

Attack and revenge: two months of war in the Gaza Strip

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On 7 October 2023, Hamas breached the Israeli security barrier, took the units of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) which were deployed there by surprise and seized control of the border region for several hours. During that time, it carried out a mass-scale massacre of the local civilian population, took numerous individuals hostage and abducted them. The same day also saw the launch of a retaliatory military operation targeting the Gaza Strip, which is incomparable with any previous stage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in terms of its brutality measured by the number of victims and the scale of damage.

As a result of the attack, Israel found itself facing a deep crisis affecting its security, domestic and foreign policy, as well as the identity of the state as a safe haven for Jews from all over the world. However, from the point of view of the residents of the Gaza Strip, the aftermath has resulted in the deaths of thousands of individuals, a constant threat to life and health for those remaining, the destruction of the material basis of existence and uncertainty regarding whether they will be able to return to their homes, or even whether they will be able to remain in the Gaza Strip at all.

The unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the systemic cause of this situation. Alongside this, however, due to the magnitude of the shock, the number of victims, the scale of the damage and the political defeat suffered by moderate voices on both sides, the prospects for its political settlement are now even more illusory than previously.

The October 7 attack: the assessment and consequences

During the attack, Hamas fighters assassinated 827 civilians and killed 401 soldiers and 72 police officers. The most tragic events happened at an open air trance music festival, where around 360 individuals were killed, mainly people in their twenties and thirties. Other civilian victims included the residents of cross-border towns, where the perpetrators not only massacred the local population but also set fire to buildings, including those in which people were hiding.

The attackers acted in a deliberate and consistent manner. They searched for victims, killed the wounded, and their intention was to maximise the number of deaths. Random people were targeted irrespective of their age and gender. In addition to Israeli Jews (who were the main target of the attack), more than 60 foreigners (including agricultural workers from Thailand and students



from Nepal) and a group of Israeli Arabs were also killed. The killings were often carried out in an extremely brutal manner. Instances of sexual and gender-based violence¹ and the desecration of dead bodies were also recorded. However, a number of the most brutal atrocities (such as the decapitation and group execution of children, or the cutting out of a foetus from a pregnant woman's body) have not been confirmed.²

The 250 individuals who were taken hostage included minors (among them one infant), a large group of senior citizens, and foreigners (mainly Thai nationals). At present, following the release of some of the hostages during the 24–30 October ceasefire, 133 individuals remain in captivity.

It is still unclear what immediate political goal Hamas sought to achieve and what reactions it intended to trigger. The organisation considers it a success that it managed to expose its opponent's weakness and to tarnish Israel's image as an invincible state. The attack has also forced Israel to launch a land operation, which it had previously avoided. This was because this type of invasion creates a major risk for the soldiers, generates significant political, image-related and economic costs, and offers no guarantee of success. Moreover, it allows Hamas to make full use of its own resources during fighting in built-up areas.

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The mass killing of civilians has left its mark on the psyche of Israeli citizens, as was intended by the attackers. It has revealed Israel's inability to protect its own citizens on its territory, and has thus undermined the credibility of its pledge to ensure security to Jews.

The attack has also brought the Palestinian issue, which had been marginalised over the past two decades, back to the international political discourse, and frozen the process of the normalisation of relations between Israel and the Arab states (in particular Saudi Arabia). However, alongside this, no regionalisation of the conflict, as expected by Hamas, has occurred and the axis of pro-Iranian forces (including Shia groups in Iraq, Syria, the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Houthi movement in Yemen) has not joined the conflict on a significant scale. Nor have the Israeli Arabs joined the confrontation, and the activity of Palestinian militant groups in the West Bank has not been sufficiently intensive to be relevant from Hamas's point of view.

The halt in the normalisation of Israeli-Arab relations, which will undoubtedly persist during the active phase of the conflict, may likely turn out to be temporary. Although the developments in the Gaza Strip do pose an obstacle to it, they do not alter both parties' interest in continuing the process in the future.³ Furthermore, the return of the Palestinian issue to the international debate may prove to be short-lived, especially as the influence of external actors on Israeli policy is minor (with the exception of the US, and even in this case this influence is limited). Moreover, the authorities in Jerusalem have viewed Hamas's unprecedented brutality as a justification not only for a brutal military response, but potentially also for a modification of the territorial status quo.

However, there is no doubt that the 7 October attack and its aftermath have transformed Hamas into an organisation of global significance and the main Palestinian political group. Should the organisation survive and no new credible leadership emerge in the West Bank, it will continue to be one of

¹ *Sexual & Gender-based violence as weapon of war during the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks*, Physicians for Human Rights, November 2023, phr.org.il.

² N. Hasson, L. Rozovsky, 'Hamas Committed Documented Atrocities. But a Few False Stories Feed the Deniers', Haaretz, 4 December 2023, [haaretz.com](https://www.haaretz.com).

³ B. Ravid, 'White House: Saudi Arabia is still interested in pursuing mega-deal', Axios, 31 October 2023, [axios.com](https://www.axios.com).

the most important actors (and potentially the most important actor) in Palestinian politics, despite the crimes it perpetrated.

As regards Israel, the public debate which has been ongoing there for the past two months has resulted in suggestions that the state security bodies were in possession of information which indicated that Hamas was preparing an attack. However, this information was either ignored or failed to reach sufficiently high echelons of the decision-making apparatus.⁴ This misinterpretation was politically motivated. According to the assessment of the situation which had prevailed in the local establishment, Israeli security policy was effective and Hamas was incapable of carrying out a large-scale attack and, most importantly, it was not interested in carrying out such an attack because it knew that retaliation would be inevitable. In addition, from the point of view of the (dominant) right wing of the Israeli political scene, the situation in which the Gaza Strip was ruled by Hamas and the West Bank by the Palestinian Authority structures, was favourable. This was because it consolidated the fragmentation which prevented any return to discussions regarding the establishment of a Palestinian state (which the right-wing parties openly oppose).

The revenge

For the first three weeks, the Israeli military response involved massive bombing raids (6,000 bombs were dropped in the first six days alone). Alongside this, however, a partial mobilisation of reservists was carried out, and a land operation was launched on 27 October. Its initial goal was to seal off Gaza City, the largest city in the Gaza Strip and in the Palestinian territories in general, and then to surround and gradually capture it. This plan continues to be consistently carried out. At present, fighting between the Israeli armed forces and Hamas is taking place in the city centre.

Following the end of the ceasefire on 30 November, operations targeting the second largest city of Khan Yunis were launched in the south of the Gaza Strip. The IDF entered the city from the north and south and, as in the case of Gaza City, cut it off from the rest of the Strip.

Israel has applied enormous fire-power while conducting this operation (including tens of thousands of tonnes of bombs dropped over the last two months). In terms of the scale of physical damage, it may be

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compared to Allied air raids on German cities during the Second World War.⁵ By mid-November, almost 50% of buildings had been destroyed or damaged in the northern part of the Gaza Strip, and around 20% in the Strip as a whole. Due to the estimated number of bombs dropped so far, their total weight and the number of combat flights carried out, this war is considered to be one of the largest air operations of the 21st century, alongside operations such as the US air strikes on Iraq during the 2003 invasion.

Israel has also carried out strikes in the West Bank. Around 270 Palestinians have been killed as a result of these since 7 October. No information is available to indicate what proportion of these victims had been involved in armed activities. However, human rights organisations operating in Israel regularly publish graphic footage which documents instances of bystanders or individuals who do not pose a major threat (e.g. stone throwers) being killed.⁶

⁴ J. Dettmer, 'Our warnings on Hamas were ignored, Israel's women border troops say', Politico, 21 November 2023, politico.eu; R. Bergman, A. Goldman, 'Israel Knew Hamas's Attack Plan More Than a Year Ago', The New York Times, 30 October 2023, nytimes.com.

⁵ J.P. Rathbone, 'Military briefing: the Israeli bombs raining on Gaza', Financial Times, 6 December 2023, ft.com.

⁶ See for example a tweet by B'Tselem, 26 October 2023, twitter.com; a tweet by Jack Khoury, 1 November 2023, twitter.com; a tweet by B'Tselem, 1 November 2023, twitter.com.

The situation of the civilian population in the Gaza Strip

The official number of casualties is more than 18,000 (as at 10 December). However, the actual figure is much higher, if the group of almost 8,000 missing individuals is taken into account. There is no reliable information on how many Hamas fighters are among the killed. The number provided by the IDF is between 1,000–2,000 and 5,000. However, it is certain that civilians account for the vast majority of the victims. Due to the ongoing military activity (including the destruction and evacuation of the northern part of the Gaza Strip which Israel had ordered prior to launching its land operation), more than 1.7 million out of a total of 2.3 million Palestinians have left their homes. However, as the operation progresses, a major portion of this group will most likely once again face the choice whether to relocate or remain in an area of intense fighting.

The UN has referred to the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip as “apocalyptic”.⁷ At the same time, it should be noted that a more precise analysis of the situation is being hampered by the physical

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separation of the Gaza Strip, its problems with communicating with the rest of the world (including repeated outages of internet services), the deaths of more than 60 local reporters,⁸ and the fact that the assistance organisations which are present there are operating in conditions of the direct threat to their staff (by 12 December 139 UN workers had died in the conflict zone).⁹ However, there is no doubt that the situation of the Gaza Strip’s civilian population is extremely difficult due to war losses, the displacement of the population, damage to infrastructure, a drinking water deficit, Israel’s failure to provide electricity and its blocking, followed by rationing, of supplies of foodstuffs, medicines and fuel (including from the Egyptian side). For example, according to the UN World Food Programme, half of Gazans are starving, 90% of them eat too little and their meals are irregular (because they have no permanent access to food).¹⁰

Out of the 36 hospitals which operated in the Gaza Strip before the war, a mere 11 continue to function. This is particularly important in the context of the 18,000 dead, 50,000 injured (including those who have suffered severe injuries) and the rapid spread of diseases linked with poor sanitary conditions.¹¹ According to the UN, around 60,000 instances of diarrhoea have so far been recorded in children aged 5 and younger and more than 160,000 cases of acute respiratory tract infections.¹²

An assessment of the military activity carried out in the Gaza Strip

Official Israeli sources claim that all actions are carried out in compliance with the law on armed conflict. Nevertheless, independent Israeli media outlets and human rights organisations (such as the +972 magazine, B’Tselem and Breaking the Silence) argue, on the basis of information obtained from their sources in the country’s establishment and other reports, that the scale of military response is deliberately disproportionate,¹³ the rate of acceptable civilian casualties is too high, and the decision to attack civilian infrastructure without sufficient military justification has been deliberate and systemic. According to these organisations, aside from legitimate targets (such as command centres, arms depots, rocket launchers, tunnels) the Israeli army has systematically targeted public utility facilities

⁷ A tweet by Martin Griffiths, 4 December 2023, [twitter.com](#).

⁸ N. Narea, ‘Israel’s wartime assault on the free press’, *Vox*, 8 December 2023, [vox.com](#).

⁹ ‘Humanitarian disaster zone’: Gaza hospital capacity decimated – WHO, United Nations, 12 December 2023, [news.un.org](#).

¹⁰ A tweet by UN News, 14 December 2023, [twitter.com](#).

¹¹ See N. Narea, ‘Israel’s wartime assault on the free press’, *op. cit.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ A tweet by Breaking the Silence, 8 November 2023, [twitter.com](#).

(such as universities, public administration buildings, centres of culture, roads, bridges, parks) as well as office buildings and high rise residential buildings, while the justification for doing so is unclear. In addition, strikes targeting the homes of Hamas fighters result in the death of their family members and other occupants.¹⁴ Human Rights Watch has documented instances of systemic damage being inflicted on agricultural areas and facilities (such as fields, orchards and greenhouses),¹⁵ and Forensic Architecture has collected evidence confirming that excavation sites have also been targeted.¹⁶

Since access to statistics is limited, no hard evidence is available to prove that Israel indeed intends to increase the losses beyond the unavoidable. However, there is some circumstantial evidence to suggest this, such as:

- the unprecedented scale of damage,
- the results of investigations carried out by independent media outlets and NGOs,
- international assessments,¹⁷
- reports showing how the IDF carried out its combat operations in the past (see: Operation Protective Edge conducted in 2014),¹⁸
- the fact that Israel does possess precision weapons, which enables it to retain control of the scale of damage.

There are several potential reasons for this course of action. Israel's imperative has been to minimise the risk to its own soldiers, including at the expense of the lives of

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Palestinian civilians, while the massive use of aviation and the razing of entire districts to the ground reduce the risks associated with subsequent land operations. The mass-scale destruction also has a psychological effect. As a consequence, the authorities in Jerusalem can hope to deprive Hamas of its social base. Finally, Israeli politicians have repeatedly announced that the territory of the Gaza Strip would be reduced in retaliation for the 7 October attack and a security buffer would be set up there. Damage to the local infrastructure and the fact that civilians have been pushed in direction of the border with Egypt may potentially facilitate the implementation of this plan.¹⁹

The goals of the operation and post-war scenarios

Israel is arguing that its operation in the Gaza Strip is intended to destroy Hamas, result in the release of hostages and ensure that the Strip no longer poses a threat. However, the first of these goals is vague and as regards the third goal, it is unclear how it will be achieved. The Israeli government's reluctance to present any positive scenarios for the Gaza Strip once the conflict ends leaves a lot of room for speculation. They are certainly considering numerous options, and their final decision as to which one to choose will depend partly on the timing of the end of the main phase of the military operation, its final outcome and the US's stance.

¹⁴ Y. Abraham, 'A mass assassination factory': Inside Israel's calculated bombing of Gaza', +972 Magazine, 30 November 2023, 972mag.com.

¹⁵ A tweet by Human Rights Watch, 4 December 2023, twitter.com; a tweet by Human Rights Watch, 4 December 2023, twitter.com.

¹⁶ A thread by Forensic Architecture, 19 December 2023, twitter.com.

¹⁷ C. Chiappa, 'Israel wants to obliterate Gaza to deter Iran, Hezbollah, says Dutch memo', Politico, 14 November 2023, politico.eu.

¹⁸ *This is How We Fought in Gaza. Soldiers' testimonies and photographs from Operation "Protective Edge" (2014)*, Breaking the Silence, breakingthesilence.org.il.

¹⁹ M. Ben-Shabbat, 'חודש למלחמת חרבות ברזל: עשר הערות על הלחימה', N12, 8 November 2023, mako.co.il.

On the basis of the available information it can be assumed that in shaping the situation in Gaza, Israel will attempt to achieve two goals: to maintain overall control of the security situation while avoiding a long-term full occupation because this would require it to take over responsibility for organising the daily life of the Palestinian population and increase the risk of attacks against Israeli military personnel. Alongside this, as long as the Israeli right-wing parties remain in power (and forming a majority in the Knesset is impossible without the participation of at least some right-wing groupings) the situation in which the Palestinian Authority structures would take over administration of the Gaza Strip as a result of the war should be ruled out. Although this scenario has been promoted by the US administration, it would result in the resumption of the debate on the creation of a Palestinian state, which the right-wing parties oppose.²⁰

At the same time, these goals could be attained should one of the following scenarios materialise. The first one involves a (full or partial) permanent depopulation of the

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Gaza Strip,²¹ which would be achieved by making it unfit for human habitation.²² However, this scenario (which *de facto* equates to ethnic cleansing, even if it is presented using humanitarian rhetoric) is hampered by the absence of a unified stance in the Israeli military command structures, resistance from Israel’s neighbours (Egypt and Jordan) and US opposition. This does not mean that this option is not being considered, as demonstrated for example by press articles and public statements by members of the Israeli government²³ and representatives of the broadly understood establishment, which call on the international community to take part in the mass resettlement of the Gaza Strip’s residents to areas located outside its borders.²⁴ These calls should be viewed as an attempt to ‘read the room’. This scenario may materialise in part, for example in the northern part of the Gaza Strip, which a major portion of the population has already fled. It would be relatively easy for Israel to prevent these individuals from returning home due to reasons linked with security issues or poor living conditions.

Another scenario involves a situation which is similar to the present one in the West Bank, where isolated Palestinian-controlled areas are divided by areas controlled by Israel. In this manner, Israel has retained its ability to ration communication between these enclaves and its *de facto* control of the security situation across the region as a whole. Repeating this in the Gaza Strip would be facilitated by the fact that already at the present stage of the war it has become divided into the northern, central and southern parts. This state may likely be maintained for an indefinite period.

However, the view suggesting that both the conflict and the possible elimination of Hamas (whatever this would involve) could foster a return to the debate on the establishment of an independent Palestine seems unfounded. This vision had been divergent with the sentiment of a large portion of Israel’s society and establishment, while after 7 October it should be viewed as completely unrealistic. This is because the Israeli government will intend to avoid a situation in which they could be stripped of effective control of any territory which could potentially be used to launch an attack. This, in turn, rules out the possibility of sovereign Palestinian statehood emerging.

²⁰ B. Ravid, ‘Netanyahu says he opposes Palestinian Authority’s return to post-war Gaza’, *Axios*, 11 November 2023, [axios.com](https://www.axios.com).

²¹ M. Tuchfeld, ‘Will Israel actively encourage migration of Gazans? The hot potato that is dividing the government’, *Israel Hayom*, 3 December 2023, [israelhayom.com](https://www.israelhayom.com).

²² G. Eiland, ‘זו לא נקמת. זה אר אנחנו או הם’, *Yediot Aharonot*, 10 October 2023, [ynet.co.il](https://www.ynet.co.il).

²³ G. Gamliel, ‘Victory is an opportunity for Israel in the midst of crisis – opinion’, *The Jerusalem Post*, 19 November 2023, [jpost.com](https://www.jpost.com); ‘Israeli minister calls for voluntary emigration of Gazans’, *Reuters*, 14 November 2023, [reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com).

²⁴ D. Danon, R. Ben-Barak, ‘The West Should Welcome Gaza Refugees’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 November 2023, [wsj.com](https://www.wsj.com); a tweet by Younis Tirawi, 4 November 2023, twitter.com; a tweet by Yair Wallach, 22 November 2023, twitter.com.

Despite the political aspect, once the most intensive part of the military operation is complete, we should expect a prolonged conflict on a smaller scale, which would involve the IDF combing the area and eliminating hotspots of resistance.²⁵ This prompts the conclusion that the war will have no definite end and its second stage may last for a very long time or even permanently.²⁶

If this scenario materialises, this would spell a continuation of instability which the Israeli government will manage by applying hard security measures, with only minimal consideration for the situation of the Palestinians. If this happens, the difference compared with the state of affairs prior to 7 October would involve a major deterioration in the situation of the Gaza Strip's population due to human and material losses and Israel's stepped up control of the area. This, in turn, combined with war-related trauma, the pauperisation of the population and the lack of prospects, will only exacerbate the trend towards radicalisation. Ultimately, this area would, on the one hand, grow even more extremely dangerous and difficult to live in for the local residents and, on the other hand, it would continue to generate risks for Israel itself and the region.

Israel's domestic political situation

The scale and brutality of the 7 October attack, the surprise and helplessness of the state apparatus and the insufficient solidarity from abroad (as viewed by the Israelis), combined with the global increase in anti-Semitic incidents, have come as a shock to Israeli citizens. This shock has triggered strong emotions such as the feeling of an existential threat,²⁷ an increase in racist sentiment against Palestinians, anger towards the Israeli government and a feeling of being alone in the world.

This sentiment is seen for example in highly radical statements suggesting that all Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are co-responsible for the attack perpetrated by Hamas²⁸ and that everyone is to blame,²⁹ and in calls for a new Nakba (the displacement of 750,000 Palestinians from what is now Israeli territory during the war of 1948–1949)³⁰ or the nuclear bombardment of the Gaza Strip.³¹

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A poll conducted in mid-October by the Israel Democracy Institute³² showed that when asked the question whether the suffering of the Palestinian civilian population should be taken into account when planning a military response 48% of Jewish (as opposed to Arab) respondents answered “no” and another 36% said that this issue should be considered “to a small degree”.

The public sentiment in domestic politics is unfavourable to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his religious-nationalist coalition partners. The public has blamed the government for the 7 October disaster and for its inadequate response to these events, including the prolonged silence on how to

²⁵ See a tweet by Skynewsarabia, 10 December 2023, twitter.com.

²⁶ N.J. Brown, 'There Might Be No Day After in Gaza', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3 December 2023, carnegieendowment.org.

²⁷ See for example a tweet by i24NEWS_English, 28 November 2023, twitter.com.

²⁸ P. Blumenthal, 'Israeli President Suggests That Civilians In Gaza Are Legitimate Targets', HuffPost, 13 October 2023, huffpost.com.

²⁹ A tweet by Avigdor Liberman, 30 November 2023, twitter.com.

³⁰ A tweet by Afif Abu Much, 11 November 2023, twitter.com.

³¹ A tweet by NEXTA TV, 5 November 2023, twitter.com.

³² T. Hermann, O. Anabi, 'Flash Survey: More Israelis are optimistic about the country's future despite being at war', The Israel Democracy Institute, 23 October 2023, en.idi.org.il.

free the hostages. This negative attitude has translated into poll results showing the level of support for specific political parties – if elections were held in the coming days, the ruling coalition could lose more than 20 of its current 64 seats in parliament and a broad alliance of left wing-centre-right wing forces led by Benny Gantz could win around 70 seats (in the 120-seat Knesset).³³

Nevertheless, Netanyahu continues to serve as the prime minister (a new majority would be required in the present parliament to oust him), another election has been planned for 2026 (although it will certainly be held sooner) and the war has postponed the prospect of a potential political transition. In addition, although the October 7 attack has stripped the ruling right-wing coalition of credibility in the personnel and party line-up aspects, paradoxically it may bring it a long-term ideological victory in the form of the consolidation of chauvinist and racist attitudes towards the Palestinians in the public debate. This is likely, even if less radical forces come to power.

Should this scenario materialise, Israel would gradually become a state which increasingly disregards the rules of the liberal international order and which has an even stronger feeling of being an independent (and relatively isolated) subject in international politics, one which is not bound either by universal values or by belonging to any geopolitical bloc.

³³ 'Election poll shows Gantz at 43 seats, Netanyahu's Likud at 18, Smotrich out', *The Times of Israel*, 24 November 2023, [timesofisrael.com](https://www.timesofisrael.com).