better or worse, clans are now embedded in Gaza humanitarian economy. Foreign donors and aid organizations, like the US-backed Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, and most importantly the people of Gaza themselves have little choice but to adjust to their presence.

What of the longer-term prospects to build stability in Gaza?

The clans of Gaza are unlikely to offer a long-term solution to Israel's strategic objectives or the deeper need to re-establish order in Gaza—at least not alone. Clans can succeed in keeping Hamas at bay, but they are unlikely to ever have the kind of military strength needed to eliminate Hamas entirely. It is also important to note that some of the clans now fighting against Hamas, like the Doghmush, also have a history of switching sides and at times even cooperating with the Islamist forces. Israel, therefore, will not be able rely on the clans to manage Gaza unaided. Maintaining a semblance of clan rule will require continual Israeli intervention, including systems to monitor its clan proxies and provide financial and military assistance where necessary. From a military perspective, outsourcing to the clans could prove as difficult as direct occupation. The civilian population in Gaza may now accept any authority that could guarantee the provision of basic needs. But the clans' performance in helping to deliver much needed aid is hardly exemplary. With time, the clans' willing to collaborate with Israel and lackluster performance in basic governance tasks will likely cost clan leaders in terms of legitimacy and support. In this scenario, clans will become as even more predatory warlords and Gaza will be doomed to future cycles of violence and even civil war.

Israel has a long track record of enlisting support from Arab clans and tribes, or outsourcing violence to them as part of a broader strategic plan. But these efforts have not proven sustainable. The lessons of the SLA in Lebanon and the Village Leagues of the West Bank are not just that so-called collaborationist forces of clan-based militias eventually succumb to more progressive, unified, and nationalistic Arab resistance. It is also that Israel's own vacillations, the tensions between seeking settlement of the land versus maintaining a security perimeter from afar, that undercut Israel's own proxies.

In any scenario for the cessation of violence and the introduction of a new order, clans may be seen by the Israeli authorities as a stabilizing factor. In the currently less likely but not unthinkable scenario where Israel adopts the policy advocated by the pro-settlements bloc in the coalition government, this would necessitate the regular presence of IDF forces and also present lucrative opportunities in government-funded construction and development projects. Clan leaders, especially those with connections to Israel, may be approached to mobilize members of their families and other connected groups to work and financially benefit from these developments. The IDF may also prefer to tacitly allow clan-related gangs to continue their involvement in illicit activities, such as smuggling and trafficking, in return for keeping stability in their territory. The reality, though, is that such an arrangement will never bring stability to Gaza as a whole, as it is likely to attract popular resistance even with the undermining of Hamas's fighting capability. Hence, clans willing to cooperate with Israel, even clandestinely, will find themselves targeted by other forces.

On the other hand, the idea that the clans could fill the vacuum created by the IDF's withdrawal and bring long-term stability, which is the primary interest of most regional actors, including Israel, is also unlikely. Competition over resources and smuggling routes, growing criminality, kidnappings, and similar developments could lead to inter-clan clashes or to segregation between communities and mutual suspicion.

The only likely way in which clan-based groups could contribute to creating some sense of order is with the construction of local governance, either under the PA's auspices or any other indigenous framework. Such a framework would provide legitimate avenues for integrating clan members into jobs in the security sector, civil service, or other opportunities linked to the budgets that such an entity can mobilize. This reality may not be a recipe for effective state-building, but it would at least marshal local forces to bring order and deny incentives for infighting and chaos. For many, this may read as stating the obvious; however, for many others, particularly in the current coalition government in Israel, there is a constant need for reminders about this reality.

Israel must acknowledge the benefits and risks of enabling the rise of clan-based power in Gaza. It must consider ways not just to empower the tribes of Gaza, but also to contain them. While tribal forces offer some short-term benefits, any system of governance that emerges in Gaza will need to introduce mechanisms to absorb and, in some cases dissolve these forces. Only governance institutions with some legitimacy can offer avenues to integrate the emerging clan-based warlords and accommodate their interests without perpetuating disorder in Gaza after the fall of Hamas. Neither Israel nor the Gaza tribes can build such institutions alone. Israel will have little choice but to find a more trusted Arab partner, possibly even the Palestinian Authority, to rebuild a system of rule in Gaza and supplant Hamas.