

Events in Israel 7-14 October 2023

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In the early hours of October the 7th, Hamas launched an unprecedented attack on Israel naming it Al-Aqsa Flood. Thousands of rockets rained down on areas in Israel in the first few hours. These gave cover to Hamas militants, who sent armed drones to hit parts of Israel's electronic border alarm system, broke through Israeli military posts and the security fence around Gaza, or flew over the barrier in motorised hang gliders, penetrating urban areas and killing or kidnapping Israelis, many of them civilians, including children and elderly people. Some militants tried to infiltrate Israel by sea.

7 October is a highly symbolic day. It coincides with the Jewish holiday Sukkot, commemorating the 40-year migration of the people of Israel to the Promised Land. On that day, Jews worldwide celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (in German: Laubhüttenfest or Erntedankfest). It turned out to be a truly bloody harvest.

Hamas's actions on the morning of 7 October were unprecedented. It was the first time that its militants were able to break out of the confinement of Gaza in numbers, and the first time that they stormed and took control of adjacent Israeli communities, something no Arab army had ever done. It is also the first time that Palestinians have taken hostage scores of Israeli soldiers and civilians, transporting an unknown number, possibly over a hundred, back with them into Gaza. Strikingly, Israel's extensive border sensors proved useless in preventing the breach. The events left many Israelis feeling numb and vulnerable, as well as shocked by the intelligence and security failures that the Hamas attacks had exposed.

The attack began with rocket fire from the Gaza Strip into Israel, followed by Hamas advancing from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory. Hamas and its ally Islamic Jihad murdered at least 1,300 civilians and soldiers and abducted more than a hundred others. It was the largest mass murder of Jews since the Holocaust. In response to the attack, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared a state of war for the first time since the Yom Kippur War in 1973.

By mid-morning the same day, Israeli aircraft had launched strikes on suspected Hamas facilities in the Gaza Strip, including several

residential high-rises that were brought down. Israel also began deploying army units to the south in order to recapture the border communities under Hamas fighters' control. Israel appeared to be preparing for a ground invasion to free Israeli hostages held by Hamas, cut the group down to size or even remove it from power. It has called up 300,000 reservists.

Numbers of dead and injured on both sides rose quickly: on the 9th of October, Israeli sources said at least 800 Israelis had been killed and more than 2,300 wounded. On the Palestinian side, health authorities have reported more than 500 Palestinians killed and over 2,700 injured, mainly by Israeli airstrikes in Gaza.

Israel's security cabinet approved a formal declaration of war, invoking Article 40 of the Basic Law for the first time in half a century, that is after the war in 1973 against Egypt and Syria that began on the sixth of October 1973. It is quite obvious that Hamas chose exactly this very symbolic date.

Hamas may have considered it opportune to strike at a moment of deep domestic division in Israel over the role of the judiciary. It may also have wanted to make its move against the background of external powers being preoccupied with the war in Ukraine and it may also have watched with alarm how Palestinians in Gaza had started to openly criticize the Hamas government for its poor performance against the backdrop of a stifling Israeli siege. Some people had taken these protests to the street.

On the next day, Israeli warplanes launched new airstrikes in the Gaza Strip. At least 20,000 Palestinians sought refuge in schools and shelters, according to the United Nations Office for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). In the evening, the Israeli Defense Forces said they had attacked a total of 120 targets in the northern Gaza Strip.

On the 9th of October, an Israeli military spokesperson said that fighting continued in Israeli settlements close to the Gaza Strip. In particular, 70 terrorists had advanced into the kibbutz Be'eri, massacring approximately 1,000, more than one tenth of the population, before the Israeli army arrived and announced that it had killed most of the terrorists in combat. An exit or entrance to the Gaza tunnel system was reportedly discovered near Kibbutz Kfar Aza.

At noon the same day, Israel launched an extensive attack on the Gaza Strip using fighter jets, helicopters and artillery, hitting more than

1,000 targets. The airstrikes also hit a market in the Jabaliya refugee camp, which was populated with civilians. Hamas also fired rockets into Israeli territory again, with casualties from hits near Jerusalem.

In the evening, Abu Obaida, spokesman for the Kassam Combat Brigade, announced that Hamas would henceforth execute an Israeli hostage every time an Israeli airstrike on the Gaza Strip hit civilians' homes "without warning". The Israeli military declared that it had captured hundreds of Hamas terrorists and killed hundreds during the day. On the same day, in an interview with Al Jazeera, Hamas representatives expressed readiness for a ceasefire, saying that the objectives had been "achieved".

Fighting continued until the morning of 10th of October. Of the civilians killed some were decapitated and others burned by Molotov cocktails. Even after Hamas' announcement the previous day regarding the killing of hostages, Israel continued its airstrikes on the Gaza Strip. Some 200 Hamas facilities were hit. The United Nations, however, pointed out that civilian facilities were also hit in the attacks. A few hours after Hamas had called on the population of Ashkelon to leave the city, it fired rockets at Ashkelon and Tel Aviv. There was also renewed mutual rocket or artillery fire between the Lebanese Hizbollah and Israel.

The only large power plant in Gaza was shut down due to lack of fuel. People are left with generators and solar power. Gaza's largest hospital, Al-Shifa, could run for "at most" four days thanks to an emergency supply of generators, a New York Times reporter reported. The World Health Organization informed that supplies for seven hospitals had been used up. The relief organization Doctors Without Borders (Ärzte ohne Grenzen) said that surgical equipment, antibiotics, fuel and other supplies were in short supply at two hospitals it operates in Gaza. The United Nations Refugee and Works Association for Palestine in the Near East (UNRWA) said it needed \$104 million to fund food, medicine and other supplies for about half a million people in Gaza for the next three months. The relief agency's stockpile in Gaza was only enough to feed about 150,000 people for twelve days. Nine United Nations staff were killed by Israeli airstrikes in Gaza since Saturday. The number of Palestinians killed in Israeli airstrikes in Gaza rose to at least 1,050, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. The number of dead in Israel from Hamas large-scale attacks

has risen to more than 1,200 as of 11 October, according to Israeli army figures. At least 3,000 people were injured.

At the Rafah border crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip, convoys carrying relief supplies have been jammed, according to Egyptian reports. Egyptian vehicles carrying fuel, construction materials and food were not allowed to cross the border.

On 11th of October, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu formed an emergency government for the period in a state of war. The emergency cabinet was approved by the Knesset the following day.

All in all, the Israeli military from 7 October to 12 October dropped 6,000 bombs on the Gaza Strip, according to its own figures.

In the morning of the 13th of October, Israeli forces called on 1.1 million people in the north of the Gaza Strip to leave the territory by eight o'clock local time, heading south along designated routes.

According to a United Nations statement, such an evacuation is "impossible without devastating humanitarian consequences".

According to reports from the north of the Gaza Strip, Hamas prevented civilians from fleeing to the south. One of the routes mentioned was attacked by the IDF on the same day.

On the 13th of October Israeli forces reported ground operations in the Gaza Strip for the first time in order to free hostages and destroy terror infrastructure. In the process, they said they found the bodies of abducted hostages.

On the 14th of October, The Israel Defence Forces announced that air strikes in the Gaza Strip had killed Murad Abu Murad, head of Hamas air operations, who was involved in planning the 7th of October attacks in Israel.

Apart from conventional fighting, all in all 58 groups participated in cyber war, the majority of which were active against Israel, but a few were also active in favor of Israel, temporarily shutting down Palestinian websites. Among the anti-Israeli groups are also pro-Russian hacktivist groups that already acted in cyberwarfare against Ukraine and its allies. For example, the pro-Russian group Killnet, which launched hacking attacks against German authorities and companies in January 2023, is responsible for attacks against both Israel and Ukraine.

The United Nations Permanent Fact-Finding Mission on the Israel-Palestine Conflict reported that there was "clear evidence that war crimes were committed in the recent explosion of violence in Israel and Gaza, and all those who violated international law and targeted civilians should be held accountable." Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International said that both Hamas' and Israel's conduct in the war constituted war crimes.

What will happen next? A look into the crystal ball is not really promising, at least not in the short term. I believe that at some point, probably after days if not weeks of fighting, there will be concerted international efforts to bring about a ceasefire, with Egypt, Qatar and possibly Türkiye leaning on Hamas. There will also be calls on Israel to de-escalate, particularly from actors outside the West, many of whom, including South Africa, are united in sympathy for the Palestinian struggle. Hamas may decide to release some hostages "for humanitarian reasons", such as children, the elderly and the sick. But events have entered uncharted territory: The coming battle, from Israel's perspective, is about gaining the freedom of all the Israeli hostages in Gaza, teaching Hamas a harsh lesson, and re-establishing dominance and the credibility of its defenses. From Hamas's perspective, there needs to be a dramatically different international approach to the plight of Gazans and of Palestinians generally. A ceasefire may require more complex negotiations than those that have ended other recent rounds of armed conflict and a lot more fighting before that happens.

More broadly, the events that started on 7 October show that Israel cannot maintain a three-front calm. Its preoccupation with the perceived threat from Hizbollah in the north and its decision to deploy the bulk of its troops to the West Bank to protect settlers appears to have enabled, if not motivated, the militants' offensive. In Gaza, even regular bombardments – and even Israel's sophisticated weaponry, spyware and world-renowned intelligence apparatus – have not prevented Hamas from building an effective asymmetrical warfare capacity. In Israeli parlance, "mowing the grass" every few years no longer works to maintain the siege on Gaza and preserve security at the same time.

Yet Israel faces no clear alternative for continuing its overall control of the Gaza Strip. If it overthrows Hamas, the only way forward

would be for Israel to station soldiers in Gaza once more. Trying to oust Hamas and replace it with other Palestinian leadership will not work, since the Palestinian Authority headed by Mahmud Abbas has proven incapable of governing the West Bank, and no alternative presents itself.

The U.S. push for normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia is likely to be put on hold or at least to make little headway as long as fighting continues. Riyadh, like other Arab capitals, is keenly aware of the pro-Palestinian sentiments among the population it rules. It will think twice before risking the perception that it would be throwing the Palestinians under the bus by striking such a deal.

These events also show that no world power can expect that Israel's conflict with the Palestinians will somehow go away. The continued occupation, the end of any peace process and the dying hope of a two-state solution are driving the region toward a major war or at least repeated outbursts of severe violence. Today, all signs point to Israel and Hamas fighting things out, with devastating consequences, as the shocking news this morning (October the 18th) demonstrate: In the attack on a hospital in Gaza up to 500 people were killed. Hamas and Israel blamed each other for the attack.

Ideally, the hopelessness of the continued confrontation will blow new life into peace efforts, including by empowering peace camps in both Israel and Palestine. For now, though, world powers should counsel restraint, at least behind closed doors, even as they publicly damn Hamas for the attack. They should lay the groundwork for attempts to bring about a ceasefire and hold on to the small hope that the power balance at that point opens space for a way forward that does not repeat the destructive patterns of the past.