

A Dangerous New Phase in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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James Ryan

On October 7, members of the military wing of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad launched a surprise attack on civilian and military targets in southern Israel. The scope and scale of the attack was shocking and brutal in equal measure—more than 1,400 Israeli civilians were murdered in often grotesque fashion, and more than 150 were taken hostage, a handful of them American citizens. The attack represents the largest mass murder of Jews since the Holocaust and called immediately to mind the events of the Yom Kippur War of 1973, nearly fifty years ago to the day.

The response of the Israeli military has been overwhelming thus far. In the six days since the attack, a truly shocking number of bombs—6,000—have fallen over Gaza. This is more than the United States dropped on the Syrian city of Raqqa during its months-long siege campaign against the Islamic State, and as many as fell on the entire country of Afghanistan in any single year of that conflict. A ground invasion by the Israeli Defense Forces appears to be imminent at the time of this publication. It is impossible to overstate the gravity and grotesque nature of this new turn in this century-old conflict.

At FPRI, we are working with our senior fellows and contributors to provide information and analysis of the situation that is true to our mission of a non-partisan, clear-eyed understanding of regional and global politics. The first in a series of webinars providing on-

the-ground perspective and can be viewed on [YouTube](#). Below, we have asked a group of our experts for initial reflections on different aspects of the first week of this new phase of the conflict. Please stay with us for future events and analysis across our platforms.

Sam Helfont

Israelis are overhauling their policies and strategies to consider not only more intense strikes against Hamas, but also a different type of war than we have seen Israel wage. Yet, despite tremendous Israeli will for an overwhelming military operation, there are no good strategic options.

Carl von Clausewitz understood that “war can be of two kinds.” The first is when one side attempts “to overthrow the enemy—to render him politically helpless or militarily impotent.” Otherwise known as war for an unlimited objective, or unlimited war. The second is a “limited” war that creates favorable conditions for “bargaining at the peace negotiations.” The strategies required for limited and unlimited war are different. A limited war can be won by wearing down an adversary’s political will. This rarely works in unlimited wars, where victory demands the physical defeat of the enemy. Those distinctions affect all aspects of the conflict.

Israel has fought several limited wars against Hamas. The logic of those wars was to foster deterrence by targeting Hamas’s will to fight. Israelis thought they could manage the conflict. Some on the Israeli political right even believed that Hamas was a useful adversary because it kept the Palestinians divided and eased pressure on Israel to make political concessions.

The Israeli government’s limited war policies were rooted in two assumptions. First, their superior intelligence and security capabilities offered sufficient protection. That proved incorrect. The second assumption deals with the nature of Hamas. In recent decades, much of the international community has tried to convince Israel that the genocidal anti-Semitism in Hamas’s charter and rhetoric was not representative of the organization; that Hamas had moderated its will and could keep the peace, or at least be deterred. Israelis debated these issues among themselves. It seems that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accepted some form of this assumption prior to last weekend. But, in the wake of last weekend’s attacks, arguments will carry little weight amongst Israelis. In recent memory, the only group to approximate Hamas’s inhumane tactics was the Islamic State (ISIS). The world was unwilling to live with the scourge of ISIS, and most Israelis have adopted a similar stance towards Hamas.

With its previous assumptions shattered, Israel’s policy options are fairly narrow: overthrow Hamas, or render it impotent. However, no good military strategy exists to achieve these objectives. More intense versions of the strategies Israel employed in its limited wars against Hamas are unlikely to succeed in an unlimited war. Mass casualties are unlikely to lead Hamas to surrender. A shift to unlimited war will likely necessitate a ground campaign to take

control of Gaza. This may produce short-term results, but unlike ISIS, Hamas enjoys significant support among the population. To create lasting effects, the invasion would probably become a protracted occupation. That would be extremely costly for Israel in terms of both life and treasure. An unmanageable insurgency in Gaza is something even far-right governments in Israel have feared since Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005.

As such, Israeli leaders face a dilemma. No good strategy exists to achieve the only politically acceptable objective.

Carol Rollie Flynn

Much has been said about Israel's failure to detect the large-scale Hamas attack on Israel last weekend, with many characterizing it as a massive intelligence failure. The conventional view is that Israel's intelligence services are highly capable, both in terms of their human source networks and sophisticated technical capabilities, which are augmented by its closest allies, including the United States. That the Israelis could have missed this attack was astounding to many observers.

The reasons for this intelligence failure are not yet known. However, one theory is that the Israelis simply did not believe that Hamas would have had the inclination or the capability to mount an attack of this magnitude, despite reports that Hamas had constructed a mock Israeli village on their side of the border and had been conducting training exercises simulating an attack. There have also been reports that the Egyptians warned the Israelis three days prior to the assault that "something big" was coming, sourced to unnamed Egyptian sources and public comments by Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee Michael McCaul. The Israelis either underestimated Hamas's capabilities and/or did not believe Hamas intended to launch an attack.

There is also a distinct possibility that the Israelis relied too heavily on technically acquired intelligence. The Israelis have long been thought to have excellent human source networks. However, in this case, they either lacked adequate human intelligence reporting or their sources were unreliable, possibly controlled by Hamas, and/or feeding them disinformation. It is also possible that the Israelis had reliable sources, but they simply did not believe what their sources were telling them.

Some Israeli commentators have also observed that the relationship between Israel and the residents of the Gaza Strip had become regularized, with many Gazan day laborers regularly crossing the border to work in Israel. Perhaps it did not seem logical to the Israelis that the Gazans would put their economic security at risk by mounting an attack. It is also possible that an important element of the Hamas deception was to persuade the Israelis that Gazans favored peace and prosperity over Hamas' unrealized political aims.

This would not be the first time that a country with sophisticated intelligence capabilities failed to respond to threat reporting. For instance, the United States took little or no preemptive action in response to CIA assessments during the summer of 2001 of a spike in al-Qaeda activity, including an August 2001 Presidential Daily Brief (PDB) that cited preparations for an attack against the United States that could be imminent. Did Israel in fact detect indicators that something was afoot, but underestimate Hamas' intent or, in the parlance of post-9/11 assessments, fail to "connect the dots?"

In fact, Hamas clearly did have the intention and the capabilities to launch a significant attack. Their vehicles and materiel were decidedly low-tech; they crossed the border in bulldozers, motorbikes, small gliders, and on foot. This was, nonetheless, a highly sophisticated operation. Hamas' operational security was particularly noteworthy, and they apparently avoided the use of cellphones, email, and other technical communications equipment because, if they had, the Israelis would have intercepted it, realized that an attack was being planned, and disrupted it.

It is likely that only a small number of personnel within the Hamas leadership would have been aware in advance of the full details of the plan and that the individual cells would have been given specific details only shortly before the attack. However, with hundreds of Hamas fighters participating in the cross-border operation, it is remarkable that at least some details about the attack did not leak to the Israelis. Even if there was compartmentalization and each Hamas cell wasn't aware of other cells, the individual cells would had to have known at least some common details a few hours or days before the attack was launched, especially if the leadership was using relatively slow word-of-mouth to spread the final launch details. It would also have been necessary for each Hamas cell to do some advance prep to get the gliders, bulldozers, boats, and weapons in place and ready to go. If not, the attack could not have been simultaneous.

There remains much uncertainty about how Hamas could pull off such a large invasion and how the Israelis could have missed it. What is certain, however, is that the world's military institutes and war colleges for years to come will study this episode to discern what if anything the Israelis could have done differently and why and how a small, ragtag force like Hamas could pull off this stunning operation.

Joshua Krasna

For Israel, October 7 is now a day that will figure in the imagination like December 7 does for Americans. This Simhat Torah holiday fell one day and fifty years after the surprise attack on Israel on Yom Kippur in 1973, until now the worst intelligence and policy failure in Israel's history, and its blackest day. Over 200 soldiers died the first day of that war and over 2,000 afterward. The present stage of the conflict has already been coined as Israel's "second Yom Kippur War." The strategic and tactical surprise, the confusion and disarray in the first hours, and the horrific cost all echo 1973. But in many ways, this October was probably worse.

First, Israel already had one Yom Kippur War. For intelligence professionals and scholars the world over, it is an ultimate case study. Underestimating your opponents; the inability to penetrate their inner motivations, and thus, their rationale; overdependence on technical collection means; and more. It should not have happened then: it certainly should not have happened now. Another lesson from 1973: While many warnings are given, and many lives are saved, good intelligence is not a fail-safe. Preparation and contingency planning must be resilient enough to function without early warning.

Second, that surprise, and the war that followed, was on distant borders, in the Golan and the Sinai, with the cost paid by soldiers. In this war in 2023, the cost of surprise was paid overwhelmingly by civilian noncombatants. It was accompanied by massive long-distance rocket attacks on Israeli cities, a newer kind of threat. The first act of this war was fought in Israelis' homes and backyards. Like the first Yom Kippur War, it took too much time, and a fearless and selfless band of brothers (and sisters), to jump in and hold the line until help finally came.

In 1973, Israel absorbed the initial blow, reeled, shook itself, and came back stronger. Ineffective commanders were replaced or sidelined, units and new tactics were constituted on the fly. Then, as now, Israel's staunchest ally, the United States, provided what was needed to recover and win. The citizen army, which is the Israel Defense Force's empowering exoskeleton, came together, despite logistical and command disarray. As Uri Bar Yosef, a scholar of that war, noted, it was the quickest recovery in military history. That war ended with the enemy driven from Israel's territory and the Israel Defense Force deep inside its own. The enemy's gains in the field—though not necessarily their intangible ones—had been wiped out. That is, of course, much harder when your enemy is not a state.

That October started an earthquake in Israeli politics and society. The Agranat Commission of Inquiry held months of hearings. It concentrated its findings on the operational and military command level, many of whom left service in ignominy. Prime Minister Golda Meir resigned. In 1977, the public punished the ruling elite for the debacle: the Labor Party, which ruled for the state's first twenty-nine years, was sent to opposition, and is now nearly extinct. This October surprise will also lead to a shakeup in political and military leadership and perhaps more widely in the politics of Israel. But that will only come the day after.

Sean Yom

The latest war between Hamas and Israel has unleashed carnage. On October 7, more Israeli civilians died than during the entire Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000–2005). Since that day, many more Palestinians have died, including a thousand Hamas militants killed by Israeli forces and thousands more civilians. As the Israeli military relentlessly bombards Gaza—now cut off from its electricity, medical supplies, and food—the United Nations has warned of a humanitarian disaster for its more than two million residents.

The consequences of the conflict will echo long after the last battle is won. Most importantly, the war signals that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has taken a macabre turn. Beforehand, Israel believed it could guarantee its national security despite rejecting the two-state solution promised by the Oslo peace process. Its one-state strategy meant sealing off the Palestinians of Gaza, and the Hamas government that ruled them, behind security barriers. On the West Bank, it required a feckless partnership with a corrupt Palestinian Authority to control its restive Palestinian populace, while allowing Israeli settlers to annex more land. Externally, it upgraded its regional standing by striking Arab peace deals through the Abraham Accords, with the prospect of normalizing ties with even Saudi Arabia on the horizon. Iran and its proxy actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas would always call for Israel's destruction; however, Israeli leaders presumed their superior military and the aegis of American support would protect them.

Such an approach is no longer tenable. The warning signs were there for more than a decade, given that Hamas and the Israeli military have exchanged violent volleys through tit-for-tat assaults, while frequent conflict across the West Bank and Jerusalem erupted between Palestinian residents and Israeli settlers. Yet the latest ghastly events show that so long as Palestinians feel they have little hope for a sovereign state of their own, the possibility of brazen terrorism will persist. Thus, the deepening war will bring little long-term relief. Hamas will see its military infrastructure destroyed, but the destruction wrought upon Gaza will traumatize another generation of Palestinians. West Bank Palestinians remain just as engaged, given the fecklessness of the Palestinian Authority and ever-encroaching Israeli settlements. The prospects of armed resistance and uprisings will persist.

Regional stakeholders have taken varying positions, signaling an overall stance of caution. While Israel's Arab allies like Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates have rebuked the siege of Gaza on humanitarian grounds, none are willing to abrogate diplomatic and trade relations with Israel to convey their displeasure. Their rulers recognize the anti-Israeli sentiments of their societies, but they also abhor Hamas and its radical Islamist ideology; they also would face American backlash should they play both sides. Saudi Arabia has more flexibility given that Saudi-Israeli normalization talks were still underway, but the latest violence has proven so jarring that its leadership spoke with Iran's president in a symbolic act of pro-Palestinian solidarity. This will mean that any Saudi-Israeli treaty will be delayed indefinitely, but not necessarily foreclosed. If there is any silver lining, it is that neither Iran nor its client Hezbollah have acceded to Hamas' calls to attack Israel. Both understand that doing so would mark escalation so grave that it could bring about direct US intervention.

Leon Hadar

Two weeks ago, much of the talk in Washington focused on negotiations to normalize Israeli-Saudi ties in return for a US-Saudi defense treaty. That mega-deal was seen as a major US diplomatic coup and a geostrategic game changer.

It could have created a pro-American Middle Eastern military and economic bloc powered by the energy resources of the Persian Gulf and Israel's high-tech industries and scientific centers, the most effective way to respond to threats posed by Iran and its regional satellites.

But in the aftermath of Saturday's surprise attack by Hamas, it is hard to imagine Saudi-Israeli peace talks making any progress, which suggests that it was launched to disrupt the ongoing normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel under the leadership of Washington.

From a geopolitical perspective, under a Saudi-Israeli agreement, the power balance in the region between Iran and Saudi Arabia would have shifted significantly in favor of Saudi Arabia and Israel and their American patron.

In addition to a formal security treaty with the United States, the Saudis would have had access to US nuclear technology, including enrichment of uranium, making it possible for the Saudis to close in on the current Iranian advantage of being close to possessing nuclear bombs.

Under present conditions, with the prospect of a bloody incursion into Gaza by the Israeli Defense Force, the conventional wisdom is now that it is unthinkable for Saudi Arabia to proceed with normalization of relations with Israel. This could amount to a serious blow to the foreign policy of the Biden administration.

Cui bono? Iran.

While Israel and the United States have not offered proof of Iranian involvement in the immediate runup to the attack, Hamas' status as a proxy for Iran is not disputable. Hamas has called on Iran and Hezbollah to attack Israel, but so far they have declined the call.

By disrupting the US-brokered talks to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel that Iran saw as threatening, the attack serves Iran's interest in torpedoing the American strategy of creating a chain of American allies linking three key choke points of global trade—the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Bab-el-Mandeb connecting the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea.

In a way, what is emerging now in the Middle East is a new and very fragile balance of power under which the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia are now facing an Iran-led bloc that includes Hamas and Hezbollah.

The concern is that if Israel launches a ground attack into the Gaza Strip, Iran could order Hezbollah to open a new front in the war with Israel in the north that could eventually ignite a regional war involving Israel and Iran.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced Sunday that he has ordered American military ships, including an aircraft carrier and additional aircraft, to move closer to the eastern Mediterranean, sending a clear warning to Iran not to take steps that could lead to a multi-front war with Israel.

The Iranians may assume that, distracted by the war in Ukraine and the military challenge China poses to in East Asia, the Americans would lack the resources and the political will for a new military intervention in the Middle East.

The Iranians may decide to test this assumption and order their Hezbollah proxy to attack Israel just as it is trying to destroy Hamas' infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, placing Israel under enormous pressure, especially if the Lebanese-Shiite group decided to attack civilian centers inside Israel, including Tel Aviv.

To avert this dangerous scenario, the United States and its European allies should make it clear that they would not allow Iran to intervene in the war in the Levant, and demand that it tame its Hezbollah allies.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, a non-partisan organization that seeks to publish well-argued, policy-oriented articles on American foreign policy and national security priorities.

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