

UNPACKING THE ONGOING CONFLICT IN PALESTINE

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On 7 October 2023, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict reached another turning point with an unprecedented assault led by the Al-Qassam Brigade, Hamas's military wing. The attack involved ground, air, and sea operations, resulting in a significant number of casualties and hostages. Israel declared 'war' on Hamas and retaliated with indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force on the Palestinian civilian population. By 16 October 2023, the toll from this ongoing conflict had reached a devastating level, with at least 2,670 Palestinians killed, a quarter of them children. The number of Israelis killed in Hamas's military operation stood at 1,400, which included 286 soldiers.¹ In a bid to escape the relentless Israeli air raids, tens of thousands of Palestinians have sought refuge in UNRWA-run schools in Gaza. The conflict has had such a devastating impact that at least 50 families in the Gaza Strip have been completely wiped out from the civil registry, as reported by the Health Ministry.²

¹ "Israel-Hamas War Updates: Israeli Water Supply Move a 'Distraction,'" Al Jazeera, October 16, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2023/10/14/israel-hamas-war-live-us-moves-second-aircraft-carrier-to-mediterranean>.

² "Scenes from Hamas's Morning Rocket Attack on Israel," Al Jazeera, October 7, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2023/10/7/scenes-from-hamass-morning-rocket-attack-on-israel>.

This unprecedented conflict was initiated with the launch of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, which was announced alongside the first strike. This initial strike targeted enemy positions, airports, and military fortifications, exceeding 5,000 missiles and shells.

The Hamas attack exposed a rare vulnerability in Israel's security apparatus, characterized by the failure of the Iron Dome defence system, intelligence gaps, and a delayed response from the Israeli state that lasted for several hours. Israel's response, besides indiscriminate and disproportionate actions, has been marked by brazen disregard of international law and international humanitarian law and has raised serious concerns about regional stability. Gaza, home to 2.2 million people, continues to grapple with a dire humanitarian crisis, characterized by incessant bombardment, cutting-off of the supply of essential goods, attacks on medical facilities, and casualties among UN personnel. The convoys of humanitarian aid, positioned near Egypt's border with the Gaza Strip, have remained unable to access the Palestinian enclave in view of escalating military action by Israeli forces. The Human Rights Watch has accused Israel of employing white phosphorus munitions in its military operations in Gaza and Lebanon, contending that the use of such weapons places civilians at risk of serious and long-term injury.³



(Source: Al Jazeera)

³ “Israel: White Phosphorus Used in Gaza, Lebanon,” Human Rights Watch, October 13, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/12/israel-white-phosphorus-used-gaza-lebanon>.

The year 2023 has been the deadliest for the Palestinians in over two decades, coinciding with significant upheaval in Israel's political and economic landscape. Notably, Prime Minister Netanyahu's policy shift aimed at restructuring the nation's judicial system has had far-reaching implications.⁴ Simultaneously, these developments unfolded in the backdrop of a shifting regional order in the Middle East, triggered by the U.S.-initiated Arab-Israel normalization process back in 2020. And most recently, there has been unprecedented Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement brokered by China.

While it may be premature to draw a definitive conclusion regarding the potential Saudi recognition of Israel and establishment of diplomatic ties, this process has been paused for the time being. The nature and scale of Israeli retaliation and the reactions of Middle Eastern countries will significantly influence the future of Arab-Israeli normalization, actively promoted by the U.S. The dire situation in Gaza, often referred to as an open-air prison, has driven the younger generation of Palestinians to seek alternatives for ending their suffering, given the historical neglect by the international community. These circumstances have created fertile ground for Hamas recruitment, particularly amidst high unemployment rates. This aligns with the understanding that as long as occupation, apartheid, and colonialism persist, resistance will endure.

The ongoing conflict has evoked a range of international reactions. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has issued a strong statement condemning Israel's actions in the current conflict, specifically denouncing the forced displacement of Palestinian people in the northern Gaza Strip and ongoing attacks.⁵ The OIC termed the blockade of humanitarian supplies as a violation of international humanitarian law and has called an emergency meeting on 18 October. Meanwhile, the Arab League and the African Union have jointly warned that Israel's planned ground invasion of Gaza could result in a genocide of unprecedented proportions. For its part, Pakistan has stressed the urgency of world community's intervention, called for immediate ceasefire and humanitarian access, announced its relief assistance for Gaza, and reiterated its support for a two-state solution.⁶ Russia called for an immediate ceasefire, advocating for negotiations with international community assistance to establish lasting peace in the Middle East. However, the Russian draft resolution in the UN Security Council failed to garner even the requisite nine votes for adoption. Separately, civil

⁴ "Analysis: Netanyahu Judicial Move Spawns Economic, Political Risks," Reuters, July 26, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/netanyahu-judicial-move-spawns-economic-political-risks-2023-07-25/>.

⁵ "OIC Affirms Its Absolute Rejection of Calls for the Forced Displacement of the Palestinian People from Gaza and Strongly Condemns the Continued Israeli Military Aggression." Organization of Islamic Cooperation, https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=39741&t_ref=26692&lan=en.

⁶ "Pakistan Stands out in Supporting Palestine Cause," The Nation, October 11, 2023. <https://www.nation.com.pk/11-Oct-2023/pakistan-stands-out-in-supporting-palestine-cause>.

society organizations and prominent individuals in the West are raising their concerns, staging protests and rallies in various cities, advocating for peace and an end to the violence in Gaza.

Western countries' reactions to the conflict have been varied - reflecting differing positions among individual governments. Traditionally, countries such as the United States that have maintained close ties with Israel, are asserting its right to self-defence, emphasizing its role as a key ally in the Middle East. The United States has deployed two aircraft carriers to the region, reaffirming strong support for Israel and also scaling ostensibly to restrain Iran.⁷ The European Union has also expressed support for Israel's right to self-defence. In the evolving situation, Iran has issued a warning to Israel regarding the potential for regional escalation if the Israeli military proceeds with a ground invasion into Gaza. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian highlighted that if efforts to immediately halt the Israeli attacks, particularly those causing harm to children in the Gaza Strip, prove ineffective, the possibility of opening multiple new fronts cannot be ruled out.⁸ Meanwhile, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has continued his shuttle diplomacy in the region with the primary objective of ratcheting up support for Israel.⁹ Even President Biden is slated to visit Israel in an expression of solidarity.

Disinformation has also become increasingly prevalent, with Israel being accused of using artificial intelligence tools to present images of destroyed corpses. The Western media's assertion regarding 'beheaded infants' represents the most recent addition to a series of distressing allegations.

The attack orchestrated by Hamas can be viewed in three aspects. First, it can be seen within the context of the rapidly changing regional order, particularly since the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020 and the anticipation of a Saudi-Israeli deal. Second, this attack may serve as a strategy to draw international attention, given the historical negligence of the Palestinian issue by the international community. Third, a plausible thesis suggests that the attack aimed to provoke Israel into launching a ground invasion of Gaza, potentially initiating a protracted and costly conflict. In such a scenario, civilian casualties and the damage caused by Israeli military operations could be exploited as a means to gain international sympathy and support.

⁷ "US-Israel Support: How the US Became Israel's Closest Ally," Vox, October 13, 2023. <https://www.vox.com/world-politics/23916266/us-israel-support-ally-gaza-war-aid>.

⁸ "Iran's Foreign Minister Warns Israel to Stop Gaza Attacks," AP News, October 14, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-iran-israel-hezbollah-2e0b7fdb0d55e379f48bda56703b776>

⁹ "Blinken to Israel on Middle East Mission to Prevent a Wider War," Reuters, October 12, 2023. [https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/blinken-headed-israel-show-us-solidarity-seek-deterrence-2023-10-11/#:~:text=WASHINGTON%2C%20Oct%201%20\(Reuters\),bombardment%20of%20the%20Gaza%20Strip.](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/blinken-headed-israel-show-us-solidarity-seek-deterrence-2023-10-11/#:~:text=WASHINGTON%2C%20Oct%201%20(Reuters),bombardment%20of%20the%20Gaza%20Strip.)

The Palestinian issue is multifaceted and revolves around the inalienable right to self-determination for Palestinians, firmly enshrined in the international law, the UN Charter, and numerous UN resolutions. Despite widespread support for a two-state solution, recent deliberate actions by Israel have seriously impeded its realization. The pursuit of economic gains by world leaders often overshadows the Palestinian cause, while Israel remains committed to its settler-colonialism. The international community's inability and unwillingness to effectively address the Israeli occupation has emboldened in its brutal approach, marked by increased illegal settlement activity, establishment of an apartheid system, and measures verging on genocide. Recent events in the Gaza Strip have unveiled a heightened level of repression by the Israeli occupation forces, in complete violation of established international norms. The declaration of war against the subjugated population contradicts established international principles, particularly the concepts of necessity and proportionality. The absence of safe areas for Gaza's civilian population raises grave concerns, and civilian casualties on both sides are deeply alarming. These circumstances underscore the urgency of seeking a peaceful resolution.

The Abraham Accords, a Trump-era initiative, especially Saudi Arabia's potential involvement, now face mounting uncertainty. There is a big question mark on what was earlier being dubbed as an imminent Israel-KSA deal. The continuing Gaza conflict undermines regional security. Saudi Arabia must navigate a complex decision, balancing its leadership role in the Islamic world with domestic and international pressures when it comes to normalization with Israel. Meanwhile, GCC states such as the UAE and Bahrain walk a delicate path, seeking the benefits of the Accords while addressing anti-Israel sentiments. Other Arab countries, not part of the Accords, align with broader Arab and Muslim support for the Palestinian cause, are relieved that they did not embrace the deal earlier. The potential expansion of the Accords may encounter hesitation from potential new members to normalize relations with Israel without significant concessions to the Palestinians in the near future. The two-state solution remains a globally endorsed path. Achieving a just and lasting solution that respects the rights and dignity of all parties involved is of paramount importance. However, it is crucial to recognize that systemic oppression, reminiscent of apartheid and genocide, inevitably leads to resistance.