



Latest Gaza War to Reshuffle Cards in the Middle East

Middle East Task Force



To cite this article:

Middle East Task Force. (2023). Latest Gaza war to reshuffle cards in the Middle East. Horizon Insights, 6(4), 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.31175/hi.2023.04.01>

Link to this issue of the journal: <https://doi.org/10.31175/hi.2023.04>

Horizon Insights Journal Homepage: <https://behorizon.org/horizon-insights/>

ISSN: 2593-3582 (printed), 2593-3590 (online)

Submit your article



Latest Gaza War to Reshuffle Cards in the Middle East

by the Middle East Task Force

Background

On October 7, 2023, in the next day of the 50th anniversary of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the world woke to the news of another terrorist attack where militants of [Hamas and Islamic Jihad](#) infiltrated borders around Gaza from land, air and sea to seize control of 26 towns and a military unit close to Gaza. Footages of civilians and soldiers abducted with the barbaric attack abound on social media. At least 260 people were reported to be killed at a techno [music festival](#) near the Gaza Strip following the launch of Hamas' brutal onslaught.

According to [Haaretz](#) , so far more than 4400 rockets have been fired from Gaza while at least 900 Israelis have been killed and 2700 wounded. From [Palestine](#) on the other hand, at least 3,478 dead and 12,065 wounded have been reported. In response to the offensive named as "Al-Aqsa Flood" operation, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel was at war adding: "The enemy will pay a price it has never known before." The US President Joe Biden described the attack as an "appalling assault against Israel by Hamas terrorists." A statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union read: "The EU condemns in the strongest possible terms the multiple and indiscriminate attacks across Israel by Hamas and deeply deplores the loss of lives. [...]" The EU recalls the importance of working towards a lasting and sustainable peace through reinvigorated efforts in the Middle East Peace Process." The [Egyptian President](#) Abdel Fattah el-Sisi emphasized the importance of ending the ongoing escalation and exercising self-restraint by all parties.

On October 09 (Monday), IDF Spokesperson Daniel Hagari said: "Control has been achieved in all the communities, but there may still be terrorists in the area." He added that they "have almost completed evacuating Gaza border residents." According to the report by [Haaretz](#) , Hamas and Islamic Jihad has stated to have 100 and 30 hostages respectively.

IDF has been conducting air raids on targets in Gaza since Day 1. On October 12, the Israeli Air Force stated over X (former Twitter) to have dropped some [6,000 bombs](#) on Gaza since the war began, adding that it "will continue to attack forcefully and relentlessly, as long as necessary."

Some analysts label the attacks as 9/11 of Israel while some others try to explain what we have been observing with conspiracy theories. But it is certain that the war will be a major event that will reshuffle cards in the region. The implications of the attack on Israel and the wider region cannot be fully grasped without a comprehensive look into international, regional, and national / local dynamics.

(How) Did the attack evade Israeli Intelligence?

Based on the strength of Israeli intelligence in control of Gaza and the long-time preparation required to conduct attacks in such scale but using conventional tactics, many analysts posit the Gaza attacks were fruit of Israeli state efforts to create a rally around the flag to save squeaking Netanyahu government. It is no secret that Israel's Shin Bet, Mossad and IDF follow closely what happens through the network of informants and agents inside Palestinian militant groups alongside high-tech surveillance equipment such as cameras and ground-motion sensors. What is more, the facts that:

- the event coincided with the 50th anniversary of the 73' War that would, by nature of the things, require extra caution,
- the [US intel community](#) , on September 28, October 5, and October 6 was in expectation of an imminent attack by Hamas, the final report of October 6 being based on reporting from Israel,
- [Egypt](#) warned the Israelis three days prior to the attacks about a likely attack,



- the weapons that have been pouring to Gaza from Iran for like a year has been a known issue by the Israeli authorities, as can be seen from X tweets by journalist Vera Mironova

does not allow us to believe that Israel was not informed or was not expecting these attacks to take place.

The problematic internal situation in Israel stemming from the hardline government's aggressive settlement policies disregarding international and humanitarian norms, and the judicial overhaul that divided the Israeli society across different fault lines in fact lends support to such theories. At a time when the hardline government is lambasted by even the staunchest ally, the US, and the whole statecraft including the IDF was politicized around the legal reforms, the event certainly unified nation behind Netanyahu to settle scores against attackers.

The theory remains short to explain several aspects. To start with, the damage made is too big. Israel could start such operations even after much smaller attacks. Taking into consideration some 130 hostages to include Major General Nimrod Aloni, the reputation of IDF and Israeli intelligence at stake, the theory seems an overstretch. Yet still it is early to decide on this. So far, the analysts close to the Israeli state have not gone further than saying the country is currently at war and an investigation after the dust of the war is settled will reveal the truth.

Iran, Hezbollah, and Türkiye

The role of Iran and Hezbollah in the attack has drawn the attention of observers and governments. Despite their sectarian divergences, Iran and Hezbollah consistently [support](#) Hamas, particularly in terms of funding, supplying weapons and military technology, as well as training Hamas-linked militants. They unite their forces against a "common enemy". This is compatible with Iran's strategy of avoiding direct confrontation and instead using proxies in the region.

Iran has praised the attack but denied its involvement by [asserting](#) that it does not meddle in other countries' decision-making processes. The assertion was also confirmed by a senior Hamas leader in an [interview](#) with NBC News. The preliminary findings of the [Intelligence Agencies](#) also [align](#) with the claims of the Iran and Hamas

The strike of Hamas against Israel occurred at a time when Israel and Arab countries were pursuing normalization. Israel had normalized ties with the UAE and Bahrain in 2020, Sudan and Morocco in 2021 through Abraham Accords. In August 2022, Tel Aviv expanded its efforts by normalizing relations with Turkey, and was in the process of normalization with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Considering the status of the country as the "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" and its financial clout over the whole Middle East, the deal would be a real-changer to allow Israel normalize relations with its neighbors and the region, help healing the [siege mentality](#) in Israel.

Saudi Arabia's main conditions for [normalization](#) with Israel are fewer restrictions on US arms sales, US assistance to develop civilian nuclear control, and major progress towards creation of a Palestinian state. If these efforts succeed, it could lead to a trilateral security alliance between Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the US. The Israeli government could claim a victory in its polarized domestic politics, and the US could present a unified front against Iran while shifting its focus to Asia and compete with China. There was a certain level of support to those conditions from within Israel and a certain progress was achieved. Being encircled by regional states to include Israel within a defense pact would mean a nightmare scenario by Iran. [Iranian President](#) Ebrahim Raisi voiced this concern on October 1, denouncing any attempts to normalize relations with Israel as "reactionary and regressive." This normalization would also mean a major blow to Hamas also. Such normalization would mean marginalization of the Palestinian cause and hopes to achieve statehood. So, at a time when:

- international leadership has ceased to exist for Palestine,
- the US has lost its ability and credibility to force a just and equitable solution to the Palestine problem,
- the Israeli governments do not respect international norms and agreements as regards rights of the Palestinians and expansion of settlements,
- as a poll in 2021 shows - nearly 80% of Palestinians want President Mahmoud Abbas to resign, 45% of Palestinians believe Hamas should lead and represent them while support to secular Fatah is only 19%,
- the KSA is so close to normalization with Israel



Hamas conducted the attack, expecting –based on historical evidence– a harsh Israeli reaction.

Hamas achieved all its objectives. As reported by AFP, Saudi Arabia informed the US on its decision to [pause](#) discussions on possible normalization with Israel. The harsh Israeli reaction has estranged Israel in the eyes of many sympathizers while increasing visibility of the Palestinian cause. Hamas also increased its political backing from Palestinians after the events, posing itself an able entity to attract global attention to the Palestinian cause.

As for Hezbollah, the group constitutes an element of threat for Israel. To deter opening of new fronts against Israel, US declared to have ordered [two aircraft carrier strike groups](#), the USS Eisenhower and the USS Gerald R Ford to the eastern Mediterranean. The [UK](#) made a similar move, declaring to have dispatched a military package to include P8 aircraft, surveillance assets, two Royal Navy ships, three merlin helicopters and a company of Royal Marines. Other forces already in the area included: four Ticonderoga class guided missile cruisers, the USS Normandy (CG 60), the Arleigh Burke class guided missile destroyers USS Thomas Hudner (DDG 116), USS Ramage (DDG 61), USS Carney (DDG 64), and USS Roosevelt (DDG 80). When added on top of the other, it shows the US and the UK are indeed alert for the contingency that Hezbollah, Iran and other states / militant groups join the war against Israel.

Lebanon, as state, has no control over the actions of Hezbollah. Yet, the internal conditions in Lebanon creates a context for the latter's actions. Within current context, Hezbollah's entry into war does not seem plausible if not provoked. The group will be willing to remain as a deterrent. As Hanin Ghaddar says, the group's strategy will be to maintain a limited escalation along the borders, to distract Israel with the chances of a Lebanon war, while maintaining plausible deniability. Yet, the escalation is always a possibility as Israel's incursion into Gaza intensifies and exchange of fire between Israel and the group can sometimes be hard to fathom where it will end.

Another beneficiary of the war is **Türkiye**. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been vocal in his criticism of Israel's actions. Erdogan has referred to the Israeli siege and bombing of Gaza as a 'massacre', expressing sympathy with Hamas, which Turkey does not consider a terrorist organization, despite it being designated as such by the United States and the European Union.

Erdogan's stance on the conflict has garnered attention and raised questions about his role in the situation. Some may argue that his strong condemnation of Israel positions him as a winner in this conflict, particularly among those who share similar views. Erdogan is a populist leader and considering Erdogan's history of shifting foreign policies, it wouldn't be surprising if Ankara changes course and distances itself from its current lukewarm relationship with Israel. This wouldn't be an unprecedented move for Turkey.

On the other hand, with the war, the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) that was agreed by the US and the EU at the G20 summit in New Delhi earlier this month becomes hard to achieve. The corridor would connect Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan and Israel by rail, entirely bypassing Turkey and it would lead to Europe and India by ship. Erdogan was vocal about his distaste with the corridor, announcing his alternative.

Migration:

The conflict situation in Gaza and Israel has caused a mass displacement of people. While dozens of small communities have been fully evacuated in southern Israel, the situation in Gaza is catastrophic. Because of the Israeli bombardments, and halt of electricity and supplies brought essential health, water, and sanitation services to the brink of collapse, and exacerbated food insecurity.

In the Gaza Strip, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) increases day by day, estimated around 1 million people of whom nearly 400,00 are taking shelter in [UNRWA](#) facilities. The U.N. has said that mass evacuation orders in the area will affect more than a million people. A total evacuation would mean the entire 2.23 million population of Gaza would have to squeeze into the southern half of the strip.

Since Gaza is surrounded by blockades imposed by Israel and Egypt, and air and sea access are also prevented by Israel, it is very difficult to leave Gaza for Palestinians. UNWRA is seeking ways for possible opening of a humanitarian corridor from Egypt.

According to the [UNHCR](#), the population of the forcibly displaced and stateless people with Palestinian origin residing in Europe in 2022 was 30,797. On the other hand, it is also evident that Palestinian refugees have been systematically [denied](#) of their right to return and forced to live in exile under precarious and vulnerable conditions outside the borders of Palestine.

The situation has a potential to increase the number of Palestinian refugees in other countries. During the times of increased mass displacement of people in the world, this has another potential to add up to the challenges that the EU has already been tackling.

Impact on Global Economy

The global economy has already experienced the adverse impacts of the COVID Crisis, as well as the Russia-Ukraine War. The conflict between Israel and Hamas could potentially further harm the global economy. In

the event that the Israel-Iran situation escalates, [Bloomberg](#) Economics anticipates a significant increase in oil prices, potentially reaching \$150 per barrel. This escalation could also result in a global economic growth decline to 1.7%, effectively causing a recession that would subtract approximately \$1 trillion from the world's total output.

NATO

The situation in Gaza overshadowed everything else in the agenda of NATO Ministers of Defence gathering in Brussels held between 11-12 October 2023. Israeli Defence Minister's presence and presentation was an indication of NATO's support to one of its Mediterranean Dialogue partner countries. NATO Secretary General condemned the terrorist attacks perpetrated by HAMAS "in the strongest possible terms" in the press conference, but this was something short of a North Atlantic Council statement which was reportedly blocked by Turkey. In line with the U.S. perception and approach, Secretary General's remarks particularly related to civilian casualties and possible third-party intervention was apparently aiming to deescalate the situation.

After Ukraine, Israel is NATO's second partner now at war, making Euro-Atlantic region and its periphery less stable and secure. Gaza War also challenges NATO's brand-new strategic concept inked in 2022 that gives NATO crisis prevention and management and cooperative security as core tasks. Historically NATO has been reluctant to actively intervene in the crises in the MENA region (with the exception of Muammar Qaddafi's Libya) but failing to deliver in this one would be perceived as a matter of credibility for NATO.

EU

When it comes to Israel-Palestine conflict, the EU hardly has a chair at the table. It's no secret since the EU cannot translate its economic muscle into political power in the absence of a common political view across the member states. The Middle East reflects this better than any other policy areas. As an example, the reactions vary from forbidding demonstrations in support of Palestine in Germany to calling on people to take to the streets to protest for Palestinians in Spain.

Most importantly, the cacophony is not limited to the member states, spreading within the European Commission. In the wake of the Hamas attack, the Neighborhood Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi readily announced to halt all Palestine aid. A spokesperson later tried to limit the damage and explained that the EU would scrutinize where the money is used as if it was never done. The HR/VR went further and said a suspension is not on the agenda, to the contrary, the aid needed to be increased. As a result, with a statement, the Commission revealed to [triple](#) the aid. Uncoordinated and unwise statements prevailed during last week inside the executive branch.

The EU's official and long-lasting stance is two state solution. This unique stance provides the EU a good advantage on intermediary efforts contrary to the US. Unfortunately, neither side will trust a paralyzed negotiator.

Palestinians: The Fight Turns into Humanitarian Plight

It is certain that the main losers in the overall picture are and will continue to be the Palestinians. Israel has already and will continue to exact a heavy toll against Hamas and 2.3 million Gazans of which 70 per cent of the settlers are refugees. As Haaretz reported, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant ordered a full siege on the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip. Accordingly, he said: "No power, no food, no gas, everything is closed. We are fighting human animals, and we act accordingly."

Israeli Air Force has been pounding Gaza since day 1. According to Health Ministry spokesman Ashraf al-Qudra as reported by Al Jazeera, at least 3,478 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli air raids on the Gaza Strip since fighting between Hamas and Israel began on October 7. Number of Palestinians injured reached 12,065 while 70 percent of the victims being women, children, and the elderly. At least 1,300 others also remain missing under the rubble, including 600 children. On October 17, a massive explosion in al-Ahli al-Arabi, also known as the Baptist hospital [killed at least 471 Palestinian](#) civilians. To date, most Arab countries hold Israel responsible while both Israel and the US blames Islamic Jihad. Israeli Defense Forces were also reported to have used white phosphorus, a weapon with a highly incendiary effect, in densely populated civilian residential areas of Gaza City. [Amnesty International](#) reported this based on "indisputable evidence" found by its fact-finding team. On October 14, the Israeli army ordered mass exodus of more than 1 million people to the south within

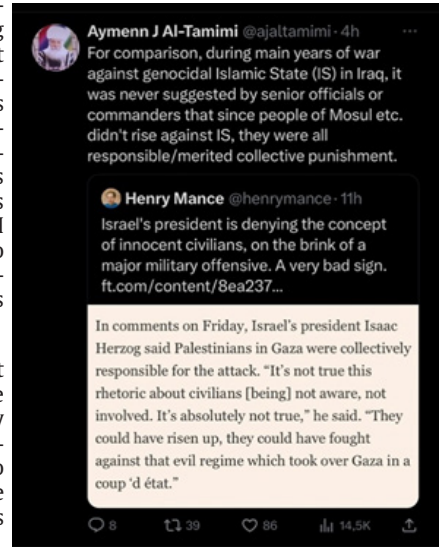


24 hours to allow for a ground operation. With no water, electricity and power, unending air raids, forced exodus, the whole weight of the war is on the Palestinians.

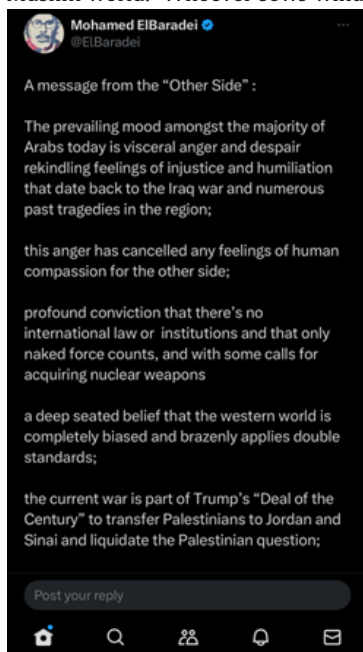
Conclusion and Strategic Foresight

Killing innocent civilians to include women and [children](#) and firing rockets to residential areas can only be labeled as terrorist attacks. There is no way to justify Hamas terrorist attacks and incursions into Israel. This is true despite Israeli government's policies of repression, blockade, annexation, and occupation of East Jerusalem, settling Jewish civilians in the East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and displacing the local population, provocative actions such as facilitating hardline groups entry to the Aqsa Mosque despite the norms that non-Muslim prayer at the mosque is forbidden. In the havoc created with the War in Ukraine and absence of a global leader, Hamas seems to have seized the moment to increase political gains, without considering the 2.3 million Palestinians living in extreme conditions in Gaza. Hamas, with the attacks on innocent civilians, has actually betrayed the Palestinian cause. A tweet by Haaretz builds a better picture of what Hamas is. Accordingly, in March 2019 PM Netanyahu told his Likud party's Knesset members: "Anyone who wants to thwart the establishment of a Palestinian state has to support bolstering Hamas and transferring money to Hamas. This is part of our strategy".

But there is no way to justify disproportionate use of force against helpless innocent civilians and civilian infrastructure under the disguise of punishing Hamas. It is not possible to attribute to any civilized norm a full siege on Gaza Strip nor Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant's statement that reads: "No power, no food, no gas, everything is closed. We are fighting human animals, and we act accordingly." Leveraging the pretext of Hamas using civilians as human shields has no place in international norms.



Israel's revert to disproportionate use of force against Palestinians, and Israeli politicians' rhetorics not heeding Palestinian lives only eclipses the view to its disadvantage, creating an extremely negative view especially in the Muslim world. Whoever sows wind reaps storm. At such moments, calm and respect to human dignity should reign to reach military targets while respecting human lives. Such conduct would help differentiate a terrorist organisation's behaviour with that of a responsible state.



So far, Hezbollah has clearly shown it has no interest in opening a new front against Israel. Iran has not made a forward movement either. If they had intention, they would have moved at the first days after the attacks, when the vulnerability was greater.

So far, there is no clear articulation of aims for the Israeli operations. What is the end state targeted in Gaza? Will Israel content itself with siege around Gaza or will it channel its military might to push Palestinians further south and create a buffer zone, or does it calculate to [force a permanent expulsion of Palestinians](#) further south into south Egypt. The provocation with no food, water and electricity, the forced exodus, the US-Israeli proposal for [North Sinai Refuge](#) for Gazans, the mass of forces in the Eastern Mediterranean in support of IDF that has no match in the region, in fact lends support to the last contingency.

Another lingering question is, what will be the aim after achieving targets in Gaza? Will Israel turn to Iran and Hezbollah to settle scores?

Given the huge military support from UK and US, Israel might turn to Hezbollah to liquidate its weapons and ammunition stockpiles and revert to Iran to reduce its nuclear enrichment capabilities, which is seen as a threat by Saudi Arabia and the UAE also.

Will it be possible to maintain momentum attained by Abraham Accords? The plight and anger felt in Arab capitals will delay if not preclude continuation of the peaceful atmosphere reached by accords after the dust settles.

If the aim is not to expel Gazans, Israel should accept mediation especially from Egypt to find a common ground to exchange prisoners, defuse tensions and bring life back to normal.