

ISRAEL'S ATTACKS ON GAZA

A MILITARY AND POLITICAL ASSESSMENT

MURAT ASLAN

SETA | ANALYSIS

NOVEMBER 2023 NO.86





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SETA Yayınları

ISBN: 978-625-6583-07-8

Layout: Said Demirtaş

Printed in Türkiye, İstanbul

by Turkuvaz Haberleşme ve Yayıncılık A.Ş., 2023

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SUMMARY¹

This analysis aims to examine the current situation in the military and political context of Hamas's October 7 operation and Israel's ongoing operations.

The Oct 7th and afterward have caused a divided globe on how to address the contradictions of new sorts. The conceptualizations of human and humanitarian security of the 1990s have leveled down. Societal security is at the edge of survival shading over the scholarly perspectives of the 1980s. The remaining fact after the Oct 7th is that the laws and norms are left aside and diplomacy has lost its sacred spirit. The devastation to civilians increased the weight of negative emotions and wisdom is not the pattern anymore. In this sense, this analysis scrutinizes 'what happened' and 'probable outcomes' on and after Oct. 7th with an objective military and political assessment of Hamas and Israeli preoccupations. The analysis attempts to conclude meta-outcomes if this conflict continues as it is.¹

¹ This analysis is the updated version of the following paper.

Murat Aslan, "Analiz: İsrail'in Gazze'deki Saldırıları | Askeri ve Politik Bir Değerlendirme", SETA, November 2023, No: 394, <https://setav.org/assets/uploads/2023/11/A394.pdf>, accessed on 21 November 2023.

INTRODUCTION

‘Operation Al-Aqsa Flood’, which Hamas claimed against Israel at 6.30 am on 7 October 2023 from the Gaza Strip, sent shockwaves through the Middle East. The aforementioned offensive caught the Israelis by surprise and struck the fear at the country’s heart due to the infiltration of Hamas members into urban in the vicinity of Gaza. That development marked the beginning of a new and brutal armed conflict between Israel and Hamas with its devastating impact on civilians. Eventually, the Iron Swords Operation that Israel launched in the wake of the ‘Operation Al Aqsa Flood’ of Hamas gave rise to a humanitarian disaster and ‘eradicated’ the rules of war as far as the Israeli government started to punish the Palestinians collectively. Hence it caused the death of more than 12,500 innocent civilians¹, mostly women and children, who could not have possibly known about the Oct. 7 attack. Moreover, the Israeli offensive rendered

¹ This number changes per the reports of varying institutions.

Gaza’s northern districts uninhabitable, displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians who were forced to head south of the region without any shelter or service.

The blatant disregard for the laws of international armed conflict and growing humanitarian concerns call for an analysis of the situation where political and military considerations of both parties have been reviewed with the limits of objectivity. This study analyzes the current state of conflict within the context of Hamas’s Oct. 7 assault and Israel’s ongoing operations, just, to depict the overall picture. In this sense, the military and political inclination of Hamas and Israel will be delved and analyzed. On the other hand, the interpretation of the events and processes is on the reader.

THE MILITARY AND POLITICAL STATE OF AFFAIRS FOR HAMAS

Analyzing the Military Situation

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, on which Hamas had ostensibly prepared itself for a long time, can be depicted by a series of preparations and acts. Disregarding the degree of success in planning and implementation of the overall process, the overall commitment of Hamas may shortly be portrayed as follows:

- In the frame of planning phase, obtaining portable weapons capable of degrading Israel’s military capabilities² and, for this purpose, producing or purchasing various light weapon systems that can be hidden in the tunnels or transferrable to probable conflict

² Yiftah S. Shapir, “Hamas’ Weapons”, https://www.inss.org.il/he/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/systemfiles/adkanENG11_4%20_corrected_Shapir.pdf, Accessed: 12 October 2023.

zones of which could be differing calibers of rockets, antitank weapons, and snipers,

- Disclosing the pending operation to an extremely limited number of Hamas members for the sake of secrecy³ and thereby maximizing the military activity's chance of success despite the capable Israeli intelligence services,
- Conducting detailed reconnaissance and surveillance to identify the weaknesses of the Israeli security forces⁴ and establishing which Israeli security stations (surrounding Gaza with real-time data delivery) would be most vulnerable to attacks,
- Creating a gap in the physical security system around Gaza⁵ before Hamas members could take action according to their predetermined roles,
- Abducting or neutralizing Israeli civilians or military personnel⁶ to prevent the Israeli security forces from retaliating immediately and using hostages in future negotiations upon being transferred to Gaza for exchange of Hamas members in Israeli prisons,
- Hamas members launching a surprise attack from Gaza with paragliders⁷ to exploit the

third dimension of the battle space that the Israelis did not expect,

- Reaching the depths of Israel by sea with rubber dinghies⁸ to increase the diversity of methods used for further surprises,
- Advancing toward the West Bank with much-trained Hamas members⁹ to create a land bridge between the West Bank and Gaza and trigger an uprising by all of Palestinians,

The ability of the U.S. and Israel to isolate the conflict and Israel's disproportionate response have made Hamas vulnerable to a protracted conflict.

- Once Israeli retaliation starts, say in the wake of Operation Iron Swords, drawing Israeli soldiers into the center of Gaza City to engage with them without being exposed to the impact of airstrikes or heavy support vehicles,
- Hunting tanks in the designated 'kill areas' as was used to be practiced during the 2008/9 Operation Cast Lead of Israel,
- Activating snipers to make the Israeli army suffer casualties,
- Taking the fight beyond Gaza's borders by incorporating other armed groups in Lebanon and Palestine,
- Ultimately, forcing Israel to make political concessions for a favorable new 'status quo'.

3 Al Jazeera, "Why the Palestinian group Hamas launched an attack on Israel? All to know", <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/7/palestinian-group-hamas-launches-surprise-attack-on-israel-what-to-know>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

4 Ronen Bergman, Patrick Kinsley, "How Israel's Feared Security Services Failed to Stop Hamas's Attack", New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-security-failure.html>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

5 Bill Hutchinson, "Death came from sea, air and ground: A timeline of surprise attack by Hamas on Israel", ABS News, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/timeline-surprise-rocket-attack-hamas-israel/story?id=103816006>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

6 Ibid.

7 Gareth Jennings, "Hamas uses paragliders to breach Israeli border", The Janes, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/hamas-uses-paragliders-to-breach-israeli-border>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

8 Josef Federman, Issam Adwan, "Hamas surprise attack out of Gaza stuns Israel and leaves hundreds dead in fighting, retaliation", Associated Press, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-gaza-hamas-rockets-airstrikes-tel-aviv-11fb98655c256d54ecb5329284fc37d2>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

9 Fatima Shbair, "Why did Hamas attack, and why now? What does it hope to gain?", the Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/why-did-hamas-attack-and-why-now-what-does-it-hope-to-gain-215248>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

Yet Hamas's aforementioned military strategy turned risks into realities because it disregarded two crucial elements. The first point relates to the nature of Hamas's attack. The quantity and quality of Hamas's military supplies and equipment could only contribute to the resistance, only if third parties would offer accessible and stable support for a long-term conflict. However, the intention and commitment of the United States and Israel to isolate the clashes in Gaza and Israel's disproportionate response increased Hamas's vulnerabilities to a long-term conflict. At the same time, Egypt has been keeping deliveries through the Rafah border crossing under control, creating supply defectiveness in case a long-term conflict would require more than what is obtained within the limits of time restraints and the delivery capacity through underground tunnels. Indeed, Hamas launched approximately 4500 rockets within the initial twenty minutes of its attack yet could not maintain the same level of fire power intensity over the following days and weeks.

That some 1400 Hamas members lost their lives after the Israeli army reached the relevant settlements, too, established that the Oct. 7 attack was not capable of yielding concrete results. That situation made it impossible for Hamas to receive military support – except from Iran. As the Israeli security forces regained control of towns and territory, that Hamas had reached, the organization was compelled to put up resistance at the heart of Gaza City accepting great pressure on the city.

Another shortcoming was the failure to foresee the consequences of the Oct. 7 attack adequately. Hamas seems to have forgotten that Israel could quickly mobilize and retaliate against such an assault – as was the case in the previous Arab-Israeli wars. Specifically, not enough attention was paid to Israel's likelihood of tar-

geting residential areas in Gaza for the sake of punishment and further deterrence. Indeed, the Israeli army's indiscriminate targeting of Gaza's city center and infrastructure forced Hamas back into Gaza as Israel cut off electricity and water to completely besiege the area.

The third factor that created sensitivity for Hamas in the military sense was Hezbollah's leader, Hasan Nasrallah, stressing in his Nov. 3, 2023 address that the ongoing conflict was a question of Palestine. Offering his 'emotional' support to the Palestinians, he insisted that Hezbollah was actually assisting Hamas with reference to that group's presence and a series of regional clashes. Yet Nasrallah fell short of declaring war on Israel.¹⁰ Signaling his commitment to 'controlled engagement' in line with Iran's military methods, the Hezbollah leader seemed to oppose a spillover of violence despite issuing the threat that he was keeping all options on the table.

It would be more accurate to portray the situation in the West Bank as tension without violent conflict. There was an initial attempt to fuel an internal divide by spreading rumors about some unconfirmed details following contacts between Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Head of State, and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken.¹¹ Subsequently, a Palestinian armed group calling itself Sons of Abu Jandal urged Abbas to make a public statement and support Hamas before attacking his convoy on 7 November 2023.

Keeping in mind that the division among the Palestinian armed groups is persistent, despite Israel's attacks against Gaza, it is apparent that the

¹⁰ Euronews, "Hizbullah lideri Nasrallah: Bütün seçenekler masada", 3 November 2023, <https://tr.euronews.com/2023/11/03/nasrallah-kuzey-cephesinde-butun-seceenekler-masada>, Accessed: 9 November 2023.

¹¹ Hürriyet, "Filistin Devlet Başkanı Mahmud Abbas'ın konvoyuna silahlı saldırı", 7 November 2023, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/son-dakika-filistin-devlet-baskani-mahmud-abbasin-konvoyuna-silahlisaldiri-42357646>, Accessed: 9 November 2023.

Palestinians have not yet matured in a military sense to repel a threat - Israel. Under these circumstances, Hamas had to stand on its own feet amid the Gaza clashes and continue a resistance campaign based on its sole existing capacity.

Analyzing the Political Situation

The fact that Hamas's 'political sphere of influence' remains limited to Gaza, suggests that the Oct. 7 operation was carried out based on certain considerations. In this context, Ali Baraka, who oversees Hamas's external relations, stated that the group perpetrated the Oct. 7 attacks to take some hostages yet Israel's weakness had caused the operation to expand.¹² In the wake of that attack's unexpected success, Hamas tried to urge Hezbollah and Palestinian groups in the West Bank to support them, believing that their attack would mark the beginning of an all-out struggle against Israel across Palestine. Indeed, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas issued a relatively positive statement hours after the Hamas attack¹³ as the Islamic Jihad expressed support for Hamas and Hezbollah pledged to attack Israel if the United States were to become involved. By contrast, Abbas's Oct. 12 statement attached greater importance to reconciliation despite supporting the Palestinian cause.¹⁴ Whereas the Palestinian Head of State, who met U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Jordan, shifted his focus on finding an 'intermediary' solution, Hamas urged all Palestinians to protest following the prayers on Friday, 13

12 Snezana Farberov, "Hamas planned Israel attack for 2 years but was shocked by success", <https://nypost.com/2023/10/12/hamas-shocked-by-success-of-israel-attack/>, Accessed: 9 November 2023.

13 Murat Aslan, "3 Soruda – Hamas'in 7 Ekim Saldirilari", AA, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/3-soruda-hamasin-7-ekim-saldirilari/3010445>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

14 Navya Beri, "Mahmud Abbas calls for 'immediate end to aggression' against Palestinians", WION, <https://www.wionews.com/world/mahmud-abbas-calls-for-immediate-end-to-aggression-against-palestinians-646060>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

October 2023.¹⁵ It is important to note that the resulting demonstrations fell short of the group's expectations.

A quick look at the general situation would reveal that Hamas was clearly unable to mobilize other Palestinian factions or Hezbollah. Whereas Hezbollah operatives carried out some mortar attacks and minor armed attacks took place in the West Bank, Israel resorted to excessive force to retaliate against those assaults.¹⁶ In other words, there was no coordinated and integrated political and military action against Israel as the fragmentation of (and hostilities among) the Palestinians revealed itself in the wake of the Oct. 7 attacks.

Iran's statement that it was unaware of the Hamas attack and Israel's confirmation of this statement show that Hamas launched Operation Al-Aqsa Flood before reaching sufficient political maturity.

How various states reacted to the Oct. 7 attacks, in turn, represents the second piece of the political puzzle. Keeping in mind that Hamas has strong ties with Iran and has been receiving support from that country, it goes without saying that Iran endorsed Hamas's actions more clearly than any other country.¹⁷ In addition to

15 Isabelle Debre, Jon Gambrel, "Tens of thousands protest after Muslim prayers across Mideast over Israeli airstrikes on Gaza", Associated Press, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-hamas-war-friday-prayers-mideast-8474ed730294a1c2299bdaef58a17142>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

16 Emmanuel Fabian, "Hezbollah fires mortars at Israel; IDF strike hits tent on Lebanon border in response", The Times of Israel, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hezbollah-fires-mortars-at-israel-idf-strike-hits-tent-on-lebanon-border-in-response/>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

17 KN Pandita, "Iran Celebrates Re-Enactment Of The Holocaust By Hamas; The Target Is Not Israel, But The US: OPED", the EurAsian, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/iran-celebrates-re-enactment-of-the-holocaust-by-hamas/>, Accessed 13 October 2023.

the public statements of Iran's religious leader Ali Khamenei, celebrations at the Iranian parliament accompanied conservatives paying tribute to Hamas with fireworks. In this regard, some observers expected the Hezbollah militiamen in Lebanon, who are under Iranian control, to attack Israel for support to Hamas. Yet the anticipated attack did not take place in the end. Furthermore, Iran insisted that it did not know about Hamas's attack in advance in the words of Khamenei – religious leader of Iran, which the Israeli authorities confirmed. Then it is a fact that Hamas launched 'Operation Al-Aqsa Flood' without accumulating sufficient political support.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Iran opted for indirect and covert engagement although Khamenei expressed support for Hamas, as could be seen in the mobilization of pro-Iranian Yemeni factions.

It is noteworthy that Iranian backed armed militia attacked United States military bases in Iraq and Syria as part of its covert engagement while the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels declared 'war' on Israel. It would seem that Iran, which welcomed the clashes between Hamas and Israel for political reasons, decided to challenge American and Israeli interests with its proxies, instead of getting involved directly, and has been reluctant to cross the line of 'plausible deniability' at all costs. Hamas, in turn, seemingly expects proxy forces to mobilize and Iran to play a more active role.

Although Hezbollah and pro-Iranian militias in Syria could always become party to the Palestinian question, there is no reason to believe that they intended to take such a step on or after 7 October 2023 —when Israel was most vulnerable. Furthermore, Israel had the capabil-

ity to mobilize its military forces and complete its preparations before attacking Gaza by air and land. That development cast further doubt on the possibility of the relevant groups taking action against Israel. Indeed, Hezbollah has carried out low-profile and limited attacks against the country, hinting that it intended to take precautions against an Israeli assault rather than throw its weight behind Hamas. Last but not least, Iran considers Hamas a proxy organization and possibly treats it just as a tool to wear down Israel and the United States.

Another major development, which relates to the interaction between Hamas and Iran, was the Oct. 27, 2023 meeting between Russia, Iran, and Hamas in Moscow. A new political dilemma emerged once it became public that Ali Bagheri Kani, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs, met Musa Abu Marzouk, a member of Hamas's Politburo, on that date.¹⁹ The Russian media reported that Iran and Hamas held talks in Moscow instead of announcing a trilateral summit between Russia, Iran, and Hamas — which meant that the Russian government opted for 'cautious engagement' with an optimism of focusing on the Ukraine front.

It is possible to observe that Russia, which has been experiencing problems in Ukraine:

- Welcomed the shift of global attention from Ukraine,
- Monitored the 'favorable' impact of simultaneous U.S. support for Israel and Ukraine,
- Assessed the Israeli operation relevant to its impact on Syrian theatre,
- Refrained from directly challenging Israel in a political and military sense,

18 Youhanna Najdi, "Iran Hamas'in İsrail'e saldırılarında rol oynadı mı?", 10 October 2023, <https://www.dw.com/tr/1%CC%87ran-hamas%C4%B1n-i%CC%87srail-sald%C4%B1r%C4%B1lar%C4%B1nda-rol-oynad%C4%B1-m%C4%B1/a-67058055>, Accessed: 9 November 2023.

19 AP, "Senior Iranian envoy met Hamas representatives in Moscow as Russia seeks to expand its clout", 27 October 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-iran-hamas-israel-palestine-9b57f4322f57f3a6f-f33e2908cb2a3ef>,

- Preferred to stay in touch with Hamas through Iran following the aforementioned meeting in Moscow.

Despite Russia's cautious stance, Hamas continues to focus on the political and military support from Moscow and Tehran — along with the continuity of that assistance.

Having issued political threats, the United States deployed the aircraft carrier USS Gerald Ford off the Israeli coast as USS Eisenhower headed to the Mediterranean and the Gulf (instead of the Pacific Ocean). Those developments caused Iran and Hezbollah to hesitate.²⁰ With the United States using two aircraft carriers to deter attacks from Lebanon, Iran and Yemen, Secretary of State Antony Blinken has been focusing on the synergy between military and political threats at his meetings in the region. At the same, it has become clear that the United States would not take direct action against Hamas and instead shall seek to isolate the organization in the international arena to relieve Israel to some degree. On the other hand, increasing societal reaction in favor of Palestine, but not Hamas, urged the American decision-makers to calm the situation especially prior to the 2024 Presidential Elections.

Meanwhile, the response from Arab governments failed to meet Hamas's expectations. It was especially important that Egypt tipped off Israel about an imminent attack three days before Oct. 7 —let alone throw its weight behind the group. Furthermore, the Egyptian government promptly announced that it would not allow Palestinian refugees to relocate to Egypt in the wake of Israel's offensive against Gaza —which signaled that Cairo has been preoccupied with

the social cost of the conflict. Egypt's humanitarian facilitation, on the other hand, played a constructive role as a hope of the least degree.

On the first day of the October 7 operation, Turkey did not accept Hamas' actions and took a balanced political position by calling for restraint.

Jordan, like Egypt, has been in contact with the United States and Israel despite exerting significant influence over the West Bank and concentrated on the backlash from Jordanian citizens of Palestinian descent. With the notable exception of Qatar, the Gulf states did not express support for Hamas —which it clearly expected. As Saudi Arabia endorsed the Palestinian cause over civilian casualties and concerns about Jerusalem,²¹ the Iranian Head of State Ebrahim Raisi and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman spoke by phone on 12 October.²² Although the United Arab Emirates issued a statement that antagonized Hamas, the rapid increase in civilian deaths in Palestine caused the original attitude to change to some degree.²³ As a result the Arab countries, with very few exceptions, focused on two issues as far as Israel continued indiscriminate targeting; civilian concerns and addressing the overall Palestine — not Hamas.

21 CNN Int, "Saudi Prince MBS Speaks To Palestine President Mahmud Abbas On The Israel-Gaza Conflict, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8laTHxAQGA>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

22 Syed Zafar Mehdi, Ahmet Dursun, "Iranian, Saudi leaders discuss Palestine over phone", AA, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iranian-saudi-leaders-discuss-palestine-over-phone/3016299>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

23 Reuters, "UAE calls Hamas attacks on Israel a 'serious and grave escalation'", <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-calls-hamas-attacks-israel-serious-grave-escalation-2023-10-08/>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

20 Tara Copp, "The US is moving quickly to boost Israel's military. A look at what assistance it's providing", Associated Press, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-military-navy-carrier-e648c53d-c53a46e2e12950784ea5e8d2>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

It is important to note that the Turkish government's approach differed from the response of other countries in the region. Specifically, Türkiye did not endorse Hamas's actions on the first day, instead calling for restraint and assuming a balanced stance. Indeed, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's initial remarks made references to Masjid Al-Aqsa (in response to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's statements) and highlighted Ankara's red line.²⁴ On 8 October, the Turkish leader urged both parties to act with restraint.²⁵ By contrast, Erdoğan's subsequent address to the Parliament concentrated on human rights violations vis-à-vis Israel's attacks against Gaza's civilian population and the country's decision to deprive that area of electricity and water.²⁶ At the same time, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan engaged with his counterparts across the region, expressing Turkish concerns and condemning Israel's conduct as far as civilians were the victims of the conflict. As the humanitarian situation worsened due to Israel's indiscriminate attacks on Palestinian civilians, Türkiye stepped up its diplomatic efforts and criticism. It is important to remember, however, that the country prioritized the protection of civilians and called for a ceasefire at all relevant meetings. Last but not least, the Turkish government volunteered to serve as a guarantor.

24 DW, "Erdoğan'dan İsrail ve Hamas'a itidal çağrısı", <https://www.dw.com/tr/erdo%C4%9Fandan-i%CC%87srail-ve-hamasa-itidal-%C3%A7a%C4%9Fr%C4%B1s%C4%B1/a-67026854>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

25 BBC Türkçe, "Türkiye, Hamas-İsrail savaşına nasıl bakıyor, arabuluculuk yapabilir mi?", <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cnd85d3g-g4jo>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

26 DW, "Erdoğan: İsrail Gazze'de devlet gibi davranmıyor", <https://www.dw.com/tr/erdo%C4%9Fan-i%CC%87srail-gazgede-devlet-gibi-davranm%C4%B1yor/a-67064515>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

THE MILITARY AND POLITICAL PICTURE FOR ISRAEL

Analyzing the Military Situation

It is no secret that Israel, a security-structured state, subscribes to a strict policy of zero tolerance to security threats due to the wars of 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973. Despite relying on its intelligence community to identify threats and risks in advance and alert the relevant officials, the Israeli state apparatus was caught by surprise when Hamas attacked the country on 7 October 2023.²⁷ That Israel disregarded a tip from the Egyptian government, too, highlighted political neglect alongside the security establishment's shortcomings. In this sense, the Israeli government and security forces appear to have ignored the rule of thumb that there can be no gap in security. Hence the country's failure to detect the various signs of Hamas's imminent attack despite placing its security forces on high alert along the borders with Lebanon and Syria as well as the line between the West Bank and Gaza. It is perfectly an outcome for politicians to pay a price for such severe neglect. Nonetheless, the security forces appear to have momentarily responded to the Hamas offensive as far as they are mobilized.

In the wake of the Hamas offensive, the Israeli government

- Formed a national security cabinet to expedite the decision-making process,
- Deployed security personnel from various parts of Israel to the Hamas-controlled territory,

27 Seth J. Fantzman, "How did Israel fail to stop Hamas' October 7 attack? – comment", Jerusalem Post, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-768059>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

- Prevented the Hamas offensive from affecting additional areas by establishing its military superiority.

Provided that governments tend to conduct military operations in multiple steps, the first stage of Israel's response focused on recovery and pushing back all Hamas operatives. In this context, the Israeli security forces immediately prioritized the security of remaining areas and sought to eliminate the threat of Hamas members. Hence the deployment of special forces, police officers and military units to the affected region was the imminent response, as ought to be. Israel claims to have killed 400 Hamas members on the first day, approximately 600 the following day and some 400 thereafter — approximately 1400 altogether— in residential areas and other parts of Israel.²⁸ Meanwhile, the Israeli government placed the security forces on high alert due to potential threats from Lebanon and the West Bank, cut off East Jerusalem from the West Bank, and took additional precautions in the occupied Golan Heights against the Iranian threat. Furthermore, the country retaliated against the Hamas offensive with widespread and disproportionate air strikes, artillery fire, and rocket fire against Gaza —where civilians have been targeted directly. Despite initially insisting that it targets the homes of Hamas leaders, Israel has been using the kind of munitions that suggest that it does not distinguish between targets causing a massive scale of destruction in Gaza. Mounting pressure on Palestinian civilians and brutal casualties of children, women and disabled, the Israeli Ministry of Defense called for the evacuation of Gaza on 13 October, instead of stopping

28 WION, "Israel-Palestine War LIVE: Israel killed at least 1,000 Gaza infiltrators, reinforcing nationwide", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCFjXNzEnC0>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

the attack, and forced civilians to leave their homes en masse, not to protect the civilians but punish them collectively.²⁹

The second stage of Israel's retaliatory assault involved taking strict security measures nationwide whilst isolating Gaza and mounting pressure on Hamas. In this context, the Israeli authorities announced that they would shoot anyone who approaches the barbed wire, part of the country's physical security system, sealed off points of entry to its territory and targeted the Rafah border crossing, which connects Egypt and Gaza, with air strikes and rockets. Although Israel placed Hamas under pressure by carrying out air strikes against urban centers and denying the Gazans access to electricity, water, food, and medical supplies, such precautions ultimately targeted the civilian population. Israel doubled those measures, which amounted to war crimes, by attacking the Al-Shifa and oncology hospitals as well as convoys of ambulances.

The third stage of Israel's campaign (which targets Hamas specifically as well as the entirety of Gaza) related to rescuing the hostages in Gaza and ensuring that Hamas ceases to pose a threat to Israel. In this context, the country made preparations for a ground offensive, deploying reservists near the border with Gaza and starting intelligence operations. Finally, the Israeli military dropped fliers on Gaza as part of a psychological operation.

The military campaign known as Operation Iron Swords involved the ground incursion following intense airstrikes and ground-to-ground fire. In this regard, the Israeli military conducted small-unit operations followed by 'reconnaissance in force' to measure the capa-

29 Al Jazeera, "Fear, confusion as Israel issues evacuation order for northern Gaza", <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/13/fear-confusion-as-israel-issues-evacuation-order-for-northern-gaza>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

bilities of Hamas. Taking those steps made it possible for Israel to assess Hamas's organization and engagement methods without committing to concrete combat. Indeed, the third ground operation was a hostage rescue mission whereby a small unit entered Gaza and created a corridor that the special forces used to evacuate a hostage. Finally, the ground forces launched a more comprehensive operation to occupy the southern parts of Gaza City and cut off its connection with the area to the south. At the same time, the Israeli army penetrated the city's outskirts from the north and northeast as well as the coastal highway from the northeast to occupy the key terrain. With the ground incursion underway, Israel created yet another corridor in the city center, with a focus on intelligence, and reportedly conducted special forces operations from there. In response to those developments, Hamas carried out limited rocket attacks, primarily targeting tanks with light shoulder-fired weapons to cause Israel to suffer serious casualties. During that period, Israel targeted civilian communities to the north of Gaza en masse and without discrimination, killing or displacing tens of thousands of civilians.

The above-mentioned military operations highlighted a dilemma that Israeli decisionmakers face. Although they needed to limit airstrikes against Gaza to rescue the hostages alive, Israeli officials actually increased the intensity of their aerial campaign – which placed the hostages at risk and reportedly killed more than 33 hostages. Meanwhile, it is necessary to avoid intense airstrikes as well as rocket and artillery attacks in urban warfare. Accordingly, Israel appears to have decided to punish the Palestinians, rather than Hamas, given the high risk of civilian casualties. Indeed, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Galant announced that the Israeli army was no longer subject to any limitations – which made clear the

country's decision.³⁰ In other words, the Israeli decision makers turned a blind eye to the killing of civilians by stating that they did not have to abide by any rules during their operations. Meanwhile, the West, mainly the United States, became complicit in civilian casualties by openly supporting Israel with reference to its supposed right to self-defense.

Keeping in mind that Israel aims to remove Hamas from Gaza and rescue hostages scattered across that region, it is possible to observe that the country has divided its ground operation into long-term stages based on different sectors and sections. Yet official statements from the Israeli government demonstrate that Israel intends to carry out a comprehensive invasion of Gaza. In this sense, there is reason to believe that Israel will expand its operations to the middle and southern sectors upon completing its operations to the north of Gaza. At the same time, the civilian death toll continues to increase as Israel does not distinguish between combatants and non-combatants in Gaza and attacks civilian spaces like hospitals, schools, and refugee camps.

In addition to Israel's aforementioned multi-stage military operation, it would be useful to discuss Washington's deployment of aircraft carriers and delivery of military supplies to the region. Specifically, the U.S. mission relates to promptly providing Israel with any weapons, munitions, or other military supplies it needs. Indeed, the fact that each aircraft carrier contains almost as many planes and vessels as an average country's air and naval forces raised questions about Washington's intentions. It is possible to observe that the United States took certain precautions against

30 Ikrane Imane Kouachi, "Israel is moving to 'a full offensive' against Gaza: Defense minister", AA, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/israel-is-moving-to-a-full-offensive-against-gaza-defense-minister/3014887>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

potential threats like an Iranian intervention or attacks by Hezbollah and other militias in Lebanon against Israel. That decision was arguably informed by concerns rooted in the unity of Arab states in past conflicts. It is worth considering, however, that the United States did not deploy any of its hospital ships for Palestinian civilians among others.

It is possible to conclude that Israel will take more radical precautions in a military sense to target Hamas and other armed groups. In this sense, the objective of removing Hamas from Gaza may be unrealistic yet Israel's ground operation will presumably continue for a long time. Nonetheless, Israel needs to take into consideration various factors related to the scope and duration of its operation. The attitude of armed militias around Israel, Iran's potential initiatives from behind the curtain, and the backlash against Israel by societies in Israel and Western countries over civilian casualties appear to be the only forces that could stop Israel. Finally, the fragmentation and polarization of Israeli politics, coupled with the Israeli population's attitude toward Benjamin Netanyahu and conservative trends, shall play a defining role.

Analyzing the Political Situation

Standing on one's own feet represents the essence of Israel's state policy. That is why the country's relations with others firmly rest on what Israel stands to gain. As a Middle Eastern country, Israel's isolation could cause more harm than good politically and economically. Hence the most recent 'normalization' enabled Israel to interact with other countries in the region without making any concessions regarding the Palestinian issue. Normalization with Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates, in particular, promised to create significant opportunities for the Israeli economy. Meanwhile, the possibility of

normalization with Saudi Arabia came up during indirect talks in September and October whereby Israel would comply with the demand of having nuclear technology to the Kingdom. Indeed, an Israeli minister was reportedly scheduled to visit Saudi Arabia prior to the Hamas attack.³¹ Having established a clear framework for energy cooperation with Egypt and Jordan, Israel has reportedly reached an agreement with Lebanon regarding the delimitation of maritime jurisdictions. However, Israel did not complete the normalization process with Lebanon, despite reaching a partial agreement, due to the latter's request for various concessions regarding their land border.³² Specifically, Hezbollah's presence in Lebanon and Iran's strong influence over that country represented major limitations. A closer look at Syria reveals that the chaotic situation since 2011, along with the Iranian military presence in that country and the question of the annexation of the Golan Heights, was enough to keep Israel's relations with the country quite frozen and hostile. Moreover, the Syrian government's attacks on the Idlib province, coinciding the days after Oct. 7th offer some relief to Israel even though Iran's activities in the region remain a cause for concern.

As U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken pledged to support Israel unconditionally and infinitely on 12 October, the country enjoys certain privileges in its dealings with countries and armed non-state actors that it considers a source of concern. In the wake of the Oct. 7 attack, Washington increased its military activities and directly assumed responsibility for keeping Israel safe. In this context, the United States became involved in

31 Kristian C. Ulrichsen, "Saudi-Israeli Normalization and the Hamas Attack", <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/saudi-israeli-normalization-and-the-hamas-attack/>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

32 Al Monitor, "US envoy urges Lebanon, Israel to agree land border", <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/08/us-envoy-urges-lebanon-israel-agree-land-border#ixzz8G1VhsjTe>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

anti-Hamas operations indirectly. There is reason to believe that Washington will continue to take necessary measures covertly to not provoke any armed groups in that part of the world and prevent attacks against American interests elsewhere.

Any analysis of Russia's attitude toward the situation, in turn, must acknowledge that Moscow sees the question of Palestine as an opportunity to mount pressure on the United States after the chaos that erupted in Syria and the Ukraine war, as mentioned above. In this sense, Russian President Vladimir Putin has been leveling accusations against the United States and expressing support for the Palestinian cause. Having announced that Russia would offer direct support to Palestine in case of an American intervention, the Russian leader positioned himself to retaliate against Washington's ongoing support for the Ukrainians.³³ In the meantime, Russia increasingly believes that Ukraine no longer represents a priority for the international community and monitors the unfolding situation with pleasure. Yet Moscow's reaction to Israeli airstrikes against pro-Iranian militiamen and the Assad regime has been limited. It was noteworthy that Russia, which has been in charge of Syria's air defenses, did not get directly involved in responding to the air strikes on Syria's infrastructure and adopted a passive stance toward those developments.

Another major consideration could be the intention of radical groups, challenging Israeli and American interests globally. That scenario would generate sympathy and support for the Palestinian cause and fuel a religious and civilizational polarization, that already exists. Indeed, Benjamin Netanyahu described his government's attacks on Gaza with reference to religious war in an attempt to mobilize Western support. Even-

tually, the continuity of the Israeli aggression on Palestinians will justify the acts of radical organizations for further irregular conflicts.

As more and more Palestinian civilians lose their lives, the political stance of Arab and Muslim states emerges as a key factor. Yet the Arab world does not seem to have adopted a decisive and clear stance, as witnessed during and after the Riyadh Summit. Despite their frustration over Hamas's Oct. 7 operation, the Gulf states gradually shifted their position due to the massacre of Palestinian civilians yet refrained from delivering a political response.

It is possible to observe that the political attitudes of the United States and Europe deeply contradict each other. Whereas the European Left support the Palestinian cause and mount pressure on their governments, they make a distinction between Palestine and Hamas due to the latter's association with the Muslim Brotherhood. It goes without saying, however, that European governments clearly support Israel. Having sought U.S. guarantees as a priority against a potential and actual Russian threat following the Ukraine war, the Europeans merely mentioned the civilian casualties in Palestine without taking any concrete steps politically. Meanwhile, European societies have been mobilizing against the civilian casualties to urge their governments to walk back their pro-Israel comments. The situation in the United States is no different. Despite supporting Israel unconditionally, the Democrats seem divided over Palestine. Indeed, Senator Rashida Tlaib, a politician of Palestinian origin, was recently censured in a 234-188 vote – with 22 Democrats voting against Tlaib and two Republicans supporting her.³⁴ In this sense,

33 Mansur Mirovalev, "Not pro-Israeli': Decoding Putin's muted response to Hamas attacks", <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/12/russia-israel-hamas>, Accessed: 13 October 2023.

34 Clare Foran, Melanie Zanon, Annie Grayer, Morgan Rimmer, "House passes resolution to censure Tlaib over Israel comments", 8 November 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/07/politics/rashida-tlaib-censure-vote/index.html>, Accessed: 9 November 2023.

the U.S. administration continues to support Israel conditionally yet Congress and the American people remain divided over the Palestinian question. It is particularly noteworthy that President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who initially made pro-Israel remarks, have been calling for a humanitarian 'pause' over the increasing number of civilian deaths. Those developments suggest that the complicated and contradictory political setting in Europe and the United States could work against Israel as time passes and social pressures increase.

Keeping in mind that the United Nations Security Council has failed to pass a resolution regarding a ceasefire in Palestine, it is possible to conclude that the question at hand has been treated with an eye on vested interests and prejudices.

CONCLUSION

The Oct. 7th destabilized the Middle East anew and created the impression that the region entered a new era. Indeed, there is reason to believe that 'states and armed non-state actors' shall engage in such sort of escalation among them in the wake of what Israel and the United States have described as Israel's 9/11. Taking into consideration the course of the Israeli aggression, it is possible to conclude that Israel has launched a long-term effort to eradicate the Palestinians and intends to marginalize Hamas through coercion rather than pursuing a smart diplomatic agreement. It would seem that this type of political and military strategy could cause armed non-state actors to react, increasingly making low-intensity conflicts a global norm.

Despite having declared "war" on Hamas, Israel refuses to accept that it must abide by the rules of war. That tendency sets a precedent for state actors that will fight armed non-state actors

in the future. In this sense, the customs regarding how states should go to war (*jus ad bellum*) and how they should conduct it (*jus in bello*) have come under greater scrutiny.

Some Israeli politicians talk about nuclear weapons, arming the civilian population and religious terms like the Prophecy of Isaiah have a negative impact on the intellectual basis of the state of conflict. This political tendency, which normalizes war and bloodshed, has already caused "radical" Israelis to legitimize attacking Palestinian civilians, not relevant to any Hamas act. Indeed, there has been an uptick in settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank as well as related deaths. Such a picture encourages civil society to discuss if there is a 'genocide' at the hands of Israel.

As human suffering becomes more and more visible over time, long-term violent conflicts could take place across the world – not just in Israel and Palestine. Considering that the countries in the region, from which Palestine expects some support, remain preoccupied with their domestic issues, Hamas would probably launch an asymmetrical campaign in the long term – even if it were to resist. Such a development would not only aggravate the humanitarian disaster in Palestine but also encourage irregular attacks against Israeli and American interests worldwide, as could be witnessed through the hijacked vessel on Nov 20th Houssies of Yemen at the mouth of the Red Sea. The aforementioned military process, which would have no winner in a military sense, is bound to make Israel the only loser in the long term whilst Palestinians will continue to suffer. Meanwhile, the idea that third parties can wait and see what happens before making an actual decision would only serve to extend the dispute and make it harder to crack the situation.

In the wake of the Oct. 7 attacks, all countries and peoples of the Middle East, including Israel, need to find a diplomatic and civilized solution to the demands of Palestinians to ensure their survival in a trusting and stable climate. For this purpose, it is necessary to take the following proposals in consideration:

- A civilizational fight will bring long-term suffering. All have the responsibility to prevent it. Gaza will be the iconic symbol of such a 'great' division.
- There is a conflict environment in which conventional-unconventional, regular-irregular, symmetric-asymmetric, proxy-hybrid, and soft-hard conflict options present complex and not repairable consequences. Gaza ignites a new wave of conflict which is state versus nonstate actors with no norms and humanitarian limitations. The Israeli decision to declare war on Hamas, with a replica of 9/11, shook the customary norms on how to start and proceed a conflict. This is a danger of eradicating centuries-old 'just war' understanding confusing the applicable norms. The question, then, is if Israel will apply the rules on prisoners of war to Hamas members after the declaration of war.
- The wisdom lost its weight in line with the 'reason of peace' while negative emotions replaced the wisdom specifically in the biased minds. That belief provoked and normalized the brutality. States are bound to comply with internal and international norms that make them distinct from the 'organizations'. Unfortunately, Israel lost the wisdom in responding the Oct. 7th. Had Israel stopped at the fences of Gaza after clearing the rear territories, there could have been great support for Israel in marginalizing and diminishing Hamas.
- The Western community has been divided in terms of addressing the Palestinian issue. The Arab states are passive in terms of managing the current developments while not interested in resolving the long-lasting incompatibility. The USA is unconditionally backing Israel for the sake of credibility in the eyes of the communities. This complicated picture led us to conclude two streams. The first is that the state actors are careful to distinguish Hamas and the Palestinian cause. The second is the polarization in the communities of the West since communities demand a fair solution to the Palestinian question while their state leaders favor an Israeli-centric resolution. On the other hand, this pattern is in vogue if the polarization of state leaders and their communities may shift the voter's behaviors due to rising Islamophobia and extremism.
- There is a confusion of concepts. The ceasefire has become a 'pause' although there must be a ceasefire to prevent human suffering. Invention of new 'not meaningful' words will push all to question the norms.
- The international society should not miss the essence of the problem by identifying the problem realistically and reinstating a political process. The creation of a geographically-integrated Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital is the key to long-term stability.
- "The idea that justice exists only among equals" is a wrong hypothesis. Palestinians deserve a just peace and prosperity in their own country.
- Israel and the USA should expect a further wave of radicalization after the Iraq and Afghanistan experiences. The loss of civil-

ian lives will be a point of justification for probable attacks to the U.S. and Israeli interests globally.

- An international peace conference would scrutinize the probable courses to search

for the 'best' way of building a 'peace deal' for Palestine. The inclusiveness and fairness must be the base of any scholarly and political attempt to resolve this issue. Israel cannot live with continuous 'fear'.

ISRAEL'S ATTACKS ON GAZA

A MILITARY AND POLITICAL ASSESSMENT

MURAT ASLAN

SETA | ANALYSIS

The Oct 7th and afterward have caused a divided globe on how to address the contradictions of new sorts. The conceptualizations of human and humanitarian security of the 1990s have leveled down. Societal security is at the edge of survival shading over the scholarly perspectives of the 1980s. The remaining fact after the Oct 7th is that the laws and norms are left aside and diplomacy has lost its sacred spirit. The devastation to civilians increased the weight of negative emotions and wisdom is not the pattern anymore. In this sense, this analysis scrutinizes 'what happened' and 'probable outcomes' on and after Oct. 7th with an objective military and political assessment of Hamas and Israeli preoccupations. The analysis attempts to conclude meta-outcomes if this conflict continues as it is.

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