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Issue Brief

Gaza War and the Risk of Major Regional Escalation

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February 02, 2024

S*ummary*

In the aftermath of the most horrific attacks against the Jewish people since the Holocaust, as Israeli PM Netanyahu himself characterised the 7 October 2023 terrorist attacks, Israel launched a blistering campaign to annihilate the Hamas threat. Israel's response has in turn raised fears of a major regional war breaking out across many fronts, involving various state and non-state actors.

Introduction

The recent International Court of Justice (ICJ) interim ruling on possible genocide in Gaza came as a mixed bag for both the contending sides—Israel and Palestinians—who are still heavily engaged in a war that has been gradually expanding across other West Asian theatres in its fourth month. While Israel will be relieved that the ICJ fell short of making a call for a ceasefire,¹ it would be upset by the legal and moral implications of the court’s assertion that there was sufficient ground for a genocide case to be pursued and over its insistence that Israel address the mounting humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

For his part, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has already rejected the court case as “outrageous”, a “vile attempt” to deny Israel the right to defend itself, and an instance of “discrimination against the Jewish state”.² Conversely, Palestinians may not have got the ruling in favour of an immediate ceasefire per se, but the verdict may help their demand for prisoner exchange and thereby a humanitarian ceasefire.

7 October Attacks: ‘Most Horrific Attack against Jews since Holocaust’

The present conflict erupted almost four months ago in the early morning hours of 7 October 2023. Already deemed as “the bloodiest single day” in modern Israeli history,³ it began with thousands of armed Hamas terrorists launching several incursions from Gaza into Israel through the air (using hang gliders), land and sea. They tore down large parts of the Gaza security fence (in about 30 places) using tractors⁴, RPGs and explosives, as well as fired about 5,000 rockets into Israel.

They even disabled Israel’s robotic machine guns and took control of major Israeli motorways, penetrating as deep as 25 km into Israeli territory.⁵ Throughout this early morning foray, Hamas militants faced little to no resistance from a mostly absent Israeli border force. Explosions were heard across the country—from Ashkelon to Tel Aviv and even as far as Jerusalem. Hamas forces even managed to kill a total of 1,139 Israelis and foreign nationals,⁶ including 764 civilians and

¹ Jeremy Sharon, [“ICJ Tells Israel to ‘Prevent Genocide’ in Gaza, Rejects Ordering Immediate Ceasefire”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 26 January 2024.

² Shrishti Jha, [“Netanyahu Calls World Court Order in Genocide Case Against Israel ‘Outrageous’”](#), *India Today*, 26 January 2024.

³ Gabriel Levin, [“How Does Israel’s Last Invasion of Gaza Compare to Now?”](#), *Voice of America*, 17 October 2024.

⁴ Shira Silkoff, [“Gaza Fence Was Not Designed to Prevent Mass Assault On Its Own, Builder Said in 2018”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 19 October 2023.

⁵ Talmiz Ahmad, [“How Israel-Hamas War Will Change West Asia’s Political Landscape”](#), *Frontline*, 10 October 2023.

⁶ [“Israel Social Security Data Reveals True Picture of Oct 7 Deaths”](#), *France 24*, 15 December 2023.

audaciously took away 248 Israeli hostages back to Gaza. According to a *New York Times* report, Israeli Army was simply “undermanned” and “out of position” during the Hamas 7 October attacks.⁷ In the words of Prime Minister Netanyahu, “Hamas perpetrated the most horrific atrocities against the Jewish people since the Holocaust and advanced to repeat these atrocities again and again and again”.⁸

Later that day, Hamas forces conducted massacres at several kibbutzim where Israeli civilians resided and at an outdoor dance music festival. Over 260 innocent attendees were killed at the psychedelic trance open-air Supernova Sukket Gathering music festival near the Reim kibbutz.⁹ It became the deadliest concert attack ever and the worst Israeli civilian massacre in its history.

This was followed by reports on 12 October 2023 that up to 40 babies were slaughtered by Hamas. Even US President Joe Biden expressed horror at the beheading of children by Hamas. However, later a White House spokesperson clarified that US officials and the president could not confirm such reports independently.¹⁰ For its part, Hamas has plainly rejected all charges of rape and children’s beheadings.

Hamas Strike Out of the Fear of ‘Abraham Accords’

In addition to the audacity and savagery of the attacks by Hamas, Israel was taken unawares by the level of sophistication, preparation and coordination shown by Hamas in conducting the 7 October 2023 attacks, which it calls ‘Al Aqsa Flood’ (*Toofan Al Aqsa*).¹¹ Although Hamas declared in its 1988 charter that “there is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad”¹² for the past 16 years, Hamas never grew as a full-fledged, well-trained and well-equipped militia—like Hezbollah or ISIS have been—and so it was never taken as an existential threat by Israel the way it is seen today. Thus, the staging of the 7 October multi-pronged attacks, which we now hear might have taken up to two years of planning and training, took Israel and global security experts by complete surprise.¹³

⁷ [“Where Was the Israel Military When Hamas Attacked”](#), *The New York Times*, 3 January 2024.

⁸ [“Israeli PM Netanyahu Dismisses Genocide Charges Against Israel, Calling It Outrageous”](#), *The Times of India*, 27 January 2023.

⁹ David Browne, Nancy Dillon and Kory Grow, [“They Wanted to Dance in Peace and they got Slaughtered”](#), *Rolling Stone*, 15 October, 2023.

¹⁰ Peter Alexander, Summer Concepcion and Megan Lebowitz, [“White House Clarifies Biden's Claim He Saw Photos of Terrorists Beheading Children in Israel-Hamas War”](#), *NBC News*, 11 October 2023.

¹¹ Mahesh Sachdeva, [“Toofan Al-Aqsa Jolts West Asian Geostrategic Architecture”](#), *The Hindu*, 9 October 2023.

¹² and Devorah Margolin, [“An Interview with Devorah Margolin on Hamas”](#), International Centre for Counter Terrorism, 8 November 2023.

¹³ Gloria Sicilia Lozano, [“Guard Down: Deconstructing the 7 October Policy, Defence and Intelligence Failure”](#), Real Instituto Alcano, 16 November 2023.

Hamas officials have since revealed several objectives behind their 7 October 2023 attacks.¹⁴ Some of them are:

- a) *Avenging settler violence* in West Bank and Jerusalem that has grown over the last two years became a trigger for the terror attacks. About 247 Palestinians have reportedly been killed in West Bank by Israelis in 2022, and about 320 have died since 7 October 2023;
- b) Taking major action against repeated and increasing clashes in the *Al-Aqsa mosque* compound;
- c) *Reversing Arab–Israeli normalisation* (particularly under Abraham Accords) that in recent years extinguished from public view the Palestinian cause as Arab leaders lined up to forge trade, even political ties with Israel;
- d) Among other objectives, Hamas leadership said it wanted to get more Israeli hostages so as to then secure the *release of Palestinian prisoners* languishing in Israeli jails for a long time.

Israel’s Bombardment: ‘More Destructive than Dresden!’

Hamas’ terrorist attacks drew massive and unprecedented punitive response from Israeli forces. Without condoning the ensuing violence, it must be understood here that Israel cannot survive in a hostile neighbourhood unless it maintains unquestionable and unassailable military superiority over its adversaries at all times. Israel’s military actions can also not be judged as per the military standards of other states, least of all Western secular democracies, because Israel was founded as a safe haven and homeland for the Jewish people, which have over the centuries suffered some of the most heinous and systematic genocides in human history, including the Holocaust from 1941–45 during World War II.

Therefore, the State of Israel was established to provide the persecuted community vital protection and an existential security and this issue thus gains primacy over the relative freedoms and rights of other communities in the vicinity that are hostile towards it. If Israel fails in providing its Jewish citizenry effective security, then the relatively small-sized state faces an immediate existential threat.

Thus, Hamas’ unprecedented terrorist attack unleashed Israel’s immediate punitive reaction—a relentless bombardment of Gaza that has over the months now destroyed about 70 per cent of the buildings in the besieged Palestinian enclave, according to the Government Media Office in Gaza. After the first two months itself, the Israeli offensive is said to have destroyed more than the razing of Syria’s Aleppo between 2012 and 2016, Ukraine’s Mariupol, or, proportionally, the Allied bombing of

¹⁴ Joe Macaron, [“Why Did Hamas Attack Now and What is Next?”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 11 October 2023.

Germany in World War II.¹⁵ It reportedly killed more civilians than the United States-led coalition did in its three-year campaign against the ISIS group.¹⁶

Between 1942 and 1945, the Allies attacked 51 major German cities and towns, destroying about 40–50 per cent of their urban areas. Robert Pape, a political scientist at the University of Chicago told *Financial Times*:

“Dresden, Hamburg, Cologne—some of the world’s heaviest-ever bombings are remembered by their places names ... Gaza will also go down as a place name denoting one of the heaviest conventional bombing campaigns.”¹⁷

Similarly, US Senator Bernie Sanders has said:

“If I used the word Dresden, Germany, to you, you think about the horrific destruction during World War II of the city. What is going on in Gaza now in three months is worse than what took place in Dresden over a two-year period. This is a catastrophe ...”¹⁸

The campaign group Amnesty International has also criticised Israel’s use of heavy munitions, claiming it used earth-shaking 2,000lb GBU-31 bombs, which are four times bigger than the 500lb bombs that were typically the largest ordnance used by allied forces in the battle for the Iraqi city of Mosul a decade ago. Thus, as of 22 January, over 26,000 people (25,105 Palestinian and 1,410 Israeli) have been killed in the Israel– Hamas war, including 83 journalists (76 Palestinian, 4 Israeli and 3 Lebanese) and over 136 UNRWA aid workers.

In an interview to *The Wall Street Journal*, PM Netanyahu defended the campaign saying that Israel’s actions and objectives are justified in that they seek to destroy Hamas, demilitarise Gaza and deradicalise the whole of Palestinian society.¹⁹

Israel’s Ground Offensive in Gaza

Almost a week after the initial attack on Israel, on 13 October, the IDF issued an evacuation order for Palestinian communities north of the Wadi Gaza, giving them 24 hours to leave for the south of the country. Then on 27 October, the IDF launched

¹⁵ Julia Frankel, [“Israel’s Military Campaign in Gaza Seen As Among the Most Destructive in Recent History, Experts Say”](#), Associated Press, 12 January 2024.

¹⁶ [“Gaza Daily Deaths Exceed All Other Major Conflicts in 21st Century: Oxfam”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 11 January 2024.

¹⁷ John Paul Rathbone, [“Military Briefing: The Israeli Bombs Raining on Gaza”](#), *Financial Times*, 6 December 2023.

¹⁸ Lauren Sforza, [“Sanders Says Gaza ‘Is Worse Than’ What Happened in Dresden During WWII”](#), *The Hill*, 14 January 2024.

¹⁹ [“Benjamin Netanyahu: Our Three Prerequisites for Peace”](#), *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 December 2023.

its long expected large-scale ground offensive into northern Gaza, leading to bloody urban warfare between Hamas and IDF with civilians caught in the crossfire.

After international alarm, a Qatari-brokered humanitarian pause began on 24 November, as active fighting in the Gaza Strip ceased and some of the Israeli and foreign hostages were released by Hamas in exchange for the release of some of the Palestinian political prisoners held by Israel. However, the truce expired in the morning on 1 December 2023, as both Israel and Hamas blamed each other for failing to agree on an extension. Since then, Israeli PM has stated Gaza war will not end soon but continue for months.

By early December, tens of thousands of people displaced by the fighting were finally moving towards south of Gaza. They packed into the border city of Rafah, in the far south of the strip. Muwasi, a nearby patch of coastline that Israel declared a safe zone, became the new place for refuge.

However, unconfirmed reports now suggest that thousands of Palestinians have started returning to the north of the Gaza Strip after the withdrawal of some Israeli forces from the area. The Israeli military said earlier that it was withdrawing thousands of forces from the Gaza Strip, in the first significant troop pullback. Some of the five brigades withdrawn will prepare for a potential second front against the Lebanese Hezbollah resistance movement.

Hezbollah, Iran and the Seven-Front Escalation

In its initial stages at least, the conflict was mainly concentrated around Gaza. However, the risk has since escalated to other regions as well. In fact, Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant has already claimed that his country is fighting a multi-front war, which will last several months. He even named the seven fronts as Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Judea and Samarra (West Bank), Iraq, Yemen and Iran.

Out of these, the front with Hezbollah became active from the day of Hamas’ brutal terrorist raids. In fact, Hezbollah had declared its support and praise for Hamas’ attack on Israel in the morning of 7 October 2023 itself and fired rockets and artillery shells at Israeli positions in the disputed Shebaa Farms a day later. These led to continuing and still ongoing clashes at several parts of the Israel–Lebanon border, Syria and the occupied Golan Heights and forced approximately 96,000 people on the Israeli side of the Lebanese border to leave their homes, while in Lebanon, more than 50,000 individuals have been displaced.

At the cusp of the New Year, news came that the US carrier battle group USS Gerald Ford, which had stationed itself in the Eastern Mediterranean, to keep Hezbollah in check in north of Israel, was leaving the region and returning to its base in Pennsylvania. No reason was given for this sudden withdrawal of the battle group.

For its part, Israel also decided to move its forces from northern Gaza to north of the country in order to take on the Hezbollah rocket attacks, which increased over time.

In fact, Hezbollah’s actions became more aggressive since the killing of Hamas’ second-in-command leader Salah Al Arouri in Beirut in a drone attack in Beirut around the turn of the new year. Stepping up his bellicose rhetoric, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah then stated: “We will not use the phrase ‘at the right place, at the right time’ in our response. In fact, the response shall come immediately and inevitably.”

Thereafter, Hezbollah has increased the ferocity of its rocket barrage and turned down US and French proposal for ceasefire with Israel. It has repeatedly targeted Israel’s Meron Air Base, even as new Lebanese groups, such as Jamah Islamiyyah, have joined it in targeting Israeli positions.

The US–Israeli front against Iran has also become increasingly restive since the new year. About 90 people were killed in blasts near the grave of former IRGC General Qassem Soleimani in Kerman on 3 January, reportedly the worst terror attack in the Islamic Republic’s history.²⁰ Although US and Israel denied any involvement in the attacks and ISIS accepted responsibility, Iranian president Ebrahim Raeisi still blamed the act on the “grudge Zionists hold against Qassem Soleimani”.²¹

This attack had come on the heels of a massive funeral of senior Revolutionary Guards commander Brig Gen Sayyed Razi Mousavi held in Tehran late in December, after he was killed in an Israeli airstrike in Syria, media reports said. Then on 20 January 2024, an intelligence officer of the IRGC Quds Force in Damascus, Brigadier General Sadegh Omidzadeh, along with four other IRGC officers, were reportedly killed in an Israeli airstrike. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an Israeli missile strike targeted a four-story building in the Mezzeh district. The attack resulted in the death of 13 individuals, including five Iranians.

The US-led Naval Campaign against Houthis

Since 12 January 2024, the United States and the United Kingdom, with support from Australia, Bahrain, Canada, and the Netherlands, have launched a series of airstrikes against Ansar Allah (commonly known as Houthi movement) in Yemen to stop Houthis from attacking ships in the Red Sea. The Houthis have been justifying their attacks by claiming they are in support of the people of Gaza facing the Israeli onslaught.

²⁰ [“Terror in Iran: On the Blasts in Iran’s Kerman and the Impact”](#), *The Hindu*, 5 January 2024.

²¹ [“Terrorist Bombings Rooted in Zionist Grudge Against Gen. Soleimani: Raeisi”](#), *Press TV*, 5 January 2024.

While the Houthis initially claimed to target only commercial ships bound for Israeli ports or with some link to Israel, it is alleged they soon began indiscriminately targeting vessels, attempting attacks on ships with no discernible Israeli ties.

By 21 December 2023, the Israeli port of Eilat saw an 85 per cent drop in activity due to Houthi action.²² Before the Houthi attack on the freighter Maersk Hangzhou on 30 December 2023, the US had already shot down a total of 24 Houthi missiles and drones and deployed naval ships to protect Red Sea lanes, but had not engaged directly with the Houthis.

On 3 January 2024, the United States and a group of countries issued an ultimatum to the Houthis to stop their activities. The first wave of strikes commenced around 2:30am (Yemen time) on 12 January. During this first wave of strikes, over 60 targets in 16 separate locations were hit by more than 100 missiles. Approximately 30 to 60 minutes later, a second wave struck dozens more targets in 12 additional locations using over 50 missiles.

According to Lt Gen Douglas Sims, the initial strikes on 12 January successfully achieved their objective of damaging the Houthis' ability to launch complex drone and missile attacks similar to the one they conducted on 10 January. However, President Biden had acknowledged by 18 January that the strikes did not stop Houthis from continuing to attack shipping, but said that efforts to stop them would continue.²³

Meanwhile, Indian ships have also been busy rescuing many of the ships in and around the Red Sea. It is reported that Captain Avinash Rawat, the master of MV Marlin Luanda, on 27 January 2024 thanked the Indian Navy for its help in stamping out the fire on his ship following a missile strike by the Houthis in the Gulf of Eden.²⁴ In the previous week, INS Visakhapatnam intercepted a cargo vessel carrying 22 crew members, including nine Indians, shortly after the Marshall Island-flagged ship faced a drone strike in the Gulf of Aden.²⁵ Earlier on 5 January 2024, the Indian Navy successfully prevented the hijacking of the Liberian-flagged vessel MV Lila Norfolk in the North Arabian Sea, rescuing all crew members.²⁶

²² Ari Rabinovitch, [“Israel's Eilat Port Sees 85% Drop in Activity Amid Red Sea Houthi Attacks”](#), *Reuters*, 21 December 2023.

²³ [“US Says ‘Not at War’ with Houthis; Biden Admits Strikes Not Halting Attacks”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 19 January 2024.

²⁴ [“Houthi Attack: Marlin Luanda Captain Thanks Indian Navy for Helping Douse Fire”](#), *Hindustan Times*, 28 January 2024.

²⁵ [“Indian Navy Ship INS Visakhapatnam Comes To Rescue Missile Struck Oil Tanker”](#), *MI News Network*, 29 January 2024.

²⁶ Manjeet Negi, [“Pirates Got Scared...’: Woman Navy Officer Explains How Hijacked Ship Was Rescued”](#), *India Today*, 18 January 2024.

Hostage Deal, Two-month ‘Ceasefire’ or Rapid Escalation?

Following the ICJ interim ruling, efforts towards an early and peaceful resolution of the crisis have picked up pace. The Israeli Prime Minister’s Office on 28 January 2024 confirmed that a four-way meeting between the US, Israel, Qatar and Egypt took place in Paris to discuss a potential deal to free all Israeli hostages held by Hamas in exchange for a two-month ceasefire. Despite significant gaps in the position of the parties, it was said progress was being made and the talks were characterised as being “constructive”.²⁷

However, the fog of war could not be thicker with news from Lebanon contradicting these welcome developments spoke of growing rumours—based on an LBCI report—that Netanyahu was preparing for a full-blown war against Hezbollah in Lebanon soon.²⁸

As the escalating crisis soon enters its fourth month, there are still more uncertainties over the course of this ongoing Israeli–Arab confrontation. For instance, the present uncertainty facing the fate of the Netanyahu government from within Israel’s political system may cause greater confusion and instability for the highly fraught West Asian region.

²⁷ Lazar Barman, [“Israel Says Paris Talks on Hostage Deal Were ‘Constructive,’ Will Continue This Week”](#), *Australian Jewish News*, 29 January 2024.

²⁸ [“Israel to Declare War Reports Spark Panic in Lebanon as Hezbollah Says ‘Fully Prepared’”](#), *News 18*, 28 January 2024.

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