

## The 2023 Israel-Hamas War



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<https://commandeleven.com>

[info@commandeleven.com](mailto:info@commandeleven.com)

<https://twitter.com/commandeleven>

## REPORT AUTHOR

“The 2023 Israel-Hamas War” was written and researched by Dr. Claude Rakisits.

Dr. Claude Rakisits is an Honorary Associate Professor in the Department of International Relations at the Australian National University. He’s also a Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS) at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) in Brussels. His academic interests are South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Before going into academia some 20 years ago, Dr. Rakisits had worked in the Australian public sector in the areas of defence, strategy, foreign affairs and intelligence. He has taught international relations and diplomacy in Australia, US, Canada, Switzerland and Belgium. He has been the academic adviser at the Australian War College, and he taught strategic developments in the Indo-Pacific at Georgetown University in Washington DC. He comments and publishes regularly for Australian and international think tanks and media outlets.

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## INTRODUCTION

The present Hamas-Israeli conflict, which is bigger than anything Israel has seen for at least 50 years, is a game-changer for the region, regardless of the outcome of the war. Hopefully, the conflict doesn't expand involving more external players which would compound an already catastrophic humanitarian situation. However, that hope is fast diminishing with every passing day. After the dust settles on the battlefield, a negotiated solution to the 75-year-old Israel-Palestine conflict will need to be found around a negotiating table. There's no other option.

## CURRENT SITUATION

On 7 October 2023 thousands of heavenly-armed Hamas fighters broke through the Gaza-Israeli barriers and attacked several nearby Kibbutz, a military base and a music concert attended by thousands of young people. In an indiscriminate killing frenzy, which lasted several hours, Hamas terrorised young, old, and handicapped civilians by killing, mutilating, and burning 1400 of them, and wounding another 5000. No mercy was shown. This massacre was [recorded on body cameras](#) found on some of the 1500 Hamas terrorists subsequently killed by Israeli soldiers. Hamas eventually returned to Gaza taking with them [over 200 hostages](#). A senior member of Hamas [referred](#) to the massacre as a "defensive operation" to Israel's "crimes of occupation". The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) also took several hostages. Although the largest number of hostages come from Israel, about [25 other nationalities are represented among them](#). These actions, specifically terrorist acts, by Hamas and the PIJ are banned under [Article 33 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949](#). At the time of writing this report, four hostages had been released unharmed.

In its aim to eliminate Hamas as a fighting force following Hamas's attack, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) have been pummeling Gaza, particularly, but not solely, the northern part, targeting Hamas military targets, sources of rocket attacks into Israel and Hamas leaders' hideouts. Sadly, but quite deliberately, these Hamas military assets are generally in highly populated civilian areas. Put differently, Hamas is effectively using the civilian population as human shields in the hope that the IDF would desist from bombing them. This hasn't happened. On the contrary, [Israel has massively increased its bombardments](#) in preparation for an expected full-blown ground operation. Already, the IDF has increased its ground entries into Gaza, briefly engaging Hamas fighters.

Israel has also cut off all water, electricity, food and fuel into the territory. While Israel does not recognize it as such, these Israeli actions are tantamount to collective punishment—an act that is banned under [Article 33 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949](#). At time of the writing, according to Hamas's Health Ministry, [more than 7000 Palestinians had been killed](#). While this figure is impossible to independently corroborate, in the past the Health Ministry's death toll figures have been relatively accurate. In his [discussions](#) with the Israeli Minister of Defence Yoav Gallant, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin has underscored the "importance of protecting civilians... focussing on the urgency of humanitarian aid delivery for civilians in Gaza".

Regardless of the precise number of civilian casualties, the humanitarian situation in Gaza is now catastrophic. This is even after Israel agreed for a couple of dozen truckloads of aid to be delivered—a drop in the bucket of desperate need. Under international pressure, [Tel Aviv has agreed](#) to allow more supplies of food, water and medicine through the only entry point into Gaza, the Rafah border post on the Egyptian border. The UN Secretary-General [made a desperate plea to the UN Security Council on 25 October](#) that a ceasefire be agreed to between the parties to allow the hostages to be released and desperately needed aid delivered. Similarly, following a summit meeting of Arab leaders in Cairo on 23 October, a [joint statement](#) was issued asking for the UNSC to demand an “immediate and sustainable ceasefire”. On 27 October, the UN General Assembly [passed](#) by 120 to 14 against and 45 abstentions a non-binding resolution calling for an “immediate, durable and sustained humanitarian truce”.

In the wake of the 7 October events the Israeli government has three categories of objectives: short-term, mid-term and long-term.

## SHORT TERM

The complete eradication of the 40,000-strong Hamas as a fighting force, which is the [official stated aim of the Israeli government](#), is on the top of the list of short-term goals. Most experts would agree that this is not an achievable goal, but the IDF can certainly severely degrade Hamas's military capability, making it easier to 'manage' it in the future. This would be a similar outcome as the situation one now has with the Islamic State, which still has residual capabilities in Syria and Iraq.

Israel will also want to hunt down the members of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Hamas's junior partner in Gaza, which also holds some of the 200 hostages. [According to Israel](#) and the Biden administration, PIJ was responsible for the accidental missile attack on the al-Ahli Arab hospital which reportedly killed some 500 people on 14 October. However, there remain doubts about that assessment. But, given the chaos and the fog of war, we will probably never know what really happened.

The rescue of over 200 hostages held by Hamas and PIJ, with as few casualties among the hostages, would be very high on the Israeli government's list. But this objective will be extremely difficult to achieve because of the terrain (most would be kept captive in the tunnels under Gaza) and the constant Israeli bombardment. Foreign governments which have citizens among the hostages would also be putting significant pressure on the Israeli government to ensure that the safety of their citizens is considered when planning its military operations. [Reportedly](#), Hamas has offered to release all foreign hostages in exchange for a five-day ceasefire. Hamas has already [released](#) two American and two Israeli hostages. Hamas has demanded additional conditions for the release of the Israeli citizens. The Netanyahu government is under [massive domestic pressure](#) to bring the hostages back at whatever cost.

For Israel to achieve, or even partially achieve, the two goals—the destruction of Hamas and the rescue of the hostages, the IDF will have to conduct a ground intervention. What it will look like remains unclear. But what any military practitioner knows is that in any conflict the defeat of the enemy cannot be achieved from the skies only; boots on the ground are required.

However, given the terrain, and regardless the scope of the ground operation, this phase of the war will undoubtedly be costly in IDF lives and treasury, very slow and potentially long. [According to former IDF Major-General Amos Yadlin](#), the ground campaign could take up to five months. Ask any military man, urban warfare is the worst of all. Who's the enemy? In the eyes of the soldiers every civilian is a potential Hamas or PIJ fighter. The massive network of hundreds of kilometres of tunnels will exponentially compound the military operation. Hamas has had years to build this highly sophisticated labyrinth of tunnels, many of them very deep, reinforced and booby-trapped. Remember that it took many months for American troops to retake Falluja and Mosul in Iraq, and in that case the Islamic State hadn't had time to build such a subterranean network of tunnels. Finally, the soldiers, especially the reservists, will be scared and inexperienced in such urban warfare.

The longer the ground operation takes the more international public opinion (already soft) will turn against Israel, especially if casualties and deaths are high. And this means international pressure for a ceasefire, including from Israel's friends and allies, will grow ever so louder. But Israel will not stop until its primary goals are achieved. As PM Netanyahu [stated](#) very clearly, "we are in the midst of a campaign for our existence". Israel also knows that the US will provide it with a steady resupply of arms. Importantly, no US president would want to be remembered as the one who abandoned Israel, especially in an election year.

While this would never be admitted by the Hamas leadership, but for Hamas the more Gazan civilians die the better it is for its narrative. It gives Hamas the opportunity to present itself as the defender of helpless Palestinians (which they are) and reinforces the poor image Israel already has in the eyes of international public opinion. In many ways, Israel is falling in Hamas's trap, but has little choice, at least in the short term. So, while Hamas is violating international humanitarian law by using civilians as shields, international public opinion has undoubtedly been softer on Hamas in that regard. The massive pro-Palestinian demonstrations throughout the world attests to this. Hamas is viewed as a legitimate military force fighting for Palestinians' right of self-determination. That its goal is the [eradication of Israel](#) (as opposed to Fatah which seeks some sort of peaceful cohabitation with Israel) is conveniently forgotten.

Finally, just as important as it is to meticulously plan a forceful military entry into a hostile environment, it is important to plan the exit strategy. This includes not only the logistics of pulling out—a vulnerable phase of any army, but also the timing of the exit. That timing will be a political decision. The Israeli political leaders will have to decide when they think their military objectives have been achieved, or sufficiently met, before getting out.

## MEDIUM TERM

Israel's top medium-term objective would be to secure its southern border to ensure that another 7 October never happens again. Presumably, it will want to build a security wall like the barrier it built on the West Bank separating it from Israel proper. Reportedly there are plans to create a no-go buffer zone inside Gaza adjacent to the wall/barrier where absolutely nothing would be able to get through—effectively a kill zone. It's interesting to note that two years ago, Israel had [announced](#) the completion of their new 65-kilometre “smart fence” around Gaza—a security barrier which was breached at 29 points on 7 October.

Israel has made clear that it intends to cut off all links to Gaza after the war. This includes not allowing Gazans to work in Israel, and no longer providing electricity, water and fuel to the Palestinian territory. It intends to completely absolve itself of any responsibility for the future of Gaza. Accordingly, it has absolutely no intention of occupying Gaza permanently. They have tried it before from 1967 to 2005, and it didn't work. That's why they pulled out in 2005, at great political cost to PM Sharon. Staying as an occupying force would only lead to defeat, especially after having effectively razed the northern part of the territory and large swath of other parts of Gaza. That's why they'll only stay as long as it is required to destroy Hamas as a credible military force.

This leads to the next important medium-term objective: find a credible player willing to take over the temporary governance of the territory until a permanent long-term solution to the future of Gaza can be found. Such a player could be a UN peacekeeping force, an Arab League force, the Palestine Authority (still the legal administrators of Gaza), or Egypt—until 1967 the former administrating power. Finding an administrating authority and force to replace Hamas will need to be found quickly and would need to take over as Israeli troops depart Gaza. Israel will not want to leave a political and administrative vacuum which could lead to chaos and even more misery for the people of Gaza. Presumably, there would at present be a lot of behind-the-scenes discussion between possible candidates for that role. I suspect there would be few credible takers in the region able to do the job effectively or wanting to do it. A UN force would be the least problematic candidate.

## LONG-TERM

Obviously living in peace without fear of being attacked by a neighbouring state or non-state actors is the primary long-term goal of Israel, one that has been elusive for the last 75 years.

After this latest game changer event that Hamas and the PIJ initiated with the killing of over 1400 Israeli civilians, Israel's willingness to even consider peace with its neighbours is very low. However, Israel and its Arab neighbours have one thing in common: they hate Hamas and the PIJ—two non-state actors which threaten the established order in the region and the rule of all the non-elected Arab despots in the region. Although this would never be admitted by the Arab leaders—even privately, but Israel is doing to Hamas

what they have been unable or unwilling to do, and that is to destroy it once and for all. None of the Arab leaders have any democratic legitimacy so much of their survival depends on domestic repression and approval by the 'Arab street'. And support for the Palestinian cause remains a powerful affective issue among the Arab population. Accordingly, these Arab leaders must be extremely careful not to appear to be siding with Israel against Hamas, even though the latter threaten the very survival of the Arab leaders' rule. One must not forget that Hamas has its ideological roots with the Muslim Brotherhood, an organisation which won the presidency in an election in Egypt in 2012. But by the following year, President Mohamed Morsi was ousted by Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who has been in power ever since. Gaza has been under a joint Egypt-Israeli blockade since 2005.

Accordingly, this common goal of eradicating these jihadists could be strong basis for Israel and its neighbours to build on to try to find a peaceful and permanent solution to the Israel-Palestine issue and have peace and development in the region. The solution would most likely mean the establishment of two states living side by side—a solution advocated by all countries in the region and the international community, including the US. This will be the topic of a follow-up report.

## A SECOND FRONT?

The biggest worry for Israel as it tries to deal with the crisis in the south is how will its neighbours, near and far, react after it invades Gaza to destroy Hamas and PIJ. And given developments in recent days, it increasingly looks like it would take a miracle to prevent this war from expanding regionally, especially if it eventually looks like Hamas may be on the verge of being completely degraded as a fighting force.

The principal opponent Israel is worried about, and which is the most likely to join the fray if the war expands regionally is Hezbollah, the 100,000-strong Shia para-military force in southern Lebanon. It is a formidable force, reportedly financed by Iran by the tune of \$1 billion per year, with tens of thousands of highly sophisticated rockets and precision missiles which can hit any part of Israel. Hezbollah has clashed with Israel on a regular basis, including since 7 October, but sufficiently below an 'understood' threshold which would start a full-fledged war between the two. The last big confrontation was in 2006 when they fought a violent one month-long war which most experts agree was a draw.

Although Hamas is a Sunni-dominated organization, it too is supported by Iran. It is estimated to be receiving \$100 million per year from Teheran. Most European countries, along with the US, have designated Hamas and Hezbollah as terrorist organisations. The principal objective of both non-state actors is the destruction of Israel, which makes them ideal allies. Their ideological and operational alliance, along with the PIJ—labelled the "axis of resistance by Tehran, gives Iran a powerful tool to confront Israel without getting directly involved in a military clash. Hezbollah, Hamas and PIJ, often with a representative of the Iranian regime, meet regularly in Beirut to coordinate their military activities.



Worrisomely, on 24 October a news agency close to Iran's Revolutionary Guards [reportedly said](#) Hezbollah's involvement in a war with Israel was now "likely". Hezbollah opening a second front would be a game changer in this war. Such a scenario would significantly increase the chances that the US would get involved in the war in support of Israel.

Accordingly, the US moved substantial military assets to the region (one naval carrier strike group in the eastern Mediterranean and one in the Gulf) not only in anticipation of a possible Hezbollah involvement in the war, but to deter Iran, and possibly other Iranian proxies, from entering the fray. For example, on 27 October, [two US F-16s struck a military facility in eastern Syria](#) run by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its local affiliates which was being used to attack two American bases in the region, Al Tanf in Syria and Ain Al-Asad in Iraq. These two US bases, which house about 3500 troops assisting local forces deal with the remnants of the Islamic State, have been [targeted a dozen times](#) by Iranian proxy forces since 18 October. [According to Ali Barakeh](#), a senior Hamas leader, Hamas was surprised that the 7 October attack prompted such a muscular and swift response from the US.

Israel is also keeping an eye out on two other fronts, Syria and the West Bank.

Like with its border with Lebanon, since the beginning of the war Israel has exchanged rocket fire with Iran-backed militias based in Syria, albeit on a lesser scale. [Reportedly](#), Iran-backed Shia groups have moved from Iraq to western Syria along the border with Israel. Of course, Syria still has an unresolved dispute with Israel, which is occupying the Golan Heights since the 1967 6-Day War.

While the West Bank has remained relatively quiet, compared to Gaza, nevertheless over 100 Palestinians have [reportedly](#) been killed in clashes between soldiers and settlers. And although the situation remains quite manageable today, this could fast deteriorate if the situation in Gaza took a serious turn for the worse.

## CONCLUSION

Hamas's massacre on 7 October—the worst attack on Israeli soil since the creation of the Jewish state in 1948, was absolutely a game changer for Israel and the Middle East. The region will never be the same again—for better or worse. Unfortunately, the war has really only begun, and things will probably get much worse before they get better. We are now in the first stage of the conflict—the preparation for the actual war, when the Israeli army enters Gaza in big numbers. Given the enormity of the objective the Israeli government has imposed itself, stage two—combat operations—could take weeks or even months. Stage three, which will follow the withdrawal of the Israeli troops from Gaza and the end of all armed hostility on all fronts, will be the stage in which a final political settlement involving Israel, the Palestinians, regional neighbours and relevant international actors can be negotiated. It would be an opportunity to build on some of the positive developments between Israel and a number of Arab states and to finally find a

permanent and peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Wars must stop and make place to peace and development for all. Stages two and three will be discussed in my next report, after the dust will have settled on the battlefield.

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