

Israel prepares to retaliate on Gaza. One week after the attack

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Following the attack on 7 October in which Hamas militants murdered 1400 people, injured 3500 and abducted at least 199, Israel is taking retaliatory action against Gaza. So far this has taken the form of bombing raids (6000 bombs were dropped in the first six days alone, striking 3600 targets). As a result, more than 2600 Palestinians (both Hamas-linked and civilians) have been killed and more than 9500 injured (as of the morning of 15 October). According to human rights organisations, Israel allegedly used banned phosphorus munitions during its attacks. The second dimension of its response includes cutting off Gaza's electricity, fuel and food supplies. The intention is to force Hamas to hand over those they have kidnapped, but in practice this has primarily led to a drastic deterioration of the humanitarian situation. Water supplies, halted on 9 October, were partially restored after President Joe Biden's intervention on 15 October, but only to the southern part of the Strip.

Israel at war

These actions will almost certainly be followed by a land and naval operation. Israel has mobilised more than 300,000 reservists and moved a significant part of its ground forces to the Gaza border. On 13 October, it also ordered the inhabitants of the northern part of the Strip – numbering more than a million people – to leave the area and move south (below the Wadi Gaza National Park) within 24 hours, although despite this deadline Israel has not yet launched a full-scale ground invasion, probably as a result of international pressure to give the civilian population more time to evacuate. This step has been condemned by the UN and human rights organisations: they considered this plan to be unfeasible, both because there was too little time, and because there is insufficient infrastructure to accommodate such a huge number of people, especially considering the acute shortage of electricity (which currently comes only from diesel generators), water, food, medicine and hospital beds. As a result of problems with power supplies, the war damage to the transmission network and potentially deliberate (though still not formally confirmed) actions taken by Israel, it is also becoming increasingly difficult to access the internet in the Strip. This limits the flow of information from there, making it more difficult to establish the situation on the ground and reinforcing Israel's already extensive dominance of the information space.

The army has eliminated the Hamas militants still within Israel itself, and has secured the border with Gaza due to the damage done to the so-called security barrier in the attack. However, towns in the southern and central parts of the country remain under periodic rocket fire from Hamas, albeit less intense than that of 7 October; this is mostly being

successfully neutralised by Israeli air defences.

The situation is also very tense in the Israel/Lebanon border area. On one hand, the pro-Iranian Hezbollah (with rockets and anti-tank weapons) and Palestinian groups in Lebanon are carrying out targeted attacks, while Israel is launching retaliatory air strikes on the other. Israeli aircraft have also attacked Damascus and Aleppo airports (thus obstructing Iran's air communications with its allies in Syria and Lebanon). Defence Minister Yoav Galant has stated that Israel is not seeking an escalation on its northern borders, but if Hezbollah triggers one it will be ready. The Israeli armed forces have also declared that they can conduct operations 'in any part of the Middle East' if necessary.

Meanwhile attacks by armed Jewish settlers on the Palestinian population in the Israeli-occupied West Bank – which were already occurring regularly – are becoming increasingly frequent. Dozens of people have been murdered in attacks of this kind since 7 October.

The 'war cabinet'

The attack by Hamas has brought about significant changes in Israel's domestic politics. On 11 October, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Benny Gantz, one of the leaders of the parliamentary opposition and a former chief of General Staff of the IDF, formed a so-called war cabinet. In addition to these two politicians, it includes minister Galant (as a member) and the minister of strategic affairs Ron Dermer (a close associate of Netanyahu) and another former IDF chief of staff Gadi Eizenkot (an ally of Gantz) as observers.

Israel now has three cabinets: a full government backed by the existing nationalist-religious coalition; a narrower state security cabinet (as stipulated in law, which was already in place before the attack), consisting of the prime minister and elected ministers and now expanded to include Gantz and Eizenkot; and an *ad hoc* war cabinet, without formal legal authority but which has a historical precedent from the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

The latter body, in the light of the understanding between Netanyahu and Gantz, is supposed to serve as the most important decision-making body for the duration of the crisis, but given PM Netanyahu's political biography to date, it seems likely that he will look for opportunities to weaken his partner and political rival, including by actually watering down this arrangement.

The expanded political base of the cabinet will temporarily strengthen Netanyahu's extremely weakened position: according to opinion polls, more than 94% of Israelis hold his government responsible for the state's failure to prepare for the 7 October attack, and 56% want him to step down once the crisis is over. The public mood is likely to deteriorate further as criticism grows over the cabinet's public silence regarding how the state intends to recover the hostages abducted by Hamas to the Gaza Strip.

International reactions

In foreign policy, the Israeli government is currently focusing on gaining the widest possible support for a retaliatory action against Hamas and preparing global public opinion for it. They have stated that the attack represents the greatest crime against Jews since the Holocaust (Netanyahu even compared it to the mass extermination of Jews at Babi Yar in 1941), and that the brutality of Hamas's methods is similar to those of the Islamic State (including claims that young children were beheaded, although this particular accusation

has not yet been confirmed). They also hold Hamas entirely responsible for the situation of the civilian population in Gaza. The Israeli foreign ministry has also used the slogan of 'Either you are on the side of Israel or you are on the side of terrorism'.

In response to the attack, the United States (in remarks by President Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and numerous members of Congress) has given Israel its unequivocal political support. In a speech on 10 October, Biden highlighted the exceptional brutality of the strike, saying they were "reminiscent of the worst massacres by ISIS", and supported Israel's right to defend itself. The US also announced that it would provide material assistance in the form of ammunition (deliveries of which have already begun) and air defence reinforcements. The President also decided to redeploy two aircraft carrier strike groups to the eastern Mediterranean (the USS *Gerald R. Ford* is already there, while the USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* left the Norfolk naval base on 14 October); this move is intended to deter other regional actors – primarily Iran and its affiliate Hezbollah – from becoming involved in the conflict.

At the same time, the Americans (like Israel) appear to be seeking to reduce the level of regional tensions, emphasising the lack of any evidence that Iran was directly involved in the planning and execution of the 7 October attacks. As for the civilians in Gaza, meanwhile, Washington is presumably exerting behind-the-scenes pressure on Egypt to create 'humanitarian corridors', which would effectively open the way for some of them to be relocated, although it is unclear how many and for how long.

At the same time – after having given a general political 'green light' to Israel to launch its very strong response – the US is now also trying to a limited extent to exert a moderating influence on it. Examples of this approach include the Israeli decision to partially resume water supplies after US intervention, and the public statements made by Secretary Blinken rejecting the idea (which has been articulated in Israeli public debate) of displacing Gaza's population to Egypt. For his part President Biden has publicly stated that Israel's renewed occupation of the Strip would be "a big mistake", and expressed confidence that it would act in accordance with the principles of the law of armed conflict.

As preparations for Israel's ground offensive progressed, on 14 October Iran communicated to Israel via the UN that it did not want a regional escalation of the conflict, but that it would intervene (either directly or through proxies such as the pro-Iranian groups in Syria or Hezbollah in Lebanon) if the operation is launched. At the same time, however, Tehran's fear of escalating the situation is evident. The Iranian government has denied any involvement in preparing the attack by Hamas; the country's president Ebrahim Rai'si also held his first telephone conversation with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman since 2016.

In response to the Hamas attack, Russia expressed "deep concern over the sharp escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" and called for a ceasefire on both sides. It also stressed that the situation could only be resolved by political means on the basis of a "two-state solution". Russia also tabled a draft resolution (while not naming Hamas) in the UN Security Council calling for an immediate ceasefire between the parties. If it is brought to a vote (tentatively scheduled for 16 October), it will be vetoed by the US, and probably also by other Western states, who prefer to leave it up to Israel to end the confrontation with Hamas on its terms.

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, speaking to his Saudi Arabian and Turkish counterparts, was said to have stated that “Israel’s actions have gone beyond the right of self-defence”, and that the country “should heed the call of the international community and the UN Secretary-General and stop the collective punishment of the people of Gaza”. The Chinese government has reiterated its position that an end to the conflict could only be achieved through a two-state solution and the creation of an independent Palestine, but made no reference to the actions of Hamas itself.

In contrast, the EU’s response to the situation in the Middle East can be described as ambiguous. On 13 October, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and the President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola paid a solidarity visit to Israel. They met Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Yitzak Herzog, and in their speeches proclaimed their support for Israel’s right to self-defence and the need to fight terror together. However, the visit and its overtones came in for widespread criticism; von der Leyen’s failure to emphasise both the need to care for civilians and Israel’s obligations to comply with the principles of international humanitarian law were seen as exceeding her remit in a manner not sanctioned by the EU’s member states. The EU’s High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell, like the President of the European Council Charles Michel, have placed much greater emphasis on humanitarian issues in their statements. On 15 October, the EU states issued a joint communiqué condemning Hamas’s attack and reaffirming Israel’s right to self-defence in accordance with humanitarian and international law while protecting civilians. At the same time, they stressed their commitment to a peace based on a two-state solution, and to the participation by the legitimate Palestinian Authority in dialogue.

Commentary

- A week after the attack, the conflict between Israel and Hamas and the situation around it is becoming increasingly tense. The former has declared that it seeks the definitive defeat of the organisation and the removal of any threat from Gaza in the future. Senior Israeli officials have stated that “Gaza will no longer be the same” (Chief of General Staff Hertsli Halevi), “Gaza will not go back to being what it was” (minister Galant) and that the aim of the operation against Hamas is to “create a new reality in Gaza” (the Prime Minister’s advisor Mark Regev). In practice, it is unclear how these aims would be realised without inflicting colossal losses on Gaza’s civilian population and/or temporarily or permanently displacing them (in whole or in part), for example to Egypt. The latter would inevitably bring accusations that Israel is conducting ethnic cleansing. However Israel’s definition of its ultimate and achievable military and political objectives still seems to be evolving – not least under pressure from the US, which in the current situation clearly has greater leverage over the government in Jerusalem than it did in the past.
- The US approach appears to be to create conditions for Israel to respond with political and material support, and to provide credible deterrence which will discourage Iran and the forces associated with it from joining the conflict. The intention is thus to enable Israel to end the conflict on its own terms, allowing it to regain a sense of security. At the same time, however, Washington is working to avoid the most drastic scenarios, such as a humanitarian catastrophe in the Strip (the beginnings of which we are already seeing)

or the effective displacement of its population out of Gaza. In practice, though, these two rationales are extremely difficult to reconcile.

- Iran's behaviour during the first week after the Hamas attack suggests that these events have taken Tehran by surprise, and it was not prepared for them. Iran's actions also indicate that a serious escalation of the regional situation would not be in its favour at this time. However, the prospect of an Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip, which would probably eliminate the rule of Hamas – an organisation which is independent of Tehran but allied to it – would pose a serious threat to its own regional position. It seems unlikely that the Iranian government would allow this to come about without attempting to escalate the conflict.
- The persistence and worsening of the Gaza conflict are advantageous for Russia and China, as it allows them to divert US attention & resources away from Ukraine & Taiwan, and to position themselves internationally as 'pro-peace' forces calling for an immediate ceasefire. The situation around the Strip will also undoubtedly be used by Moscow and Beijing to point out the hypocrisy of the West, as applying double standards to the war in Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East. The audience for this message will primarily be the countries of the so-called Global South, whose favour and support the US and the EU have been seeking in the context of the war in Ukraine.