



Israel and Hamas: Major Conflict After Surprise Attacks

October 10, 2023

Overview

On October 7, 2023, Gaza Strip-based militants led by the Palestinian Sunni Islamist group [Hamas](#) (a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, or FTO) engaged in a [series of surprise attacks](#) by land, sea, and air against Israel (see **Figure 1**). The assault targeted Israeli military bases and civilian areas during the final Jewish high holiday, almost exactly 50 years after the Egypt-Syria surprise attack that sparked the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The [Biden Administration](#) and [Israel](#) have stated publicly that they do not have evidence that the Iranian government had a planning role, but are looking at the question. Some figures from Hamas and the Iran-backed Shia Islamist group [Lebanese Hezbollah](#) (also an FTO) [have claimed](#) that Hamas received support for the attacks from Iran, though a senior Hamas official [has denied](#) an Iranian planning role. Iranian officials [have praised the assault](#) publicly. The attacks' scope and lethality against Israel have no precedent in the 16 years Hamas has controlled Gaza. The nature of the violence [stunned Israelis](#); [apparent intelligence and operational failures](#) in preventing the assault surprised Israeli, U.S., and other Western officials.

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Figure 1. Map of Areas Involved in Surprise Attacks

Source: CNN

In response, Israel's cabinet [formally declared war](#) on Hamas, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asserting that [Israel will win a long and difficult](#) campaign. As it seeks to push militants out of Israeli territory, target them in densely populated Gaza, and recover hostages, the Israeli government has [announced a total siege](#) on Gaza—described as a halt on the supply of electricity, food, water, and fuel. Features similar to past rounds of Israel-Hamas conflict include indiscriminate [Hamas rocket fire](#) into Israel, regular [Israeli air strikes](#) in Gaza, [humanitarian concerns](#) on both sides, and Israel's deployment of the [Iron Dome](#) anti-rocket system.

Reportedly, more than [900 Israelis](#) (and at least [11 American civilians](#)) and [680 Palestinians](#) in Gaza have died as of October 10, with Israel claiming that the bodies of around [1,500 dead militants](#) have been found in southern Israeli areas recaptured by its military. Additionally, militants are reportedly holding [more than 100 persons hostage](#) in Gaza, and Hamas has [reportedly threatened](#) to kill hostages in the event of Israeli strikes on civilian targets in Gaza.

Hamas and Gaza

Hamas emerged in Gaza in the late 1980s, and established itself as an alternative to the secular Fatah movement in the 1990s by violently attacking Israeli targets after Fatah had entered into a peace process with Israel. Aside from those living in Gaza and the West Bank, some Hamas leaders and personnel may live in Arab countries and Turkey. Hamas's political leader, Ismail Haniyeh, is supposedly based in Qatar. Hamas reportedly receives much of its funding, weapons, and training from Iran.

After Israel withdrew military forces from Gaza in 2005, Hamas forcibly seized it from the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority (PA) in 2007. Since then, Gaza has faced crisis-level economic and humanitarian conditions, partly owing to broad restrictions that Israel and Egypt—citing security concerns—have imposed on the transit of people and goods. Before the current violence, Hamas and other militants engaged in four major conflicts with Israel (2008-2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021). Egypt and Qatar have helped mediate conflict and provide basic resources, but Gaza has not experienced broader economic recovery or reconstruction.

Many Palestinians and people in other countries in the region have expressed support for the Hamas attacks. Hamas's military leader alleged Israeli encroachments on Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem, and called on all Arabs to “expel the (Israeli) occupiers.” West Bank-based Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas has emphasized “Israeli aggression” in Gaza and the well-being and defense of Palestinians. Some analysts have described the PA as “wanting to see Hamas fail but unable to openly cheer for Israel,” facing a “Catch 22.” Other Arab governments have called for an end to violence, with a statement from Saudi Arabia calling for restraint and protection of civilians while pointing to longtime Israeli policies as potentially provocative.

The following factors may affect the conflict's trajectory:

- **Hamas's motivation and timing.** Factors possibly driving the Hamas attacks include the potential to disrupt U.S.-brokered diplomacy aimed at Saudi-Israeli normalization (and the Abraham Accords more broadly); bolster Hamas's domestic political position vis-à-vis the aging Abbas and struggling PA; take advantage of Israeli domestic turmoil; and use hostages to compel Israeli concessions (perhaps including prisoner releases). A former senior U.S. official has speculated, “Hamas's intention is to get Israel to retaliate massively and have the conflict escalate: a West Bank uprising, Hezbollah attacks, a revolt in Jerusalem.”
- **Hezbollah's role.** Hezbollah exchanged fire with Israel across the Lebanese border “in solidarity” with Hamas on October 8. It did so again on October 9 in supposed retaliation for lethal Israeli cross-border shelling, after Israeli forces engaged in a deadly standoff with several militants—possibly from Palestine Islamic Jihad (another FTO)—who came over the border. Escalation with Hezbollah would likely present major challenges for Israel and its population centers, given Hezbollah's capabilities and arsenal of rockets and missiles.
- **Israeli leadership and domestic concerns.** With its conventional military superiority, Israel's decisions on how to conduct air and potential ground operations in Gaza may affect the conflict's length, severity, and humanitarian and political outcomes—including who effectively controls Gaza. Israel's opposition has called for national cohesion amid reported discussions about a possible emergency unity government.

U.S. Policy and Congress's Role

President Joe Biden offered “all appropriate means of support to the Government and people of Israel,” and discouraged “any other party hostile to Israel” from seeking advantage. Per a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that runs through FY2028, Congress has appropriated \$3.3 billion a year for Israel in Foreign Military Financing and \$500 million in joint missile defense from FY2019 to FY2023. The

MOU [also allows](#) for more missile defense funding under exceptional circumstances if the United States and Israel agree. Following the 2021 Israel-Hamas conflict, [Congress appropriated \\$1 billion](#) in additional FY2022-FY2024 missile defense funding. These appropriations have supported U.S.-Israel coproduction of Iron Dome's Tamir interceptors.

Congress may consider whether or not to provide additional support for Israel, with Israel's [requests](#) of the Administration reportedly including precision-guided small-diameter bombs and more Iron Dome funding. Israel also may seek arms withdrawals from the [U.S. stockpile in Israel](#). Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin ordered the deployment of a carrier strike group to the Eastern Mediterranean to bolster "[deterrence posture](#)" in the region, and the provision of munitions and other security assistance to Israel.

U.S. officials and lawmakers also may consider whether or not to provide humanitarian support for [the Palestinians](#). After the 2021 conflict, [the Biden Administration provided](#) bilateral aid to the Palestinian people and contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

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