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A Second October War in Israel-Palestine

On 7 October, Hamas carried out a massive assault on Israel, drawing immediate comparisons to the 1973 conflict, when the Egyptian and Syrian armies similarly breached Israeli defences. In this Q&A we explore how the conflict has unfolded and what it could mean for the future of the region.

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What happened?

In the early hours of 7 October, Hamas launched what it called Operation al-Aqsa Deluge, a multi-pronged attack on Israel, including Israeli border towns ringing the Gaza Strip. Thousands of rockets rained down on areas in Israel in the first few hours. These gave cover to Hamas militants, who sent armed drones to hit parts of Israel's electronic border alarm system, broke through Israeli military posts and the security fence around Gaza, or flew over the barrier in motorised hang gliders, penetrating urban areas and killing or kidnapping Israelis, many of them civilians, including children and elderly people. Some militants tried to infiltrate Israel by sea.

By mid-morning the same day, Israeli aircraft had launched strikes on suspected Hamas facilities in the Gaza Strip, including several residential high-rises that were brought down. These operations continued through 8 October and into the next day. Israel also began deploying army units to the south; their first priority appeared to be to recapture the border communities under Hamas fighters' control. This operation was reportedly nearing completion by the end of 8 October. The next phase has yet to start, but Israel appears to be preparing for a ground invasion to free Israeli hostages held by Hamas, cut the group down to size or even remove it from power. It has called up 300,000 reservists.

Numbers of dead and injured on both sides rose quickly: on 9 October, Israeli sources said at least 800 Israelis had been killed and more than 2,300 wounded. The dead include over 200 civilians apparently gunned down at a desert music festival. On the Palestinian side, health authorities have reported more than 500 Palestinians killed and over 2,700 injured, mainly by Israeli airstrikes in Gaza. Many on both sides remain unaccounted for.

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The human toll is certain to rise further as the fighting continues. Civilians will inevitably bear the brunt as the conflict escalates, especially in the likely event of an Israeli ground invasion of Gaza. On 9 October, Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant announced that Israel would allow “no electricity, no food, no fuel” into Gaza, promising a “full siege”. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu previously vowed to reduce parts of Gaza to rubble. He warned Palestinian civilians to leave, but as they have no access to Egypt, on one side, or Israel, on the other, they have nowhere to go.

Caught unawares on the holiday of Simchat Torah, which in 2023 coincided with the Jewish Sabbath, Israeli political and military leaders were slow to respond. Gallant was the first to speak publicly several hours after the start of the Hamas operation, stating that the Islamist movement had made a “grave mistake” and that Israel would prevail. Netanyahu appeared shortly thereafter, affirming that Israel was in a state of war. The next day, Israel’s security cabinet approved a formal declaration of war, invoking Article 40 of the Basic Law, for the first time in half a century.

In the long view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Hamas’s actions on the morning of 7 October were unprecedented. It was the first time that its militants were able to break out of the confinement of Gaza in numbers, and the first time that they stormed and took control of adjacent Israeli communities, something no Arab army had ever done. It is also the first time that Palestinians have taken hostage scores of Israeli soldiers and civilians, transporting an unknown number, possibly over a hundred, back with them into Gaza. Strikingly, Israel’s extensive border sensors proved useless in preventing the breach. The events left many Israelis feeling numb and vulnerable, as well as shocked by the intelligence and security failures that the Hamas attacks exposed. Many were angry with the government’s shortcomings in communicating with families in harm’s way, in getting soldiers deployed where they needed to be and even in making sure the troops had basic equipment. Western politicians and commentators expressed horror in traditional and social media outlets as pictures and stories emerged of young children taken hostage and families murdered in their homes by militants conducting door-to-door searches.

What explains the slow Israeli response?

The Israeli security apparatus appeared taken by surprise, sending out no warning. A refrain rapidly emerged in Israel that the attack had echoes of the 1973 conflict, known as the October, or Yom Kippur, war, when the Egyptian and Syrian armies punched through Israeli defences unexpectedly, dealing the Israeli army and establishment a psychological blow. The 50-year anniversary of that event was on 6 October, the eve of Hamas’s move. This time, it was not armies threatening Israel, but dozens of Hamas and allied militants entering Israeli communities.

Without official Israeli explanations, all is speculative for now, but accusations of a colossal intelligence failure started flying almost immediately and already appear to have settled into conventional wisdom both at home and in Western capitals. Given the scale and coordinated nature of the various prongs of the assault, Hamas must have been preparing it for quite some time, yet those plans remained undetected by Israel’s reputedly pervasive intelligence apparatus in the occupied territories.

As for the lack of military preparedness, a combination of factors may account for it. As noted, the attack took place on Jewish holidays. But more broadly the Israeli military may have had its eye on other concerns, such as the perceived greater threat from Hizbollah in Lebanon and deployments to protect Israeli settlers and thwart Palestinian attacks in the West Bank. Divisions within Israel over the far-right government’s plan to overhaul the judicial system may have eroded military morale, as security officials have been warning for months. The lack of preparedness may also reflect a certain hubris, to the effect that Palestinians would be incapable of carrying out anything of this scope and that the Israeli security establishment, which all its sophisticated technology and means of intelligence gathering, is invincible.

Heads may well roll in Israel over the failure to anticipate the attack. Opposition leader Yair Lapid has used the opportunity to call for a time-limited emergency unity government, on the condition that far-right ministers are excluded from decision-making; this move could help reunify Israeli political ranks for the duration of the fight, or deepen the split, as politicians and government leaders start blaming one another.

Why now, and why this?

Mohammed al-Deif, the military commander of Hamas's Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, distributed a speech early on in which he mentioned in particular the situation around al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and conditions for Palestinians in Israeli prisons in justification for the attack. Tensions were high during the Jewish holidays, when an unprecedented 5,000 Jewish worshippers ascended the Holy Esplanade – which Jewish tradition holds to be the site of the ancient Temple and where al-Aqsa is also located – to pray during Sukkot; Jewish prayer there is prohibited by the decades-old Status Quo understandings between Israel and Jordan (the custodian of Jerusalem's Muslim and Christian holy sites). Palestinians in Gaza protested along the Israeli security fence. Yet compared to previous unrest related to al-Aqsa, or matters such as Palestinian prisoners, these demonstrations were hardly out of the ordinary. The fact that planning for the Hamas operation is likely to have been under way for months suggests there was no single trigger.

The issue may well come down to timing. Hamas, which has made no pronouncement in this regard, may have considered it opportune to strike at a moment of deep domestic division in Israel and a perceived laxity or lack of vigilance regarding Palestinian capabilities. It may also have wanted to make its move against the background of external powers being preoccupied with the war in Ukraine. Hamas likely also finds it useful to upset the dynamics around diplomatic efforts by the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel to reach a tripartite deal that would, among other things, result in normalisation of relations between the latter two countries; Hamas and Palestinians generally fear that such an arrangement can only push their cause farther down the global agenda. The Islamist movement may also have watched with alarm how Palestinians in Gaza had started to openly criticise the Hamas government for its poor performance against the backdrop of a stifling Israeli siege. Some people had taken these protests to the street.

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Still, it is hard to know what Hamas leaders' endgame is in an attack on Israel deadlier than any in decades. It would be inconceivable for them not to expect a major Israeli response, one that could further destroy Gaza, exact a terrible toll on its long-suffering inhabitants and possibly spell the end of Hamas governance in the enclave. The murder and kidnapping of innocent civilians during the assault will make it difficult for Western politicians who might otherwise call for restraint to do so, at least in the first few days of an Israeli offensive.

Hamas seems to believe that drawing Israeli ground troops into Gaza to extract the hostages would cause heavy casualties, including on the Israeli side, and trigger outrage in the Muslim world and beyond. The group may even hope that Israel will re-establish a ground presence in Gaza – for Israel a costly and politically unpopular move for which even far-right politicians have traditionally had no appetite – so that Hamas could return to operating as an armed resistance, much as it does in the West Bank. (Saleh al-Arouri, deputy head of Hamas' political bureau, openly said: "The resistance bases its position and plans on the worst possibilities, including a ground invasion, [which would be] the best scenario for us to resolve the battle".) With the 1973 war in mind, after which Israel eventually had to return the Sinai to Egypt in exchange for peace, Hamas may even be trying to reach a transformative point, aiming for a long-term truce, something they have offered Israel in the past.

What could happen next?

There are several bad scenarios.

Israel may well send ground troops into Gaza in an attempt not only to punish Hamas but also to retrieve its kidnapped citizens. From its side, Hamas seeks to trade the hostages for the thousands of Palestinians held in Israeli prisons, though that seems a hard sell, at least any time soon, given the scale of Hamas's attack. The presence in Gaza of at least a hundred – precise numbers are as yet unclear – Israeli captives, whom Hamas could use as human shields, make for an even more complicated Israeli operation. An incursion will likely trigger a terribly bloody fight in which many more people could be killed, including Israeli soldiers, and parts of Gaza could suffer utter destruction. On the evening of 7 October, Israel cut off the electricity supply to the enclave, and the water supply is running low. The UN said 123,000 people were sheltering in its 44 schools around Gaza, adding that it had been forced to suspend food distribution to over 112,000 families.

From its side, Hizbollah may encourage Palestinian groups in Lebanon to enter the fray, opening a second front for Israel in the north, as occurred during the 2021 Gaza war and again in April, when tensions were running high around al-Aqsa.

Initially, Hizbollah responded to the Hamas attack and Israeli bombardment by announcing merely that it was closely following events, in part via constant contact with leaders of Palestinian armed groups.

Palestinian militants in Lebanon – belonging to Hamas or other groups – cannot operate against Israel without Hezbollah’s nod of approval. It thus appears that Hamas must have acted on its own initiative on this occasion, even if with counsel from its ally Hezbollah and their collective benefactor, Iran. Thus far, there is no solid evidence that Iran instigated Operation al-Aqsa Deluge, which had plenty of internal drivers, even if it provided Hamas with military technology and expertise, while cheering on the attack when it was in progress. The U.S. government says it has yet to find a “smoking gun” demonstrating Iranian involvement, though the accusation is gaining currency in Washington and doubtless shaping the policy debate. The [Israeli military](#), for its part, has not connected Iran to the attack, either.

Whatever level of coordination there has been to date between Hezbollah and Hamas, the potential for the two groups to work together is very real. During the 2021 Gaza war, Hezbollah and Hamas set up a [joint operations room](#), enabling Hezbollah to put its strategic know-how at Hamas’s disposal; this move created a precedent for what these groups call the “axis of resistance” to be involved even when only Hamas was doing the actual fighting. The coordination could go further still. Depending on the Israeli response to the 7 October attacks, Hezbollah may get embroiled directly itself in response to escalating violence in Gaza, the West Bank and especially Jerusalem, with possibly destructive consequences for Lebanon, in addition to whatever damage Hezbollah missiles would wreak inside Israel. The challenge would then be to contain the fighting to just those actors and prevent it from escalating into a broader war in the Middle East. On 8 October, Hezbollah fired into the Sheba Farms region in southern Lebanon, which it considers occupied by Israel, while Israel lobbed shells into agricultural areas of southern Lebanon. No one was hurt, and no red lines were crossed. But these are dangerous games with a high risk of spinning out of control.

There are other escalatory scenarios as well. One is that Palestinians in other parts of Palestine could rise up in solidarity with their kin in Gaza (some protests have already erupted, with seven Palestinians killed by Israeli army fire). Israeli settler militias in the occupied West Bank might use the opportunity to invade Palestinian towns and villages, as they have been doing with increasing frequency over the past year. Palestinians in Israel might launch protests, as they did in May 2021.

Can outside actors help end the current fighting?

It appears unlikely that will happen immediately. As Israel’s main security partner, the U.S. has greater influence over its actions than others, but the Biden administration appears reluctant to intercede. Until 7 October, the administration’s principal approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was to push for some sort of “economic peace” – a steady infusion of Gulf funding into the occupied territories that would not alter the political status quo – by promoting normalisation of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia and hoping to avoid another major bout of fighting, given its other priorities. But it also entailed standing by largely passively in the face of repeated settler attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank, the killing of ever-increasing numbers of Palestinians, including children, by the army and the expansion of Israel’s settlement enterprise in the West Bank toward de facto annexation.

Based on official statements, a consensus has formed in Western capitals to condemn Hamas, not just its targeting of civilians, but Arab governments have been more circumspect. Saudi Arabia [called](#) for an “immediate halt to escalation”, adding that it has issued repeated warnings about the risk of an explosion as the occupation deepens; it also mentioned Israel’s provocations at al-Aqsa and its actions depriving the Palestinian people of their legitimate rights. As for the U.S., President Joe Biden’s national security team surely understands the risks that a Gaza ground invasion – as well as aerial and naval bombardment – will pose to civilians. But while Secretary of State Antony Blinken [expressed support](#) for Turkish efforts to encourage a ceasefire, White House statements notably lacked the usual calls for a proportionate response or the exercise of restraint, likely reflecting, among other things, an awareness of how those would be received by a pro-Israel domestic audience still stunned by what happened. It is also salient that nine U.S. citizens were among those killed in Hamas’ initial assault, according to the State Department; the group may be holding others hostage. The Pentagon has ordered an aircraft carrier strike group into the eastern Mediterranean in an attempt to deter other regional parties from getting involved.

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At some point, probably after days if not weeks of fighting, there will be concerted international efforts to bring about a ceasefire, with Egypt, Qatar and possibly Türkiye leaning on Hamas. There will also be calls on Israel to de-escalate, particularly from actors outside the West, many of whom are united in sympathy for the Palestinian struggle. ([South Africa](#) has already weighed in along these lines.) Hamas may decide to release some hostages “for humanitarian reasons”, such as children, the elderly and the sick. But events have entered uncharted territory: the coming battle, from Israel’s perspective, is about gaining the freedom of all the Israeli hostages in Gaza, teaching Hamas a harsh lesson, and re-

establishing dominance and the credibility of its defences; and from Hamas's perspective, it is about compelling a dramatically different international approach to the plight of Gazans and of Palestinians generally. A ceasefire may require more complex negotiations than those that have ended other recent rounds of armed conflict and a lot more fighting before that happens.

More broadly, the events that started on 7 October show that Israel cannot maintain a three-front calm. Its preoccupation with the perceived threat from Hizbollah in the north and its decision to deploy the bulk of its troops to the West Bank to protect settlers, combined with the apparent assessment that Hamas lacked the capability or desire to carry out a major offensive at this time, appears to have enabled, if not motivated, the militants' offensive. In Gaza, even regular bombardments – and even Israel's sophisticated weaponry, spyware and world-renowned intelligence apparatus – have not prevented Hamas from building an effective asymmetrical warfare capacity. In Israeli parlance, "mowing the grass" every few years no longer works to maintain the siege on Gaza and preserve security at the same time.

Yet Israel faces no clear alternative for continuing its overall control of the enclave. If it overthrows Hamas, the only way forward would be for Israel to station soldiers in Gaza once more. Trying to oust Hamas and replace it with other Palestinian leadership will not work, as [the Palestinian Authority headed by Mahmoud Abbas](#) has proven incapable of governing the West Bank and no alternative presents itself.

The U.S. push for normalisation of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia is likely to be put on hold or at least to make little headway as long as fighting continues. Riyadh, like other Arab capitals, is keenly aware of the pro-Palestinian sentiments among the population it rules. It will have to think twice before risking the perception that it would be throwing the Palestinians under the bus by striking such a deal.

These events also show that no world power can expect that Israel's conflict with the Palestinians will somehow go away. The continued occupation, the end of any peace process and the dying hope of a two-state solution are driving the region toward a major war or at least repeated outbursts of severe violence. Today, all signs point to Israel and Hamas fighting things out, with devastating consequences. Ideally, the hopelessness of the continued confrontation will blow new life into moribund peace efforts, including by empowering peace camps in both Israel and Palestine. Fresh thinking on that front cannot start early enough. For now, though, world powers should counsel restraint, at least behind closed doors, even as they publicly excoriate Hamas for the attack, lay the groundwork for attempts to bring about a ceasefire and hold on to the small hope that the power balance at that point opens space for a way forward that does not repeat the destructive patterns of the past.

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