

THE ISRAEL - HAMAS CONFLICT: OVERVIEW AND SCENARIOS

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Abstract: On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched a large-scale raid across the Israeli border, which caused Israel to deploy a series of retaliatory actions with military power, prompting many concerns within the international community regarding the unprecedented humanitarian crisis facing the Palestinian people and the security of the Middle East. These moves are all part of the strategic calculations of both sides. Currently, the military conflict has entered its sixth month, during which Israel and Hamas have both achieved some of their goals. However, many conflicting opinions still lead to an increasingly tense and unpredictable situation. The article provides an overview of the conflict situation, outlines the strategic goals of Israel and Hamas, and forecasts potential conflict scenarios.

Key words: West Bank, Gaza Strip, Israel - Hamas, conflict

Overview of the Israel - Hamas conflict

On October 7, 2023, al-Qassam Suicide Brigades (the military wing of the Hamas movement) launched Operation “Al-Aqsa Storm” to end Israel’s blockade of Palestinian settlements. The attack resulted in more than 1,200 deaths, primarily Israeli citizens, making it the deadliest day for Israel since its independence. More than 240 people were also taken hostage during the attack, including soldiers, women, children, and the elderly of Israel¹.

The root cause of this conflict stems from long-standing tensions between Israelis and Palestinians. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict existed before the establishment of Israel in 1948 and is one of the most complex and difficult-to-resolve issues in modern world

history. Conflicts between the two sides for decades left thousands dead and injured. Recently, Israel has actively expanded settlements for Jews, imposing harsh security restrictions on Palestinians in the West Bank, an area nominally controlled by the Palestinian Authority but actually under Israeli occupation. Meanwhile, the Gaza Strip is controlled by Hamas but is also tightly blockaded by Israel. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip frequently accuse Israel’s strict control policies of making their lives difficult.

In response to the lightning attack by Hamas Forces, from the night of October 7, 2023, Israel launched the first stage of Operation “Iron Swords” to retaliate with intense airstrikes and artillery shelling in the

Gaza Strip, which killed and injured thousands of people, mostly Palestinian civilians. Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu pushed for the formation of the War Cabinet and declared a state of war while ordering increased air strikes on Hamas positions in the Gaza Strip and mobilising the Army to prepare for an all-out ground offensive against Hamas.

On October 28, 2023, Prime Minister Netanyahu announced the start of phase two of the “Iron Swords” campaign, deploying amphibious forces to attack the Gaza Strip. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) has expanded its ground and underground attacks, combined with an air campaign targeting Hamas’ facilities. Meanwhile, Hamas accused Israel of killing Israeli hostages during these strikes, besides fighting back in Gaza and continuously launching projectiles at Israel.

At the end of November 2023, Hamas announced a truce with Israel, brokered by Egypt and Qatar, on a four-day humanitarian ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, which took effect on November 24, 2023. They renewed the ceasefire several times, but on the morning of December 1, 2023, the IDF accused Hamas of violating the ceasefire agreement in Gaza and opening fire on Israeli territory. Hence, the IDF continued its combat operations in the Gaza Strip. The end of the ceasefire agreement with Hamas means that the IDF moves the ground military campaign to stage three, throughout the territory of the Gaza Strip, to eliminate

threats from Hamas and establish a management mechanism for Israel in this area. In February 2024, Israel announced the expansion of attacks to the Rafah city in southern Gaza, close to the Egyptian border, to destroy the four remaining battalions of Hamas. Nevertheless, Rafah shelters over half of Gaza’s Palestinian residents who have sought refuge from past IDF airstrikes. Israel’s plan to land on Rafah caused many international concerns about a massacre with immeasurable consequences. After months of war, the conflict has left more than 30,000 Palestinians dead, mostly women and children, and reduced much of the Gaza Strip’s infrastructure to rubble; 80% of Gaza’s population is severely affected; 2.3 million people had to leave their homes and hundreds of thousands were pushed to the brink of famine, lacking clean water, medical care and essential services².

The conflict in the Gaza Strip tends to spread to many areas in the Middle East when it involves the participation of other Iranian proxy forces (Hezbollah and Houthis). Iran has denied direct involvement in Hamas’s activities but expressed support for this group. Specifically, on the Israel-Lebanon border, fighting has taken place daily between the IDF and Hezbollah militant groups since October 7, 2023, causing considerable casualties on both sides. As of February 25, 2024, Hezbollah announced that it had attacked nearly 1,000 different targets of the IDF in the border area, killing 211 soldiers and forcing the Israeli Army to

deploy three more divisions from Gaza to the border with Lebanon to enhance security. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah announced that Hezbollah's presence at the border had held back 1/3 of the Israeli Army and 1/2 of the Navy. On the Israel-Syria border, numerous air strikes between the two sides have also been recorded since the conflict broke out between Israel and Hamas. However, the severity is not as severe as on the Israel-Lebanon front. On November 1, 2023, the Houthis Islamic Movement in Yemen claimed responsibility for a drone attack on Israel and carried out many long-range missile attacks on the city of Eilat/Israel, forcing Israel to activate their air defence systems and mobilise naval forces to support the U.S. and allied forces in the Red Sea. Attacks of Houthis and Hezbollah contributed to dispersing Israel's focus on Hamas in southern Gaza with a commitment to support and unite with Hamas until the Israeli Army completely withdrew from Gaza.

Objectives and intentions of the two sides in the conflict

For Israel

The highest goals of Operation "Iron Swords" are to restore military deterrence, protect the national interests and security of Israel as well as domestic military and civil facilities of Israel against attacks from such armed forces as Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Hezbollah in the border with Lebanon and Houthis from Yemen as well as other rebel forces in the region. Especially for Hamas,

Prime Minister Netanyahu has repeatedly affirmed that Israel will continue its current war in Gaza until achieving all its aims, including destroying members of Hamas. In addition, Israel wants to show off its strength while maintaining its superiority in military power, as well as affirming its political and diplomatic position against "adversaries" and among allies in the Middle East region. Since the beginning of the military conflict with Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Israel has received relatively large commitments of political support and security assistance from Western allies, especially the U.S. Recently, Prime Minister Netanyahu's administration has remained firmly opposed to the peace plan or "Two-State" solution promoted by several intermediary countries, including the U.S. Accordingly, Israel is trying to use the progress achieved on the battlefield to put pressure on the U.S. and its allies. Ultimately, Israel wants to rescue all hostages but still puts much pressure on Hamas and other rebel forces holding hostages in the Gaza Strip to force them to reduce their demands and create favourable conditions to move toward a long-term post-war solution in Gaza that benefits Israel as well as the Jewish community.

After more than five months of conducting Operation "Iron Swords", the IDF divided the Gaza Strip into two parts, the Northern and Southern areas, gaining extensive territory in the North, notably Gaza City. In addition, Israel claimed about 12,000 out of

30,000 Hamas fighters were killed in the Gaza Strip³. Hamas's forces and command system in northern Gaza were basically neutralised, and kilometres of tunnels were destroyed, causing the activities of Hamas in northern Gaza to be "paralyzed." On February 23, 2024, Prime Minister Netanyahu publicly proposed a plan to prepare for post-conflict in the Gaza Strip, which includes establishing a security buffer zone in Gaza. Israel's continued promotion of its military campaign in the central and southern Gaza Strip is likely a move to pressure the international community to accept this plan. Besides, Israel continues to receive support from the U.S. and the West in its war with Hamas. Despite some disagreements regarding humanitarian issues and post-conflict management of the Gaza Strip, the West, especially the U.S., still supports Israel. On February 20, 2024, the U.S. continued to veto the U.N. Security Council's Draft Resolution on the situation in Gaza, which is the third time the U.S. has vetoed a draft resolution related to the Israel-Hamas conflict since October 2023.

For Hamas

The specific goal of Operation "Al-Aqsa Storm" was to break Israel's long-standing blockade of the Gaza Strip. In addition, Hamas wants to prevent the Middle East peace process between Israel and the "Arab World" in general and Saudi Arabia in particular, promoted by the U.S. Hamas forces consider this compromise to have prompted the Jewish government to step up

its repression policy against Palestinians. In addition, Hamas wants to attract support from the Palestinian people as well as the international community for its "career." Hamas determines that the only way to accomplish its mission is through violent struggle, so Hamas rejects all peaceful solutions and refuses to recognize the State of Israel. Hamas is also competing politically and strategically with President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah Movement in the West Bank, which is internationally recognized as the current official Palestinian Authority. In the long term, Hamas's biggest goal is to completely liberate the Palestinian territory occupied by Israel, unify the people and country as well as build an "Islamic State" here under Hamas leadership. According to Hamas's perspective, the occupied Palestinian territory includes all of today's Israeli territory along with the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

Currently, Hamas gunmen continue to firmly "stick" to the Gaza Strip due to its guerrilla fighting tactics and a complex tunnel system. In the seven-day ceasefire agreement, Hamas consolidated and hid its forces while re-establishing contacts with other "jihadist" forces in Gaza and developing new measures to fight against Israeli ground forces... In addition, according to the U.S. Institute for the Study of War, Hamas and the other Palestinian militias' transition from delaying operations to deliberate defence, especially in the North, successfully slowed down the pace of Israel's attack. Expert Ahron Bregman at Kings College London

said that “in northern Gaza, Hamas operates like a guerrilla force by avoiding major battles. However, this tactic may change when Israel operates in southern Gaza. Hamas can return to its traditional organizational structure, divided into formations of battalions and brigades.”⁴ Despite the small number of troops, Hamas is ready to retake the northern areas whenever Israel is caught off guard. Furthermore, Hamas continues to receive significant attention from the international community. Some international experts assess that the current Israeli government’s drastic and “aggressive” response to the current conflict could bring many benefits to Hamas. The ground offensive campaign that Israel has launched in the Gaza Strip is alienating Israel from neighbouring countries, exacerbating regional tensions. In the long term, the conflict in the Gaza Strip could increase support for Hamas, at least among some Muslim countries in the region.

Hamas’s raid on Israeli territory restored the “resistance spirit” of the gunmen and the support of the Palestinian people against Israel. After “taking over” Gaza in 2007, Hamas must avoid conflict with Israel as much as possible to ensure that Israel does not increase economic pressure and launch large-scale attacks on Gaza. However, this caused disagreements within Hamas when it was said to have lost its fighting goals. According to a recent poll among the Palestinian community, 72% of respondents believe that Hamas was “right” to launch the attack on October 7,

2023. The majority of those polled believe that Hamas’s efforts are only aimed at protecting the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem against “Jewish extremists.” In the West Bank, 44% of respondents said they support Hamas, up from 12% in September 2023. In Gaza, this Muslim group received 42% support, a slight increase from 38% in September 2023⁵.

An analysis of some scenarios of the Israel - Hamas conflict shortly

Scenario One: Israel and Hamas reach a temporary ceasefire agreement and pause fighting activities in Gaza. This scenario is highly likely to happen when Israel and mediators have agreed on a proposal to pause fighting for about six weeks in exchange for the release of about 40 hostages held by Hamas. Israel is under tremendous pressure from the international community to launch a ground attack on the city of Rafah, which can increase the risk of a humanitarian disaster in the Gaza Strip. All E.U. countries, except Hungary, have warned Israel against this plan. Meanwhile, the U.S. (Israel’s close ally) also continuously warns Israel to be cautious with the decision to attack Rafah. The U.S. hopes to reach a temporary ceasefire agreement soon to rescue hostages, considering it a necessary condition to maintain long-term support for Israel. Within Israel, Prime Minister Netanyahu is also facing opposition from hostage families and political pressure, being accused of “prioritising his own political life over the interests of the country.” The conflict

between Israel's War Cabinet is also becoming increasingly apparent between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Benny Gantz. Furthermore, it is difficult for Israel to rescue all hostages through military action and pressure, so a temporary ceasefire could help Israel find a way to locate hostages and gain time to prepare for further military operations in southern Gaza.

However, in this case, the conflict between Israel and Hamas will continue after the ceasefire agreement because the two sides have not reached their goals. Prime Minister Netanyahu himself stated that, even if the ceasefire negotiations and the release of hostages achieve progress, Israel is still determined to attack the city of Rafah. Achieving a ceasefire agreement would only delay Israel's campaign somewhat, and Israel would achieve victory within a few weeks.

Scenario Two: Israel escalates its ground war against Hamas, and the security situation on the Red Sea remains complicated. This scenario takes place when Israel launches a ground campaign in the city of Rafah, and Houthis forces continue to step up attacks on targets in the Red Sea. Israel is dominating the battlefield by successfully neutralising the majority of Hamas's battalions, nearly achieving the goal of building a security buffer zone in the Gaza Strip. In that scenario, Israel would have to carry out a lightning attack on Rafah to quickly destroy the roots of Hamas forces since they are

under tremendous international pressure. However, Israel faces two risks: First, the feasibility of destroying Hamas is not high because their solid, complex underground tunnel system and guerrilla warfare techniques could bog down Israel, besides the support of the Palestinians that Hamas has built up for long, especially after Operation "Al-Aqsa Storm." Second, great pressure from allies, especially the U.S., will prevent Israel from conducting offensive activities. The U.S. is preparing for the presidential election at the end of 2024, so President Joe Biden desperately needs the support of the American people, who are tired of the current government's conflict engagement policy. Therefore, during this time, the U.S. may reach an agreement with Iran to pressure Israel to withdraw its troops while Houthis no longer attack ships in the Red Sea area. Therefore, in reality, the possibility of this scenario is not too high.

Scenario Three: Israel and Hamas reach a long-term ceasefire agreement and conduct diplomatic negotiations on a peaceful solution to the conflict. This scenario is almost unlikely to happen in the short term because Israel's current top goal is still to destroy Hamas, and up to this point, Israel has not yet completed its plan. Most of the remaining Hamas fighters may still be hiding in the city of Rafah, and this will be an essential target for Israel. Israel will not stop until completely neutralising Hamas's military capabilities or pushing this group out of the Gaza Strip.

Conclusion

The conflict between Israel and Hamas has peaked with military operations following the attack by Hamas on October 7, 2023. Continuous fighting has caused both sides to suffer losses and created a severe humanitarian disaster for the Palestinian people, questioning the role of international laws and threatening regional security, especially the risk of conflict-spreading. Hamas has succeeded in attracting attention from the international community and the support of the Palestinian people. At the same time, Israel has restored its deterrent power through its retaliation, although its somewhat extreme response is facing fierce opposition from the international community. Therefore, shortly, Israel and Hamas may negotiate a temporary ceasefire to appease public opinion, recalculate benefits, and plan for further moves. However, regarding their current viewpoints, the security situation in the Middle East will be complicated to predict even if a ceasefire is achieved./

Notes:

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/10/israel-revises-death-toll-from-october-7-hamas-attack-to-1200-people>

² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/longform/2023/10/9/israel-hamas-war-in-maps-and-charts-live-tracker>

³ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-12000-hamas-fighters-killed-in-gaza-war-double-the-terror-groups-claim/>

⁴ [https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20231205-how-hamas-s-military-strategy-](https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20231205-how-hamas-s-military-strategy-against-israel-is-evolving-in-southern-gaza)

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⁵ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/poll-shows-soaring-support-for-hamas-in-west-bank-as-90-say-abbas-should-resign/>

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