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Special Briefing: A new Israel-Gaza war and regional reverberations

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Dangerous scenarios as Hamas-Israel war awaits Israeli response

Paul Salem

President and CEO

- *In addition to the bloodshed in Israel and the growing death toll in Gaza, there are risks that the conflict might spill over to other arenas, including Lebanon and Syria.*
- *In the short run, the U.S. and other powers should work to avoid a widening of the conflict and try to bring this latest round of Gaza-Israeli fighting to a close; but In the medium term, this should be yet another wakeup call that abandoning the political process and extinguishing the possibility of a two-state solution only breeds more despair among Palestinians and strengthens the extremists, like Hamas, and their Iranian backers.*



The Hamas attack inside Israel on Oct. 7 has already upended security and politics along the Israeli-Palestinian axis as well as in the region more broadly; but as Israel prepares its response, the days and weeks to come might bring about even more dangerous scenarios. At a minimum, what can be expected is a large-scale set of Israeli [military operations](#) in Gaza that has already included punishing aerial bombardment, but might also include a ground invasion. Hamas is surely expecting such an assault and has received ample training from Hezbollah on ways to fight back. It still has rocket capabilities in reserve, but more crucially it has over 100 Israeli military and civilian captives to try to deter or blunt the Israeli response. Israel lost more than [1,000](#) people in the Hamas attack, and it is vowing that its response will be bigger than ever before.

In addition to the bloodshed in Israel and the growing death toll in Gaza, there are risks that the conflict might spill over to other arenas. The situation in the West Bank has already been volatile, with clashes between Palestinians and Israeli security forces as well as between Israeli settlers and local Palestinians. So far around 20 Palestinians there have been killed and about 80 injured. As the Israeli counterattack unfolds in Gaza, the situation there is likely to get much worse. So far, the situation among Jewish and Arab Israelis inside Israel has not boiled over, but tensions are only likely to rise in the coming days and weeks.



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The wider risk involves Hezbollah in Lebanon. So far, Hezbollah has chosen to stay out of the fray; it has done so in previous Hamas-Israeli conflicts and generally does not want to repeat the experience of 2006, when a limited operation escalated into a large-scale war that it did not want. Strategically, Hezbollah's function is to remain as a deterrent for Iran to dissuade Israel or the United States from any direct action against Iran; Iran would not want that deterrent wasted. Israel also does not want to open a second front in the north. However, if the Israeli operations in Gaza turn into a much wider campaign to occupy large swathes of Gaza and attempt to fully uproot Hamas, then Hezbollah, with Iran's blessing, might choose to open a second front. Neither of them wants to lose Hamas as a regional asset. Israel has already moved some troops to its northern border with Lebanon and threatened that Israeli retaliation against a Hezbollah second front would not only devastate Lebanon, again, but also lead to devastating attacks on Iran and Hezbollah's ally in Damascus.

The U.S. has moved a carrier strike group to the eastern Mediterranean to stand ready to provide support for Israel in this conflict; media close to Hezbollah have read the carrier move as a U.S. threat to join in retaliation if Hezbollah opens a second front. Thus, what started as the most acute Palestinian-Israeli conflict in decades could quickly escalate and expand into a much wider regional war, the consequences of which on the humanitarian, political, security, and global economic levels cannot be calculated.

In the short run, the U.S. and other powers should work to avoid a widening of the conflict and try to bring this latest round of Gaza-Israeli fighting to a close. When Israel ends its operations in Gaza, Hamas will likely still be standing, and Israel and Hamas will have to enter into negotiations to deal with a large-scale prisoner exchange and agree on new security arrangements along the Israel-Gaza border. In the meantime, thousands more will die, and hundreds of thousands of civilians will be caught in the crossfire and require intense humanitarian assistance.

In the medium term, this should be yet *another* wakeup call that abandoning the political process and extinguishing the possibility of a two-state solution only breeds more despair among Palestinians and strengthens the extremists, like Hamas, and their Iranian backers. After the mourning and stock-taking, there needs to be a serious push to resume peace efforts between Israelis and Palestinians, and this time with the participation of Arab countries that also want to see a more peaceful Middle East with a just resolution of the Israel-Palestine issue.

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50 years on, Israelis are facing another Yom Kippur War-like experience

Nimrod Goren

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- *The brutal surprise attack by Hamas on Oct. 7 is becoming a major event in Israel's history, reminiscent of the Yom Kippur War exactly 50 years ago.*
- *As Israel seeks the upper hand in warfare, a collective societal experience is emerging, marked by surprise, anguish, heroism, agency, and solidarity.*

A couple of weeks ago, Israelis commemorated the 50th anniversary of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. That devastating event has shaped the Israeli mindset ever since and eventually contributed to the transition from full-fledged Israeli-Arab wars to an era of diplomacy and engagement.



The war's anniversary became a moment of reflection for Israel: Veterans told previously unknown stories, memoirs and analyses were published, and movies that captured the period were screened. The Yom Kippur War experience became more vivid than before for those who were not around at the time.

While this moment is still fresh, something similar is happening once again. Another generation of Israelis now has to go through war and brutality, following the surprise terror attack by Hamas on Oct. 7, on a quiet holiday morning. Events are still unfolding, but five key components of the collective Israeli experience that is emerging can already be traced.

Surprise: It all came out of the blue. Israelis have experienced multiple rounds of warfare and escalation with Gaza, but these gradually evolved in a tit-for-tat manner. This time it was different — there was no prior warnings or context (beyond the never-ending Israeli-Palestinian conflict). It was not only the atrocities committed that surprised Israelis, it was also the manner and ease with which Hamas infiltrated Israeli territory and wreaked havoc there. That went against what Israelis had grown to believe or expect.

Anguish: Never before has Israel experienced such a large number of fatalities, casualties, and captives in one day and within its civilian population. The full scope of the tragedy is still unknown, as numbers are rising by the day and many are still considered missing. Beyond the



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grief, sadness, and concern, due to the personal, communal, and national losses and uncertainty, there is shock from the ISIS-like atrocities committed by Hamas against Israeli civilians.

Heroism: Citizens rose to the occasion and carried out heroic acts that inspire and give hope to many: the [young woman](#) who organized neighbors and saved her kibbutz; the [hostage couple](#) who distracted their captives with coffee and cookies until they were rescued; the former general and [left-wing parliamentarian](#) who personally went in and out of the combat zone to rescue survivors and bring them home; and the [former general](#) who drove south with his wife on a personal rescue mission to free his captured family.

Agency: Israelis are in the midst of a nation-wide effort to support those in need — families evacuated from the south, soldiers called up for duty, families who have lost or are still missing loved ones, and small businesses that are struggling. Almost every town now has a hub for donating, cooking, collecting, and hosting. The sense of civic empowerment that many Israelis developed during the struggle to safeguard their country's democracy is now spilling over to a new arena. The same networks set up throughout 2023 for pro-democracy community organizing are now being used to collect and distribute aid.

Solidarity: Messages and gestures of support are pouring in from the international community. Leaders are issuing statements, aid is being provided, global landmarks are being lit up with the Israeli flag, and friends and colleagues (including from Arab and Muslim countries) are reaching out to Israelis they know. Israelis, who so often feel they are facing a hostile world that does not understand their experience, are being embraced and feel strengthened — at least for now. (The response to Israel's retaliatory attacks in Gaza will likely impact this trend.)

Israelis are facing a difficult situation these days. So too are Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Currently, each side is consumed by its own suffering and immediate needs; but once the dust settles, it will be important to foster a parallel — and later, joint — understanding that extremism and conflict are not the way to go. Six years after the Yom Kippur War, Israel and Egypt reached peace, against all odds. In six years or fewer, the goal should be for Israelis and Palestinians to do the same.

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Hamas attack irreversibly alters the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Khaled Elgindy

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- *The horrific Hamas assault represents an unprecedented intelligence failure on Israel's part and a massive political failure; it did not happen in a vacuum though and comes in the context of not just a 56-year-old Israeli military occupation and suffocating 16-year-long blockade of Gaza but also a more recent spike in violence, settler terrorism, and the most extreme government in Israel's history.*
- *The attack also represents a huge political and moral failure by the U.S., EU, Arab states, and the rest of the international community, who despite occasional hand wringing have largely been content to maintain the status quo as long as it was mostly Palestinians who paid the price.*



The scale and brutality of Hamas' stunning attack on Israel on Oct. 7 is still being felt by Israelis and will have lasting repercussions for many years to come. More than 1,000 Israelis have been killed so far, which has been widely and rightly condemned across the globe. In response to Hamas' killing spree, Israel has launched a massive aerial bombardment against Gaza on a scale never seen before in a bid, according to Israeli leaders, to end Hamas' military and governing capability. So far, at least 700 Palestinians have been killed and many thousands injured, more than 120,000 have been displaced internally, and Gaza has sustained massive damage.

In addition to the horrible human toll, it is impossible to overstate the extent to which the Hamas attack represents an enormous and unprecedented intelligence failure on Israel's part. Gaza is one of the most heavily surveilled geographic spaces in the world, and Israel controls movement into and out of it. But it is also a huge political failure. The current coalition has touted itself as *the* government of Israeli security. Moreover, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had been promising Israelis a "new Middle East," in which normalization with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states was just around the corner and where the Palestinian issue was a thing of the past. As a result, the Israeli political establishment allowed itself to be lulled into a sense of triumphalism and complacency.



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It is precisely that false sense of security that the audacious Hamas operation was designed to shatter. Much like in 1973, when Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack on Israel, the Hamas attack was designed to deliver a shock to the Israeli system as well as to the broader international community.

The horrific Hamas assault did not happen in a vacuum or out of the blue, of course. It comes in the context of not just a 56-year-old Israeli military occupation and suffocating 16-year-long blockade of Gaza but also the deadliest violence in the West Bank in more than two decades, unrestrained settler terrorism, regular encroachments on the al-Aqsa Mosque by Jewish extremists, and the most extreme government in Israel's history. Analysts and diplomats have long warned of the potential for a major explosion, and presumably it has arrived.

In that sense, the attack also represents a massive political and moral failure by the United States, European Union, Arab states, and the rest of the international community, who despite occasional hand wringing over the dire situation of Palestinians, have largely been content to maintain the status quo as long as it was mostly Palestinians that paid the price. The Hamas operation was designed to dramatically and irrevocably alter that calculation.

In this, at least, the bloody Hamas assault seems to have succeeded. While the long-term fallout from the carnage in both Israel and Gaza is not yet known, both the region and the conflict have been irreversibly altered. Moreover, the worst may still lay ahead. The gruesome attacks on Israelis have garnered an unprecedented outpouring of sympathy and solidarity from around the world. In doing so, however, U.S., EU, and other Western officials have yet — rather alarmingly — to call for a ceasefire or to demand that Israel abide by international law or even to express concern for Palestinian civilians in the face of the unprecedented bombing. This has rightly been seen by Israel as a blank check to continue its pummeling of Gaza as it sees fit. In the end, without immediate and responsible third-party intervention, the world may simply be trading one atrocity for another.

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The Biden administration shifts its Middle East policy into a higher gear

Brian Katulis

Vice President of Policy

- *Hamas' shocking surprise attack and incursion against Israel this weekend put the Middle East higher on the Biden administration's overall national security agenda.*
- *The efforts to advance a more proactive diplomatic approach, including a possible Saudi-Israeli normalization deal, will be placed on the backburner as the Biden team engages in crisis diplomacy and steps up security support to partners across the region.*



The shocking surprise attack and incursion into Israel by Hamas terrorists this weekend has pushed the Middle East higher on the Biden administration's national security agenda in ways it had not expected when it came into office or planned for in recent weeks. Indeed, on the eve of these dramatic events, President Joe Biden's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan had sounded an optimistic tone, [saying](#), "The Middle East region is quieter today than it has been in two decades."

That was then, and this is now. Before the Oct. 7 attacks, the Biden team had been moving toward a more proactive approach that put diplomacy front and center in its efforts across the region, in Yemen but also through new projects like [the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor \(IMEC\)](#), an ambitious plan to link the region more closely together with Asia and Europe. The buzz before this calamity was talk of a [possible Saudi-Israeli normalization deal](#).

With a new Middle East war apparently having broken out, however, all of those plans will be pushed to the sidelines. In reaction to Hamas' brutal attack, the Biden team signaled strong support for Israel and announced it was sending the [USS Gerald R. Ford carrier strike group](#) to the eastern Mediterranean in an effort to deter Hezbollah and Iran from entering the fray and further complicating a challenging security environment. The Biden administration also rallied the support of top U.S. allies France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom; yesterday, the five [issued a strong joint statement](#) in support of Israel.



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In many ways, these initial steps are likely the easiest moves the Biden administration will make because the quickly escalating conflict will very likely become even more complicated in the coming phase. Efforts to secure the safe release of hostages seized by Hamas terrorists and other groups will be difficult; Israel is poised to take military action in Gaza on a scale that it has never attempted before; and the loss of life and humanitarian challenges that will result will be devastating. It will also provoke endless political debates and sharp diplomatic divides in the region.

This author's [recent assessment](#) of the Biden administration's Middle East policy underscored how President Biden came into office in 2021 looking to keep the region lower on its overall list of priorities, but it gradually stepped up its engagement in this part of the world during the past two years, with a focus on putting diplomacy first. The events of this past weekend have now thrust its Middle East policy into a new and more dangerous phase, one where the stakes are very high. Secretary Blinken is [headed to Israel](#) this Thursday to try to navigate this maelstrom. How the conflict plays out could end up defining the Biden administration's foreign policy legacy in ways the team did not anticipate.

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Iran's unconvincing balancing act

Alex Vatanka

Director of Iran Program and Senior Fellow, Black Sea Program

- *Since the Oct. 7 Hamas attack, Tehran has tried to walk a tightrope, attempting to capitalize on the ongoing violence while still claiming it had no responsibility for it.*
- *Other than payback, Iran likely sees the Hamas attack as a moment to stack the deck in the region, planting doubts in the minds of Israel's leaders as well as those in Arab states pursuing normalization with Israel.*



Iran's stance since the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel has been an unconvincing balancing act. It shows Tehran wants to capitalize on the ongoing violence but still prefers to claim no responsibility for it. The coming weeks and months, as the Israel-Hamas conflict evolves in this new and uncharted phase, will show if Iran can safely walk this tightrope. The reaction from Tehran so far indicates that Iranian officials are both anxious as well as hopeful about the regional repercussions.

On the one hand, the regime in Tehran has celebrated the attack as proof that armed conflict with Israel is the only course of action available to the Palestinians. And yet, on Oct. 10, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei felt it necessary to say that Tehran had not been involved in the attack. As he put it, the [claim](#) that "non-Palestinians" were involved is a "miscalculation."

This Iranian assertion of innocence is aimed at shielding Tehran from international criticism as a key instigator behind the violence. It is, however, a hard sell given that Iran has provided support for Hamas for decades, despite ups and downs in relations. Iran's financial and military support for Hamas is well known. Hamas officials are proud of receiving [cash in suitcases](#) from Tehran; and Iran's Quds Force, part of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, has been providing [missiles](#) to Hamas since at least 2008.

Still, Iran's denial that it had a direct role in the Hamas attack might be credible. As of today, both the U.S. and the [Israelis](#) have found no evidence that Iran masterminded the attack. But no one can deny that the regime in Tehran has been looking to hit at Israel in a spectacular fashion for some time. As Tehran sees it, it has been repeatedly humiliated by Israel — from the



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U.S.-Israel [Stuxnet cyberattacks](#) against its nuclear program in 2010 to the [assassinations](#) of a number of Iranian officials in recent years, including Israel's role in the [killing](#) of Quds Force head Qassem Soleimani in 2020.

Other than payback, Iran very likely sees the Hamas attack on Israel as a moment to stack the deck in the region. First, Tehran, Hamas, and other members of the Iran-led “Axis of Resistance,” including Lebanese Hezbollah, will use this conflict to plant doubts in the minds of Israeli leaders. Operation al-Aqsa Flood was certainly a monumental intelligence failure for Israel, and Iran and its allies will hope that Israel will — once its ongoing operations in Gaza are over — retrench and reassess its options.

At the same time, Iran is using this round of conflict to create doubt among Arab states that were moving toward normalizing ties with Israel or have already done so. As Khamenei's top advisor Ali Akbar Velayati [said](#), “Those willing to normalize with Israel should learn a lesson from the latest developments in Palestine.” This is not exactly a subtle warning but suggests what Tehran hopes to see happen, not necessarily where the region will go from here. Much depends on Israeli actions in the coming days and weeks, but it is too premature for Iran to assume this latest violence will vindicate its Axis of Resistance.

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The specter of the 2006 July war hangs over Lebanon

Fadi Nicholas Nassar

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Nadim Shehadi

Contributor

- *Where things will go from here is deeply uncertain, and the real question is whether Hezbollah stands to gain anything by joining the war or whether Israel will decide to escalate the conflict and involve Hamas's allies in the "Axis of Resistance."*
- *Washington seems to have finally come to the realization that the Middle East still matters; failing to take decisive action always leads to far more costly and less rewarding modes of intervention.*

A tenuous uncertainty looms over the Lebanon-Israel border, amid speculation, mixed messages, and rumors that the Hamas-Israel war might expand to include Hezbollah. In Lebanon, the memory of the July 2006 war is still fresh, with what began as limited skirmishes quickly expanding into a devastating invasion.

The real question is whether Hezbollah stands to gain anything by joining the war or whether Israel will decide to escalate the conflict and involve Hamas's allies, such as Hezbollah and Iran.

The Hamas attack on Israel has ended a brief period of optimism about the future of the region that began with the Chinese-brokered détente between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March.

If Hamas can claim any victory, it is principally a local one over its Palestinian rivals and a regional one shared by the "Axis of Resistance" led by Iran and including Hezbollah. It has restored the armed resistance agenda over that of a peace process and normalization drive now led by Saudi Arabia.





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Politically, Hamas has made itself the main interlocutor moving forward and marginalized the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Fatah movement. Several myths have been smashed. One of them is confidence in Israel's intelligence and security establishments; this means Israelis can no longer feel secure in their own homes and take the protection provided by the state for granted.

Hamas's gains are also Hezbollah's gains; they have already been realized and are intangible and irreversible. From that perspective, it makes little sense for Hezbollah to open another front. The results are similar to the claim by Hezbollah of having dented the Israel Defense Forces' image of invincibility in the 2006 July war, which emboldened the resistance agenda, including Hamas. Images of Israeli civilians fleeing in fear and the vulnerability of its soldiers have a ripple effect throughout the region, undercutting the perception of Israel's absolute power.

Meanwhile, Israel's options are limited, and the question is whether it is likely to open a second front on the northern border without setting, let alone realizing, any clear objectives in Gaza. Clearly, there is no option of doing nothing, and the choices of invasion, reoccupation, or retaliation are also difficult to define and risk unprecedented losses of civilian life. This raises the concern that it may choose to pursue a regional escalation.

It is a July 2006 moment for Hamas and Israel. That month, Israel entered Lebanon with no clear objective that it could declare as successfully achievable. It was this failure on Israel's part that gave Hezbollah the opportunity to win the narrative war.

Indeed, amid a devastated Lebanon, Hezbollah's declared victory was ultimately over its local rivals as it regained its mantle of resistance. Fifteen years later, it has wiped out its rivals and controls the country. It has little to gain and everything to lose from another war.

Both Hamas and Hezbollah have successfully demonstrated that violence can create results, such as the release of prisoners through hostage swaps where negotiations have failed, and cement their position as the main powerbrokers, eclipsing official institutions.

Still, the fog of war, risk of miscalculation, and uncertain context, coupled with the still unclear position of Iran, which may play the deciding factor in how its Lebanese ally will act, put the risk of war at its highest since 2006.

It did not have to be this way. With Washington sending warships in what appears to be a last-ditch effort to deter a ruinous regional war, it seems to have finally come to the realization that the Middle East still matters, and failing to take decisive action always leads to far more costly and less rewarding modes of intervention. Riddled with contradictions, the failures of U.S. policy in the region have come home to roost. Appearing to blur the mistakes of the Trump and Obama administrations, the Biden administration has, on the one hand, advanced a narrow



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regional plan to normalize relations with Israel while marginalizing what should have been the central issue — a reasonable and just pathway to a Palestinian state. On the other, the U.S. has primarily focused its attention on Iran’s nuclear program while deprioritizing or rather failing to develop a coherent and robust policy to curb Iran’s proxy militias, which continue to be its leading tool of leverage (and destabilization) in the region. No one can predict what comes next — except, of course, for an urgent reset in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

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A brutal, brazen, and sophisticated terrorist attack

Charles Lister

Senior Fellow, Director of Syria and Countering Terrorism & Extremism programs

- *A lot of attention has been paid to the complexity and sophistication of Hamas' attack, but what was arguably even more impactful was how bold it was.*
- *With a major Israeli ground incursion of Gaza looking increasingly likely, it is hard to imagine this conflict not spilling over into something wider, particularly as Hamas' allies in Lebanon and Syria are already positioned to intervene.*



There can be no understating the significance of Hamas' assault on Israel and the war that it has triggered. For starters, Hamas' attack was simply unprecedented — in scale, scope, lethality, and brutality. According to Israeli authorities, at least 1,000 Israelis were killed and dozens, if not more than 100, kidnapped and taken back to Gaza as hostages. This was a terrorist attack in every sense: Men, women, children, and the elderly were massacred, with some beheaded. The scale of the violence eclipsed any single terrorist attack conducted by the Islamic State anywhere in the world, ever.

At the same time, Hamas demonstrated an effective level of combined warfare that we've never seen from it before, with forces attacking Israel along multiple axes, on the ground, by sea, and from the air. There was a simultaneous cyber component to the attack too, not to mention the overwhelming waves of short- and long-range rocket and ballistic missile fire. The use of paragliders and drone-dropped armor-piercing munitions underline yet again the extent to which non-state actors are watching and learning from each other — from warzones like Syria, Turkey, Ukraine, and further afield. A lot of [attention](#) has been paid to the complexity and sophistication of Hamas' attack, but what was arguably even more impactful was more simple: how bold the assault was. None of the weaponry or tactics displayed by Hamas are new to analysts, but few if any expected Hamas to be so audacious.

How Israel was caught so off guard will be studied and debated for some time, but as things stand, the situation looks set to escalate markedly. Already, nearly 800 Palestinians have been killed in a retaliatory Israeli air campaign — including at least 140 children and 120 women. Some parts of urban Gaza have been turned to rubble almost as far as the eye can see. As of Monday, 300,000 Israeli troops have been mobilized, with a major ground incursion looking



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increasingly likely. Should that develop, it is hard to imagine this conflict not spilling over into something wider, with Hamas' allies in Lebanon and Syria already positioned to intervene. At least four Hezbollah fighters were killed on Oct. 9, in a string of attempted small-scale ground infiltrations. One of them was a Palestinian-Syrian from Damascus, whose role and death serves to illustrate that borders matter little when it comes to Iran's potent regional proxy network. More rocket fire and Israeli retaliation has followed along the Lebanese border on Monday. In Syria meanwhile, a large force of at least 100 Hezbollah fighters and other local Iranian proxies were spotted deploying to the border with the disputed Golan Heights last night.

At this point, there is no doubting Iran's role. There is no world in which an Iranian proxy launches such a game-changing assault on Israel without the highest levels of Iranian awareness, investment, clearance, and involvement. Israeli authorities were already aware of Iran's role in coordinating — from Lebanon — recent flare-ups with Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza in 2022 and 2023. This escalating conflict will be no different.

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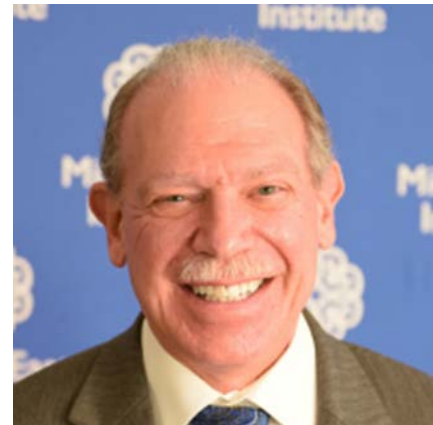
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The Hamas attack challenges the future of the Abraham Accords

Gerald M. Feierstein

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- *Despite their preference to protect their engagement with Israel on the one hand, and their concerns over the implications of Iranian support for extreme regional destabilization on the other, Arab Gulf states, especially the Saudis, will be sensitive to reignited public support for the Palestinians.*
- *Gulf governments are likely to maintain a low profile as they wait to see the dust settle, neither supporting an Israeli government that they view as responsible for this debacle nor taking steps to break with Israel.*



Both for the Gulf Arab signatories to the Abraham Accords and for the Saudis currently in dialogue with Israel and the United States over joining the multi-party normalization deal, the Hamas attack is a worst-case scenario. The Arab governments see relations with Israel providing both direct benefits in terms of closer security ties as well as trade and investment opportunities, and indirect value from stronger links to the U.S. Moreover, they have long seen Hamas, once an affiliate of the detested Muslim Brotherhood and now tied to Iran, as a threat to their own regime security as well as to broader regional stability. Iran's as-yet-unproven role in supporting the attack raises questions whether their resolve to engage Tehran and press for diplomatic resolutions to the region's conflicts was misguided. A decision to cool if not end diplomatic outreach to the Iranian regime will ratchet up tensions in the Gulf area and force Middle Eastern governments to once again prioritize defense and security over their preferred focus on economic diversification.

The Biden administration will undoubtedly make all of these points to regional capitals and urge support for Israel to demonstrate that "terrorism doesn't succeed." Yet despite their preference to protect their engagement with Israel on the one hand, and their concerns over the implications of Iranian support for extreme regional destabilization on the other, Gulf governments, especially the Saudis, will be sensitive to reignited public support for the Palestinians. Since the advent of Benjamin Netanyahu's extreme right-wing government at the very end of last year, Arab populations have been angered by the rise of anti-Palestinian violence, the racist, anti-Arab rhetoric by Israeli government leaders, and the violations of Islamic holy places in Jerusalem by Israeli extremists. They have been further frustrated by the



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failure of their own leaders, who share their concerns, as well as by the U.S. and the Western democracies to hold Israel's officials to account for these actions. Needless to say, few in the Arab world would agree with the assertion that the Hamas attack was "unprovoked."

Thus, Gulf governments are likely to maintain a low profile as they wait to see the dust settle, neither supporting an Israeli government that they view as responsible for this debacle nor taking steps to break with Israel. As in previous explosions in Gaza, they will hope that the situation resolves quickly and that the certain Israeli military response does not create even higher numbers of innocent Palestinian casualties, thus further inflaming an angry and restive domestic population.



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War in Gaza adds to Egypt's multiple parallel crises

Mirette F. Mabrouk

Senior Fellow and Founding Director of the Egypt program

- *With fears growing that the war in Gaza could spill over its borders, crisis-wracked Egypt is preparing for a wave of refugees to enter North Sinai.*
- *While there is little to no love lost for the Islamist Hamas in Egypt, there is overwhelming public sympathy and support for the Palestinians which may undermine 50 years of solid economic, military, and intelligence cooperation with Israel.*



“Leave now.” That was Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s directive to Palestinian residents of Gaza on Oct. 8, the day after Hamas launched an attack on Israel, unprecedented in its size and ferocity. Netanyahu’s directive sounded like a forewarning but in all likelihood it was for the benefit of Western audiences. Those with any knowledge of the situation know that the residents of Gaza cannot “leave.” Gaza, long referred to as the world’s largest open-air prison, is blockaded on one side by Israeli forces and the other by Egyptian troops. While Egypt has been letting Gazans pass through for humanitarian reasons, on Monday night [an Israeli airstrike hit the Rafah border crossing](#) between Gaza and Egypt, effectively cutting off the only escape route out of the enclave.

The situation is inexpressibly grim. And to regional watchers, there are some parallels with the sudden explosion that was the Arab Spring. While the signs slowly and clearly built up for all to see, the actual moment of revolution still took everyone by surprise. In this case, as recently as August, [the United Nations’ Middle East envoy](#) Tor Wennesland told the Security Council that increasing violence was being fueled by “despair over the future,” adding, “The lack of progress towards a political horizon that addressed the core issues driving the conflict has left a dangerous and volatile vacuum, filled by extremists on all sides.”

But as horrific as the situation already is, there are fears it could escalate into something far worse: a conflict that spills over its borders. While Egypt, Qatar, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia are standing by ready to mediate, neither side in the conflict is showing any willingness to talk. Diplomats from Egypt, normally the go-to arbitrator, have said, anonymously, that the current situation is too volatile for an immediate intervention. Egypt is watching with particular anxiety. While the Gaza border crossing is normally closely guarded, the Egyptian government is acutely



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aware that the current situation will require a rewriting of the rulebook. Despite Egypt's policy on not allowing the crossing to be breached, officials [reportedly say](#) they are expecting it to happen and are quietly preparing for it. According to [a statement put out by the North Sinai Governorate](#), Governor Mohamed Shousha held a crisis management meeting on Sunday, asking for inventories at mills, markets, and fuel stations; moreover, he ordered schools and available housing to be used for humanitarian shelters if necessary and gave instructions to manage the tons of aid in food and medicals supplies the government has prepared. This comes while Egypt is already dealing with a humanitarian calamity on its southern border, with 325,000 refugees having entered the country, fleeing the civil war in Sudan. Both tragedies come at a time when Egypt is undergoing its worst economic crisis in living memory.

Nor will the government have to deal solely with economic concerns. Egypt was the first Arab country to make peace with Israel, and that peace has held firm for almost 50 years. Both neighbors maintain solid economic, military, and intelligence cooperation. However, as firmly as public dissent is discouraged in Egypt, it would be futile to attempt to quash public opinion altogether. And while there is little to no love lost for the Islamist Hamas in Egypt, there is overwhelming public sympathy and support for the Palestinians — as there is throughout much of the region. While there is little outright glorification of violence in mainstream circles, social media crackles with Arab questions as to why the world should now be outraged by the deaths of Israeli civilians while consistently ignoring the deaths of Palestinian civilians. The [shooting of 12-year-old Ahmad Rabi](#) by an Israeli soldier the day before the Hamas attacks went largely unreported. Shot at a distance of less than 100 meters (i.e., close enough for the soldier to note precisely how young the boy was), he was the 49th child to be killed this year.

A recent editorial by Hossam Badrawy raised the old land swap theory, put forward by successive Israeli governments, since Egypt and Israel first made peace, whereby Palestinians would be moved to Egypt's North Sinai (and Jordan), effectively making them Egypt and Jordan's "problem." In return, Egypt would receive Israeli land. It's a suggestion that has failed to gain any traction with either Cairo or Amman.

Egypt is also struggling with other threats to its relationship with Israel: On Sunday, a [junior police officer in Alexandria shot and killed two Israeli tourists and an Egyptian national](#) in an altercation at a tourist site. The officer was, in turn, shot by a senior Egyptian officer and investigations are ongoing. Clearly Israel has more pressing matters on its plate at the moment, but there will have to be a tense conversation at some point soon.

All of the above makes it urgent for Egypt to attempt to find a way to quell the violence in Gaza, while simultaneously making it more difficult to do so.

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Anxious to demonstrate Turkey's regional centrality, Erdoğan offers to mediate

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- *By highlighting Turkish support for the Palestinians and capacity to play the role of intermediary in eventual ceasefire negotiations, Ankara hopes to simultaneously demonstrate Turkey's importance within the Muslim world and its value to Western allies.*
- *At this point, Erdoğan's preference seems to be to demonstrate Turkey's centrality without taking unwarranted risks; but the longer the conflict goes on, the harder it will be for Ankara to maintain the status quo.*



The dramatic new wave of violence between Israel and Hamas has shaken up the region, pushing many governments in the neighborhood to respond in a bid to prevent further escalation of the conflict. Ankara is no exception: By highlighting Turkish support for the Palestinians and capacity to play the role of intermediary in eventual ceasefire negotiations, it hopes to simultaneously demonstrate Turkey's importance within the Muslim world and its value to Western allies.

Turkish support for the Palestinian cause is widely felt, if not always particularly intense outside of Islamist circles. In public comments, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called for both sides to exercise restraint, while focusing attention on Turkey's defense of the al-Aqsa Mosque and championing of a Palestinian state. Most opposition leaders, [including Republican People's Party head Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu](#), have also framed their public messaging to highlight their support for the Palestinians.

This messaging has extended to the media space. For both domestic and regional audiences, the Turkish government has been careful to highlight that it backs Palestinian rights, while downplaying Hamas' targeting of civilians. From the moment the current crisis broke out, the Turkish press — and in particular state-allied media — has highlighted Israeli violence in the conflict but provided only limited coverage of Hamas' targeting of civilians. This imbalance has been particularly true of [the Arabic-language coverage in Turkey's official Anadolu Press](#).



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The other component of Turkey's messaging has been to promote itself as an intermediary in brokering a de-escalation of hostilities between Hamas and Israel. This is a favored role for the Turkish government because it allows Ankara to highlight its utility to its Western allies and, at low cost, places Turkey at the center of wider regional events. But like its efforts at brokering a deal between Russia and Ukraine, there is an element of performative display here. Israel may no longer trust Turkey to play a neutral mediator's role; and in any case, the Israeli state is unlikely to be interested in de-escalation for some time to come.

The latest violence could, in fact, end up derailing the tentative rapprochement between Turkey and Israel. At this point, Erdoğan's preference seems to be to demonstrate Turkey's centrality without taking unwarranted risks. The longer the conflict persists, however, and the more casualties the Palestinians suffer, the more difficult it will be for Ankara to maintain the status quo.

Photo at the top by SAHER ALGHORRA/Middle East Images/AFP via Getty Images