

## **Introduction**

On the evening of Friday, October 6, a familiar air of bustling activity enveloped the Israeli populace as people fixed the final preparations for the arrival of Shabbat.

For the Palestinian community, the evening carried a different significance. It was the night before 50th anniversary of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the coordinated offensive launched by Egypt, Syria, and a coalition of Arab states against Israel with the aim of liberating territorial losses incurred following the 1967 June War. The aftermath of Yom Kippur initiated a series of peace negotiations and normalisation of diplomatic relations between Israel and a number of Arab states. From a Palestinian perspective, these negotiations signified a turning point symbolising the perceived abandonment of Palestinian liberation by the wider Arab world.

Both communities woke to an unexpected series of events the next day. Sirens reverberated across Israeli cities Tel Aviv, Ashqelon, and Ashdod, as rockets breached Israel's supposedly impenetrable Iron Dome defence system. Global media headlines and imagery portrayed masked assailants belonging to Hamas' al-Qassam Brigade moving methodically through Israeli neighbourhoods, perpetrating unprovoked violence by taking hostages and inflicting enormous casualties.

## **Background**

A critical examination of the region's history spanning the last 75 years reveals that characterising the events of October 7 as 'unprovoked' is a violent myth. The foundational context lies in the fact that the narrow Gaza strip served as the landing point for Palestinian refugees ethnically cleansed during the 1948 Nakba, signifying the catastrophic aftermath of Israel's victory in the face of the military coalition of Arab States following its declaration of independence that year. This historical backdrop underscores the deep-seated complexities and enduring grievances that persist within the region. Today's tension bears the weight of the enduring Israeli occupation, which traces its origins to the Nakba. In 2005, Israel implemented a unilateral disengagement plan concerning the region, involving the withdrawal of settlements and Israel Defense Forces (IDF) personnel. This decision followed a proposal initiated by former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2003, driven by international pressures and heightened security considerations. Following the withdrawal, Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian legislative election, a result that was violently challenged by Fatah— the Palestinian political party through which Israel's Knesset exerts influence— and the Sharon administration blockaded Gaza, plunging it into a humanitarian crisis from which it has never recovered. In 2012, a UN report forecasted that the Gaza Strip would become uninhabitable by 2020. In 2018, the Norwegian Refugee Council characterised Gaza as the world's largest open-air prison, citing a population density of nearly 5,000 individuals per square kilometre. Gazan resistance to Israeli occupation faced periodic military operations orchestrated by the IDF, colloquially termed 'mowing the lawn' within Israeli public discourse.

For Hamas, October 7 represented more than a mere act of retribution or a markedly violent gambit for liberation. It signified a laying down of the 'wero' at the feet of neighbouring Arab states that have normalised ties with Israel. Despite Arab heads of state— notably Egypt's al-Sisi and Saudi Arabia's bin Salman— piggy-backing off the Palestinian liberation cause to bolster their domestic political agendas and resonate with local constituents, these leaders concurrently invest in economic partnerships with Israel.

## **Humanitarian perspective**

Crucially, Hamas' attacks provided the Knesset the opportunity to fulfil the Zionist vision for the complete eradication of Gaza. Western actors, with the United States and Germany at the forefront, emphasised Israel's right to defend itself, as the following two months has seen over 14'000 Gazans killed by Israeli bombs, including 5'600 children. Over 1.7 million have become homeless, with displacement numbers exceeding the 1948 Nakba. Within Israeli circles, there has been a disturbing mainstream acceptance and advocacy for the mass population transfer of Palestinians, a concept framed within Israeli political discourse as a morally justifiable and indispensable action. Moreover, the manipulation of food scarcity and insecurity has been wielded as a strategic tool, as highlighted by Daniel Levy, a former Israeli official and the head of the US/Middle East Project. Levy contends that the Knesset employs disinformation tactics to rationalise assaults, deliberately targeting civilian populations by severing access to essential resources such as food, electricity, water, and other supplies.

Stockton University's Holocaust and Genocide Studies expert, Raz Segal, characterizes Israel's asymmetrical military intervention as emblematic of a 'textbook genocide.' Segal underscores the significance of the intent to obliterate as a defining element within the conceptual framework of genocide. Notably, leaders of the state and members of Prime Minister Netanyahu's war cabinet have advocated for the complete destruction of Gaza. In the period preceding the initial ceasefire, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant openly declared an imminent resumption of emphatic warfare, affirming the readiness of the IDF for an immediate reinitiation of hostilities. Concurrently, Israeli Minister of National Security Itamar Ben Gvir has issued threats to dismantle the coalition government if the military operation ceases. The period before the ceasefire saw the war cabinet sanctioning measures that appeared permissible under the circumstances.

Multilateral legal and humanitarian institutions face challenges in upholding their designed functions, primarily due to Gaza's recurrent exposure to acts of war crimes, the prevalence of impunity measures, and systematic impediments to humanitarian access. Disturbingly, personnel affiliated with the World Health Organisation and the UN have been categorised as legitimate military targets according to discussions within the Knesset. Moreover, Israeli military strikes have targeted seven different hospitals, alongside UN schools and places of worship. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres described a harrowing incident involving an attack on a United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) school, wherein numerous women and children seeking refuge and safety within UN premises lost their lives or sustained injuries.

Aerial observations of northern Gaza indicate extensive destruction inflicted upon urban centres and agricultural territories, attributable to the deployment of over 20,000 tons of munitions supplied by Israel's allies. The Knesset has justified its measures, citing the necessity to combat terrorism by employing any means deemed essential, which has included the deployment of banned weapons such as white phosphorus. Additionally, reports indicate the use of discriminatory tactics, such as sniper fire, deliberately targeting civilians, recorded at Gaza's al-Quds hospital and during the initial hours of the first ceasefire. These actions raise pertinent concerns about their compliance with international humanitarian law.

## **Regional outlook**

The ramifications of the conflict extend beyond Gaza, resonating significantly in the West Bank. Here, settler violence has been encouraged by far-right ministers whilst Minister Ben Gvir's reported arming of settler militias has contributed to a daily average of seven attacks, and over 200 reported casualties since October 7. Alarming statistics highlight that 2023 has emerged as the deadliest year for children in the West Bank, with November alone witnessing a higher mortality rate among children than any other month in the past 56 years.

The situation in Ramallah has further deteriorated with the recent establishment of two new checkpoints, effectively severing its connection with the Northern West Bank, exacerbating regional divisions and limiting mobility in the area.

Since October 7, the pre-existing confrontations between Israel and the Shia axis of Iran-supported Islamist groups—specifically Lebanon's Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthi movement—have undergone a substantial escalation. Concurrently, Syria's armed forces, under the leadership of President Bashar al-Assad and General Ali Mahmoud Abbas, have exploited the situation by launching attacks on Israeli farms situated in the historically Syrian Golan Heights region. The widening scope of the conflict presents a profoundly disconcerting scenario for the politically fragile nations of Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. The recent surge in refugees seeking shelter has notably increased the strain on the infrastructure and resources of cities such as Beirut and Damascus. In terms of alignment with Palestinian liberation efforts, the escalation of Hezbollah and the Houthi movement's involvement is particularly concerning, as rather than representing a resistance against Israeli occupation of Palestine, their actions appear to align more closely with Iran-driven proxy objectives.

### **The Netanyahu war-cabinet's endgame**

The ostensible goal of defeating Hamas and Islamic Jihad is simply unattainable, with the latest round of violence in Gaza certain to create yet another generation of Palestinians with militant opposition to Israeli occupation. Despite persistent international appeals for ceasefires and diplomatic resolutions, it has become increasingly apparent that, under the Netanyahu-led war cabinet, Israel's entitlement to self-defence operates without discernible constraints.

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