

Israel and Hamas 2023 Conflict In Brief: Overview, U.S. Policy, and Options for Congress

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On October 7, 2023, the Palestinian Sunni Islamist group Hamas (a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, or FTO) led surprise attacks against Israel from the Gaza Strip by land, sea, and air. The assault came on a Jewish holiday, 50 years after the Egypt-Syria surprise attack on Israel that sparked the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The October 7 assault's scope and lethality against Israel have no precedent in the 16 years Hamas has controlled Gaza, and the nature of the violence stunned Israelis. The apparent intelligence and operational failures in preventing the assault have become a subject of analysis for Israeli and U.S. officials. Iran reportedly provides material support to Hamas, and according to U.S. officials may be complicit in a broad sense, but President Joe Biden has said "there is no evidence" that Iran helped plan the attack.

In response to the October 7 attacks, Israel's cabinet formally declared war on Hamas. Israel has initiated efforts to recover some 240-250 hostages (including some Americans) taken during the Hamas-led assault, undertaken an aerial bombardment campaign, mobilized hundreds of thousands of reserve troops, and launched ground operations against Hamas in Gaza. Israel's government has almost completely halted the supply of electricity, food, water, and fuel to Gaza, which before the conflict had already faced crisis-level economic and humanitarian conditions. On October 28, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced the "second stage of the war, whose objectives are clear: To destroy the military and governmental capabilities of Hamas and bring the hostages home."

The United Nations has stated that Gaza, with an estimated 1.4 million Gazans (more than half of the territory's approximately 2.1 million people) displaced and major shortages in life-sustaining supplies, constitutes a major humanitarian crisis. U.S. officials have worked with Israel, Egypt, and the United Nations to allow for some international humanitarian assistance to enter Gaza from Egypt. The U.N. Secretary-General has repeatedly called for a humanitarian ceasefire.

Reportedly, more than 1,400 Israelis (and at least 36 U.S. citizens) and 8,500 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed as of October 31. Hundreds of U.S. citizens are estimated to be in Gaza, and the U.S. government is discussing safe passage for them with Egypt and Israel, with some people reportedly crossing into Egypt on November 1. Five hostages (including two Americans) have been released or rescued to date.

There are risks that the conflict could expand. For example, the Iran-backed Shia Islamist group Lebanese Hezbollah (another FTO) has exchanged fire with Israel and could create a second front at the Israel-Lebanon border. U.S. statements and actions, including expedited arms deliveries to Israel and the reported movement of major U.S. military assets, appear intended to warn Hezbollah or others not to get involved. U.S. officials have warned Iran of a strong response if groups Iran supports continue to target U.S. military positions in the region. Additionally, amid rising tensions and violence between Palestinians and Israelis in the West Bank, President Biden has called for attacks by "extremist settlers" against Palestinians to stop.

In October 2023, President Biden asked Congress to appropriate more than \$8 billion in U.S. security assistance for Israel, and more than \$9 billion in global humanitarian assistance amounts that could partly be allocated for Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel. Members of Congress have expressed differing views on the request and its various elements. Congress may consider whether or not to provide additional military assistance to Israel or humanitarian assistance for Palestinians and Israelis, perhaps partly based on whether the Biden Administration and Congress can ensure that any assistance would not be used beyond its intended purposes. Congress also may weigh other legislative and oversight options.

For additional background on the conflict, see CRS Report R47754, *Israel and Hamas October 2023 Conflict: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)*, coordinated by Jim Zanotti, Jeremy M. Sharp, and Christopher M. Blanchard.

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Conflict Overview

Background

On October 7, 2023, the Palestinian Sunni Islamist group Hamas (a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, or FTO) led a series of surprise attacks from the Gaza Strip by land, sea, and air against Israel (see **Figure 1**). Palestine Islamic Jihad (or PIJ, another FTO) claimed that its forces also participated in the attacks, and other militants outside of Hamas and PIJ may also have joined. The assault targeted Israeli military bases and civilian areas during the final Jewish high

Possible Iranian role in Hamas attacks

The possible role of Iran in the planning, support, or execution of the Hamas attacks is a question of keen interest to many Members of Congress. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has described Iran as “complicit in this attack in a broad sense,” given the level of support it has provided Hamas for years.¹ President Joe Biden said on October 15, “did they [Iran] have foreknowledge; did they help plan the attack ...there’s no evidence of that at this point.”²

holiday, just over 50 years after the Egypt-Syria surprise attack on Israel that sparked the 1973 Yom Kippur War (known in the Arab world as the October War). The October 7 attacks’ scope and lethality have no precedent in the 16 years Hamas has controlled Gaza. The nature of the violence stunned Israelis and many others.³ The apparent intelligence and operational failures in preventing the assault or limiting its impact became a subject of analysis for Israeli and U.S. officials. Some

analysts have said that Israel may have missed signals, over-relied on technological solutions, and/or misread Hamas’s intentions, among other factors.⁴

In response to the attacks, Israel’s cabinet formally declared war on Hamas, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asserting that Israel would win a long and difficult campaign, and then forming an emergency unity government with some members of the opposition. Israel also halted supplies from Israeli territory to Gaza of electricity, food, and fuel. Israel’s military has mobilized hundreds of thousands of troops, conducted air and artillery bombardments in Gaza, and initiated ground operations in Gaza’s northern half. Hamas and other Gaza-based militants have continued indiscriminate rocket fire into Israel.

On October 7, the Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations, Gilad Erdan, sent a letter to the Security Council stating that the initial assault was perpetrated “by terrorist organizations led by Hamas.”⁵ That same day, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield reaffirmed to Israeli officials “our ironclad support for Israel’s

¹ White House, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan,” October 10, 2023. For more information on Hamas, its possible reasons for the attacks, and Iranian material support for Hamas, see CRS Report R47754, *Israel and Hamas October 2023 Conflict: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)*, coordinated by Jim Zanotti, Jeremy M. Sharp, and Christopher M. Blanchard.

² Scott Pelley, “President Joe Biden: The 2023 60 Minutes interview transcript,” CBS News, October 15, 2023. One article has highlighted conflicting accounts about whether and to what extent Iran was directly involved in the October 7 attacks. Summer Said et al., “Hamas Fighters Had Trained in Iran Before Israel Attack,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 26, 2023.

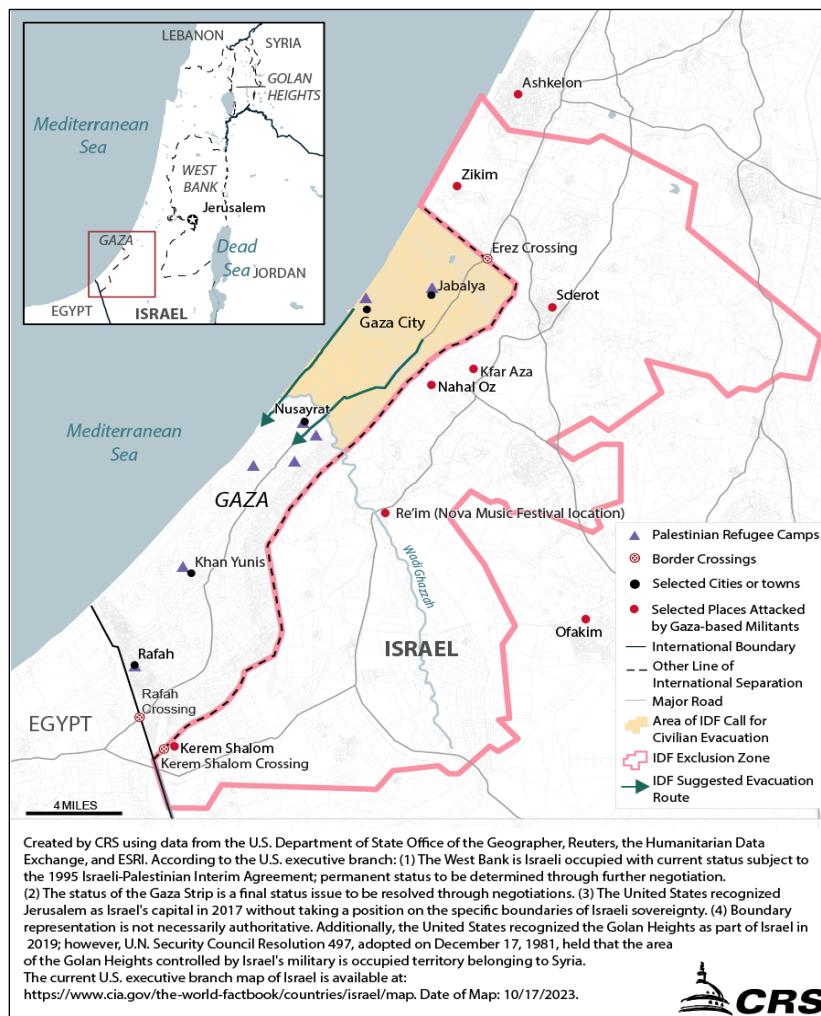
³ Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “President Herzog reveals Hamas ‘Captivity Taking Handbook’ in CNN interview,” October 15, 2023.

⁴ Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Experts React: Assessing the Israeli Intelligence and Potential Policy Failure,” October 25, 2023; Ronen Bergman et al., “How Years of Israeli Failures on Hamas Led to a Devastating Attack,” *New York Times*, October 29, 2023.

⁵ X, Pamela Falk CBS News Correspondent United Nations, October 7, 2023, <https://twitter.com/PamelaFalk/status/1710717063939936336>.

security and right to self-defense.”⁶ In a letter to the Security Council on October 10, Ambassador of the Permanent Observer Mission of the “State of Palestine” to the United Nations Riyad Mansour alleged that actions Israel was taking in response constituted “war crimes.”⁷

Figure I. Israel and Gaza: Conflict Map



On October 13, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) announced that it was “call[ing] for” the evacuation of all civilians in Gaza City “from their homes southwards for their own safety and protection.”⁸ Hamas reportedly called on people in these areas to remain in place.⁹ U.N. officials have expressed concern about potentially grave humanitarian consequences from widespread

⁶ U.S. Mission to the United Nations, “Statement by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield on Attacks on Israel,” October 7, 2023.

⁷ Michelle Nichols, “Palestinian UN envoy accuses Israel of ‘genocidal’ campaign against Gaza,” Reuters, October 10, 2023.

⁸ Israel Defense Forces, “IDF Announcement Sent to the Civilians of Gaza City,” October 13, 2023. Passages from the announcement include, “The IDF calls for the evacuation of all civilians of Gaza City from their homes southwards for their own safety and protection and move to the area south of the Wadi Gaza,” and “Civilians of Gaza City, evacuate south for your own safety and the safety of your families and distance yourself from Hamas terrorists who are using you as human shields.”

⁹ “Hamas tells Gaza residents to stay home as Israel ground offensive looms,” Reuters, October 13, 2023.

evacuation, and Israel has reportedly conducted some air strikes in southern Gaza areas. An estimated 1.4 million Gazans (more than half the territory's approximately 2.1 million people¹⁰) are displaced from their homes as of October 31—with 300,000 of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in northern Gaza areas that are particularly vulnerable to conflict and disconnected from outside flows of life-sustaining supplies.¹¹

Observers debate how to apportion blame between the militants and Israel for the worsening of already dire humanitarian conditions in Gaza. While those faulting Israel argue that Israeli actions have inflicted casualties and limited life-sustaining supplies, those blaming Hamas assert that Hamas personnel in Gaza and other militants reportedly contribute to making civilian areas and facilities unsafe by operating in or near them.

There are reportedly hundreds of U.S. citizens in Gaza, many of whom are seeking to leave; U.S. officials have stated that they are working with Israel and Egypt to arrange safe passage for them. Egypt, via consultations with U.S., Israeli, and U.N. officials, has publicly agreed to the use of its Rafah crossing with Gaza to open a humanitarian corridor for international aid into the territory, and to allow U.S. citizens and other foreigners safe passage out. The State Department has advised Americans who can safely do so to transit toward the Egyptian border with Gaza. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in October 31 congressional testimony that Hamas appears to have obstructed their departure.¹² As quoted in news accounts, some U.S. citizens in Gaza have criticized the U.S. response, citing bombardments and other hardships as additional impediments; some have reported reaching the vicinity of the Rafah border and being unable to cross because of Egyptian officials.¹³ On November 1, reports indicated that some U.S. citizens and other foreigners had started crossing from Gaza into Egypt.¹⁴

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said on October 31 that the “level of humanitarian assistance that has been allowed into Gaza up to this point is completely inadequate and not commensurate with the needs of people in Gaza, compounding the humanitarian tragedy.” He also reiterated his previous appeals “for the immediate and unconditional release of those civilians held hostage by Hamas,” as well as “for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire.”¹⁵

U.S. officials have reportedly sought to facilitate the provision of international assistance for Gazans via the Rafah crossing in a way that can be monitored to prevent diversion by Hamas. Additionally, on October 18, President Biden announced a \$100 million U.S. humanitarian assistance contribution for Gaza and the West Bank.¹⁶ U.N. officials have said that assistance levels to date address only a small fraction of the needs of Gaza's population, and have raised public health concerns in connection with poor sanitation and consumption of unsafe water by IDPs. On October 31, Israel reportedly resumed supply from a water line to some central Gaza areas, but supply to a southern Gaza water line had stopped a day earlier, and the line to northern

¹⁰ Per Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook figures.

¹¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #25,” October 31, 2023.

¹² Testimony available at <https://www.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-7867772?3>.

¹³ Nina Kravinsky and Leila Fadel, “Americans in Gaza feel abandoned by their government,” NPR, October 27, 2023; Joanna Slater, “Hundreds of Americans trapped in Gaza with ‘no safe place for us to go,’” *Washington Post*, October 20, 2023.

¹⁴ Lawahez Jabari and Doha Madani, “First civilians leave Gaza through Rafah border crossing into Egypt,” NBC News, November 1, 2023.

¹⁵ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #25,” October 31, 2023.

¹⁶ White House, “U.S. Announcement of Humanitarian Assistance to the Palestinian People,” October 18, 2023; Brett Samuels, “Biden announces humanitarian aid deal for Gaza,” *The Hill*, October 18, 2023.

Gaza remained cut off.¹⁷ Israeli officials have stated that they have prevented humanitarian fuel shipments into Gaza because of concerns that Hamas might divert the fuel for its military efforts; some observers have pointed to evidence that Hamas has hoarded much of the fuel currently inside Gaza.¹⁸ U.N. officials say that they need some level of fuel to conduct civilian relief efforts. Israeli officials have claimed that Hamas could provide life-sustaining supplies to civilians,¹⁹ and announced plans on October 29 to permit significantly increased non-fuel humanitarian supplies through Rafah to areas of southern Gaza that can accommodate IDPs.²⁰

Reportedly, more than 1,400 Israelis (and at least 36 U.S. citizens in Israel) and 8,500 Palestinians in Gaza had been killed as of October 31.²¹ Hamas and other militants aligned with them could be holding some 240 to 250 persons in Gaza that were taken hostage in the October 7 attacks,²² and Secretary Blinken has said that some of the 10 Americans unaccounted for are part of those being held hostage.²³ A Hamas spokesman has said that the group “is prepared to release non-Israeli hostages once conditions allow movement in Gaza.”²⁴ To date, Hamas has released four hostages, including two Americans. Hamas spokespeople have variously said that Hamas would not release Israeli captives without a cease-fire, and that it would release all hostages if Israel released all Palestinian prisoners in its custody. On October 30, Israeli forces in Gaza rescued an Israeli soldier who was being held hostage. Israelis have debated whether their government’s military objectives against Hamas conflict with or complement its goals to recover hostages.²⁵

Key Developments

Israel has formed an emergency unity government and “war management cabinet” that includes key opposition figure Benny Gantz (a former defense minister and chief IDF commander) alongside Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant.²⁶ With some Israeli ground operations ongoing on October 28, Netanyahu announced the “second stage of the war,

¹⁷ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #25,” October 31, 2023.

¹⁸ Michelle Nichols, “Israel’s military tells UN in Gaza: ask Hamas for fuel,” Reuters, October 24, 2023; Matthew Rosenberg and Maria Abi-Habib, “As Gazans Scrounge for Food and Water, Hamas Sits on a Rich Trove of Supplies,” *New York Times*, October 27, 2023.

¹⁹ Stephen Kalin, “Israel Says Gaza Has Enough Food, Water, Fuel, Medical Supplies,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 2023.

²⁰ Israel is reportedly inspecting goods at its border with Egypt before allowing the goods to enter Gaza via Rafah. IDF Daily Recap: Hamas - Israel War October 29th, 2023 (19:30) - Day 23. See also “Israel agrees to allow 100 trucks of humanitarian aid into Gaza each day — official,” *Times of Israel*, October 31, 2023.

²¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #25,” October 31, 2023; Jim Garamone, “Austin, Blinken Ask for Funds to Defend Embattled Democracies,” DOD News, October 31, 2023. Palestinian casualty figures come from the Hamas-controlled health ministry in Gaza. Additionally, Israel reported that the bodies of around 1,500 dead militants had been found as of October 10 in southern Israeli areas recaptured by its military.

²² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #25,” October 31, 2023; Hamas spokesman Abu Ubaida quoted in Harriet Sherwood, “Hamas says 250 people held hostage in Gaza,” *The Guardian*, October 16, 2023.

²³ Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to the Press,” October 20, 2023.

²⁴ “Hamas says it is preparing to release non-Israeli hostages,” NBC News, October 16, 2023.

²⁵ Adam Goldman and Eric Schmitt, “Conflict’s Tall Order: Smash Foes While Saving Hostages,” *New York Times*, November 1, 2023; Julia Frankel, “Israel says its war can both destroy Hamas and rescue hostages. Their families are less certain,” Associated Press, October 28, 2023.

²⁶ Barak Ravid, “Israel’s Netanyahu forms unity government with ex-Defense Minister Gantz,” *Axios*, October 11, 2023; and Jeremy Sharon, “Netanyahu, Gantz agree to form emergency unity government,” *Times of Israel*, October 11, 2023.

whose objectives are clear: To destroy the military and governmental capabilities of Hamas and bring the hostages home.”²⁷ **Hamas** and other Palestinian militants may rely on their knowledge of Gaza’s terrain, a vast network of tunnels, and urban warfare tactics to counter Israel’s conventional military superiority.

Since the October 7 attacks, Israel has exchanged fire with the Iran-backed Shia Islamist group **Lebanese Hezbollah** (an FTO) and Palestinian militants across Israel’s northern border with Lebanon. Israel has ordered the evacuation of more than 40 communities in northern Israel. If these clashes escalate, Hezbollah’s arsenal of more than 100,000 missiles and rockets could pose a grave threat to Israeli strategic sites and population centers.²⁸ Israel has also reportedly exchanged some cross-border fire with “pro-Hezbollah fighters” in southern Syria.²⁹

Officials from the **Palestinian Authority/Palestine Liberation Organization (PA/PLO)**, based in the West Bank, appear to be in a difficult position. While they do not endorse Hamas, they likely remain mindful of the sizable population of Palestinians who support confronting Israel.³⁰ While PA President and PLO Chairman Mahmoud Abbas has criticized Israel’s actions, he has also said that no organization other than the PLO represents the Palestinian people.³¹ Amid rising tensions and violence between Palestinians and Israelis in the West Bank, President Biden has called for attacks by “extremist settlers” against Palestinians to stop.³²

As continuing conflict has increased civilian casualties in Gaza, some regional and international actors have grown more critical of Israeli and U.S. policy. **Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar,** and the **United Arab Emirates** have jointly insisted on an immediate cease-fire.³³ Action at the United Nations has reflected broader concerns around the world. To date, multiple draft U.N. **Security Council** resolutions on the conflict have failed. On October 27, the U.N. **General Assembly** adopted a resolution (opposed by the United States) calling for an “immediate, durable and sustained humanitarian truce leading to a cessation of hostilities,” and for the protection of civilians under international law (including the release of all civilians illegally held captive).³⁴ One observer has noted that developments related to the ongoing conflict could affect U.S. international influence with key regional and global actors.³⁵

Selected Open Questions

Recovering Hostages. Can Israel do it? If so, how, and would the United States have a role? Under what conditions might Hamas release or harm hostages—whether Israeli, dual-national, or foreign? To what degree do Israeli military operations put some hostages at risk?

²⁷ “Netanyahu says the Gaza war has entered a new stage and will be ‘long and difficult,’” Associated Press, October 28, 2023.

²⁸ Adi Hashmonai, “Israel Plans to Evacuate Communities Close to Border with Lebanon, Many Refuse to Leave,” *Haaretz*, October 17, 2023.

²⁹ “Israel strikes kill 8 Syria troops, hit Aleppo airport: defence ministry,” Agence France Presse, October 25, 2023.

³⁰ Mohammad al-Kassim, “PA President Mahmoud Abbas MIA as Hamas wages war against Israel,” *Ynetnews*, October 10, 2023.

³¹ “President Abbas discusses difficult developments in Palestine with Venezuelan counterpart,” Wafa News Agency, October 16, 2023.

³² White House, “Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese of Australia in Joint Press Conference,” October 25, 2023.

³³ The New Arab, “Arab group at UN ‘doubling efforts to secure Gaza ceasefire,’” October 25, 2023.

³⁴ Resolution available at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/N23/319/20/PDF/N2331920.pdf?OpenElement>.

³⁵ Hugo Dixon, “Israel war tests US appeal to global swing states,” Reuters, October 30, 2023.

Israeli Military Ground Operations in Gaza. If ground operations continue, how long and extensive would they be, and with what results and human costs? To what extent would Hamas officials, affiliates, and sympathizers be killed, captured, expelled, or otherwise proven not to pose a threat for Israel to declare victory, or to consider Hamas's rule over Gaza or its ability to threaten Israel eliminated or sufficiently reduced? What will the conflict mean for governance of Gaza's more than two million people? If Hamas is ousted, who might assume responsibility? How will the conflict affect support in Gaza for Hamas? Can military operations effectively remove threats from people in Gaza with whom Israel has a long, complicated history of violence and uneasy coexistence? What might reconstruction cost and who would pay for it?

Potential Escalation Between Israel and Hezbollah or Other Actors. Could a major second front materialize? What might trigger a broader conflict (e.g., an Israeli operation that endangers Hamas's position in Gaza; unrest in the West Bank and/or Jerusalem; choices or miscalculations at the Lebanese border or involving Iran; strikes involving groups in Syria, Iraq, or Yemen)?

Longer-term Outcomes. What might be the longer-term ramifications for U.S. priorities such as regional stability, security for Israel, countering the reach of Iran and its allies, and quality of life for all affected people? How will U.S. support for Israel in the current conflict affect its standing in the region? In the context of Israel's future relations with regional Arab actors, can U.S.-Israel-Saudi diplomacy resume, and would efforts toward an Israeli-Palestinian two-state solution be viable?

U.S. Policy

The United States government has stated its support for military operations by Israel to defend itself in line with international law, including in Gaza. U.S. officials have publicly disagreed with calls for a cease-fire, citing Israel's right to defend itself. Nevertheless, U.S. officials have voiced support for "humanitarian pauses"—more limited in time and geographical scope—that might safely facilitate aid delivery.³⁶

President Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, and several other Administration officials have visited Israel and other countries in the region since the outbreak of conflict. During Secretary Blinken's trip, he outlined "four key [U.S.] objectives: to make clear that the United States stands with Israel; to prevent the conflict from spreading to other places; to work on securing the release of hostages, including American citizens; and to address the humanitarian crisis that exists in Gaza."³⁷

Also, in October 31 testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee, Secretary Blinken said, "We have about 400 American citizens and their family members, so it's roughly 1,000 people who are stuck in Gaza and want to get out. I'm focused on this intensely," adding that about another "5,000 third-country nationals from other countries [are] seeking to get out."³⁸

In an October 15 interview, President Biden expressed support for Israeli efforts to eliminate Hamas—calling it a "group of people who have engaged in barbarism that is as consequential as the Holocaust." When asked in the same interview if he would "support Israeli occupation of Gaza at this point," President Biden said, "I think it'd be a big mistake." Later in the interview, he said that "the extreme elements of Hamas don't represent all the Palestinian people," and that

³⁶ White House, "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, National Economic Council Director Lael Brainard, and NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby," October 26, 2023.

³⁷ U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to the Press," Cairo, Egypt, October 15, 2023.

³⁸ Testimony available at <https://www.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-7867772?3>.

“there needs to be a Palestinian authority. There needs to be a path to a Palestinian state.”³⁹ In his October 31 testimony, Secretary Blinken said that “what would make the most sense would be for an effective and revitalized Palestinian Authority to have governance, and ultimately, security responsibility for Gaza,” but that if doing so “in one step” cannot happen, “other, temporary arrangements” could involve other regional countries and/or international agencies.⁴⁰

U.S. Military Deployments

Since October 7, President Biden has positioned additional U.S. military assets and personnel to the Middle East in an apparent effort to bolster Israel’s defense, deter Iran and Iranian-supported groups from widening the war, support select Arab partners, and prepare for contingencies, such as an evacuation of U.S. citizens in Israel and Gaza.

Navy and Marine Corps Forces. The United States has repositioned the *USS Gerald R. Ford* carrier strike group, which was already in the Mediterranean, to the Eastern Mediterranean, and directed the *USS Dwight D. Eisenhower* carrier strike group, which was starting a previously scheduled deployment from Norfolk, to the Persian Gulf via the Mediterranean. Each strike group includes an aircraft carrier with an embarked carrier air wing, along with one cruiser and three destroyers. Each carrier air wing includes about 40 F/A-18 strike fighters and about 20 other support aircraft. The cruisers and destroyers can conduct air defense operations and can be armed with Tomahawk land-attack cruise missiles. Some of the cruisers and destroyers are additionally capable of conducting theater-range ballistic missile defense operations.

The United States has repositioned the *USS Bataan* Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea. The ARG consists of three amphibious assault ships—the “large deck” amphibious assault ship *USS Bataan*, which looks like a medium-sized aircraft carrier, and two additional amphibious ships, *USS Mesa Verde* and *USS Carter Hall*. Embarked across the three ships is the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). A MEU is Marine Corps unit with approximately 2,400 Marines, their aircraft, ground vehicles, weapons, and supplies. Amphibious ships with their embarked Marine forces can be particularly valuable for conducting evacuation operations or humanitarian assistance/disaster response (HA/DR) operations.

Air Force Aircraft. The United States has also ordered additional F-35, F-15, and F-16 fighter aircraft, and A-10 attack aircraft to the Middle East region.

Army Air and Missile Defense Units. To enhance the air defense capabilities of Arab partners in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility, the United States has dispatched a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system to Saudi Arabia, and Patriot air and missile systems to Kuwait, Jordan, Iraq, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.

U.S. Advisors. The United States has sent to Israel several U.S. officers with expertise in combatting terrorist groups in urban environments gained from U.S. operations in Iraq and Syria to offer “advice to our Israeli partners on best practices for mitigating civilian harm.”⁴¹

U.S. Military Response to Iranian-Supported Groups

Iranian officials have threatened to become involved in response to the Israeli operation in Gaza, with the foreign minister reportedly stating in mid-October that Iran “cannot remain a spectator”

³⁹ Scott Pelley, “President Joe Biden: The 2023 60 Minutes interview transcript.”

⁴⁰ Testimony available at <https://www.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-7867772?3>.

⁴¹ U.S. Department of Defense, “Senior Defense Official, Senior Military Official Hold a Background Briefing on Israel,” October 23, 2023.

to such operations.⁴² In late October, however, he said, “We don’t want this war to spread out.”⁴³ Iran supports several proxy non-state actors across the Middle East, and armed groups in Iraq and Yemen have expressed support for the Hamas attacks on Israel and pledged support to Palestinians. Some have threatened military action against U.S. interests if the United States intervenes militarily in the Israel-Hamas war. Some groups have already conducted military operations directed at U.S. forces in the Middle East and/or possibly Israel. In Iraq, since October 7, U.S. forces have faced repeated drone attacks, leading to several injuries. Iran-allied Houthis in Yemen have reportedly launched multiple drones toward Israel.⁴⁴ On October 25, President Biden warned Iran not to threaten U.S. forces, saying, “My warning to the Ayatollah was that if they continue to move against those troops, we will respond. And he should be prepared.”⁴⁵ On October 26, Secretary Austin stated that U.S. forces struck two facilities in eastern Syria used by Iran and its allies for “ongoing and mostly unsuccessful attacks against U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria by Iranian-backed militia groups.”⁴⁶

U.S. Expedited Arms Deliveries to Israel

Since October 7, the Biden Administration has expedited the provision of U.S. military and security assistance to Israel. According to one report, dozens of military and civilian cargo aircraft have landed in Israel as part of a U.S. emergency airlift of munitions to Israel.⁴⁷ As of October 31, shipments have included: (1) small-diameter bombs (250 pounds) made by Boeing under a 2021 \$735 million Direct Commercial Sale;⁴⁸ (2) interceptors to replenish Israel’s Iron Dome (a U.S.-supported short-range anti-rocket, anti-mortar, and anti-artillery system);⁴⁹ (3) Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAMs - a kit that converts unguided armaments into satellite-guided bombs);⁵⁰ and (4) 155mm artillery shells.⁵¹

After receiving two bipartisan congressional letters⁵² calling on the Administration to provide Israel with two Iron Dome batteries previously purchased by the U.S. Army, the Administration announced on October 24 that it would transfer the batteries to Israel; the Pentagon did not

⁴² “Iran warns it may not ‘remain a spectator in Israel-Hamas conflict – as U.S. urges Iran not to intervene,” *Forbes*, October 15, 2023.

⁴³ “Iran does not want Israel-Hamas conflict to spread, foreign minister says,” Reuters, October 29, 2023.

⁴⁴ “Yemen’s Huthi rebels claim drone attack on Israel,” Agence France Presse, October 31, 2023.

⁴⁵ White House, “Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese of Australia in Joint Press Conference,” October 25, 2023.

⁴⁶ Department of Defense, “Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III’s Statement on U.S. Military Strikes in Eastern Syria,” October 26, 2023.

⁴⁷ Avi Scharf, “OSINT Shows U.S. Deploying More Arms and Troops to Israel, Cyprus and Jordan,” *Haaretz*, October 24, 2023.

⁴⁸ Anthony Capaccio, “Boeing Sped 1,000 Smart Bombs to Israel After Hamas Attacks,” Bloomberg, October 10, 2023.

⁴⁹ White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Terrorist Attacks in Israel,” October 10, 2023.

⁵⁰ “The US is moving quickly to boost Israel’s military. A look at what assistance it’s providing,” Associated Press, October 14, 2023.

⁵¹ Reportedly, the Administration has decided to redirect these shipments, which had been taken from the U.S. stockpile in Israel (WRSA-I) to provide to Ukraine, back to Israel for their use. See, Barak Ravid, “Scoop: U.S. to send Israel artillery shells initially destined for Ukraine,” *Axios*, October 19, 2023.

⁵² See, Senator Jacky Rosen, “Rosen Leads Bipartisan Group of Senate Armed Services Committee Members in Requesting Additional Iron Dome Batteries for Israel,” October 11, 2023 and Representative Brian Mast, “Mast, Moskowitz, Bipartisan Coalition Urge DoD to Send Additional Iron Dome System to Israel,” October 16, 2023.

publicly indicate the terms and legal authorities underpinning the planned transfer.⁵³ According to a report, DOD intends to lease the batteries to Israel with the United States retaining ownership.⁵⁴

Humanitarian Assistance for Palestinians

During President Biden's October 18 visit to Israel, he announced \$100 million in U.S. humanitarian assistance for Gaza and the West Bank, to "help support over a million displaced and conflict-affected people with clean water, food, hygiene support, medical care, and other essential needs" via "trusted partners including UN agencies and international NGOs."⁵⁵ On October 24, Representative James Comer, Chair of the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability, joined with 23 other Representatives to request documents from the U.S. Agency for International Development, in an apparent effort to learn whether or not any U.S. assistance to Gaza and the West Bank may previously have been diverted—or be at risk of future diversion—by Hamas, other FTOs, or their affiliates.⁵⁶ In October 31 testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee, Secretary of State Blinken said that U.S. officials can track and monitor the humanitarian assistance transiting Egypt's Rafah crossing into Gaza, after inspection by Israeli and Egyptian officials,

to ensure that it's actually gotten to where it's supposed to go and not been diverted. To date, we don't have reports either from the UN or from Israel that this assistance has been diverted from its intended recipients, but it's something that we're going to track very closely. Can I promise you and this committee that there'll be 100 percent delivery to the designated recipients? No. There will inevitably be some spillage. We haven't seen it to date, but I think we have to anticipate that. But the overwhelming, overwhelming majority of the assistance thus far is getting to people who need it. And we need more.⁵⁷

President's Budget Request to Congress and Proposed Legislation

In an October 19 Oval Office speech, President Biden announced an emergency supplemental budget request to support U.S. partners, including Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan, and address other domestic and global issues.⁵⁸ In sum, the President seeks over **\$14 billion** in Israel-related funding, of which **\$8.7 billion** would be for direct aid for Israel, including: (1) **\$4 billion** in DOD funding for Iron Dome and David's Sling defense systems; (2) **\$3.5 billion** in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), all of which may be made available for Israel to spend in-country in local currency (known as off-shore procurement); and (3) **\$1.2 billion** in DOD funding for the Iron Beam laser-based defense system being developed by Israel.

In addition, the President has requested **\$5.4 billion** for DOD's response to the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza and related expenses, including: (1) **\$4.4 billion** that could be transferred among several defense appropriations accounts for various purposes (including the replenishment of U.S. defense equipment, reimbursement of DOD for defense services provided to Israel; expansion of munitions production; and production of unspecified critical defense articles); (2) **\$801.4 million**

⁵³ Noah Robertson, Bryant Harris and Jen Judson, "US agrees to send two Iron Dome batteries to Israel," *Defense News*, October 24, 2023.

⁵⁴ "US to send two Iron Dome systems back to Israel – sources," Reuters, October 19, 2023.

⁵⁵ White House, "U.S. Announcement of Humanitarian Assistance to the Palestinian People," October 18, 2023.

⁵⁶ Letter available at <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/24080806-23-10-23-letter-to-usaid-re-gaza-west-bank-funding-copy>.

⁵⁷ Testimony available at <https://www.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-7867772?3>.

⁵⁸ The request is available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Letter-regarding-critical-national-security-funding-needs-for-FY-2024.pdf>.

for ammunition procurement; and (3) **\$198.6 million** “to mitigate industrial base constraints” through Defense Production Act purchases.

To allow for the obligation of requested funds for these intended purposes, the supplemental request also includes proposed provisions that would amend several existing laws. The request would amend the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2005 (P.L. 108-287, §12001) to permit the transfer of previously prohibited categories of defense articles to the Government of Israel, and temporarily waive limitations on the total value of defense stockpiles located in Israel and set aside for Israel’s use per 22 U.S.C. §2321h(b). The request also contains a provision that would authorize the Secretary of Defense to provide fewer than 30 days’ notice to Congress when transferring defense articles to Israel in extraordinary circumstances.

The request includes over **\$9 billion** in funding via global humanitarian accounts that could be partly allocated to address the needs of those affected by the crisis in Gaza and Israel (including in neighboring countries): **\$5.65 billion** in International Disaster Assistance (IDA) and **\$3.495 billion** in Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA).

On October 30, House majority members published a draft \$14.3 billion supplemental appropriations bill for Israel. While the bill closely follows the President’s request for Israel, it adds, among other provisions, a reporting requirement describing all security assistance provided to Israel since the October 7 attacks; raises the cap on presidential drawdown authority (PDA) to \$2.5 billion for FY2024; and requires a report to Congress on all uses of FY2024 PDA. The bill also would offset the proposed additional appropriations for Israel by rescinding \$14.3 billion for the Internal Revenue Service. The bill does not include appropriations for Ukraine.

Possible Options for Congress

Congress may consider an array of legislative or oversight options related to the ongoing conflict, amid rapidly evolving developments and broader regional and U.S. foreign policy considerations. Select options and considerations are discussed below, and some others (such as sanctions on Iran, Hamas, or related actors; or the authorization of U.S. military force) are discussed in CRS Report R47754, *Israel and Hamas October 2023 Conflict: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)*, coordinated by Jim Zanotti, Jeremy M. Sharp, and Christopher M. Blanchard.

Additional U.S. Assistance for Israel

Lawmakers may consider whether to increase, maintain, or condition existing U.S. support for Israel. Relevant types of U.S. assistance may include:

Additional Missile Defense Funding. Congress and successive Administrations have demonstrated strong support for joint U.S.-Israeli missile defense projects designed to thwart a diverse range of threats. Iron Dome is actively defending Israeli territory against Hamas rocket fire.

Additional Foreign Military Financing (FMF) for Israel. Since 1999, U.S. assistance to Israel has been outlined in 10-year government-to-government Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs). According to the current MOU, “Both the United States and Israel jointly commit to respect the FMF levels specified in this MOU, and not to seek changes to the FMF levels for the duration of this understanding.” However, because Congress controls appropriations, some lawmakers have indicated that they would favor exceeding annual MOU-delineated FMF limits.

Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA). Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA) authorizes the President to allow for the immediate transfer of defense articles and services from U.S. stocks,

up to a funding cap established in law, in response to an “unforeseen emergency” (22 U.S.C. §2318(a)(1)). For FY2024, the general cap for all countries is \$100 million. In the context of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Biden Administration has authorized 47 drawdowns initially valued at nearly \$25 billion.⁵⁹ Section 5505 of the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for FY2023 (P.L. 117-263) added paragraph 3 to 22 U.S.C. 2318(a) (FAA, Sec.506(a)), which created a separate drawdown category for Taiwan with its own dollar value cap. One option for Congress would be to consider whether or not to do the same for Israel.

Use of U.S. Stockpile in Israel. Since the 1980s, the United States has stockpiled military equipment in Israel, but only “single-use” armaments that could not be used by the IDF. Section 514 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (22 U.S.C. §2321h) allows U.S. defense articles stored in war reserve stocks to be transferred to a foreign government through Foreign Military Sales or through grant military assistance, such as FMF. Congress limits the value of assets transferred into War Reserves Stocks for Allies (WRSA) stockpiles located in foreign countries in any fiscal year through authorizing legislation. Since 1989, Israel has requested access to the stockpile on at least two occasions, and Congress has called on successive Administrations to ensure the WRSA-I contains adequate supplies of precision-guided munitions to be made available to Israel in emergency situations.⁶⁰ Congress could consider whether or not to engage the Administration on use of the WRSA-I.

Emergency Arms Sales. In the event that Israel requests the immediate use of U.S. equipment not on hand, U.S. law provides for emergency sales of U.S. equipment without congressional review. Per provisions in the Arms Export Control Act (AECA, P.L. 90-629, 82 Stat. 1320, as amended), Israel, along with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand (commonly referred to as NATO+5) already have shorter congressional review periods (15 days instead of 30) and higher dollar notification thresholds than other countries for both Foreign Military Sales and commercially licensed arms sales, or Direct Commercial Sales. In more urgent situations, the AECA authorizes the President to declare, in a formal notification to Congress, that “an emergency exists” requiring that a sale of U.S. equipment to a foreign partner is “in the national security interests of the United States,” thereby waiving mandatory congressional review.

Additional Humanitarian Assistance for Palestinians and Israel

As mentioned above, the President’s October supplemental budget request includes more than **\$9 billion** in humanitarian assistance potentially usable for needs in and around Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel from the MRA and IDA accounts. In a separate October request, the President asked for **\$1.05 billion** in “Food for Peace” grants for global emergency food needs via the Department of Agriculture.⁶¹

Members of Congress are debating the scope and conditions under which current or proposed humanitarian assistance should be allocated. Some strongly support boosting humanitarian aid for

⁵⁹ CRS In Focus IF12040, *U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine*, by Christina L. Arabia, Andrew S. Bowen, and Cory Welt.

⁶⁰ CRS Report RL33222, *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

⁶¹ See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Summary-of-Funding-Request-to-Meet-Critical-Needs.pdf>.

Palestinians and facilitating its provision,⁶² while others have expressed concerns that Hamas or other militants could divert aid shipments for their own use.⁶³

End-Use Monitoring of U.S. Defense Articles

Congress may examine and debate end-use monitoring (EUM) requirements for U.S. defense articles in the context of the conflict. U.S. aid and arms sales—including to Israel—are subject to laws such as the AECA and Foreign Assistance Act (FAA). The AECA requires the Departments of State and Defense to conduct EUM to ensure that recipients of U.S. defense articles use such items solely for their intended purposes.⁶⁴ In addition, in summer 2023, the Department of State announced the formation of the Civilian Harm Incident Response Guidance (CHIRG), a process whereby U.S. officials will “investigate reports of civilian harm by partner governments suspected of using U.S. weapons and recommend actions that could include suspension of arms sales.”⁶⁵ On October 16, DOD spokesperson Sabrina Singh said, “Of course, we monitor and we keep track of the assistance that we’re providing. But once it is in the hands of ... the Israelis on how they want to use, it’s – it’s really their decision.... So how the Israelis choose to use the supplies capabilities that we give them is really not up to us.”⁶⁶

Calls for a Ceasefire, Pauses, and/or Respect for International Law

Members of Congress are debating whether or not to call for a ceasefire or humanitarian pause to the conflict and whether or not to examine the applicability of international law to the conflict. Some Members have proposed a resolution (H.Res. 786) that, among other things, urges the Administration to call for a ceasefire.⁶⁷ Others have written a letter to the Administration urging U.S. officials to, among other things, advise Israel to abide by international law in its actions, including with respect to the protection of civilians.⁶⁸ House Speaker Mike Johnson has stated that “There will be a ceasefire when Hamas ceases to be a threat to Israel.”⁶⁹

⁶² See text of October 18 letter from 33 Senators to Secretary Blinken at https://www.murphy.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/un_humanitarian_appeal.pdf; and text of October 20 letter from 130 Representatives to President Biden at https://connolly.house.gov/uploadedfiles/letter_to_president_biden_on_israel.pdf.

⁶³ Rachel Oswald, “GOP seeks to end aid to Palestinian refugee agency amid Gaza war,” *Congressional Quarterly*, October 26, 2023; Marc Rod, “Risch: Plan for post-Hamas Gaza a ‘work in progress,’” *Jewish Insider*, October 19, 2023; Marc Rod, “Republicans signal concerns about aid to Palestinians, Ukraine in Israel funding request,” *Jewish Insider*, October 23, 2023. Lawmakers in both chambers have introduced bills during the 118th Congress entitled the Stop Taxpayer Funding of Hamas Act, which would prohibit any U.S. funding for Palestinians in Gaza absent a presidential certification that (among other things) the assistance would not benefit Hamas or other terrorist organizations or affiliates. Senate version: S. 489; House version at <https://kustoff.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/kustoff.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/text-stop-taxpayer-funding-of-hamas-act.pdf>.

⁶⁴ CRS In Focus IF11197, *U.S. Arms Sales and Human Rights: Legislative Basis and Frequently Asked Questions*, by Paul K. Kerr and Michael A. Weber; CRS Report R46814, *The U.S. Export Control System and the Export Control Reform Act of 2018*, by Paul K. Kerr and Christopher A. Casey.

⁶⁵ Missy Ryan, “Biden administration will track civilian deaths from U.S.-supplied arms,” *Washington Post*, September 13, 2023.

⁶⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, Press Gaggle with Sabrina Singh, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary, October 16, 2023.

⁶⁷ Available online at <https://bush.house.gov/imo/media/doc/bushceasefirenowresolution.pdf>.

⁶⁸ Available online at <https://jayapal.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Letter-Expressing-Concern-on-the-Humanitarian-Situation-in-Gaza.pdf>.

⁶⁹ “House Speaker Mike Johnson Tells GOP Jewish Confab: ‘God Is Not Done with Israel,’” *Ha’aretz*, October 29, 2023.

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