

ISRAEL-GAZA WAR

An AKE Insights Report

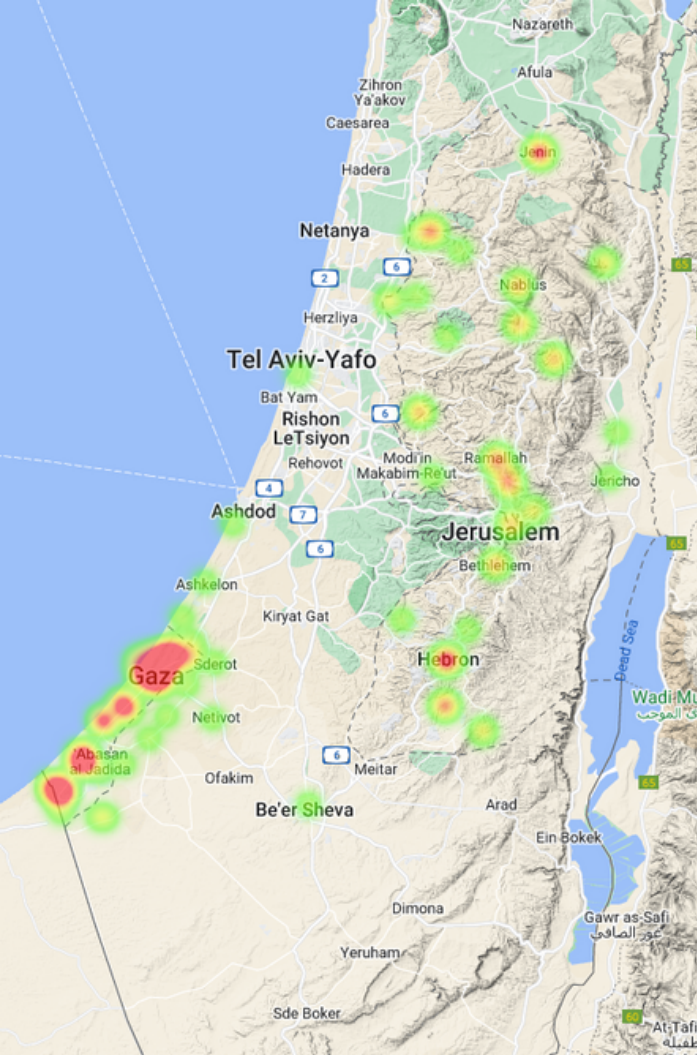
3 November 2023



AN UNPRECEDENTED ATTACK AND INTELLIGENCE FAILURE

On 7 October the al-Qassam Brigades – the military wing of Gaza-based political party Hamas – launched Operation al-Aqsa Flood – a coordinated air and ground attack on southern Israel. Hamas broke through the security barriers on the Gaza border, attacked nearby Israeli towns and villages and took control of the Erez crossing – the only pedestrian crossing in and out of the Gaza Strip. Thousands of rockets were fired from Gaza targeting Israeli cities, including Tel Aviv and Ashkelon. Since then, at least 1,200 Israelis have allegedly been killed and thousands more were injured, while over 200 Israelis remain hostages in Gaza. The Israeli government immediately launched retaliatory air operations with intense airstrikes and a total blockade on Gaza – with at least 9,000 Palestinians killed and thousands injured according to the Gaza Ministry of Health and close to 1.4 million people displaced according to the United Nations (UN) as of 1 November. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has pledged to continue military operations until the destruction of Hamas and committed to launching a ground invasion of the Palestinian enclave to do so.

The 7 October attack will live in the collective Israeli consciousness for years. Hamas's attack indicated a massive intelligence failure by Israel, which in the past has shown the ability to pre-empt similar attacks from Gaza. The number of Israeli casualties is by far the highest in decades of sporadic confrontations between Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups and has precipitated an unprecedented Israeli response, which has caused catastrophic destruction in Gaza. Many Israelis have called for Netanyahu to be held accountable for the failure to prevent the attack and for the aftermath of the ongoing conflict. Many senior intelligence and military officials will undoubtedly face opprobrious enquiries.



Security incidents recorded in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank since 7 October. Image source: AKE's Global Intake

Hamas presented its 7 October attack as a response to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, the repeated Jewish incursions into al-Aqsa Mosque and the treatment of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli detention centres. Moreover, Hamas's use of force is an indictment on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process which has been at a standstill for decades amid the Palestinian Authority (PA)'s waning legitimacy and Israel's increasingly hawkish governments. The attack is testament to the divisions within the Palestinian resistance movement, particularly as they relate to the use of armed struggle to attain political objectives, which has proved to be ineffective.

IN GAZA AND THE WEST BANK

Following Hamas's victory in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections – deemed free and fair by international observers – in 2007 Israel began enforcing a land, sea and air blockade on the Gaza Strip. The blockade has created dire socio-economic conditions for the 2.3 million Palestinian residents in Gaza, punctuated by deadly recurrent escalations of the confrontation with Israel, most notably in 2008, 2014 and during the 'Great March of Return' in 2018 – in which 223 Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces during largely peaceful demonstrations.

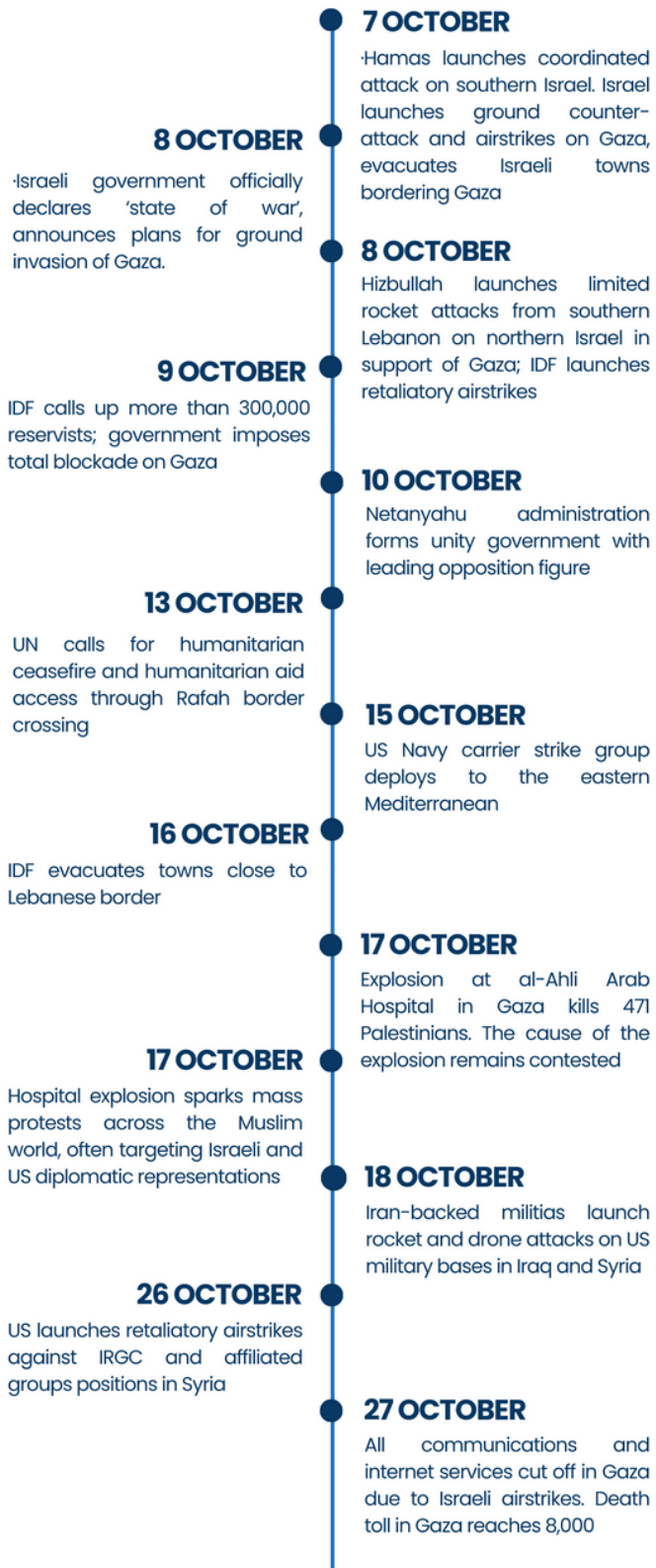
Since coming to power in Gaza, Hamas has consolidated its control of the enclave, ensuring the stable provision of public services – which remain constrained by the Israeli blockade – through its political arm. Concurrently, Hamas's military arm – the al-Qassam Brigades – has established firm roots in the territory, mostly by constructing a network of underground tunnels which allows militants to move around free from Israeli detection and to be shielded from Israeli airstrikes. This network has been crucial to prepare the 7 October attack and will likely prove critical in the event of the anticipated ground invasion.

While most reporting has, rightly, focused on Gaza, the security situation in the West Bank has significantly deteriorated since 7 October. Before the start of the conflict, near-daily Israeli Defense Force (IDF) raids into the occupied West Bank killed over 200 Palestinians in the deadliest year on record for Palestinians in the West Bank, according to the UN. At least 122 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli military forces and Israeli settlers since 7 October. Settlers have launched attacks against Palestinian towns, villages and farms, injuring hundreds and forcing dozens of Palestinian farmers off their lands, often reportedly in the presence of IDF soldiers amid increasing calls for the annexation of all or parts of the West Bank by the settler community.

REGIONAL ESCALATION?

The risk of escalation has steadily increased in the Middle East since 7 October. Israeli military operations sparked outrage throughout the region, with daily protests and heightened hostility towards Israel and the United States (US) – Tel Aviv's foremost ally. Many regional state and non-state actors are under intense political pressure to act, even reluctantly, in defence of the Palestinians, whether through diplomatic or military means. For some, the issue is a matter of credibility. Such is the case for Iran, which has consistently asserted that the Palestinian cause is of the highest importance.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS IN THE ISRAEL-GAZA WAR



Tehran's reaction has thus far been measured despite aggressive rhetoric towards Israel and its Western allies. However, Iranian authorities repeatedly warned that Israel will face as of yet unspecified consequences for its actions in Gaza. Although unlikely, a direct Israeli-Iranian conflict would be catastrophic for already fragile regional stability. Tehran has seemingly instructed its affiliated armed groups to carry out small-scale attacks against Israel and US assets in the region as a way to put pressure on the US to call for Israel to exercise restraint and ultimately a ceasefire in Gaza. Should the Israel continue to intensify airstrikes, enforce a blockade and launch a ground invasion of Gaza, Tehran would undoubtedly consider an intensification of Iranian-led efforts against the country.

Iran's foremost non-state affiliate - the Lebanese Hizbullah operating in southern Lebanon and an avowed enemy of Israel - began carrying out attacks against Israeli military positions in northern Israel on 8 October. These low-level attacks signal an intent to posture, rather than inflict significant damage, warning Tel Aviv of the prospect of a northern front in the event of an escalation in Gaza. Experts estimate that Hizbullah has amassed a considerable stockpile of rockets - close to 150,000 - which could penetrate Israeli missile defence systems.

Lebanon is arguably most at risk of fallout from an Israel-Hizbullah escalation. While most of the Lebanese population remains hostile to Israel due to Tel Aviv's involvement in the Lebanese Civil War, the 2006 Israel-Hizbullah war and the treatment of Palestinians, dire socio-economic and political conditions suggest little enthusiasm for a confrontation with Israel. During the 2006 war, Israeli airstrikes extended beyond Hizbullah's areas of operation often targeting Beirut, ostensibly in retaliation against Lebanese political elites for allowing the presence of Hizbullah in the country. In the event of a direct Israel-Hizbullah confrontation, similar strikes cannot be ruled out.

In Iraq, Iran-backed Shi'ah militias - collectively known as the 'Islamic Resistance in Iraq' - have benefited from their role in the fight against Islamic State (IS) (2014-2017) to consolidate their power in Iraq and Syria. These groups form part of Tehran's 'Axis of Resistance' against the US and Israel - together with President Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria, Hizbullah, Huthi rebels in Yemen and allied Palestinian militant groups. As such, they are often called on by Iran to act as proxies to further Tehran's foreign policy objectives. These militias have conducted at least 25 rockets and drone attacks against military bases hosting US troops in Iraq and Syria since 17 October. These confrontations, while still relatively low-level, further raise the risk of a wider confrontation between Iran and its affiliates against Israel and its allies.



A GLOBAL CONFLICT

Despite highly-localised and concentrated areas of fighting, the ongoing conflict – as previous Israeli-Palestinian confrontations – is by nature a global one. Whether with the involvement of global and regional powers, international organisations, the worldwide popular mobilisation representing both sides or the ubiquitous media coverage of events on the ground, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems inescapable and has broad geopolitical implications.

Regionally, the ongoing conflict will affect security and political dynamics, including the recent trend of normalisation of relations between Tel Aviv and several Arab states – most notably the United Arab Emirates and Morocco. In light of the heavy Palestinian casualties and the overwhelming support for the Palestinian cause in the Arab world, Arab states are likely to continue to support Palestinians – if only rhetorically – driving or widening the wedge between Israel and its Arab neighbours. The reported normalisation talks between Tel Aviv and Riyadh, for instance, is currently on hold, already damaging the Washington-led agenda of setting up an unofficial pro-Western anti-Iranian alliance in the Middle East. Moreover, the conflict is likely to strain established relations between Tel Aviv and its regional partners, in particular with Ankara, which has robustly denounced Israeli actions in Gaza, reversing months of efforts to mend relations and undermining a potential energy partnership in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Globally, the conflict will likely contribute to deepening the West and ‘the rest’ divide, whereby the non-Western world – often referred to as the ‘Global South’ – perceives unconditional Western support for Israel as evidence of a double standard in the application of declared ‘moral values’ and international norms of war. This trend was particularly evident in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, when the West’s overwhelming political and material support for Kyiv was not reciprocated by the Global South.

Consequently, the conflict carries negative implications for the advancement of Western geopolitical and economic interests and drives hostility towards the West in general and towards the US in particular. On 19 October the US State Department issued a worldwide alert for US citizens abroad 'to exercise increased caution' in the wake of the conflict, providing further evidence of the increasingly unfavourable perception of the US as a result of its foreign policy agenda.

The onset of the Israel-Gaza war is also consequential for the war in Ukraine, insofar as media attention and the US's and European Union's (EU) political focus diverts to the Middle East. With little breakthrough in its summer counteroffensive, Kyiv's increasing concerns as to the Western determination to sustain significant military support may be compounded by the West's now divided attention and resources. Incoming Republican Speaker of the US House of Representatives Mike Johnson has already indicated that Israel would be prioritised over Ukraine when discussing the military aid package proposed by President Joe Biden on 20 October. This mirrors the decreasing support for aid to Ukraine among the Republican party's electorate, which has dropped by 30 per cent since the war started in February 2022. Public support risks further falling in the coming months as the Israel-Gaza war will continue to dominate the media, limiting Kyiv's ability to foster public support in the EU and the US. However, most EU leaders and the US administration ostensibly remain determined to continue supporting Ukraine.

A PROTRACTED CONFLICT?

The security situation in Israel, the Palestinian Territories and the broader region as well as the outcome of the ongoing conflict are largely dependent on the ambitions of Israel's government and on the US's capacity, or willingness, to restrain these ambitions. So far – and regardless of calls for a cessation of hostilities from most UN member states and from international and humanitarian organisations – the Israeli government has maintained the course and has shown no intention to let up its stated objective, namely the complete destruction of Hamas. Netanyahu, who has borne the brunt of the responsibility for the intelligence failure on 7 October, is now fighting for his political survival. In the immediate aftermath of the Hamas attack, he pledged to "destroy" Hamas and resolve the issue of Israeli hostages held in Gaza – objectives which may in fact prove mutually incompatible and liable to trigger a regional escalation.

Ultimately, Tel Aviv will likely struggle to balance military objectives with political realities and the risk of regional escalation. At present, Israeli forces are carrying out daily small-scale ground assaults on the periphery of northern Gaza, the efficacy of which may be limited to weakening Hamas. However, such assaults will likely provide some domestic political cover for Netanyahu as he seeks to fulfil his promise and perhaps absolve himself for the 7 October failures. The Israeli administration continues to adamantly oppose any talks of a ceasefire. Therefore, IDF airstrikes and limited ground operations into Gaza – as well as heightened security measures in the West Bank – are expected to continue possibly for several months as suggested by Netanyahu and other senior Israeli officials.

Despite aggressive posturing, greater Iranian involvement in the Israel-Gaza conflict – through attacks on Israel, US and Western assets in the region – remains unlikely. Tehran presumably appreciates that an open military confrontation with Tel Aviv and its allies will incur a devastating human and economic cost amid already dire internal socio-economic conditions. Nevertheless, its support for the Palestinian cause will remain adamant and will likely rely on Tehran's 'Axis of Resistance' to react to Israeli actions in Gaza. Hizbullah in particular is likely to draw a red line at the planned full-scale Israeli ground invasion of Gaza, which has been repeatedly postponed, perhaps reluctantly, in consideration of its presumed geopolitical implications.



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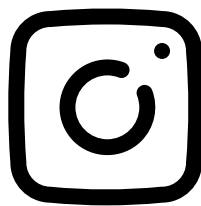
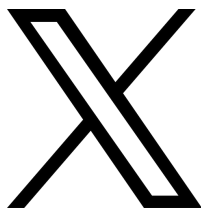
AKE International
239 Kensington High Street
London
W8 6SA, UK
T: +44 (0) 2038169970
E: enquiries@akegroup.com

Hereford

AKE International
Lbarn, Dovehills Farm
Bishops Frome,
Herefordshire
WR6 5BQ, UK
T: +44 (0) 2038169970
E: enquiries@akegroup.com

Singapore

AKE International
6B Orange Grove Road
Level 4 COMO House
Singapore 258332
Tel: +65 6304 1462
E: enquiries@akegroup.com



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20

