

In August 2005, when Israel unilaterally withdrew from the narrow coastal territory, then-Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon promised it would make Israel safer. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice hailed the move as "historic."

Israel had left behind a political vacuum, however. That, along with decisions by Israel, the U.S. and Palestinian rivals inadvertently boosted the militant Islamic group Hamas into power. Hamas is stronger than ever, and Israel's air strikes risk bolstering it further, according to current and former U.S. officials, diplomats and analysts.

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