

Israel and Hamas October 2023 Conflict: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

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On October 7, 2023, the Palestinian Sunni Islamist group Hamas (a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, or FTO) led surprise attacks against Israel by land, sea, and air. The assault came on a Jewish holiday, 50 years after the Egypt-Syria surprise attack that sparked the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The attacks' scope and lethality against Israel have no precedent in the 16 years Hamas has controlled Gaza, and the nature of the violence stunned Israelis. The apparent intelligence and operational failures in preventing the assault will be a subject of analysis for Israeli and U.S. officials. Iran reportedly provides material support to Hamas, and according to U.S. officials may be complicit in a broad sense, but President Biden has said "there is no evidence" that Iran helped plan the attack.

In response to the attacks, Israel's cabinet formally declared war on Hamas. Israel has initiated efforts to recover hostages, begun an aerial bombardment campaign against militants in Gaza, mobilized hundreds of thousands of reserve troops, and repositioned ground forces close to Gaza. Israel's government almost completely halted the supply of electricity, food, water, and fuel to Gaza, which before the conflict had already faced crisis-level economic and humanitarian conditions.

Israeli officials have said that they aim to change the status quo in Gaza, and are contemplating a major ground invasion that may seek to end Hamas's rule there. The Israel Defense Forces has said it "calls for" all civilians residing in northern Gaza to evacuate southward. Hamas called on people to remain in place. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has expressed concern for the effects Israeli actions regarding Gaza may have on civilian well-being. An estimated 1 million Gazans (nearly half the territory's population) have been displaced from their homes.

On October 16, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that the United States and Israel have agreed to develop a plan that will enable international humanitarian aid to reach civilians in Gaza. On October 18 during a visit to Israel, President Biden confirmed this plan and announced \$100 million in U.S. humanitarian assistance for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.

Reportedly, more than 1,400 Israelis (and at least 32 American civilians) and about 3,785 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed as of October 19. Additionally, Israel has reported that the bodies of around 1,500 dead attackers have been found in southern Israeli areas recaptured by its military. Militants are also reportedly holding some 200-250 persons hostage in Gaza (including some Americans). Hundreds of American citizens are estimated to be in Gaza, and the U.S. government is discussing safe passage for them with Egypt and Israel.

Hamas's attack preparations may have extended over several years. Possible motivating factors for the attacks' timing include the potential to disrupt Arab-Israeli normalization efforts, bolster Hamas's domestic and regional position, capitalize on Israeli political turmoil, and use hostages as leverage for prisoner releases or other concessions from Israel. The West Bank-based Palestinian Authority appears to be in a difficult position: unwilling to embrace Hamas and its attack on Israel, but unable to denounce them for fear of alienating West Bank Palestinians.

Exchanges of fire after October 7 between Israel and the Iran-backed Shia Islamist group Lebanese Hezbollah (another FTO) have fueled speculation that Hezbollah could create a second front at the Israel-Lebanon border. U.S. statements and actions, including expedited arms deliveries to Israel and the reported movement of major U.S. military assets, have conveyed warnings to Hezbollah not to get involved. President Biden is reportedly

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requesting that Congress appropriate up to an additional \$14 billion in U.S. security assistance for Israel. U.S. officials have stated that they do not intend the use of U.S. ground forces, but are reportedly deliberating about what might or might not “trigger U.S. military involvement.”

Congress may consider whether or not to provide additional military assistance to Israel. Congress also may weigh whether or not to increase scrutiny of the use of U.S. defense articles, provide humanitarian assistance for Palestinians, enact sanctions on Hamas or other parties, or otherwise legislate or conduct oversight.

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Conflict overview

On October 7, 2023, Gaza Strip-based militants led by the Palestinian Sunni Islamist group Hamas (a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, or FTO) engaged in a series of surprise attacks by land, sea, and air against Israel (see **Figure 1**. Israel and Gaza: Conflict Map). Palestine Islamic Jihad (or PIJ, another FTO) claimed that its forces also participated in the attacks, and others outside of Hamas and PIJ may also have joined. The assault targeted Israeli military bases and civilian areas during the final Jewish high holiday, just over 50 years after the Egypt-Syria surprise attack that sparked the 1973 Yom Kippur War, known in the Arab world as the October War. The attacks' scope and lethality against Israel have no precedent in the 16 years Hamas has controlled Gaza. The nature of the violence stunned Israelis and many others.³ The apparent intelligence and operational failures in preventing the assault or limiting its impact has become a subject of analysis for Israeli and U.S. officials.⁴

Possible Iranian role in Hamas attacks

The possible role of Iran in the planning, support, or execution of the Hamas attacks is a question of keen interest to many Members of Congress. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has described Iran as "complicit in this attack in a broad sense," given the level of support it has provided Hamas for years.¹ President Joe Biden said on October 15, "did they [Iran] have foreknowledge; did they help plan the attack ...there's no evidence of that at this point."²

For more detail, see "Did Iran play a role in planning, directing, or otherwise enabling the Hamas attacks?" below.

In response to the attacks, Israel's cabinet formally declared war on Hamas, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asserting that Israel will win a long and difficult campaign. On October 7, the Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations, Gilad Erdan,

sent a letter to the Security Council that stated, "this is an initiated attack by terrorist organizations led by Hamas."⁵ That same day, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield reaffirmed to Israeli officials "our ironclad support for Israel's security and right to self-defense."⁶

During the following week, Israel took steps to halt the supply of electricity, food, water, and fuel to Gaza, mobilized troops, and initiated an aerial bombardment campaign targeting Gaza-based militants. In a letter to the Security Council, Ambassador of the Permanent Observer Mission of the "State of Palestine" to the United Nations Riyadh Mansour alleged that Israel's actions through October 10 "constitute war crimes."⁷

¹ White House, "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan," October 10, 2023.

² Scott Pelley, "President Joe Biden: The 2023 60 Minutes interview transcript," CBS News, October 15, 2023.

³ Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "President Herzog reveals Hamas 'Captive Taking Handbook' in CNN interview," October 15, 2023.

⁴ For information on prevailing conditions in the region before the outbreak of conflict, see **What were** prevailing conditions (with Gaza, Jerusalem, West Bank, Israel, and regional diplomacy) before the attacks?. For information on the four previous major Israel-Hamas conflicts since Hamas seized Gaza in 2007, see **Previous major** Israel-Hamas conflicts.

⁵ X, Pamela Falk CBS News Correspondent United Nations, October 7, 2023, <https://twitter.com/PamelaFalk/status/1710717063939936336>.

⁶ United States Mission to the United Nations, "Statement by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield on Attacks on Israel," October 7, 2023.

⁷ Michelle Nichols, "Palestinian UN envoy accuses Israel of 'genocidal' campaign against Gaza," Reuters, October 10, 2023.

Observers debate how to apportion blame between the militants and Israel for the worsening of humanitarian conditions that were already dire. While Israeli actions mentioned above have inflicted casualties and limited life-sustaining supplies, Hamas personnel in Gaza and other militants reportedly contribute to making civilian areas and facilities targets by operating in or near them.

The situation faced by civilians in Gaza, including some American citizens, appears to be growing increasingly desperate. There are reportedly hundreds of U.S. citizens in Gaza, many of whom are seeking to leave; the White House has stated that it has sought to work with Israel and Egypt to arrange safe passage for them. The State Department has advised Americans who can safely do so to transit toward the Egyptian border near Gaza, though conditions may not permit that move for some.⁸

As of October 16, Egypt has stated its readiness to use its Rafah crossing with Gaza to open a humanitarian corridor for aid into the territory, and to allow U.S. citizens and other foreigners safe passage out. However, Egyptian officials claim that Israeli air strikes have made the crossing inoperable to date, with details difficult to verify.⁹

On October 13, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) announced that it “calls for” the evacuation of all civilians in Gaza City “from their homes southwards for their own safety and protection.”¹⁰ Hamas reportedly called on people in these areas to remain in place.¹¹ U.N. officials have expressed concern about potentially grave humanitarian consequences,¹² with an estimated 1 million Gazans (nearly half the territory’s population) currently displaced from their homes. Reportedly, some of those who have evacuated or have been evacuating may have been killed by Israeli airstrikes.¹³ U.N. Secretary General António Guterres has called for a ceasefire, the immediate release of hostages, and unimpeded humanitarian aid.¹⁴ Under reported U.S. pressure, Israel announced the resumption of water supply to southern Gaza on October 15.¹⁵

On October 16, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that the United States and Israel have agreed to develop a plan that will enable international humanitarian aid to reach civilians in Gaza. On October 18, during a visit to Israel, President Biden confirmed this plan to facilitate international aid to Gaza through Egypt, and announced \$100 million in U.S. humanitarian assistance for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.¹⁶

⁸ U.S. Department of State, “Information for U.S. Citizens in Gaza,” October 18, 2023.

⁹ “Gaza aid stuck as Egypt says Israel not cooperating,” Reuters, October 16, 2023.

¹⁰ Israel Defense Forces, “IDF Announcement Sent to the Civilians of Gaza City,” October 13, 2023. Passages from the announcement include, “The IDF calls for the evacuation of all civilians of Gaza City from their homes southwards for their own safety and protection and move to the area south of the Wadi Gaza,” and “Civilians of Gaza City, evacuate south for your own safety and the safety of your families and distance yourself from Hamas terrorists who are using you as human shields.”

¹¹ “Hamas tells Gaza residents to stay home as Israel ground offensive looms,” Reuters, October 13, 2023.

¹² “UN says Israel wants 1.1 million Gazans moved south,” Reuters, October 12, 2023.

¹³ Yahya Abou-Ghazala, “They followed evacuation orders. An Israeli airstrike killed them the next day,” CNN, October 17, 2023; “70 killed after convoys of evacuees in Gaza hit by Israeli airstrikes,” NBC News, October 14, 2023.

¹⁴ “Middle East on ‘verge of the abyss’ UN warns, as Israel-Hamas conflict deepens Gaza crisis,” UN News, October 15, 2023.

¹⁵ Barak Ravid, “Israel resumes water supply to southern Gaza after U.S. pressure,” Axios, October 15, 2023.

¹⁶ White House, “U.S. Announcement of Humanitarian Assistance to the Palestinian People,” October 18, 2023; Brett Samuels, “Biden announces humanitarian aid deal for Gaza,” *The Hill*, October 18, 2023.

Reportedly, more than 1,400 Israelis (and at least 32 American citizens) and about 3,785 Palestinians in Gaza had been killed as of October 19,¹⁷ with a single explosion at a Gaza City hospital on October 17 apparently killing many civilians. Hamas-run authorities in Gaza claimed that Israel carried out a strike on the location, but Israel attributed the explosion to a misfired rocket launched by Palestine Islamic Jihad (or PIJ, another FTO).¹⁸ President Biden has expressed outrage and sadness at the explosion and loss of life. While in Israel on October 18, he said that “based on what I’ve seen it appears it was done by the other team, not – not you [Israel]. But there’s a lot of people out there who are not sure.”¹⁹ He said later that day that his public statement to Netanyahu was based on data shown to him by the Defense Department.²⁰

As part of their attacks, Hamas and other militants aligned with them could be holding some 200 to 250 persons hostage in Gaza.²¹ A Hamas spokesperson threatened on October 9 to kill hostages in the event of unannounced Israeli strikes on civilian homes in Gaza;²² a Hamas spokesman later said that the group “is prepared to release non-Israeli hostages once conditions allow movement in Gaza.”²³ Rescuing the hostages would be highly challenging, and the goal of doing so may affect Israeli military planning.²⁴

¹⁷ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #13,” October 19, 2023; White House “Remarks by President Biden on the United States’ Response to Hamas’s Terrorist Attacks Against Israel and Russia’s Ongoing Brutal War Against Ukraine,” released October 20, 2023. Additionally, Israel reported that the bodies of around 1,500 dead militants had been found as of October 10 in southern Israeli areas recaptured by its military.

¹⁸ “Israel denies involvement in Gaza hospital blast, says explosion caused by Palestinian rocket,” Associated Press, October 17, 2023; Neri Zilber, “Gaza hospital explosion caused by misfired Palestinian Islamic Jihad rocket, says IDF,” *Financial Times*, October 18, 2023.

¹⁹ White House, “Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel Before Bilateral Meeting,” October 18, 2023.

²⁰ Kathryn Watson, “Biden tells Israel, ‘You’re not alone’; says military data show Gaza militants to blame for hospital explosion,” CBS News, October 18, 2023.

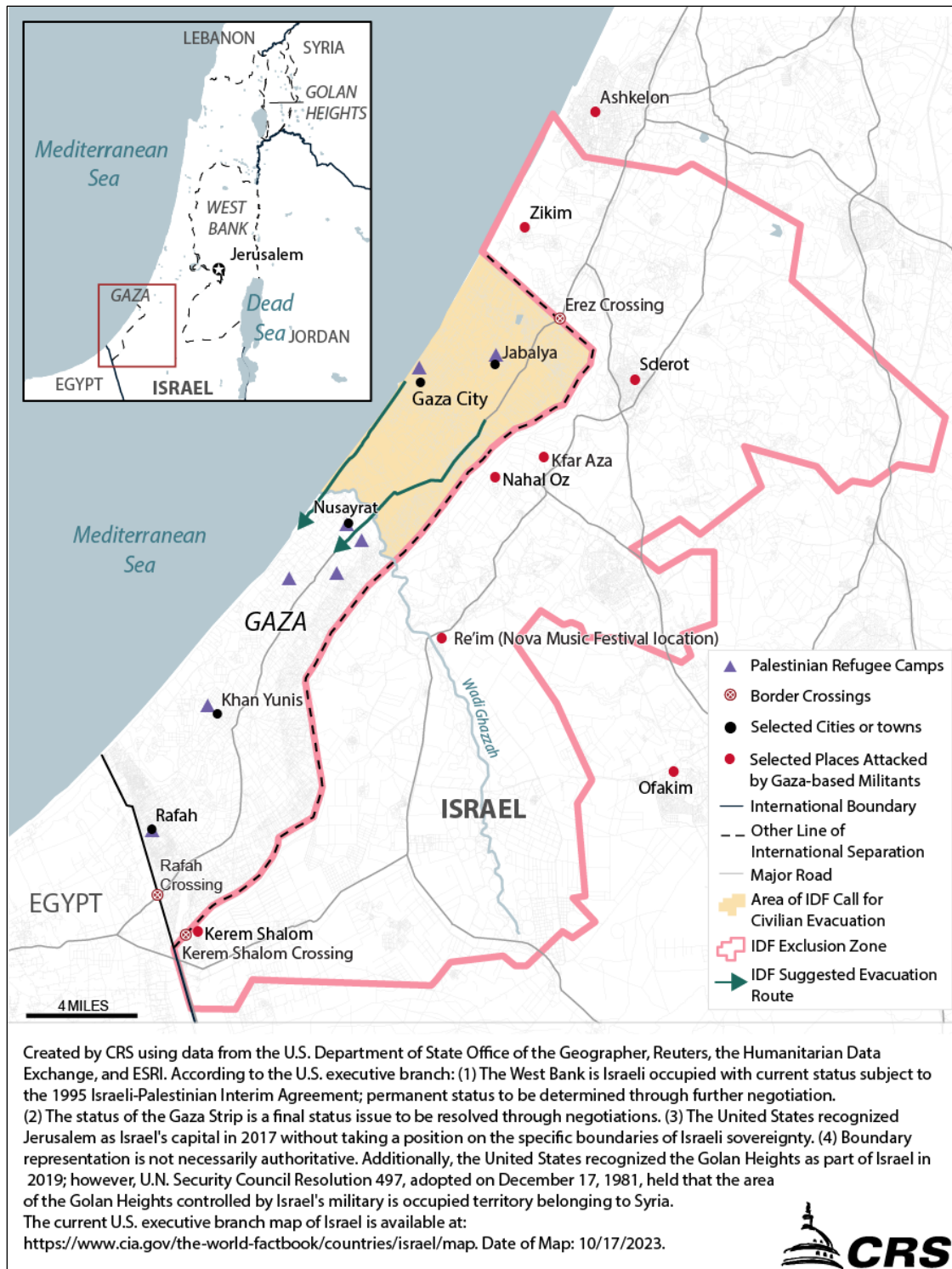
²¹ Emanuel Fabian, “IDF says hostages in Gaza include around 30 children, 10-20 elderly people,” *Times of Israel*, October 19, 2023; Hamas spokesman Abu Ubaida quoted in Harriet Sherwood, “Hamas says 250 people held hostage in Gaza,” *The Guardian*, October 16, 2023.

²² An individual identified as Abu Ubaydah of the Al Qassam Brigades said, “Going forward, we announce that each time our peaceful people are targeted in their houses without a prior notice, we will respond by executing one of the civilian hostages. We will video the execution and broadcast it. We hold the enemy accountable for this decision before the world. The ball is in its court.” Al Jazeera Satellite Television, October 9, 2023, 1700 GMT.

²³ “Hamas says it is preparing to release non-Israeli hostages,” NBC News, October 16, 2023.

²⁴ Danielle Gilbert, “Why the Gaza Hostage Crisis Is Different,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 17, 2023.

Figure I. Israel and Gaza: Conflict Map



State of play

Main parties and other key actors

Israel has formed an emergency unity government and “war management cabinet” with key opposition figures (see “How might the conflict affect Israel’s government and domestic politics?”), and Prime Minister Netanyahu stated that Israel’s military intends to “demolish Hamas” as it prepares for a likely ground assault of Gaza.²⁵ In an invasion, **Hamas** and other Palestinian militants may rely on their knowledge of Gaza’s terrain, a vast network of tunnels, and urban warfare tactics to counter Israel’s conventional military superiority.

Since the October 7 attacks, Israel also has exchanged some fire with the Iran-backed Shia Islamist group **Lebanese Hezbollah** (an FTO) and Palestinian militants across Israel’s northern border with Lebanon. Israel has ordered the evacuation of 28 communities in northern Israel. If these clashes escalate, Hezbollah’s arsenal of more than 100,000 missiles and rockets could pose a grave threat to Israeli strategic sites and population centers.²⁶

Officials from the **Palestinian Authority/Palestine Liberation Organization (PA/PLO)**, based in the West Bank, appear to be in a difficult position, unwilling to embrace their Hamas rivals but also unable to denounce them for fear of alienating the sizable population of Palestinians who support confronting Israel.²⁷ Amid rising tensions and violence between Palestinians and Israeli soldiers and settlers in the West Bank. PA President and PLO Chairman Mahmoud Abbas has criticized Israel’s actions, but also has said that no organization other than the PLO represents the Palestinian people.²⁸

The **United States**; the **European Union**; Arab governments including **Egypt**, **Jordan**, and **Qatar**; and various international organizations, among other parties, may seek to play roles in efforts at mediation or humanitarian assistance. Some have started making such overtures. After Qatari mediation, Hamas released two American hostages on October 20.

As U.S. officials travelled to Israel and around the region, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian made a regional tour of his own, meeting with Iran-allied or -friendly actors in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Qatar, including top Hamas and Hezbollah leaders.²⁹

Major U.S. policy statements and actions

President Biden and senior members of his Administration have condemned the attacks on Israel. They have pledged unwavering U.S. support for Israel, directed the provision of U.S. military and security assistance to Israel, engaged diplomatically with Middle East and global interlocutors, encouraged Israeli decision makers to implement Israel’s response in accordance with international humanitarian law, underscored the importance of civilian protection for all

²⁵ “Israel vows to demolish Hamas as troops prepare to move on shattered Gaza,” Reuters, October 15, 2023.

²⁶ Adi Hashmonai, “Israel Plans to Evacuate Communities Close to Border with Lebanon, Many Refuse to Leave,” *Haaretz*, October 17, 2023.

²⁷ Mohammad al-Kassim, “PA President Mahmoud Abbas MIA as Hamas wages war against Israel,” *Ynetnews*, September 10, 2023.

²⁸ “President Abbas discusses difficult developments in Palestine with Venezuelan counterpart,” Wafa News Agency, October 16, 2023.

²⁹ Peter Baker and Farnaz Fassihi, “Fearing Escalation, Biden Seeks to Deter Iran and Hezbollah,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2023.

conflict actors, sought to assist American citizens in Israel and Gaza, and negotiated with Israel to enable humanitarian aid to reach civilians in Gaza.

In an interview aired on the program *60 Minutes* on October 15, President Biden expressed support for Israeli efforts to eliminate Hamas—calling it a “group of people who have engaged in barbarism that is as consequential as the Holocaust”—while also appealing for the protection of civilians and a pathway to a Palestinian state, and responded to a question about whether he would “support Israeli occupation of Gaza” with a warning that it would be “a big mistake.”³⁰ On October 18, President Biden traveled to Israel and voiced additional support for its efforts against Hamas and its allies. Also on October 18, the United States vetoed a draft United Nations Security Council resolution on the conflict (see “United Nations”).

In an October 19 Oval Office speech, President Biden announced that he is sending Congress an urgent budget request to support critical partners, including Israel and Ukraine, and address other domestic and global issues. The Administration is reportedly requesting that Congress provide \$14 billion for security assistance to Israel and \$10 billion in general humanitarian assistance (some of which could potentially fund humanitarian needs in Gaza).³¹ Biden also referred to the protection of civilians and U.S. efforts to work with Israel and Egypt to provide humanitarian assistance to Palestinians in Gaza. In the speech, he said:

In Israel, we must make sure that they have what they need to protect their people today and always. The security package I’m sending to Congress and asking Congress to do is an unprecedented commitment to Israel’s security that will sharpen Israel’s qualitative military edge, which we’ve committed to – the qualitative military edge. We’re going to make sure Iron Dome continues to guard the skies over Israel. We’re going to make sure other hostile actors in the region know that Israel’s stronger than ever and prevent this conflict from spreading.

Look, at the same time, [Prime Minister] Netanyahu and I discussed again yesterday the critical need for Israel to operate by the laws of war. That means protecting civilians in combat as best as they can. The people of Gaza urgently need food, water and medicine. Yesterday, in discussions with the leaders of Israel and Egypt, I secured an agreement for the first shipment of humanitarian assistance from the United Nations to Palestinian civilians in Gaza. If Hamas does not divert or steal this shipment—these shipments, we’re going to provide an opening for sustained delivery of lifesaving humanitarian assistance for the Palestinians.³²

From October 11 to 16, **Secretary of State Blinken** conducted a circuit of high-level diplomacy and consulted leaders and officials in Israel, Jordan, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt before returning to Israel to consult with Israel’s emergency war cabinet. The Administration said the visits had “four key objectives: to make clear that the United States stands with Israel; to prevent the conflict from spreading to other places; to work on securing the release of hostages, including American citizens; and to address the humanitarian crisis that exists in Gaza.”³³ In media remarks, Secretary Blinken expressed U.S. opposition to the relocation of civilians from Gaza to the Sinai Peninsula. He also criticized Hamas for its operational practices, describing the group as using the civilian population of Gaza as human shields.³⁴ U.S. diplomats

³⁰ Scott Pelley, “President Joe Biden: The 2023 60 Minutes interview transcript.”

³¹ “Biden declares Israel and Ukraine support is vital for US security, will ask Congress for billions,” Associated Press, October 19, 2023.

³² White House “Remarks by President Biden on the United States’ Response to Hamas’s Terrorist Attacks Against Israel and Russia’s Ongoing Brutal War Against Ukraine,” released October 20, 2023.

³³ U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to the Press,” Cairo, Egypt, October 15, 2023.

³⁴ U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken with Randa Abul Azm of Al-Arabiya,” October 15, 2023.

are facilitating the evacuation of U.S. citizens in Israel to Cyprus via ship, and remain engaged with authorities in Israel and Egypt regarding U.S. nationals in Gaza.

Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin travelled to Israel on October 13 and met with Israeli leaders to discuss “expediting security assistance to Israel, including precision guided munitions and air defense ammunition.”³⁵ The President has directed the Department of Defense to position two U.S. carrier strike groups in the eastern Mediterranean Sea and has bolstered U.S. air assets in the region in an apparent bid to reassure Israel and other U.S. partners, and to warn Iran and Hezbollah not to widen the conflict. U.S. 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit forces reportedly were in transit to the eastern Mediterranean from the Persian Gulf as of October 17. U.S. officials have stated that they do not plan to involve U.S. troops in armed action, and NSC spokesman John Kirby has stated that “the Israelis have made it very clear that they don’t want foreign troops on their soil—that they want to prosecute these operations on their own.”³⁶ President Biden and other U.S. officials have implied U.S. willingness to use force, without specifying potential triggers or red lines.³⁷

President Biden has appointed former Ambassador **David Satterfield** as the Special Envoy for Middle East Humanitarian Issues.

What are some important questions that remain unanswered?

As the Israel-Hamas conflict approaches its two-week mark, how the following issues unfold may be particularly important for the parties and U.S. interests.

- **Recovering the hostages.** Can Israel do it? How? With the help of the United States? Will Hamas follow through on threats to kill some hostages in response to Israeli strikes affecting civilians in Gaza? Will Hamas release non-Israeli hostages when movement and access conditions in Gaza permit? Would Israel or the United States exchange prisoners for hostages?
- **An Israeli ground assault on Gaza.** If it happens, as statements from Israeli officials suggest, how long and extensive will it be, and with what results and human costs? What would an invasion mean for Hamas’s rule over Gaza, and if Hamas were to be defeated, who would assume responsibility for the territory and its over two million people? Would such a defeat effectively remove threats that Israelis have historically faced from people in Gaza with whom Israel has a long, complicated history of violence and uneasy coexistence? What might reconstruction costs be, and who would pay them?
- **Potential escalation between Israel and Hezbollah or other Iran-backed actors.** Could a major second front materialize? What might trigger escalation?

³⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, “Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III’s Visit to Israel,” October 13, 2023.

³⁶ White House, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby,” October 12, 2023.

³⁷ On October 17, John Kirby, National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications said, “There are no plans or intentions to put U.S. boots on the ground in combat in Israel. But as we’ve also said, we have significant national security interests in the region. Those national security interests have not changed. As a matter of fact, they are more important perhaps now than they have been in the recent past. And those forces will be there to demonstrate a sincere capability of protecting and defending those national interests if need be.... We never talk about future military operations, and I simply wouldn’t do that. They are there to send a deterrence signal. There is more than enough capability to de—protect and defend our national security interests if it comes to that.” White House, “Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby En Route Tel Aviv, Israel,” October 17, 2023.

An Israeli operation that endangers Hamas's position in Gaza? Miscalculations at the Lebanese border? Strikes involving groups in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, or attacks elsewhere? Could the situation escalate into more direct conflict between Israel and Iran?

- **Impact of major civilian casualties.** How might incidents causing major civilian casualties, such as the October 17 explosion (whose cause is disputed) that reportedly killed many Palestinians at and around a Gaza City hospital, or the cumulative effect of casualties over time, affect global public sentiment and various actors' stances on the conflict?
- **Longer-term outcomes.** What might be the longer-term ramifications for U.S. priorities such as regional stability, security for Israel, countering the reach of Iran and its allies, and quality of life for all affected people? How will U.S. support for Israel in the current conflict affect its standing in the region? Can U.S.-Israel-Saudi diplomacy resume, and will efforts toward an Israeli-Palestinian two-state solution be viable? Does this conflict have implications for U.S. efforts to influence outcomes in places of significant global contention such as Ukraine and Taiwan, or for the U.S. role in influencing the overall world geopolitical order?

Report methodology

This report provides information and analysis on complex and fluid developments in an ongoing conflict. Information in this report is drawn from official statements, media reporting, and other publicly available information as of October 19, 2023. CRS cannot independently verify the details of reported conflict and diplomatic developments, and information presented herein is subject to revision as additional information becomes available. Levels of documentation and the specificity of publicly available information may vary, and the facts of individual incidents or developments may remain subject to dispute.

CRS is unable to investigate, confirm, or refute allegations of war or atrocity crimes and violations of international humanitarian law. CRS cannot make definitive assessments of whether reported incidents might arguably constitute war or atrocity crimes pursuant to international law, or whether evidence collected would necessarily lead to prosecutions for such crimes. Statements of attribution by U.S. or other international officials are not determinative for the purposes of legal accountability.

What is Hamas and who supports it?

Overview

Hamas, or the Islamic Resistance Movement, is a Palestinian Islamist military and sociopolitical movement that grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni religious and political organization founded in Egypt in 1928 that has branches throughout the world.³⁸ Hamas emerged in Gaza in the late 1980s, and established itself as an alternative to the secular Fatah movement in the 1990s by violently attacking Israeli targets after Fatah had entered into a peace process with Israel. Over time, Hamas has attacked or repressed Palestinian political and factional opponents.

³⁸ U.S. State Department, Country Reports on Terrorism, 2021, released February 2023.

After Israel withdrew military forces from Gaza in 2005, Hamas forcibly seized the territory from the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority (PA) in 2007.³⁹ Hamas has both political and military components, and exercises de facto government authority and manages service provision in Gaza. Hamas controls Gaza through its security forces and obtains resources from smuggling, informal “taxes,” and reported external assistance. According to the U.S. State Department, “Hamas has received funding, weapons, and training from Iran and raises funds in Persian Gulf countries. The group receives donations from some Palestinians and other expatriates as well as from its own charity organizations.”⁴⁰ Media reports have suggested that during this decade, Hamas has received some of its funding in cryptocurrency.⁴¹

Yahya Sinwar, Hamas’s leader for Gaza, came from Hamas’s military wing (see **Figure 2**). Aside from those living in Gaza and the West Bank, some Hamas leaders and personnel reportedly live in Arab countries and Turkey. Qatar allows Hamas’s political bureau leader, Ismail Haniyeh, to operate an office in Doha.

Hamas and other Gaza-based militants have engaged in occasional conflict with Israel since Hamas seized Gaza by force in 2007. During major conflicts in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021, Hamas and other militants launched rockets toward Israel, and Israeli military strikes decimated much of Gaza’s infrastructure.

Since 2007, Gaza has faced crisis-level economic and humanitarian conditions, partly owing to broad restrictions that Israel and Egypt—citing security concerns—have imposed on the transit of people and goods. Gazans face chronic economic difficulties and shortages of electricity and safe drinking water.⁴² Because Gaza does not have a self-sufficient economy, external assistance largely sustains humanitarian welfare. Egypt and Qatar helped mediate conflict and provided basic resources in the wake of four past major Israel-Hamas clashes, but Gaza has not experienced broader economic recovery or reconstruction (see “Hamas-controlled Gaza” below).

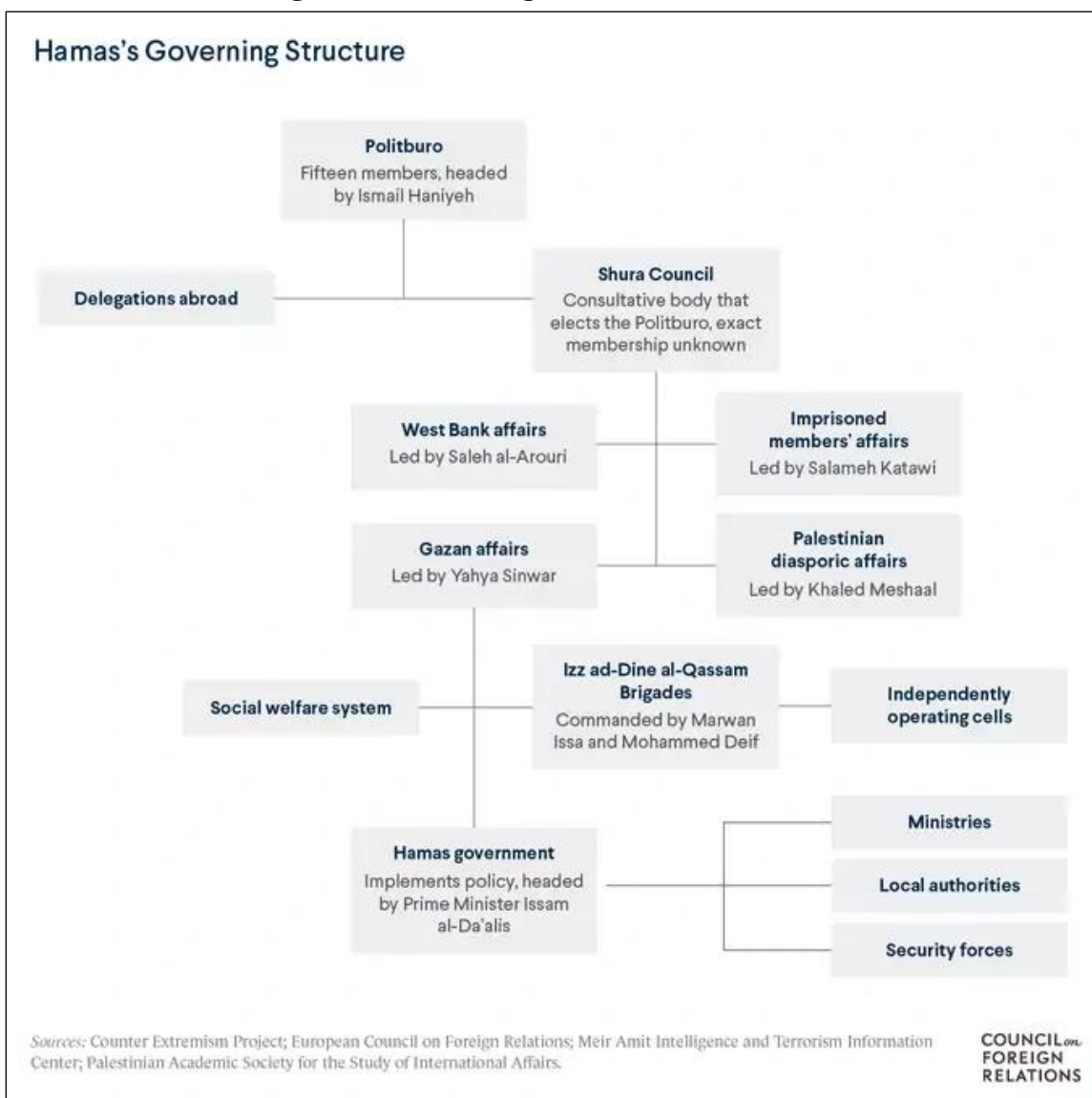
³⁹ CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti, updated October 27, 2022.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ E.g., Angus Berwick and Ian Talley, “Hamas Militants Behind Israel Attack Raised Millions in Crypto,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2023.

⁴² For information on the situation, see U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs occupied Palestinian territory (OCHA-oPt), Gaza Strip: Critical Humanitarian Indicators, <https://www.ochaopt.org/page/gaza-strip-critical-humanitarian-indicators>.

Figure 2. Hamas Organization and Personnel



Source: Council on Foreign Relations using noted sources, October 2023.

Hamas's military wing, the Izz al Din al Qassam Brigades,⁴³ has killed hundreds of Israelis⁴⁴ and more than two dozen U.S. citizens (including some dual U.S.-Israeli citizens)⁴⁵ in attacks since 1993. As the Qassam Brigades developed from a small band of guerrillas into a more sophisticated organization with access to greater resources and territorial control, its methods of

⁴³ Izz al Din al Qassam was a Muslim Brotherhood member, preacher, and leader of an anti-Zionist and anti-colonialist resistance movement in historic Palestine during the British Mandate period. He was killed by British forces in 1935.

⁴⁴ Figures sourced from Jewish Virtual Library website at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Terrorism/TerrorAttacks.html> and <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/comprehensive-listing-of-terrorism-victims-in-israel>. In the aggregate, other Palestinian militant groups (such as Palestine Islamic Jihad, the Fatah-affiliated Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) also have killed scores, if not hundreds, of Israelis since 1993.

⁴⁵ Figures sourced from Jewish Virtual Library website at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Terrorism/usvictims.html>.

attack evolved from small-scale kidnappings and killings of Israeli military personnel to suicide bombings and rocket attacks against Israeli civilians. The planning, preparation, and implementation of the October 7, 2023, attacks in Israel apparently demonstrate a further evolution in the Qassam Brigades' capabilities, including the use of drone munitions, personnel-capable gliders, and complex infantry operations featuring thousands of personnel attacking across Israeli-controlled lines along multiple axes.

Hamas's ideology combines Palestinian nationalism with Islamic fundamentalism. Hamas's founding charter committed the group to the destruction of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic state in all of historic Palestine.⁴⁶ A 2017 document updated Hamas's founding principles. It stated that Hamas sees its conflict as being with the "Zionist project," rather than Jews in general, and expressed willingness to accept a Palestinian state within the 1949/50-1967 armistice lines (the provisional borders of the West Bank and Gaza) if it results from "national consensus," while rejecting Zionism completely and stating Hamas's preference for the establishment of an Islamist Palestinian state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea and from the southern Israeli city of Eilat to the Lebanese border.⁴⁷ (For background on the history of Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflict, see **Appendix B** and CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.)

Having consolidated control over Gaza, and pursuing popular support through armed attacks on Israel, Hamas has appeared to seek to compete politically with other Palestinian movements and establish its indispensability to a future negotiated Israeli-Palestinian political arrangement. Hamas's 2017 document states that the group remains open to democratic political competition with Palestinian rivals, but underscores goals incompatible with recent Arab-Israeli normalization diplomacy. Elections have not occurred in Gaza since 2007, and Hamas appears to maintain strict control over political activity in areas under its control. Human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have documented Hamas human rights violations against Palestinian civilians and violence against Israelis.

Foreign terrorist organization designation and consequences⁴⁸

The U.S. government designated Hamas as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) on October 8, 1997. (PIJ and Lebanese Hezbollah (or Hizballah) were designated as FTOs on the same date.) The State Department's Bureau of Counterterrorism (CT) is responsible for identifying entities for designation as an FTO. Prior to doing so, the Department is obligated to demonstrate that the entity in question engages in "terrorist activity" or retains the capability and intent to engage in terrorist activity or terrorism.⁴⁹ When assessing entities for possible designation, the CT Bureau looks not only at the actual terrorist attacks that a group has carried out, but also at whether the group has engaged in planning and preparations for possible future acts of terrorism or retains the capability and intent to carry out such acts.

Entities placed on the FTO list are suspected of engaging in terrorism-related activities. By designating an entity as an FTO, the United States seeks to limit the group's financial, property,

⁴⁶ For an English translation of the 1988 Hamas charter, see http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp.

⁴⁷ "Hamas in 2017: The document in full," *Middle East Eye*, May 1, 2017. This document, unlike the 1988 charter, does not identify Hamas with the Muslim Brotherhood.

⁴⁸ Prepared by John W. Rollins, Specialist in Terrorism and National Security. For more information, see CRS In Focus IF10613, *Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)*, by John W. Rollins.

⁴⁹ As defined in Section 212 (a)(3)(B) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) (8 U.S.C. §1182(a)(3)(B)), or "terrorism," as defined in Section 140(d)(2) of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act (FRAA), Fiscal Years 1988 and 1989 (FRAA) (22 U.S.C. §2656f(d)(2)).

and travel interests. Per Section 219 of the INA, as amended by Section 302 of the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-132), the Secretary of State must demonstrate that the entity of concern has met the three criteria to allow the Department to designate it as an FTO. The suspected terrorist group must:

- be a foreign organization,
- engage in or retain the capability and intent to engage in terrorism, and
- threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national defense, foreign relations, or the economic interests of the United States.

In general, the designation of an entity, such as Hamas, as an FTO leads or may lead to the following consequences:

- It is unlawful for a person in the United States or subject to the jurisdiction of the United States to knowingly provide “material support or resources” to a designated FTO.
- Representatives and members of a designated FTO, if they are aliens, are inadmissible to, and in certain circumstances removable from, the United States.
- The Secretary of the Treasury may require U.S. financial institutions possessing or controlling any assets of a designated FTO to block all transactions involving those assets.
- May motivate efforts by the U.S. government and other nations to curb terrorism financing.
- May stigmatize and isolate the FTO outside of its established support base.
- May deter donations or contributions to and economic transactions with the FTO.
- May heighten public awareness and knowledge of the FTO and terrorist organizations more generally.
- May signal to other governments U.S. concern about designated organizations.

Hamas’s relationship with Iran

The Iranian government has supported Hamas for decades, going back nearly to the group’s inception.⁵⁰ Iranian officials met with Hamas leaders and expressed public backing for the group and its goals beginning in the early 1990s, as Hamas sought to take up the mantle of Palestinian resistance to Israel against the backdrop of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)-Israel negotiations that culminated in the 1993 Oslo Accord.⁵¹ Hamas opened an external office in Iran in 1992.

⁵⁰ The Iranian government has backed terrorist groups since the early 1980s, focused initially on supporting the Shia Islamist group Hezbollah in Lebanon and pressuring Persian Gulf monarchies to cease their support for Iraq in its war against Iran. After the first Palestinian *intifada* (or uprising) broke out in 1987 (the same year Hamas was founded), Iran began to focus more on supporting Palestinian groups. See U.S. State Department, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1986*, January 1988 and *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1989*, April 1990.

⁵¹ “Iran pledges to aid Hamas in fight for ‘free Palestine,’” *Independent* (London), November 17, 1992; Christopher Walker, “PLO fears rise of fundamentalists,” *Times* (London), December 18, 1992; “Iran tells Hamas it is firmly against PLO peace deal,” Reuters, November 30, 1993. For background on the Oslo Accord, see CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

It is less clear how much material support the Iranian government provided to Hamas in the first years of the relationship. In 1998, Hamas's spiritual leader Ahmad Yassin (later killed in a 2004 Israeli strike) reportedly obtained from Iran a pledge of \$15 million a month.⁵²

During the second Palestinian *intifada* (or uprising) of 2000-2005, Iran reportedly continued to provide support to Hamas, including via the Shia Islamist group Lebanese Hezbollah (also an FTO).⁵³ Some experts have contrasted Iran's relationship with Hezbollah (a "full Iranian proxy," in the words of one observer) with its relationship with Hamas ("a pragmatic partner to Iran's anti-Israel axis").⁵⁴

Since Hamas took over de facto control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, it has engaged in several rounds of conflict with Israel, with continued reported material and financial support from Iran. Iranian aid has been especially important to Hamas in light of Israeli-Egyptian restrictions in place for Gaza since 2007 on the transit of people and goods, and with regard to Hamas's arsenal of rockets, which have featured prominently in Hamas attacks against Israel for years. Iran reportedly initially smuggled rockets into Gaza by sea and via illicit tunnels under the Egyptian border. After Egypt began cracking down on those tunnels in 2013, and as ties between Iran and Sudan (a key arms transit point) began to deteriorate in 2014, Iran apparently focused more on teaching Palestinian militants how to use Iranian systems and locally manufacture their own variants.⁵⁵

Iran-Hamas relations deteriorated after the outbreak of violence in Syria in 2011, with Iran and Hezbollah backing the government of Bashar al Asad, and Hamas siding with the mostly Sunni opposition. In 2012, Hamas's political leadership left Damascus; Qatar has since then allowed it to operate an office in Doha. In 2017, with Hamas more isolated regionally and with the Iran-backed Asad government ascendant, the two sides began to repair ties and have since appeared closely aligned. Hamas's top political leader, Ismail Haniyeh, reportedly visited Tehran at least three times between 2019 and the October 7 attacks.⁵⁶

The level of Iranian material support for Hamas has reportedly remained high in recent years. In a September 2020 publication, the State Department reported that "Iran historically provided up to \$100 million annually in combined support to Palestinian terrorist groups, including Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command."⁵⁷ Haniyeh reportedly said in a January 2022 interview that Iran was the "main funder" of a \$70 million "plan of defense for Gaza" after 2009.⁵⁸ According to an October 2023 media report, "An Israeli security source said that Iran had significantly increased funding for Hamas' military wing in the past year from \$100 million to about \$350 million a year."⁵⁹

Some analysts have asserted that certain weapons—particularly rocket-propelled grenades—that Gazan militants are observably using (based on open source images) are likely of North Korean origin. One U.S.-based scholar said, "This could be new supplies or from previous shipments

⁵² Laura King, "Hamas leader gaining Arab support," Associated Press, May 27, 1998.

⁵³ Aaron Mannes, "Iran binds Hizballah to Hamas," *Jerusalem Post*, March 30, 2004.

⁵⁴ Ido Levy, "How Iran fuels Hamas terrorism," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 1, 2021.

⁵⁵ Fabian Hinz, "Iran transfers rockets to Palestinian groups," Wilson Center, May 19, 2021; Adnan Abu Amer, "Report outlines how Iran smuggles arms to Hamas," *Al-Monitor*, April 9, 2021.

⁵⁶ Maren Koss, "Flexible resistance: How Hezbollah and Hamas are mending ties," Carnegie Middle East Center, July 11, 2018. Haniyeh reportedly visited Tehran in June 2019, January 2020 (for Soleimani's funeral), and August 2021 (for Raisi's inauguration). Iran and Sudan announced the resumption of diplomatic relations on October 9, 2023.

⁵⁷ U.S. State Department, *Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities*, September 2020.

⁵⁸ Mai Abu Hasaneen, "Hamas holds memorial tribute for Soleimani in Gaza," *Al-Monitor*, January 7, 2022.

⁵⁹ Samia Nakhoul, "How Hamas secretly built a 'mini-army' to fight Israel," Reuters, October 16, 2023.

going back as far as 2009,” and that any North Korean weapons likely took an indirect route via Iran or Syria to Hamas. North Korea’s official news agency denied that any of its weapons were being used in the ongoing conflict.⁶⁰

Hamas attacks: Why and why now?

Hamas leaders have said that their planning and preparation for the October 2023 attacks took place over several years, suggesting that the group made a strategic decision to prepare itself to be able to carry out attacks and operations that might change the status quo and prevailing assumptions in the group’s long confrontation with Israel.⁶¹ The decision to launch the attacks in October 2023 may reflect various Hamas motivating factors, including the following:

- **Disrupting Arab-Israeli normalization efforts** – The October 7 attacks may have been intended to disrupt existing and potential future normalization agreements between Israel and Arab states, including U.S.-backed efforts to promote Saudi-Israeli normalization. Hamas may have assessed that Arab governments’ increased willingness to normalize relations with Israel before the establishment of a Palestinian state—and potential PA acquiescence to this trend—provided an opening for Hamas to portray itself as uniquely committed to the Palestinian national cause.
- **Seeking to strengthen its domestic and regional position** – Hamas may have launched the attacks in a bid to bolster its domestic political position vis-à-vis the struggling PA and its president Mahmoud Abbas. Difficult and deteriorating living conditions in Gaza may have increased local political pressure on Hamas, and Hamas leaders may have perceived political opportunity arising from alleged Israeli encroachments on Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem and a pattern of confrontations in 2022 and 2023 between Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank. A former senior U.S. official has speculated, “Hamas’s intention is to get Israel to retaliate massively and have the conflict escalate: a West Bank uprising, Hezbollah attacks, a revolt in Jerusalem.”⁶²
- **Capitalizing on Israeli domestic turmoil** – Political tensions have risen in 2023 among Israelis, stemming from disputes over proposed judicial reform and other issues. Hamas and its allies may have perceived an opportunity to strike at a time of internal division and distraction within Israel, and perhaps amplify discord among Israelis, by launching the attacks and successfully targeting Israeli military and civilian targets.
- **Using hostages for prisoner releases or other concessions** – Hamas leaders have long highlighted the release of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel as a priority for the group, and may have launched the attacks to use hostages to obtain prisoner releases or other Israeli concessions.

⁶⁰ “North Korea denies its weapons used by Hamas against Israel,” Reuters, October 12, 2023.

⁶¹ Hamas official Ali Baraka quoted in Samia Nakhoul and Laila Bassam, “Who is Mohammed Deif, the Hamas commander behind the attack on Israel?” Reuters, October 11, 2023.

⁶² Martin Indyk, “Why Hamas Attacked—and Why Israel Was Taken by Surprise,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 7, 2023.

What is Palestine Islamic Jihad and who supports it?

Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is another FTO that, like Hamas, is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood and receives support from Iran, including possibly cryptocurrency.⁶³ PIJ emerged in the 1980s in the Gaza Strip as a rival to Hamas. Since 2000, PIJ has conducted several attacks against Israeli targets (including suicide bombings), killing scores of Israelis. PIJ militants in Gaza sometimes take the lead in firing rockets into Israel—perhaps to pressure Hamas into matching its hardline tactics or to demonstrate its credentials as a resistance movement to domestic audiences and external supporters.

PIJ's ideology combines Palestinian nationalism, Sunni Islamic fundamentalism, and Shiite revolutionary thought (inspired by the Iranian Revolution). PIJ seeks liberation of all of historic Palestine through armed revolt and the establishment of an Islamic state, but unlike Hamas has not established a social services network, formed a political movement, or participated in elections. PIJ has not received as much support from Palestinians as Hamas has. Some PIJ leaders reside in Syria, Lebanon, or other Arab states.

For three days in August 2022, Israel and PIJ militants in Gaza exchanged fire. Hamas stayed out of the violence. A similar round of violence between Israel and PIJ (with Hamas abstaining) took place in November 2019. PIJ personnel reportedly hold some of the hostages from the October 7 attacks and claimed operations at Israel's northern border with Lebanon in the days following the attacks.⁶⁴

According to the State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism for 2021 (most recent), "estimates of PIJ's membership range from about 1,000 to several thousand."

Is there evidence that Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad are using cryptocurrency to finance their activities?⁶⁵

According to reporting by the *Wall Street Journal* and CNN, citing a cryptocurrency analytics firm, digital currency wallets linked to Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) received as much as \$93 million in cryptocurrency between August 2021 and June 2023. Digital currency wallets linked to Hamas allegedly received about \$41 million over a similar time frame (a figure attributed to a different analytics firm), but Israeli authorities may have been able to interdict some or all of that amount.⁶⁶

On October 10, the Israel government issued a press release stating that, in collaboration with Binance (the world's largest cryptocurrency exchange), it had frozen cryptocurrency accounts

⁶³ Berwick and Talley, "Hamas Militants Behind Israel Attack Raised Millions in Crypto."

⁶⁴ "Islamic jihad faction holding over 30 Israelis captive, its chief says," Reuters, October 8, 2023; "Palestinian Al Quds Brigades claim responsibility for attack at Lebanon-Israel border," Reuters, October 9, 2023.

⁶⁵ Prepared by Rebecca M. Nelson, Specialist in International Trade and Finance; and Liana W. Rosen, Specialist in International Crime and Narcotics.

⁶⁶ Angus Berwick and Ian Talley, "Hamas Militants Behind Israel Attack Raised Millions in Crypto," *Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2023; Scott Glover et al., "'They're opportunistic and adaptive': How Hamas is using cryptocurrency to raise funds," CNN, October 12, 2023.

linked to Hamas.⁶⁷ On October 18, the United States applied sanctions to a Gaza-based cryptocurrency exchange with links to Hamas.⁶⁸

U.S. financial regulators have previously raised concerns about Hamas-linked activity in cryptocurrencies. For example, In March 2023, the U.S. Commodity Futures Trade Commission filed a civil enforcement action against Binance.⁶⁹ Among other items, the CFTC alleges that Binance received and dismissed information regarding Hamas transactions in February 2019.⁷⁰

Additionally, in August 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice announced a series of terrorism-related cryptocurrency actions. One of them involved the Qassam Brigades, described as Hamas's military wing.⁷¹ According to an industry report from early 2020, Qassam Brigades cryptocurrency fundraising efforts had generated "tens of thousands of dollars of Bitcoin" and was among "the largest and most sophisticated cryptocurrency-based terrorism financing campaigns ever seen."⁷² As part of the actions reported in August 2020, U.S. law enforcement seized the infrastructure of the Qassam Brigades websites and subsequently covertly operated *alqassam.net*. U.S. law enforcement also reportedly tracked and seized 150 cryptocurrency accounts through which funds were laundered to and from Qassam Brigades accounts. The United States Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia also unsealed criminal charges against individuals who allegedly acted as related money launderers while operating an unlicensed money transmitting business. Cryptocurrency donations reportedly continued to flow to the Qassam Brigades following the August 2020 actions; the campaign for such donations appears to have ended in April 2023.⁷³

How did Hamas achieve the element of surprise?

The nature and timing of the attacks from Gaza have prompted questions about whether or not the Israeli or U.S. governments had prior information to suggest such attacks were possible or imminent or, if not, why they might have missed signs or misinterpreted indications. IDF Major General Aharon Haliva, the head of the Military Intelligence Directorate, has stated that his command failed to warn of the attack and that he bears "full responsibility for the failure."⁷⁴ Ronen Bar, head of the Israel Security Agency (also known as the Shin Bet or Shabak), also has taken personal responsibility for the intelligence failure. An unnamed U.S. official in a White House-organized press briefing declined to address the question of U.S. intelligence prior to the

⁶⁷ Camomile Shumba and Sandali Handagama, "Hamas-Linked Crypto Accounts Frozen by Israeli Police, with Binance's Help: Report," *Coin Desk*, October 10, 2023.

⁶⁸ U.S. Department of Treasury, "Following Terrorist Attack on Israel, Treasury Sanctions Hamas Operatives and Financial Facilitators," October 18, 2023.

⁶⁹ Commodity Futures Trading Commission, "CFTC Charges Binance and Its Founder, Changpeng Zhao, with Willful Evasion of Federal Law and Operating an Illegal Digital Asset Derivatives Exchange," press release, March 27, 2023.

⁷⁰ *Commodity Futures Trading Commission v. Changpeng Zhao, Binance Holdings Limited, Binance Holdings (IE) Limited, Binance (Services) Holdings Limited, and Samuel Lim*, 33 (United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois 2023).

⁷¹ U.S. Department of Justice, "Global Disruption of Three Terror Finance Cyber-Enabled Campaigns," August 13, 2020.

⁷² Chainalysis, "Terrorism Financing in Early Stages with Cryptocurrency but Advancing Quickly," January 17, 2020, <https://www.chainalysis.com/blog/terrorism-financing-cryptocurrency-2019/>. See also Elliptic, "Cracking the Code: Tracing the Bitcoins from a Hamas Terrorist Fundraising Campaign," April 26, 2019.

⁷³ David Carlisle, "How Hamas Has Utilized Crypto, and What May be Coming," Elliptic, October 11, 2023; Nidal Al-Mughrabi, "Hamas Armed Wing Announces Suspension of Bitcoin Fundraising," Reuters, April 28, 2023.

⁷⁴ Emanuel Fabian, "IDF intel chief says he 'bears full responsibility' for not warning of Hamas attack," *Times of Israel*, October 17, 2023.

attack, and said that the United States “will continue to provide Israel with support during this critical time, including close—close, deep intelligence sharing.”⁷⁵

Israel’s reportedly advanced intelligence capabilities appear to have failed to detect planning and preparation for the October 7 attacks, including Palestinian groups’ acquisition or development of munition-carrying drones, personnel-carrying gliders, and thousands of missiles and rockets. Some former Israeli security officials have speculated that Palestinian armed groups have adapted their operations and methods following repeated rounds of conflict with Israel.⁷⁶ Periodic attacks in Syria—attributed to Israel—against reported shipments of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah and other armed groups on Israel’s northern borders suggest that Israel’s intelligence and defense establishment remain actively focused on transregional and cross-border security threats. Domestic political tensions and confrontations between Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank and in and around Jerusalem also may consume Israeli intelligence and domestic security resources. There is insufficient publicly available information at this time to determine whether or how these factors may have affected Israel’s ability to detect, prevent, and respond to the October 7 attacks.

Some Members of Congress or others may raise questions about U.S. intelligence detection or interpretation of data prior to the attacks. U.S. intelligence officials have not indicated that the United States had specific information to suggest the October 7 attacks were imminent. In April 2023, U.S. Director for Central Intelligence William Burns said, “Despite the promise of the Abraham Accords and progress to a normalization between Israel and more Arab states, tensions in the region, including between Palestinians and Israelis, threaten to bubble over again.”⁷⁷ The U.S. military and its naval partners periodically intercept weapons shipments in the Arabian Sea-Red Sea corridor that have been presumed to be destined for the Iran-backed Houthi movement in Yemen. It is possible that Hamas and other Gaza-based armed groups use similar sources, methods, and routes to acquire and smuggle weaponry.

Hamas figures have suggested that their planning and preparations for the attacks spanned several years, and included a “subterfuge campaign” in which it sought to convey the impression that it was unprepared for or unwilling to engage in a new round of conflict.⁷⁸ As one apparent element of this effort, Hamas encouraged Israel to believe that economic incentives it was providing to Gazans were decreasing Hamas’s motivation to engage in conflict.⁷⁹ Hamas figures also have told the media that they compartmentalized information about their plans and limited dissemination to exclude even senior political leaders.⁸⁰ The groups responsible also may have taken other operational security measures to conceal their activities and preparations. Footage released by the attackers indicates that initial attacks were made against Israeli technical observation infrastructure along the Gaza-Israel line of control; the disabling of these sites may have contributed to the attackers’ apparent achievement of operational surprise.

⁷⁵ White House, “Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official Regarding Hamas Terrorist Attacks in Israel,” October 7, 2023.

⁷⁶ Tia Goldenberg, “What went wrong? Questions emerge over Israel’s intelligence prowess after Hamas attack,” Associated Press, October 9, 2023.

⁷⁷ U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, “DCIA @ Rice University,” April 11, 2023.

⁷⁸ Samia Nakhoul and Laila Bassam, “Who is Mohammed Deif, the Hamas commander behind the attack on Israel?” Reuters, October 11, 2023; Samia Nakhoul and Jonathan Saul, “How Hamas duped Israel as it planned devastating attack,” Reuters, October 10, 2023.

⁷⁹ Nakhoul and Saul, “How Hamas duped Israel as it planned devastating attack.”

⁸⁰ Hamza Hendawi, “Hamas political leaders were unaware of Israel incursion plan, Egypt officials say,” *The National*, October 9, 2023.

There is insufficient public information available at this time to determine whether or how the deployment locations of IDF personnel in Israel and the West Bank at the time of the attacks may have shaped events or the initial Israeli response. The attacks' occurrence during Jewish Israelis' observation of the Sabbath and the holiday of Simchat Torah also may have benefitted the attackers and increased the likelihood that the public spread of information and mobilization of a response would be slower.

Did Iran play a role in planning, directing, or otherwise enabling the Hamas attacks?

It remains unclear to what extent, if at all, the government of Iran was directly involved in the October 2023 Hamas assault. U.S. and Israeli officials have stated publicly that despite the Iranian government's longstanding support for Hamas and its enthusiastic praise for the October 2023 assault, they do not have evidence at this time that the government of Iran played a direct role in planning it or carrying it out. Media accounts, citing a variety of unnamed U.S. and foreign officials, have varied in their assessments of Iranian involvement.

As of October 17, 2023, one early media account has indicated that Iran had a direct role in the October 7 attacks. On October 8, 2023, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, citing unnamed Hamas and Hezbollah sources, that senior Iranian officials from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) met with Hamas counterparts (along with Hezbollah and PIJ leaders) in Beirut regularly since August to plan the attacks and, on October 2, 2023, "gave the green light for the assault."⁸¹ The publishing of that account reportedly caused some controversy among *Wall Street Journal* reporters.⁸² A subsequent October 11 report in the *Wall Street Journal* indicated that U.S. intelligence agencies assessed that Iran "likely knew Hamas was planning operations against Israel but didn't know the precise timing or scope."⁸³

Most other media reports align with that latter account from October 11. On October 9, 2023, the *Washington Post* reported that planning for the assault began "as early as mid-2022" with "key support" from Iran (including training for Hamas militants in camps in Lebanon), but that "U.S. and Israeli officials said they have no firm evidence so far that Iran authorized or directly coordinated the attack." That article said further that the "rockets and missiles launched by Hamas may have been locally produced, but they possess a clear Iranian pedigree."⁸⁴ Multiple outside experts have expressed skepticism that Hamas could plan such a complex and resource-intensive assault without the awareness, if not active support, of Iran.⁸⁵ However, CNN reported on October 11 that the United States had collected intelligence indicating senior Iranian officials were "caught by surprise" by the assault, perhaps as a result of Hamas's "operational independence from Iran."⁸⁶ The *New York Times* similarly reported the U.S. collection of intelligence showing

⁸¹ Summer Said et al., "Iran helped plot attack on Israel over several weeks," *Wall Street Journal*, October 8, 2023.

⁸² Max Tani, "Wall Street Journal reporters split over Iran story," *Semafor*, October 16, 2023.

⁸³ Warren Strobel, "Iran knew Hamas was planning attacks, but not timing of scale, U.S. says," *Wall Street Journal*, October 11, 2023.

⁸⁴ Joby Warrick et al., "Hamas received weapons and training from Iran, officials say," *Washington Post*, October 9, 2023.

⁸⁵ Said et al., op. cit.; Dan De Luce et al., "Hamas attack bears hallmarks of Iranian involvement, former U.S. officials say," NBC News, October 8, 2023.

⁸⁶ Zachary Cohen et al., "Initial US intelligence suggests Iran was surprised by the Hamas attack on Israel," *CNN*, October 11, 2023.

that unnamed Iranian officials “who typically would be aware of operations involving the Quds Force” were surprised by the assault.⁸⁷

As of October 17, U.S. officials in public statements maintained that firm evidence tying Iran directly to the assault did not exist, though they also asserted that “ Hamas wouldn’t be around in the way that it is without the support that it’s received from Iran over the years,” as Secretary of State Blinken said on October 8.⁸⁸ Blinken stated the same day, “In this moment, we don’t have anything that shows us that Iran was directly involved in this attack, in planning it or carrying it out, but that’s something we’re looking at very carefully, and we’ve got to see where the facts lead.”⁸⁹ On October 9, Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer said that “Iran is broadly complicit in these attacks,” given that Iran has been Hamas’s “primary backer for decades,” but that there were no signs of “direct involvement” by Iran as of yet.⁹⁰ Finer also said “we do not have the ability to corroborate [the *Wall Street Journal* report] at this time.”⁹¹ A State Department spokesperson said on October 10, “we do not have information to suggest that Iran either directed or orchestrated these attacks by Hamas. Iran likely knew Hamas was planning operations against Israel, but without the precise timing or scope of what occurred.”⁹²

An IDF spokesperson reportedly said something similar, saying, “Iran is a major player but we can’t yet say if it was involved in the planning or training.”⁹³ Another IDF spokesperson said, “We have no evidence or proof” of Iranian involvement but, “We are 100 percent sure that the Iranians were not surprised.”⁹⁴ For their part, Iranian officials, as noted above, have denied direct involvement; one Hamas official said on October 9, 2023, that Iran was unaware of the operation in advance.⁹⁵

Some observers (including some Members of Congress) have tied the October 2023 Hamas assault to funds from the September 2023 U.S.-Iran agreement that involved the freeing of several U.S. hostages in exchange for the transfer of \$6 billion in Iranian funds from South Korea to Qatar.⁹⁶ For more on these topics and congressional action, see “Iran: Transfer of \$6 billion”

⁸⁷ Adam Entous et al., “Early intelligence shows Hamas attack surprised Iranian leaders, U.S. says,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2023.

⁸⁸ U.S. State Department, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken with Dana Bash of CNN’s State of the Union,” October 8, 2023.

⁸⁹ U.S. State Department, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken with Kristen Welker of NBC’s Meet the Press,” October 8, 2023.

⁹⁰ “U.S. to offer ‘every kind of support’ to Israel on hostages, White House advisor says,” CBS News, October 9, 2023.

⁹¹ Andrew Zhang et al., “‘No evidence or proof’: Israel and U.S. uncertain of Iran link to Hamas attack,” *Politico*, October 9, 2023.

⁹² U.S. State Department, Press Briefing, October 10, 2023.

⁹³ “No evidence yet of Iran link to Hamas attack, says Israeli military,” *Guardian*, October 9, 2023.

⁹⁴ Andrew Zhang et al., op. cit.

⁹⁵ Bassem Mroue and Sarah el Deeb, “Hamas official says Iran and Hezbollah had no role in Israeli incursion but they’ll help if needed,” Associated Press, October 9, 2023.

⁹⁶ See, for example, Representative French Hill, “Release: Rep. Hill condemns Hamas attack on Israel,” October 7, 2023; Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Ranking Member’s Press, “Risch statement on terrorist attacks against Israel,” October 7, 2023. For background on the prisoner exchange/fund transfer agreement, see CRS Report R47321, *Iran: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Clayton Thomas.

What is the role of the Palestinian Authority in this crisis?

After Hamas's attacks on October 7, despite the considerable animus between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, PA President Mahmoud Abbas said that Palestinians have the right "to defend themselves against the terrorism of settlers and the occupation forces."⁹⁷ In a statement released the same day, the PA Ministry of Foreign Affairs blamed Israel for "the destruction of the peace process" and said that "the continuation of the injustice and oppression to which the Palestinian people are exposed is the reason behind this explosive situation."⁹⁸ Per some analysts, the Hamas attack has put Abbas in a difficult position, unwilling to embrace his Hamas rivals and their attack on Israel, but also unable to denounce them for fear of alienating West Bank Palestinians.⁹⁹ Abbas has continued to engage with other world leaders (including an October 9 call with U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres, in which Abbas asked the United Nations to "immediately intervene to stop the ongoing Israeli aggression"), but has not made any public appearances.¹⁰⁰

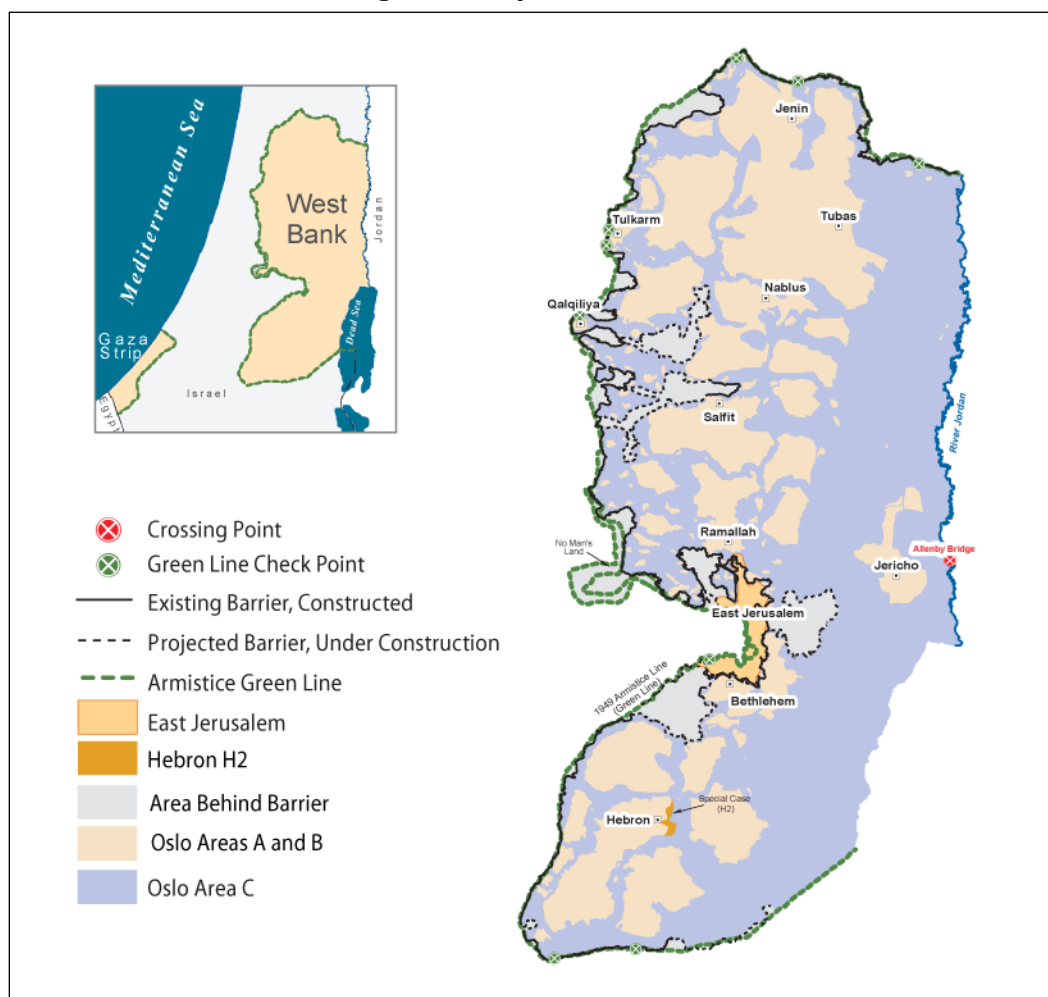
The PA was created in the 1990s to provide Palestinians with temporary, limited self-rule in Gaza and specific urban areas of the West Bank (see **Figure 3**)—under overarching Israeli control—pending a final Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. It is dominated by Fatah, a secular Palestinian political party whose chairman Mahmoud Abbas has served as PA president since his election by Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza in 2005 after the death of Yasser Arafat. When his four-year term expired in 2009, the PA extended his term indefinitely until new elections could take place; no elections have occurred to date. The PA has exercised little or no effective control in Gaza since Hamas forcibly seized control there in 2007. Having different Palestinian leaders in the two territories has complicated the question of who speaks for the Palestinians at home and abroad.

⁹⁷ Gianluca Pacchiani, "Abbas stressed Palestinian right to self defense, as int'l community condemns Hamas," *Times of Israel*, October 7, 2023.

⁹⁸ State of Palestine Ministry of Foreign Affairs (@pmofa), X post, October 7, 2023, <https://twitter.com/pmofa/status/1710630801379922370>.

⁹⁹ Mohammad al-Kassim, "PA President Mahmoud Abbas MIA as Hamas wages war against Israel," *Ynetnews*, September 10, 2023.

¹⁰⁰ "President Abbas calls on UN to promptly intervene to stop Israeli aggression against Palestinians," WAFA News Agency, October 9, 2023.

Figure 3. Map of West Bank

Source: U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs occupied Palestinian territory, 2018, adapted by CRS.

Note: All boundaries and depictions are approximate.

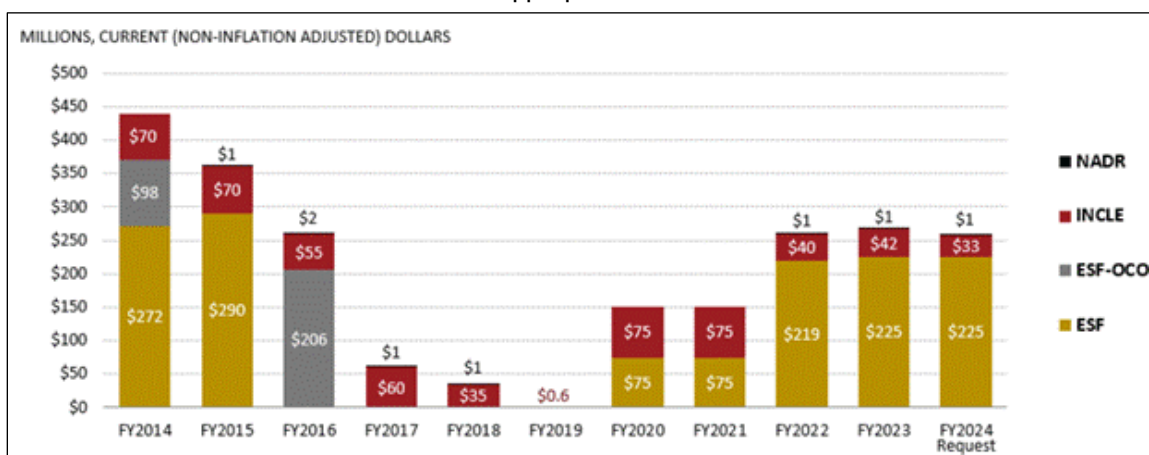
Successive U.S. presidential Administrations and Israeli governments appear to have viewed the Abbas-led PA as a traditional counterweight to Hamas. Under Abbas, the PA does not appear to have actively organized or directed violent campaigns targeting Israel or Israelis. The PA and its security forces generally engage in some discreet coordination efforts with Israel to counter shared threats from Hamas and other militants. This coordination has reportedly waned at least to some extent in connection with increased West Bank violence in 2023.

The United States has invested in boosting PA governance and security capacities. The U.S. Security Coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority (USSC), established in 2005, is a U.S.-led multilateral mission of more than 75 security specialists from nine NATO countries based in Jerusalem, with a forward post in the West Bank city of Ramallah, where the PA is headquartered.¹⁰¹ The USSC is headed by a three-star U.S. flag officer who leads U.S. efforts to

¹⁰¹ Information provided by the USSC to CRS, October 20, 2022. The core of the USSC is made up of U.S. military officers hosted by the Department of State. Supporting contingents of security specialists from the United Kingdom and (continued...)

help develop and reform the PA security sector, and facilitate coordination and communication between Israeli and PA security units. For more information about the USSC and U.S. non-lethal security assistance to PA security forces, see CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti. See **Figure 4** for information on overall bilateral U.S. aid to the Palestinians.

Figure 4. U.S. Bilateral Aid to the Palestinians, FY2014-FY2024 Request
appropriations



Sources: U.S. State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), adapted by CRS.

Notes: All amounts are approximate and reflect appropriations for each fiscal year. Some amounts have been appropriated but not obligated. Amounts for FY2024 have been requested but not appropriated. NADR = Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, and Related Programs, INCLE = International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement, ESF = Economic Support Fund, OCO = Overseas Contingency Operations.

Despite the potential for the PA to act as a counterweight to Hamas, some factors now constrain the United States from supporting the PA as it had in Abbas's early years of rule. The PA is facing a major ongoing financial crisis that could lead to bankruptcy, amid Palestinian domestic turmoil, internal corruption allegations, and grievances the PA has with current Israeli government policies in the West Bank—including on settlements and security.¹⁰² In a July 2023 CNN interview, President Biden said that the PA has “lost its credibility” and created a “vacuum for extremism among the Palestinians.” He also said at the time that some Israeli cabinet members are “part of the problem,”¹⁰³ referring to Israeli-Palestinian tensions stemming from Israeli actions in the West Bank and Jerusalem.

Speculation surrounds who might lead the PA once President Abbas (born in 1935) leaves office—whether via elections or otherwise¹⁰⁴—perhaps further contributing to West Bank instability as various actors anticipate a contest for succession.

The Taylor Force Act (TFA, enacted in March 2018 as Div. S, Title X of P.L. 115-141), prohibits most U.S. economic aid that “directly benefits” the PA, because of certain PA payments “for acts

Canada work with the U.S. core team, as do smaller contingents from the Netherlands, Turkey, Italy, Poland, Greece, and Bulgaria.

¹⁰² Alex Lederman, “The Palestinian Authority Is in Danger, and So Is Israel,” Israel Policy Forum, June 29, 2023.

¹⁰³ Transcript: “Interview with U.S. President Joe Biden,” CNN, July 9, 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Udi Dekel and Noa Shusterman, “*The Day after Abbas*”: Strategic Implications for Israel, Institute for National Security Studies, December 2022; International Crisis Group, *Managing Palestine’s Looming Leadership Transition*, February 1, 2023.

of terrorism.”¹⁰⁵ U.S. officials have encouraged other parties in the region to support the PA,¹⁰⁶ encountering some public criticism because language in the TFA calls on all countries to cease budgetary support to the PA until it “stops all payments incentivizing terror.”¹⁰⁷

Palestinian Payments for “Martyrs” and Prisoners

The Palestinian practice of compensating families who lost a member (militant or civilian) in connection with Israeli-Palestinian violence reportedly dates back to the 1960s.¹⁰⁸ Palestinian payments on behalf of prisoners or decedents in their current form apparently “became standardized during the second *intifada* [uprising] of 2000 to 2005.”¹⁰⁹ Various PA laws and decrees since 2004 have established parameters for payments.¹¹⁰ U.S. lawmakers and executive branch officials have condemned the practice, arguing that it may incentivize violence, and focusing particular criticism on an apparent tiered structure that provides higher levels of compensation for prisoners who receive longer sentences.¹¹¹

Beyond these issues, PA security forces have faced a number of challenges in seeking to counter Hamas and other militants. When the forces have cautiously avoided confrontation, they have been vulnerable to criticism from Israeli and U.S. officials that they are weak or incapable of maintaining order, or even sympathetic to the militants’ causes. When they have undertaken operations to arrest militants—which in some cases may have been for the purpose of minimizing Israeli incursions—some domestic critics have labeled them as collaborators with Israel, especially when such operations and the resulting prosecution and imprisonment of suspects appeared to be related to Israeli raids, information sharing, or objectives.¹¹²

¹⁰⁵ During the legislative process for the TFA, some Members of Congress argued that these PLO/PA payments—made to Palestinians (and/or their families) who are imprisoned for or accused of terrorism by Israel—provide incentives for Palestinians to commit terrorist acts. For more information see CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

¹⁰⁶ U.S. Mission to the United Nations, “Remarks by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Situation in the Middle East,” May 24, 2023.

¹⁰⁷ Sander Gerber, “Opinion: Biden & Co. Keep Funding Palestinian Terror—in Defiance of Congress,” *New York Post*, June 20, 2023.

¹⁰⁸ Neri Zilber, “An Israel ‘Conspiracy Theory’ That Proved True—but Also More Complicated,” *The Atlantic*, April 27, 2018.

¹⁰⁹ Eli Lake, “The Palestinian incentive program for killing Jews,” *Bloomberg*, July 11, 2016.

¹¹⁰ Yossi Kuperwasser, “Incentivizing Terrorism: Palestinian Authority Allocations to Terrorists and their Families,” Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, <http://jcpa.org/paying-salaries-terrorists-contradicts-palestinian-vows-peaceful-intentions/>.

¹¹¹ See, for example, Opening Statement of Senator Bob Corker, in U.S. Congress, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *Consideration of the Taylor Force Act*, hearings, 115th Cong., 1st sess., July 12, 2017, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/rep/release/corker-opening-statement-at-hearing-on-taylor-force-act>; Joel Gehrke, “House passes bill that could cut off Palestinian Authority funding due to aid of terrorists’ families,” *Washington Examiner*, December 5, 2017. For an analysis arguing that these PLO/PA payments are not the primary drivers of violence against Israel, see Shibley Telhami, “Why the discourse about Palestinian payments to prisoners’ families is distorted and misleading,” Brookings Institution, December 7, 2020.

¹¹² Jack Mukand, “A year on, Nizar Banat’s killing sheds light on PA corruption, but justice is on hold,” *Times of Israel*, October 3, 2022; Ahmad Melhem, “Palestinian Authority steps up arrests in Nablus,” *Al-Monitor*, September 28, 2022.

How has Israel's military responded to the attacks?

Counterattacks in Gaza via air and artillery strikes

Having formally declared war on Hamas, the Israeli government has mobilized around 360,000 reservists, or between 3% and 4% of Israel's total population. Netanyahu has stated that Israelis should expect prolonged conflict. With operations against attackers inside Israel reportedly concluded as of October 11, thousands of Israeli air and artillery strikes have occurred in the Gaza Strip, and Israeli ground forces are reported to be building a base and massing in adjacent areas.

Israeli strikes in Gaza present a dilemma because several military targets are located in close proximity to civilian residential areas and other facilities like schools and hospitals. President Biden said in a *60 Minutes* interview that Hamas hides "behind the civilians" and puts "their headquarters where civilians are."¹¹³

Israeli officials have stated that the IDF tries to avoid civilian casualties and provides warnings to civilians before some strikes.¹¹⁴ In such efforts, the IDF may be limited by incomplete or imperfect information, Israeli perceptions regarding operational urgency, and constraints on how precisely the IDF can deliver warnings. An unnamed senior Israeli government source has said:

the "roof knocking" policy, whereby the IDF has previously used text messages, phone calls, or an initial strike on the roof to warn residents of a building that it is about to be struck, is not the system currently applying. In certain circumstances, it will be used, the source says, but today Israel is already evacuating masses of the [Gaza] populace from central terrorist areas and attacking there.¹¹⁵

The effectiveness of Israel's strikes in Gaza in destroying or damaging military positions, personnel, and infrastructure is unclear. Israel claims to have killed a number of militant leaders, including some from Hamas's elite Nukhba forces who reportedly helped spearhead the October 7 attacks.¹¹⁶ Despite Israeli efforts to target rocket launching infrastructure, Hamas and other militants continue to fire rockets into Israel, though these salvos reportedly have not matched the volume and intensity of the initial barrage on October 7.¹¹⁷ It is unclear to what extent this may be due to damage from Israeli strikes, Hamas operational decisions, or other factors.

¹¹³ Scott Pelley, "President Joe Biden: The 2023 60 Minutes interview transcript."

¹¹⁴ Jack Detsch and Anusha Rathi, "Israel Prepares for Block-by-Block Warfare in Gaza," *Foreign Policy*, October 13, 2023.

¹¹⁵ "Senior Israeli source: Gaza will not be Hamastan; 'roof knocking' policy no longer norm," *Times of Israel*, October 9, 2023.

¹¹⁶ According to the IDF, the IDF and Israel Security Agency (ISA, Shin Bet, or Shabak) have killed Ali Qadi, Commander of Hamas's Nukhba Jabalya Assault Company; Muetaz Eid, Commander of the Hamas Southern District of National Security; Zachariah Abu Ma'amar, Head of the International Relations office in Hamas's Politburo; Joad Abu Shmalah, Hamas Minister of Economy in Gaza; Belal Alqadra (or Bilal al Kedra), Commander of the Nukhba Southern Khan Yunis Assault Company; Merad abu Merad, Head of the Hamas Aerial Array in Gaza City; and Osama Mazini, the head of the Shura Council of Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Information retrieved from <https://idfanc.activetrail.biz/anc16102023.12345> and <https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/updates-articles-videos-and-more/real-time-updates/>, October 17, 2023. See also "Nukhba Force: All you need to know about Hamas' lethal military unit in target of Israel Army," CNBC, October 13, 2023.

¹¹⁷ The initial barrage apparently included some 2,500-3,000 rockets. Samia Nakhoul and Jonathan Saul, "How Hamas duped Israel as it planned devastating attack," Reuters, October 10, 2023.

Iron Dome

According to figures from the IDF, from October 7 through October 16, Hamas, other Gaza-based Palestinian militants, and Hezbollah fired an estimated 6,000 rockets at Israel.¹¹⁸ Of that amount, roughly 2,000-3,000 were fired within the initial hours of Hamas's surprise attack against Israel in the early morning of October 7.¹¹⁹ Iron Dome's targeting system and radar are designed to fire its Tamir interceptors only at incoming projectiles that pose threats to the area being protected, and, in previous rounds of Israel-Hamas confrontations, Iron Dome's interception rate has exceeded 90%.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, when facing a rocket barrage, even with success rates exceeding 90%, some rockets reach populated areas. There is insufficient public information available at this time to authoritatively assess Iron Dome's interception rate in the current conflict.¹²¹ According to one analysis by the Modern War Institute at West Point, "If Hamas fires ten rockets and misses with nine, Iron Dome can most likely intercept the one threatening round.... But extrapolate this dynamic—by firing a thousand, two thousand, or even more rockets—and, eventually, the advantage shifts in favor of the attacker."¹²² In the ongoing war, Israel has deployed Iron Dome batteries nationwide to defend both against rocket attacks emanating from Gaza and mortar and rocket attacks emanating from Syria and Lebanon.

Though Iron Dome apparently continues to successfully intercept incoming rockets at a high rate, some Israelis and some others have questioned whether Israel has become over-reliant on technological solutions both to deter their adversaries and prolong difficult policy dilemmas vis-à-vis the Palestinians.¹²³ According to one Israeli critic, though Iron Dome undoubtedly has provided Israelis a certain sense of security, it also has led many Israelis to "not feel the urgency, or sufficient enough optimism, to press their leaders to solve the underlying problems causing the long-term crisis facing Gaza."¹²⁴

Siege of Gaza

Since Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007, Israel has maintained air, land, and sea restrictions on access to and from Gaza for people and goods, in concert with similarly tight parameters that Egypt enforces at its land border with Gaza. A security fence separates Gaza from Israel, though militants reportedly penetrated it in at least 28 areas during the October 7 attacks. A maritime exclusion zone remains in place off the Gaza coast. The Erez crossing between Gaza and Israel was damaged in the attacks and is closed. Israel has declared a military exclusion zone

¹¹⁸ Government of Israel, Israel Defense Forces, <https://www.idf.il/en/>.

¹¹⁹ Samia Nakhoul and Jonathan Saul, "How Hamas duped Israel as it planned devastating attack," Reuters, October 10, 2023.

¹²⁰ "Israel says Iron Dome shoots down 97% of Gaza rockets," Reuters, August 7, 2022.

¹²¹ One analyst has said, "Iron Dome's interception rate may have remained constant compared to previous conflicts, with the successful strikes due to the high number of rockets fired. It also seems possible, however, that the high number of rockets fired and their launch frequency overwhelmed the system and degraded its interception rate." Fabian Hinz, "The Hamas attack and Israeli military options: Rocket use by Hamas and Islamic Jihad," International Institute for Strategic Studies, October 10, 2023.

¹²² Patrick Sullivan and John Amble, "What Happened to Iron Dome? A Lesson on the Limits of Technology at War," Modern War Institute at West Point, October 10, 2023.

¹²³ Seth J. Frantzman and Aaron Mehta, "In wake of Hamas attack, Israel may have to change intel, tech strategy," *Breaking Defense*, October 9, 2023. See also Michael Koplow, "The Great Shattering," Israel Policy Forum, October 9, 2023.

¹²⁴ Anshel Pfeffer, "The Costly Success of Israel's Iron Dome," *The Atlantic*, May 24, 2021.

surrounding Gaza in areas of southern Israel, having evacuated Israeli residents of the region to areas farther north in Israel.

On October 9, Israel announced a “complete siege” in Gaza that would apparently cut Gaza’s residents off from the flow of food, water, fuel, and electricity.¹²⁵ On October 12, Israel’s energy minister said that Israel-imposed restrictions on the flow of goods, including fuel, and the cessation of the provision of water and electricity services from Israel to Gaza would remain in place until the release of Israeli hostages from Gaza.¹²⁶

The siege has generated fierce debate between

- those who argue the siege is a necessary element of Israel’s efforts to deprive its adversaries of important supplies and sustenance, and demoralize and confuse them in connection with a likely Israeli ground invasion; and
- those who criticize Israeli measures as potentially severely harmful to civilians—including vulnerable populations in hospitals, the elderly, and young children—and assert that the measures breach international law.

“IDF’s call” for evacuation from northern Gaza

On October 13, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) announced that it “calls for” for the evacuation of all civilians in Gaza City in northern Gaza “from their homes southwards for their own safety and protection”¹²⁷ (see **Figure 1**. Israel and Gaza: Conflict Map). Hamas called on people in these areas to remain in place.¹²⁸ U.N. officials expressed concern about potentially grave humanitarian consequences,¹²⁹ with an estimated 1 million Gazans (nearly half the territory’s population) displaced from their homes. Reportedly, some of those who have evacuated or have been evacuating may have been killed by Israeli airstrikes.¹³⁰

There are reportedly hundreds of American citizens in Gaza, many of whom are seeking to leave. The White House has stated that it has sought to work with Israel and Egypt to arrange safe passage for them, but—according to one media report as of October 17—“diplomatic efforts to ensure this have continued to stall.”¹³¹

The possibility of large numbers of refugees raises complex issues for neighboring Egypt (see “What is Egypt’s role regarding humanitarian developments in Gaza?”). On October 13, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al Sisi said that Gazans must “stay steadfast and remain on their land.” He committed to ensuring the delivery into Gaza of international humanitarian assistance arriving in Egypt,¹³² but Egyptian officials have claimed that Israeli strikes in Gaza at or near the Rafah crossing at the Egypt-Gaza border have prevented efforts to reopen the crossing (discussed further below).

¹²⁵ Ruby Mellen et al., “Israel ordered a ‘complete siege’ of Gaza. Here’s what that looks like,” *Washington Post*, October 11, 2023.

¹²⁶ Israel Katz (@Israel_katz), post on X, 2:34 AM EST, October 12, 2023.

¹²⁷ Israel Defense Forces (@IDF), post on X (formerly Twitter), 1:50 AM EST, October 13, 2023.

¹²⁸ “Hamas tells Gaza residents to stay home as Israel ground offensive looms,” Reuters, October 13, 2023.

¹²⁹ “UN says Israel wants 1.1 million Gazans moved south,” Reuters, October 12, 2023.

¹³⁰ Yahya Abou-Ghazala, “They followed evacuation orders. An Israeli airstrike killed them the next day,” CNN, October 17, 2023; “70 killed after convoys of evacuees in Gaza hit by Israeli airstrikes,” NBC News, October 14, 2023.

¹³¹ Astha Rajvanshi, “Why Egypt’s Border with Gaza Is Sealed,” *Time*, October 17, 2023.

¹³² “Gazans must ‘remain on their land’: Egypt’s al-Sisi,” Agence France Presse, October 13, 2023.

For residents in the northern Gaza region who faced endemically poor living and working conditions at the outset of conflict, followed by days of active bombardment, the “IDF’s call” for them to abruptly leave their homes and most of their possessions may present enormous stresses. Many humanitarian experts argue that implementing an evacuation may not be feasible, especially under present conditions. Medically compromised, elderly, and disabled individuals, their families, or families with young children may face particular challenges finding safety. Individuals and families confront the question of whether to remain in a zone that may likely experience more intense conflict in the coming days and weeks, or to migrate to southern Gaza areas where residential and health care infrastructure is reportedly inferior in capacity to that in the north, while risking potential hazards during the journey and upon arrival. For example, Hamas may discourage or block movement. Some Gazans’ reaction to Israeli directives to evacuate could be affected by personal and collective memories of the mass expulsion or displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians during the 1948 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars.¹³³ Thus, some Gazans might interpret such directives as additional steps that are part of a larger pattern of Israeli efforts to weaken or destroy the Palestinian national cause.

Under pressure reportedly exerted by the United States, among other governments and organizations, to ensure that those who live in or evacuate to southern Gaza do not face life-threatening privation, Israel announced the resumption of water supply there (but apparently not other items) on October 15.¹³⁴ Then, on October 16, Secretary of State Blinken announced:

the United States and Israel have agreed to develop a plan that will enable humanitarian aid from donor nations and multilateral organizations to reach civilians in Gaza – and them alone – including the possibility of creating areas to help keep civilians out of harm’s way. It is critical that aid begin flowing into Gaza as soon as possible.

We share Israel’s concern that Hamas may seize or destroy aid entering Gaza or otherwise preventing it from reaching the people who need it. If Hamas in any way blocks humanitarian assistance from reaching civilians, including by seizing the aid itself, we’ll be the first to condemn it and we will work to prevent it from happening again.¹³⁵

On October 18 during a visit to Israel, President Biden confirmed this plan to facilitate international aid to Gaza through Egypt, and announced \$100 million in U.S. humanitarian assistance for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.¹³⁶

It is unclear whether or how the movement of a large portion of northern Gaza’s population to southern Gaza might affect Israeli future military operations or improve humanitarian outcomes. If large numbers of civilians leave the areas of Gaza City and its vicinity, where Israel claims that most Hamas and other militant infrastructure is located, Israel might be able to more precisely target adversaries with less collateral damage. However, it is possible that militants could seek to embed themselves with evacuating civilians, while also using Hamas’s vast internal network of tunnels to impede Israeli military efforts (see “Hamas tunnel system”). Israel has reportedly conducted several air strikes in southern Gaza since October 7, particularly in Khan Yunis, where Hamas reportedly maintains operational infrastructure.

¹³³ See, for example, “Israeli evacuation call in Gaza hikes Egypt’s fears of a mass exodus of refugees into its territory,” Associated Press, October 13, 2023.

¹³⁴ Barak Ravid, “Israel resumes water supply to southern Gaza after U.S. pressure,” Axios, October 15, 2023.

¹³⁵ Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to the Press on President Biden’s Upcoming Trip to Israel and Agreement with Israel to Develop a Humanitarian Aid Plan for Gaza,” October 16, 2023.

¹³⁶ White House, “U.S. Announcement of Humanitarian Assistance to the Palestinian People,” October 18, 2023; Brett Samuels, “Biden announces humanitarian aid deal for Gaza,” *The Hill*, October 18, 2023.

What role do humanitarian considerations have in the conflict?

What international humanitarian law responsibilities do the conflict parties have?¹³⁷

All parties to the current conflict, including Hamas and Israeli forces, as well as any other state militaries or non-state armed groups who join the fighting, are prohibited by international humanitarian law (IHL) from causing undue suffering amongst civilians and combatants during the conflict. IHL, also known as *jus in bello*, is intended to limit harm and suffering caused by parties to an armed conflict. These prohibitions adhere in all instances of the use of military force or other military operations in armed conflict, including actions taken in self-defense against armed attack. The basic principles of IHL include (1) the distinction between civilians and combatants; (2) the prohibition of attack on those not participating in armed conflict (*hors de combat*), including combatants who have surrendered or been wounded; (3) the prohibition against infliction of unnecessary suffering; (4) the principle of necessity, which permits military action only when necessary to weaken the military capacity of an enemy; and (5) the principle of proportionality, which prohibits military action that will cause injury or death to civilians or damage to civilian objects that is excessive in relation to the military advantage gained.¹³⁸ IHL violations might have already occurred, be ongoing, or continue to take place as this conflict unfolds, as indicated by

- the attacks of October 7 on civilians and the taking of civilian hostages;
- reports of intentional or indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian areas and destruction of civilian and cultural buildings—including places of worship, hospitals, and schools; and
- statements by officials on both sides of the conflict explaining plans to attack, starve, or deny humanitarian assistance to a civilian population, or destroy objects indispensable to a civilian population's survival, and reports of such plans and actions being carried out.

Both Israel and the “State of Palestine” are required to prevent and punish criminal violations of IHL (“war crimes”), systematic widespread attacks on civilian populations (“crimes against humanity”), and the intentional destruction of any group in whole or in part (“genocide”).¹³⁹ In addition, the International Criminal Court (ICC) possesses the authority to investigate and prosecute alleged instances of these crimes during the current conflict. In December 2014, Palestinian leaders accepted ICC jurisdiction over crimes committed by Palestinian nationals or “in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, since June 13, 2014,” and in January 2015 the “State of Palestine” became party to the Rome Statute, the treaty that

¹³⁷ Prepared by Matthew C. Weed, Specialist in Foreign Policy Legislation.

¹³⁸ See International Committee of the Red Cross, *Fundamentals of IHL*, https://casebook.icrc.org/law/fundamentals-ihl#d_iii.

¹³⁹ To the extent that Hamas is considered the governing authority for Gaza, which for purposes of the Geneva Conventions appears to be considered part of the “State of Palestine,” Hamas holds responsibility for adherence to the Geneva Conventions in Gaza. As a party to armed conflict, Hamas, whether considered as a state or non-state actor, is bound by the obligations of IHL and its officials and personnel are subject to criminal prosecution for atrocity crimes. See generally Jelena Pejic, “The Protective Scope of Common Article 3: More Than Meets the Eye,” *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 93, no. 881 (March 2011).

established the ICC.¹⁴⁰ After a preliminary examination, the ICC Prosecutor announced in March 2021 that he had opened a formal investigation into the “situation in Palestine.”¹⁴¹ On October 10, 2023, the Office of the ICC Prosecutor stated that the Prosecutor’s investigation extends to the current conflict, and that the Office is continuously gathering information and evidence related to all alleged atrocity crimes.¹⁴² Israel rejects the ICC’s jurisdiction over its nationals.¹⁴³

What is the status of hostages taken from Israel?

On October 16, a spokesman for Hamas said the group was holding 200 hostages, said 50 others were being held by other “resistance factions and in other places,” and claimed that Israeli strikes since October 7 had killed 22 hostages.¹⁴⁴ A Hamas spokesman also said that the group “is prepared to release non-Israeli hostages once conditions allow movement in Gaza.”¹⁴⁵ An earlier Hamas statement claimed to have dispersed hostages, including in tunnels reported to span areas of the Gaza Strip.¹⁴⁶ On October 19, an Israeli media account cited IDF data stating that “among the 203 hostages that the military believes with high confidence are being held by terrorists in the Gaza Strip, some 30 are children and youths, and another 10-20 are elderly.”¹⁴⁷

On October 9, President Biden said, “We believe it is likely that American citizens may be among those being held by Hamas,” and he said “I have directed my team to work with their Israeli counterparts on every aspect of the hostage crisis, including sharing intelligence and deploying experts from across the United States government to consult with and advise Israeli counterparts on hostage recovery efforts.”¹⁴⁸ On October 11, John Kirby, National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications, said, “We know that a—a number of those Americans are being held hostage right now by Hamas.”¹⁴⁹

The presence of hostages complicates Israeli military considerations and planning, along with U.S. diplomatic, military, and intelligence considerations. Past cases of Hamas hostage taking suggest that related concerns could persist for years.

In prior conflicts with Israel, Palestinian armed groups, including Hamas, have taken hostages and used them to extract concessions from Israel, including the release of prisoners. In 2011, Hamas secured the release of more than a thousand prisoners in exchange for a single Israeli soldier held hostage. On October 9, Al Jazeera aired a statement attributed to Hamas’s Qassam Brigades threatening that Hamas would broadcast the execution of civilian hostages in response

¹⁴⁰ International Criminal Court, *Situation in the State of Palestine*, ICC-01/18, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/palestine>.

¹⁴¹ International Criminal Court, *Statement of ICC Prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, Respecting an Investigation of the Situation in Palestine*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-prosecutor-fatou-bensouda-respecting-investigation-situation-palestine>.

¹⁴² “ICC Prosecutor Says Mandate Applies to Current Israel-Palestinian Conflict,” Reuters, October 10, 2023.

¹⁴³ “Israel Rejects ICC Probe, Saying It Lacks Jurisdiction,” Associated Press, April 8, 2021.

¹⁴⁴ Hamas spokesman Abu Ubaida quoted in Harriet Sherwood, “Hamas says 250 people held hostage in Gaza,” *The Guardian*, October 16, 2023.

¹⁴⁵ “Hamas says it is preparing to release non-Israeli hostages,” NBC News, October 16, 2023.

¹⁴⁶ Hamas statement on Telegram social media, as reported in Cassandra Vinograd and Isabel Kershner, “Hamas Took Scores of Hostages from Israel. Here’s What We Know About Them,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2023.

¹⁴⁷ Emanuel Fabian, “IDF says hostages in Gaza include around 30 children, 10-20 elderly people,” *Times of Israel*, October 19, 2023.

¹⁴⁸ White House, “Statement from President Joe Biden on American Citizens Impacted in Israel,” October 9, 2023.

¹⁴⁹ White House, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby,” October 11, 2023.

to any subsequent Israeli strikes on civilian homes that occur without prior warning.¹⁵⁰ Qatar, which allows Hamas to operate an office in Doha, reportedly has engaged Hamas figures in discussions on a potential swap of female Hamas-held hostages for female Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.¹⁵¹ In an October 10 interview, one prominent Palestinian politician from the West Bank rejected Hamas's kidnapping of children, and said that messages had been delivered to Hamas to dissuade it from executing any hostages.¹⁵² He indicated that Hamas was considering possible prisoner exchange proposals. On October 10, top Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh said that Hamas will not engage in negotiations on the status of hostages until the conflict concludes and that the group would only release hostages for agreeable concessions.¹⁵³ Hamas released a video showing an Israeli hostage on October 17.¹⁵⁴

What is the humanitarian situation in Gaza?¹⁵⁵

The Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated areas in the world. More than two million people, the majority of whom are registered Palestinian refugees, live in the territory and most rely on humanitarian assistance. In Gaza, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) provides humanitarian services to 1.4 million Palestinian refugees;¹⁵⁶ the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA) coordinates humanitarian assistance for other vulnerable populations. UNRWA has 13,000 national and international staff in Gaza, most of them refugees themselves.¹⁵⁷ Before the Hamas attack on Israel, the humanitarian situation in Gaza was already protracted and living conditions were dire.¹⁵⁸ UNRWA's persistent funding shortfalls limited its capacity to respond.¹⁵⁹ The World Food Program (WFP) cut assistance for 60 percent of its food aid recipients in Gaza in June 2023, despite deepening food insecurity, also due to underfunding.¹⁶⁰

Hostilities and airstrikes in Gaza continue to destroy infrastructure and humanitarian facilities and, as of October 19, 2023, had reportedly displaced more than about 1 million people, including about 527,500 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) taking spontaneous shelter in UNRWA's schools, which are temporarily closed.¹⁶¹ The sharp increase in displacement was partly due to

¹⁵⁰ An individual identified as Abu Ubaydah of the Al Qassam Brigades said, "Going forward, we announce that each time our peaceful people are targeted in their houses without a prior notice, we will respond by executing one of the civilian hostages. We will video the execution and broadcast it. We hold the enemy accountable for this decision before the world. The ball is in its court." Al Jazeera Satellite Television, October 9, 2023, 1700 GMT.

¹⁵¹ Reuters, "Qatar leading talks to swap Hamas-held hostages for Palestinians in Israeli jails," October 9, 2023.

¹⁵² Sarah Ferguson and Marina Freri, "Palestinian politician claims Hamas ready to swap hostages," ABC News Australia, October 10, 2023.

¹⁵³ Regional media reports on Hamas statement, October 10, 2023.

¹⁵⁴ Ivana Kottasová, "Hamas releases first video of a hostage taken to Gaza," CNN, October 17, 2023.

¹⁵⁵ Prepared by Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy.

¹⁵⁶ For information on UNRWA, U.S. contributions to it, and congressional oversight, see CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

¹⁵⁷ U.N. News, "Explainer: UN on the ground amid Israel-Palestine crisis," October 10, 2023.

¹⁵⁸ U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), *2023 Humanitarian Response Plan: Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)*, January 2023; U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), *Annual Operational Report 2022*, July 27, 2023.

¹⁵⁹ International Crisis Group, "UNRWA's Reckoning: Preserving the UN Agency Serving Palestinian Refugees." Report 242, September 15, 2023.

¹⁶⁰ WFP, "WFP sounds alarm on food security amid conflict in Israel and Palestine, urges immediate humanitarian access," October 8, 2023.

¹⁶¹ UNOCHA, *Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel*, Flash Update #13, October 19, 2023; UNRWA, "Situation Report #7 on the situation in the Gaza Strip," October 17, 2023.

civilians in northern Gaza attempting to relocate to southern Gaza following the October 13 “IDF call” for evacuation. An unknown number of civilians remain in the north. Although the numbers are fluid, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry, in Gaza as of October 19, an estimated 3,785 civilians had been killed and more than 12,500 injured.¹⁶² These figures do not include fatalities from a reported October 17 strike on an UNRWA school in Al Maghazi refugee camp in central Gaza, which is sheltering an estimated 4,000 IDPs, or the estimated many patient and IDP fatalities from the October 17 explosion mentioned above at Al Ahly hospital in Gaza City.

Israel’s imposed “complete siege” and cutoffs of food, water, fuel and electricity to Gaza have had an impact on emergency services and health facilities amid high demand for lifesaving care.¹⁶³ Overcrowding and lack of basic relief supplies, shelter facilities, water, and sanitation services have created severe hardship for civilians.¹⁶⁴ On October 15, Israel announced a resumption of water supply to Southern Gaza. As of October 19, humanitarian assistance on the Egyptian side awaiting delivery to Gaza in response to needs—including food, water and medicines—has reportedly not moved past the Rafah crossing at the Gaza-Egypt border. On October 18, the Biden Administration announced that Israel had agreed to allow humanitarian assistance to flow between Egypt and Gaza, with the understanding that it would be subject to inspections, and that it should go to civilians and not Hamas militants. The timeline on when assistance might start to move is not known.¹⁶⁵ UNRWA and WFP are coordinating limited food distribution in shelters. WFP has prepositioned food and is aiming to reach 1.3 million beneficiaries with critical assistance over the next two weeks.¹⁶⁶ The intensity of the hostilities constrains the ability of humanitarian staff to deliver assistance and supplies into the territory. At least 14 U.N. employees had been killed in air strikes in Gaza as of October 17.¹⁶⁷

Protection of and access to civilians remain key concerns. The World Health Organization and other U.N. agencies and partners proposed establishing a humanitarian corridor for safe, unimpeded humanitarian access to reach people in Gaza with critical supplies.¹⁶⁸ The International Committee of the Red Cross, which is working closely with the Magen David Adom and the Palestine Red Crescent Society “to assist those who are wounded or sick and in need, has called for all parties to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and to take every possible step to prevent civilians from further harm.”¹⁶⁹ The U.N. officials have argued for a suspension of hostilities that might enable the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the release of hostages held by Hamas.

What is Egypt’s role regarding humanitarian developments in Gaza?

Egypt controls the Rafah border crossing into Gaza, making it the only non-Israeli-controlled passenger entryway into Gaza. As war continues in Gaza and the humanitarian situation there

¹⁶² UNOCHA, *Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel*, Flash Update #13, October 19, 2023.

¹⁶³ UNRWA, “Situation Report #7 on the situation in the Gaza Strip,” October 17, 2023.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ AP News, “Israel will let Egypt deliver some badly needed aid to Gaza, as it reels from hospital blast,” October 18, 2023.

¹⁶⁶ WFP, “WFP Palestine Emergency Response External Situation Report #3,” October 18, 2023.

¹⁶⁷ UNRWA, “Situation Report #7 on the situation in the Gaza Strip,” October 17, 2023.

¹⁶⁸ U.N. News, “Explainer: UN on the ground amid Israel-Palestine crisis,” October 10, 2023.

¹⁶⁹ International Committee of the Red Cross, “Israel and the Occupied Territories: Targeting civilians leads to further spirals of violence and hatred,” October 10, 2023.

worsens, Egypt's government may not welcome large numbers of refugees pouring into the northern Sinai Peninsula, an area which has witnessed a decade of insurgency between the Egyptian military and various terrorist groups, including an affiliate of the Islamic State (Sinai Province).¹⁷⁰ Additionally, Egypt faces an ongoing economic crisis at home and a civil war in Sudan on its southern border. Perhaps most importantly, the Egyptian government may consider the possibility that temporary resettlement of Palestinians in Egypt could extend over a long term or become permanent, akin to the situation of some Palestinians living in refugee camps elsewhere in the region.¹⁷¹

Egypt may play a central role in humanitarian aid delivery. On October 12, Egypt directed that international aid shipments should arrive via air to Arish in the northern Sinai, about 30 miles from Gaza. On October 16, Secretary Blinken said that the United States and Israel agreed "to develop a plan" to deliver the aid into Gaza.¹⁷² As of October 17, 2023, approximately 160 trucks carrying humanitarian aid for the Gaza Strip have left Arish airport for the Rafah border crossing.¹⁷³

The Egyptian government, which has claimed (during the week of October 16) that the Rafah border crossing is technically open but inoperable due to Israeli airstrikes on the Gaza side of the crossing, may be using its sovereign control over Rafah as leverage to negotiate understandings with Israel, Hamas, and/or the United States over the passage of people and/or humanitarian aid. Such understandings could relate to a number of issues, ranging from reassurances that Palestinians won't be permanently settled in Egypt, to financial inducements for Egyptian cooperation.¹⁷⁴ On October 15, Secretary Blinken may have attempted to reassure Egypt by saying that the United States does not support the mass relocation of Gazans into Egypt, but added "we also want to make sure that they're out of harm's way and that they're getting the assistance they need."¹⁷⁵

What are other relevant humanitarian considerations?

U.S. policy

A senior U.S. defense official acknowledged the relevance of civilian protection concerns in an October 9 briefing, saying, "engagement on mitigating collateral damage and civilian casualties is always part of the conversation with all of our allies and partners. It's no different with Israel."¹⁷⁶ On October 10 and October 11, President Biden stated that he had discussed the importance of observation of the laws of war with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu.¹⁷⁷ An October 14 Pentagon statement on Secretary of Defense Austin's call with Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said the Secretary "discussed the importance of adhering to the law of war, including civilian

¹⁷⁰ "Egypt discusses Gaza aid, rejects corridors for civilians, say sources," Reuters, October 11, 2023.

¹⁷¹ Heba Saleh, Henry Foy, and Guy Chazan, "Fear of Gaza exodus looms over Egypt," *Financial Times*, October 17, 2023.

¹⁷² "Gaza aid arrives at border crossing but no plan for delivery yet," Reuters, October 17, 2023.

¹⁷³ "Trucks carrying aid for Gaza Strip arrive at Rafah crossing," Reuters, October 17, 2023.

¹⁷⁴ For example, see Steven T. Dennis, "US Aid to Egypt in Limbo Amid Conflict," *Bloomberg*, October 16, 2023 and "Can Egypt be persuaded to accept Gazan refugees?" *The Economist*, October 14, 2023.

¹⁷⁵ Jacob Magid, "Blinken says efforts to relocate Palestinians from Gaza to Sinai a 'non-starter,'" *Times of Israel*, October 15, 2023.

¹⁷⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, "Senior Defense Official Holds a Background Briefing on U.S. Force Posture Changes in the Middle East," October 9, 2023.

¹⁷⁷ White House, "Remarks by President Biden on the Terrorist Attacks in Israel," October 10, 2023.

protection obligations, and addressing the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza while Israel continues its operations to restore security.”¹⁷⁸ Following the October 17 explosion at the Al Ahly hospital in Gaza, President Biden said, “The United States stands unequivocally for the protection of civilian life during conflict.”¹⁷⁹ He subsequently stated that evidence pointed toward a Palestinian source of the explosion.¹⁸⁰ U.S. laws and regulations regarding arms sales and security assistance restrict certain sales of defense articles to foreign recipients found to have committed human rights violations.¹⁸¹

In Israel

After the attacks, Israeli authorities evacuated tens of thousands of people from towns and cities in southern Israel. Thousands of people injured in the attacks on Israel have received medical support. Ongoing indiscriminate indirect rocket and mortar fire from the Gaza Strip poses security threats across southern and central Israel, and additional mass evacuations are possible, which could create humanitarian needs.

Is an Israeli ground invasion likely, and what are the probable implications?

Objectives and operational considerations

Israel has initiated air strikes and reportedly localized raids, but the questions of whether it will launch a ground assault, and, if it does, how extensive such a ground assault might be, loom large. The IDF has said it plans a wide-ranging offensive against Hamas, including coordinated attacks by land, air, and sea. Cyber and electronic warfare operations also would appear likely. Some observers, including former U.S. military commanders and defense officials, have speculated on the nature of a potential Israeli ground invasion. While entry into Gaza from the far north at the Erez crossing may be favorable for the movement of large tanks and armored personnel carriers, the IDF could try to enter at other points in central or southern Gaza to surround or surprise Hamas or to cut its lines of communication. Observers have anticipated the following possible developments, among others:

- **Urban warfare settings.** Gaza-based militants may be able to limit Israeli armored vehicles’ maneuverability, with “anti-tank mines and obstacles intended to channelize them into concentrated fires,” and surface-to-air missiles targeting planes and helicopters.¹⁸²
- **Block-by-block close quarters fighting.** Israel may be aided to some extent by advanced robotics technology, the urban warfare capabilities of its Merkava

¹⁷⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, “Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III’s Call with Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant,” October 14, 2023.

¹⁷⁹ White House, “Statement from President Joe Biden on the Hospital Explosion in Gaza,” October 17, 2023.

¹⁸⁰ White House, “Statement from President Joe Biden on the Hospital Explosion in Gaza,” October 17, 2023.

¹⁸¹ For more information, see CRS In Focus IF11197, *U.S. Arms Sales and Human Rights: Legislative Basis and Frequently Asked Questions*, by Paul K. Kerr and Michael A. Weber.

¹⁸² Luis Martinez, “‘Extremely difficult’: What would be Israel’s objectives in an offensive into Gaza?” ABC News, October 13, 2023; Mehul Srivastava and John Paul Rathbone, “‘Everything you can imagine and worse’ awaits Israeli army in Gaza,” *Financial Times*, October 12, 2023.

tanks, techniques honed by advanced training for clearing areas and avoiding ambushes, and the layered use of drones and aircraft.¹⁸³

Retired General Kenneth “Frank” McKenzie, former U.S. Central Command commander, has stated, “Fighting in a built-up area is the most difficult of all combat operations and Gaza is uniquely dense, uniquely packed, high-rise buildings ... plus Hamas has had years to put an elaborate tunnel system into place, which would make it even more difficult.”¹⁸⁴ Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has said that militants could surprise Israeli troops with new types of weaponry.¹⁸⁵ In light of these challenges, the IDF could potentially opt for tactics in Gaza that differ from traditional military ground operations. Some observers question whether any attempt to remove Hamas’s leadership from Gaza would be viable without a major ground invasion.

Hamas tunnel system

Hamas reportedly began using tunnels in Gaza for military purposes in 2006, when Hamas members used the tunnel system in battle and to capture an Israeli soldier who was later exchanged for more than 1,000 prisoners in Israeli jails. Hamas claimed in 2021 to have built 311 miles worth of tunnels under Gaza (a little less than half the length of the New York City subway system).¹⁸⁶ Israel’s intelligence community contends that resources provided by international donors for Gaza relief, recovery, or reconstruction from past conflicts have been diverted by Hamas to build and fortify its tunnels and bunkers.¹⁸⁷

Israel has reportedly spent billions of dollars on “sensors to detect underground movements and building a barrier to block tunnels from reaching into Israel.”¹⁸⁸ From FY2016 to FY2023, after Hamas’s extensive use of cross-border tunnels in the 2014 Israel-Hamas conflict, Congress has appropriated \$320 million in Department of Defense funding for U.S.-Israel collaboration on detecting, mapping, and neutralizing underground tunnels that threaten either country.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Martinez, “‘Extremely difficult’: What would be Israel’s objectives in an offensive into Gaza?”

¹⁸⁵ Srivastava and Rathbone, “‘Everything you can imagine and worse’ awaits Israeli army in Gaza.”

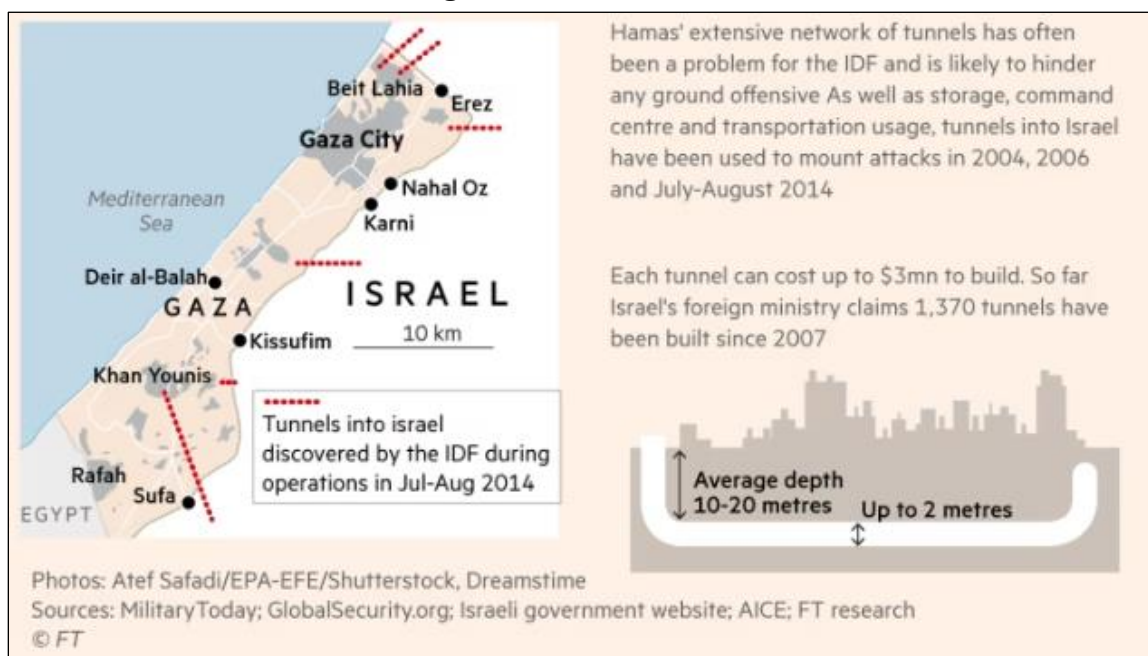
¹⁸⁶ Joshua Berlinger, “The ‘Gaza metro’: The mysterious subterranean tunnel network used by Hamas,” CNN, October 17, 2023.

¹⁸⁷ Jason Gewirtz, “‘We know they’re waiting for us’: Gaza’s tunnels pose deadly challenge for Israeli troops,” CNBC, October 12, 2023.

¹⁸⁸ Srivastava and Rathbone, “‘Everything you can imagine and worse’ awaits Israeli army in Gaza.”

¹⁸⁹ CRS Report RL33222, *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

Figure 5. Tunnels in Gaza



Source: *Financial Times*, citing other sources.

Note: CRS cannot independently verify the information herein.

According to various media reports,¹⁹⁰ some features of the tunnel system (see **Figure 5. Tunnels in Gaza** and **Figure 6. View Inside a Gaza Tunnel**), include the following:

- A reported rail system that allows militants to transport rockets underground to different launch sites within the territory, frustrating Israeli efforts to destroy Hamas's rocket capacity from the air.
- Storage of weapons and ammunition, food, electricity generators, and other supplies to allow militants refuge and opportunities for tactical surprise against Israeli forces in Gaza for an extended period of time.
- Opportunities for militants to disperse themselves and the hostages they hold, complicating any potential Israeli operation to enter, clear, or destroy tunnels.

Some observers say that the IDF may opt to find ways to “smoke out” militants from the tunnels rather than storm them.¹⁹¹ Bombing the underground passages is reportedly the most efficient way to destroy tunnels.¹⁹² However, any method that could cause death or severe injury could also affect hostages possibly held inside or Gazan civilians located above or nearby.

¹⁹⁰ Gewirtz, “‘We know they’re waiting for us’: Gaza’s tunnels pose deadly challenge for Israeli troops”; Srivastava and Rathbone, “‘Everything you can imagine and worse’ awaits Israeli army in Gaza”; Detsch and Rathi, “Israel Prepares for Block-by-Block Warfare in Gaza”; Martinez, “‘Extremely difficult’: What would be Israel’s objectives in an offensive into Gaza?”; Neri Zilber and Mehul Srivastava, “Military briefing: the shape of a Gaza invasion,” *Financial Times*, October 13, 2023.

¹⁹¹ Gewirtz, “‘We know they’re waiting for us’: Gaza’s tunnels pose deadly challenge for Israeli troops.”

¹⁹² Berlinger, “The ‘Gaza metro’: The mysterious subterranean tunnel network used by Hamas.”

Figure 6. View Inside a Gaza Tunnel



Source: CNN, based on a February 2018 photo.

Who or what could replace Hamas control in Gaza?

It is unclear whether the removal of Hamas from power is within Israel's capabilities or at what price it might be possible. It is unclear who would govern in Hamas's place and whether such a change would result in a lasting peace.

If **Israel** were to reassume responsibility for Gaza, whether for a temporary duration or indefinitely, it would return to the role its military had from 1967 (when it captured the territory, which had been under Egyptian administration) until the then-new PA assumed limited self-rule in Gaza in 1994. From 1994 until the full withdrawal of Israel's military and settlers in 2005, PA administration of Gaza remained subject to overarching Israeli control. Some Israelis and other observers might wonder why Israel would seek to return to a role of direct administrative responsibility that it discarded in stages after the outbreak of the first Palestinian intifada in 1987. In the wake of the October 7 attacks and ensuing conflict, Israeli leaders and citizens may be reassessing the costs and benefits of devoting manpower and resources to the administration of Gaza, with its very complicated political, economic, security, and humanitarian situation.

When asked in his *60 Minutes* interview if he would "support Israeli occupation of Gaza at this point," President Biden said, "I think it'd be a big mistake." He then said that he believes that Hamas must be "eliminated entirely," but that "there needs to be a Palestinian authority. There needs to be a path to a Palestinian state."¹⁹³ In the event Palestinian control were established, it is unclear whether or how Israel, Palestinian leaders, or third parties could prevent the political participation in Gaza of groups and individuals that share or sympathize with Hamas's views.

The **PA** (discussed above) faces a number of challenges in connection with its limited self-rule over parts of the West Bank. Similar factors could complicate efforts aimed at having the PA

¹⁹³ Scott Pelley, "President Joe Biden: The 2023 60 Minutes interview transcript."

regain control over Gaza, especially considering it lost control to Hamas in 2007. Additionally, if the PA were to be placed in charge of Gaza by Israel, the Palestinian public could have great difficulty accepting its legitimacy.

President Biden said that “Hamas and the extreme elements of Hamas don’t represent all the Palestinian people.”¹⁹⁴ It is unclear whether the removal of much or all of Hamas’s leadership and organizational structure, if it occurs, would effectively quash all individuals and groups who may have an interest in or engage in efforts to organize violence against Israel. Hamas and other Islamist or secular militant groups with sizable bases of support in Gaza may respond to popular sentiment. Hamas leaders and operatives who survive the conflict in Gaza or are in exile elsewhere, or other Palestinian figures, could conceivably organize rear-guard efforts, insurgencies, or other movements to oppose or hinder the rule of whatever controlling authority might succeed Hamas.

Whether Hamas somehow maintains its control in Gaza, or some other governing structure eventually takes over—be it Israel, the PA, or an entity approved by some combination of Israelis, Palestinians, and international actors, a major international effort to fund relief, recovery, and reconstruction, and to restructure patterns of life in Gaza, could take place. For any would-be governing state or body, such an effort could help mitigate some initial difficulties of resourcing Gaza’s administration and caring for its vast humanitarian needs.

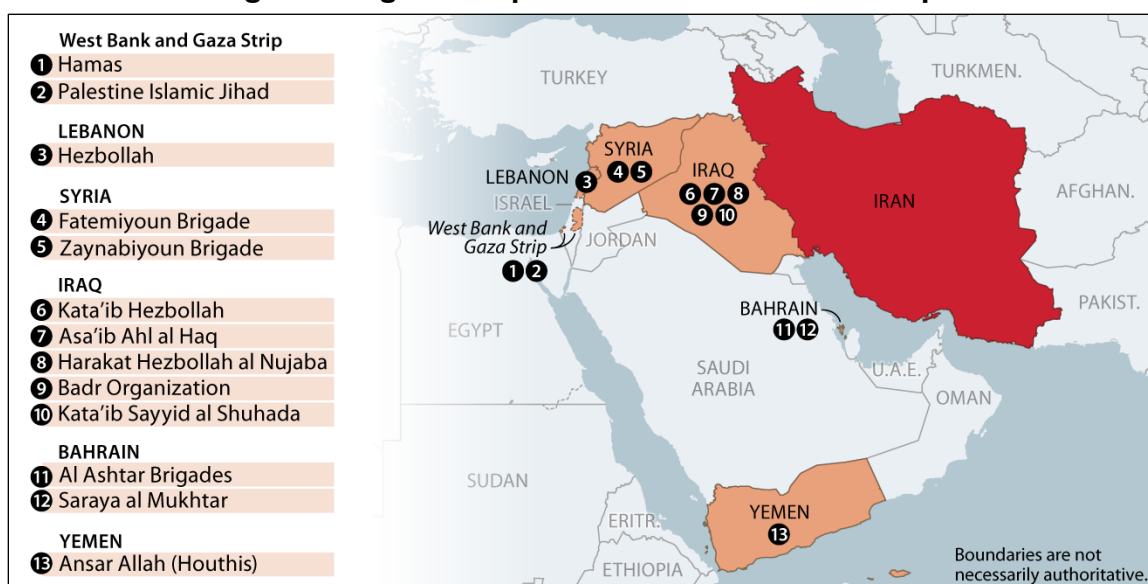
Could the conflict widen to include other actors against Israel?

Lebanese Hezbollah

Beyond Hamas, Israel faces hostile actors on a variety of fronts, many backed by Iran. The most acute of these threats arguably comes from Hezbollah, which some consider Iran’s closest and most capable proxy. Hezbollah last fought a war with Israel in 2006, when it launched thousands of rockets into northern Israel and conducted cross-border raids into Israeli territory—killing more than 40 civilians. Its militia has since periodically launched rockets into Israel (and has reportedly acquiesced at times to Hamas or PIJ rocket strikes on Israeli-held territory from Lebanon, an apparent indication of deepening Hamas-Hezbollah ties) as Hezbollah has accumulated an arsenal of over 100,000 rockets and missiles.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Patrick Kingsley et al., “Rockets from Lebanon point to growing Hamas cooperation with Hezbollah,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2023; Hanna Davis, “Lebanon: Inside Hezbollah’s arsenal,” *Middle East Eye*, June 2, 2023.

Figure 7. Regional Map of Selected Iran-Allied Groups

Source: CRS, based on various open sources.

On October 8, 2023, Hezbollah launched artillery and rocket attacks on Israeli targets, stating that it did so “in solidarity” with the Hamas attack the day before, prompting Israeli retaliatory strikes that reportedly killed Hezbollah fighters.¹⁹⁶ A raid by PIJ (and possibly including Hamas militants) across the Lebanese border on October 10 reportedly killed three Israeli soldiers and prompted further Israeli attacks on Hezbollah sites in Lebanon.¹⁹⁷

On October 16, the Israeli defense ministry ordered residents of 28 Israeli communities near the border to evacuate to state-funded guesthouses.¹⁹⁸ On October 17, additional projectile exchanges led to reports of three Israelis injured and five Hezbollah fighters dead.¹⁹⁹

U.S. officials have reportedly conveyed to Lebanese officials the message that “Hezbollah must not get involved,” and some analysis suggests that the militia’s leadership reportedly seeks to keep its operations “limited in scope, preventing a big spillover into Lebanon while keeping Israeli forces occupied in northern Israel.”²⁰⁰ Hezbollah may increase attacks as a way to distract Israeli forces or to seek a military advantage in northern Israel in the event of a large-scale Israeli military ground operation into Gaza. According to a former head of Israel’s military intelligence:

Probably, Hezbollah thinks that they cannot sacrifice themselves for the Palestinians because their whole reason for existence is Iran, not Gaza. So if they see more signs of weaknesses, then surely they will see an opportunity. If they see signs of the opposite, of strength and resolve, they will probably not get tempted.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁶ “Israel, Hezbollah exchange artillery, rocket fire,” Reuters, October 8, 2023.

¹⁹⁷ “Lebanon’s Hezbollah on war footing but moves carefully as conflict widens,” Reuters, October 11, 2023.

¹⁹⁸ Lauren Sforza, “Israel orders evacuations near Lebanon border,” *The Hill*, October 16, 2023.

¹⁹⁹ “5 Hezbollah fighters are killed as tensions flare along the border between Lebanon and Israel,” Associated Press, October 17, 2023.

²⁰⁰ “Lebanon’s Hezbollah on war footing but moves carefully as conflict widens,” Reuters.

²⁰¹ Amy Mackinnon, “Can Israel Handle a War on 2 Fronts?” *Foreign Policy*, October 14, 2023.

West Bank militants

Israel also faces threats from the West Bank, where tensions have increased dramatically in 2023 (see **What were** prevailing conditions (with Gaza, Jerusalem, West Bank, Israel, and regional diplomacy) before the attacks?). Newer, youth-driven Palestinian militant groups like the Jenin Brigades and Nablus-based Lion's Den—which polls suggest enjoy high levels of Palestinian domestic popularity—have emerged.²⁰² According to some open sources, various factors may fuel increased Palestinian militancy, including Israeli actions in the West Bank, PA weakness, socioeconomic challenges, and the easy availability of weapons.²⁰³ One article suggests that much of the funding comes from Iran, with weaponry improvised, stolen from Israel, or smuggled across the Jordanian border.²⁰⁴

Hamas leaders have encouraged West Bank Palestinians to join their attack on Israel. Some Palestinians have held marches to celebrate the attacks.²⁰⁵ Between October 7 and October 19, at least 79 Palestinians have reportedly been killed by Israeli forces or settlers in West Bank clashes, with some 700 others (mostly Hamas members) detained.²⁰⁶ The IDF has apparently used checkpoints and barriers to limit Palestinian movement within the West Bank.²⁰⁷

Groups in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen

Further afield, a years-long campaign of strikes inside Syria attributed to (and sometimes claimed by) Israel has targeted reported weapons shipments from Iran to Iran-backed armed groups. The transfer of such weapons, the reported presence in Syria of Iranian personnel and Iran-backed armed groups, and the consolidation of Syrian government control over areas of southern Syria adjacent to Israel increases the risk that Israel could face attacks from Syria in the event of wider conflict. Some media reports suggest that the United Arab Emirates warned the Syrian government not to intervene or to allow strikes against Israel from its territory; Emirati officials declined to confirm the reports.²⁰⁸ On October 10, Israeli forces returned fire after indirect fire from southern Syria struck areas of northern Israel. On October 19, a Lebanese press outlet reported that a drone attack had targeted the U.S. outpost near At Tanf in southeastern Syria and a missile attack had targeted a U.S. facility in northeastern Syria near Deir ez Zour.²⁰⁹

Armed groups in Iraq and Yemen have expressed support for the Hamas attacks on Israel and pledged support to Palestinians; some have threatened military action against U.S. interests if the United States intervenes militarily in the Israel-Hamas war. In Iraq, the Iraqi government Popular

²⁰² Ayman Oghanna, "Inside the Lions' Den: the West Bank's Gen Z fighters," *Economist (1843 Magazine)*, July 7, 2023; Udi Dekel, "The Lion's Den: A Wake-Up Call for Imminent Challenges," Institute for National Security Studies, October 19, 2022; Hani al-Masri, "The Jenin Brigades and The Lions' Den: Palestine's new resistance," *Middle East Eye*, October 21, 2022.

²⁰³ Dekel, "The Lion's Den"; al-Masri, "The Jenin Brigades and The Lions' Den."

²⁰⁴ Reuters, "Palestinian gunmen say they're fighting for Jenin, not foreign backers," August 14, 2023.

²⁰⁵ "Street rallies celebrate Hamas onslaught in West Bank and throughout the Middle East," *Times of Israel*, October 8, 2023; "Hamas deputy chief anticipates hostages will be swapped for Palestinian prisoners," *Times of Israel*, October 8, 2023.

²⁰⁶ UNOCHA, "Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #13," October 19, 2023; "West Bank gripped by fear, anger as Gaza war rages," Agence France Presse, October 17, 2023, quoting one Palestinian villager as saying, "Soldiers and settlers are now quick to open fire in revenge for what's happening in Gaza."

²⁰⁷ Ali Sawafta and Henriette Chacar, "As Gaza war rages, Israeli forces kill 27 Palestinians in West Bank," Reuters, October 11, 2023.

²⁰⁸ Barak Ravid, "Scoop: UAE warns Syria's Assad not to get involved in Hamas-Israel war," *Axios*, October 9, 2023.

²⁰⁹ "Lebanese Iran-aligned Al-Mayadeen reports attacks on two U.S. bases in Syria," *Reuters*, October 19, 2023.

Mobilization Forces praised the attacks, as have leaders of the Badr Organization and U.S.-designated terrorist organizations Kata'ib Hezbollah, Harakat Hezbollah Al Nujaba, Asa'ib Ahl al Haq, and Kata'ib Sayyid al Shuhada.²¹⁰ Attacks by these groups on U.S. personnel in Iraq or a renewed political initiative by these groups and their allies to expel U.S. forces from Iraq could, among other things, jeopardize U.S. counter-Islamic State operations in Syria and Iraq. On October 18, U.S. Central Command said U.S. forces in Iraq had foiled three attempted drone attacks in Iraq—two on an Iraqi military base that hosts U.S. soldiers in western Iraq, one of which resulted in injuries to Coalition forces, and a third drone attack in northern Iraq.²¹¹ A U.S. civilian contractor reportedly suffered a cardiac event and died during the attack in western Iraq.

On October 10, the leader of Yemen's Ansar Allah/Houthi movement Abdulmalik al Houthi gave a speech praising the attacks on Israel, calling for support to Hamas and other armed Palestinian groups, and threatening attacks if the United States intervenes militarily in Israel's war in Gaza.²¹² As discussed below, on October 19 the Pentagon said that U.S. naval forces had intercepted missiles and drones "launched from Yemen, heading north along the Red Sea, potentially towards targets in Israel."²¹³

Iran

Iranian officials have threatened to become involved if Israel proceeds with a military ground operation in Gaza, with the foreign minister reportedly stating that Iran "cannot remain a spectator" to such an operation.²¹⁴ National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on October 15, "We have means of communicating privately with Iran" and that the United States had used those means to convey the message that Iran should not become involved.²¹⁵ Beyond supporting proxies, Iran could also seek to disrupt global energy markets or strike Israel directly with its long-range missiles; either would likely precipitate a much larger conflict.²¹⁶

How have international actors responded?

Arab states

Most Arab governments have expressed support for an end to violence, with some expressing or implying concern about the October 7 Hamas attacks, and some explicitly expressing support for the Palestinian people. Several Arab governments, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE, Egypt, and Qatar, condemned and attributed to Israel the October 17 explosion at the Al Ahly hospital in Gaza. Collectively, the League of Arab States (Arab League) member states have called for civilian protection and avoiding further escalation.

²¹⁰ Statements released October 9 and 10 on social media, and Iraqi media reports.

²¹¹ U.S. Central Command, "U.S. Forces Defend Against Drones in Iraq," October 18, 2023.

²¹² Ansar Allah, "The Leader: We are in complete coordination with the axis of resistance, and if the Americans intervene, we are ready to do so," October 10, 2023, at <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/633132>.

²¹³ U.S. Department of Defense, "Pentagon Press Secretary Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder Holds an On-Camera Press Briefing," October 19, 2023.

²¹⁴ "Iran warns it may not 'remain a spectator in Israel-Hamas conflict – as U.S. urges Iran not to intervene," *Forbes*, October 15, 2023.

²¹⁵ CBS News, "Transcript: National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan on 'Face the Nation,'" October 15, 2023.

²¹⁶ "Iran threatens to join the Gaza war, fueling fears of an expanded conflict," *Stratfor*, October 16, 2023.

- An October 7 statement from **Saudi Arabia** called for “an immediate halt to the escalation between the two sides, the protection of civilians, and restraint” and highlighted the kingdom’s past warnings that Israeli policies could provoke confrontation.²¹⁷ A Saudi statement following an October 15 meeting between Secretary of State Blinken and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abd al Aziz Al Saud said the kingdom calls “for lifting the siege on Gaza, to bring justice, stability and peace and ensure that the Palestinian people attain their legitimate rights. The Kingdom rejects the targeting of civilians, the destruction of infrastructure and of vital services that affect everyday life.”²¹⁸ A Saudi government statement on Secretary Blinken’s earlier October 15 meeting with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud stated the kingdom’s “categorical rejection of calls for the forcible displacement of the Palestinian people from Gaza,” called for “an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and its surroundings” and called for “an end to all forms of military escalation against civilians.”²¹⁹ The statement called on the international community “to stop the violence and advance the peace process” according to U.N. Security Council Resolutions and the U.N. General assembly “and the Arab Peace Initiative” (API, the Saudi-led, Arab League-endorsed peace plan from 2002). Separate Saudi Foreign Ministry statements earlier that day reiterated calls for an independent Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.²²⁰
- **Qatar**, which allows Hamas to operate an office in Doha, said on October 7 that it “holds Israel solely responsible for the ongoing escalation.”²²¹ On October 8, it called for “all parties to halt the escalation to attain calm and entirely halt the armed confrontations on all fronts.”²²² In an October 13 press conference with Secretary Blinken, Qatar’s Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani said the Hamas office in Doha “was started to be used as a way of communicating and bringing peace and calm into the region, not to instigate any war. And this is the purpose of that office.”²²³ On October 13, the Qatari government rejected “the attempts to forcibly displace the brotherly Palestinian people from Gaza Strip,” called for “lifting the blockade on the Strip and providing full protection to civilians under international law and international humanitarian law,” and affirmed the Palestinian right to statehood with East Jerusalem as its capital.²²⁴

²¹⁷ Saudi Arabia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Statement, October 7, 2023, <https://x.com/KSAmofoaEN/status/1710629609757086172?s=20>.

²¹⁸ Saudi Press Agency, “HRH the Crown Prince, US Secretary of State Hold Talks,” October 15, 2023.

²¹⁹ Saudi Arabia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (@KSAmofoaEN), Statement, X post, October 15, 2023, at <https://twitter.com/ksamofaen/status/1713259184291020841>.

²²⁰ Saudi Arabia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (@KSAmofoaEN), Statement, X post, October 15, 2023, at <https://twitter.com/ksamofaen/status/1712947177935224837>.

²²¹ Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Qatar Expresses Concern over the Developments in Gaza Strip and Calls for Deescalation,” October 7, 2023.

²²² Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Qatar Reiterates Call for Halting Escalation to Protect Region from Danger of Descending into a Wider Cycle of Violence,” October 8, 2023.

²²³ U.S. State Department, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken with Qatari Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammed Bin Abdulrahman Al Thani at a Joint Press Availability,” October 13, 2023.

²²⁴ Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Qatar Announces Its Categorical Rejection of the Attempts to Forcibly Displace the Palestinian People from Gaza Strip,” October 13, 2023; and, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Holds Phone Call with UN Secretary-General,” October 13, 2023.

- The **United Arab Emirates (UAE)**, which normalized diplomatic relations with Israel in 2020, called the Hamas attacks “a serious and grave escalation” and said the UAE government “is appalled by reports that Israeli civilians have been abducted as hostages from their homes. Civilians on both sides must always have full protection under international humanitarian law and must never be a target of conflict.”²²⁵ Following the October 17 explosion at the Al Ahly hospital in Gaza, the UAE Foreign Ministry “stressed the need for an immediate cessation of hostilities and to ensure that civilians and civilian institutions are not targeted.”²²⁶
- **Jordan’s** Foreign Ministry called for a halt to escalation²²⁷ and its Royal Court said that in a call with PA President Mahmoud Abbas, King Abdullah II stated that “there can be no peace or stability without comprehensive resolution of the Palestinian issue on [the] basis of the two-state solution, guaranteeing the establishment of [an] independent sovereign Palestinian state on [the] 4 June 1967 lines with East Jerusalem as its capital.”²²⁸ On October 10, Jordan said it would dispatch humanitarian relief supplies to Gaza through the Rafah crossing in coordination with Egypt.²²⁹ On October 17, King Abdullah II said, “No refugees in Jordan, no refugees in Egypt. This is a situation of humanitarian dimension that has to be dealt [with] inside of Gaza and the West Bank and not to try and push the Palestinian challenge in their future onto other people’s shoulders.”²³⁰ Jordan offered to host a summit between President Biden, the King, President Sisi of Egypt, and PA President Mahmoud Abbas, but cancelled the summit in the wake of the October 17 explosion at the Al Ahly hospital in Gaza.
- **League of Arab States** (Arab League) Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit said during a visit to Moscow, “We completely reject violence, but on both sides,” and said, “The Palestinian problem cannot be postponed any longer, and the U.N. decisions must be implemented.”²³¹ The Arab League met at the ministerial level on October 11 to discuss the crisis and issued a decision calling for the cessation of Israel’s war and an end to further escalation.²³² The statement condemned the killing and targeting of civilians “by both sides” and acts contrary to international law. The statement further called for the release of civilians, prisoners, and detainees. Iraq and Libya asserted reservations to the statement’s inclusion of the phrase “by both sides.”

²²⁵ UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “In a statement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has called for the protection of civilians and stressed that the immediate priority is to end the violence and protect the civilian population,” October 8, 2023, <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2023/10/8/8-10-2023-uae-population>.

²²⁶ UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The UAE condemns the Israeli attack on Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital in Gaza and calls for an immediate cessation of hostilities,” October 18, 2023.

²²⁷ Jordan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, X post, October 7, 2023, <https://twitter.com/ForeignMinistry/status/1710624188925427893>.

²²⁸ Jordanian Royal Court (@RHCJO), X post, October 8, 2023, <https://twitter.com/rhcjo/status/1711082875821441104>.

²²⁹ Jordanian Royal Court, “King issues directives to dispatch aid to Palestinians in Gaza,” October 10, 2023.

²³⁰ Eyad Kourdi, “Jordanian king warns against forced migration of Palestinians to Jordan and Egypt,” CNN, October 17, 2023.

²³¹ Guy Faulconbridge, “Russia accuses US of ‘destructive’ approach on Israeli–Palestinian war,” Reuters, October 9, 2023.

²³² League of Arab States Resolution 8987, “On Ways to take political action to stop Israeli aggression and achieve Peace and Security,” October 11, 2023.

Iran

Iranian government officials have been united in expressing enthusiastic support for the assault, including:

- Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who wrote, “God willing, the cancer of the usurper Zionist regime will be eradicated at the hands of the Palestinian people and the Resistance forces throughout the region,” while reposting a video of civilians fleeing Hamas attackers on X (formerly Twitter).²³³ In an October 10, 2023, speech, Khamenei praised the Hamas attack but said that Iran was not “behind this move.”²³⁴
- President Ebrahim Raisi, who said, “Iran supports the legitimate defense of the Palestinian nation.”²³⁵ In an October 16 call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Raisi said Palestinian groups are “free and independent in making any decision they need, and naturally we support all the measures the resistance takes to combat Zionist aggression.”²³⁶
- Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, who said on October 15 that if measures to end Israeli operations in Gaza fail, “it is highly probable that many other fronts will be opened.”²³⁷

China and Russia

- The Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China (PRC, China) released a statement calling on “relevant parties to remain calm, exercise restraint and immediately end the hostilities to protect civilians and avoid further deterioration of the situation.”²³⁸ The statement went on to say that “The fundamental way out of the conflict lies in implementing the two-state solution and establishing an independent State of Palestine.” On October 13, the PRC Foreign Ministry said China calls “on all parties to exercise restraint, de-escalate the situation on the ground as soon as possible and prevent further expansion of the conflict. The top priority is to ensure the safety of civilians, and open corridors for aid so as to avoid a severe humanitarian crisis in Gaza.”²³⁹ PRC officials advised PRC citizens to leave Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza and said that since October 7, four PRC citizens had been killed, six were injured, and two are missing.
- Russia expressed concern about violence between Israel and Palestinians and a Kremlin spokesman said, “It is very important to find ways as soon as possible to move towards some kind of negotiation process in order to reduce this escalation

²³³ “Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (@khamenei_ir), X post, October 7, 2023, at https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/1710752170096701778. Khamenei days earlier said much the same thing in public remarks. “Normalization with Israel like ‘backing the wrong horse’: Leader,” *Tehran Times*, October 3, 2023.

²³⁴ “Inside story: Iran’s supreme leader strongly rejects role in Hamas attack,” *Amwaj.media*, October 10, 2023.

²³⁵ “Iranian president backs assault on Israel, holds talks with Gaza terror leaders,” *Times of Israel*, October 8, 2023.

²³⁶ “Putin, Raisi discuss Israel-Gaza war,” *Rudaw*, October 16, 2023.

²³⁷ Maziar Motamedi, “Iran warns Israel of regional escalation if Gaza ground offensive launched,” *Al Jazeera*, October 15, 2023.

²³⁸ PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson’s Remarks on the Escalation of Tensions Between Palestine and Israel,” October 8, 2023.

²³⁹ PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference,” October 13, 2023.

and move away from a military solution.”²⁴⁰ In an October 10 meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that the attacks and conflict reflected failures of U.S. policy in the Middle East region.²⁴¹ According to the Kremlin, Russia has expressed “serious concern about the likelihood of the conflict escalating into a regional war” in calls with regional leaders, including Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu.²⁴² Russia has said that it is taking steps “to help normalize the situation, prevent further escalation of violence and prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip,” and is calling “for the establishment of a humanitarian truce in order to urgently provide assistance to all those in need.”²⁴³ Russia also proposed a U.N. Security Council resolution that the Council rejected on October 16 (see below).

United Nations²⁴⁴

United Nations responses to the surprise attacks are fluid and continue to evolve as new developments emerge. More than 20 U.N. entities continue to operate in what the United Nations calls the “occupied Palestinian territory,” which includes the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, with the aim of monitoring human rights and security as well as providing humanitarian and development assistance.²⁴⁵ The U.N. Security Council, which is mandated with maintaining international peace and security, failed to adopt two separate draft resolutions on October 16 and October 18, respectively:

- The October 16 draft resolution, proposed by Russia, would have condemned all violence and terrorism directed against civilians and called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, the secure release of all hostages, the unimpeded provision and distribution of humanitarian assistance, and the safe evacuation of civilians.²⁴⁶ The draft resolution did not mention Hamas. Five members voted in favor of the resolution (China, Gabon, Mozambique, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates), four voted against (France, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and six abstained.²⁴⁷ After the vote, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield stated, “By failing to condemn Hamas, Russia is giving cover to a terrorist group that

²⁴⁰ “Palestinian state ‘most reliable’ solution to conflict with Israel: Russia,” Al Jazeera, October 9, 2023.

²⁴¹ “Putin blames failure of US policy for Mideast conflict, Russia says talking to both sides,” Reuters, October 10, 2023.

²⁴² Guy Faulconbridge and Mark Trevelyan, “Putin pushes need for talks in calls with Israeli, Arab and Iranian leaders,” Reuters, October 16, 2023.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Prepared by Luisa Blanchfield, Specialist in International Relations.

²⁴⁵ According to the United Nations, at least 14 U.N. staff operating in Gaza have been killed since the attacks. (Press Briefing: Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Latest: Occupied Palestinian Territory/Israel,” October 17, 2023). See, United Nations, “United Nations Country Team in Palestine,” at <https://unsco.unmissions.org/un-country-team-0>. The U.N. peacekeeping mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) monitors the security situation along the Israel-Lebanon border.

²⁴⁶ U.N. document, S/2023/772. Also see U.N. document, SC/15445, October 16, 2023. Security Council decisions on substantive matters are made by an affirmative vote of nine members, including the concurring votes of the five permanent members (the United States, China, France, Russia and the United Kingdom, or “P-5”). A negative vote from any of P-5 member is said to “veto” the resolution or decision, preventing its adoption.

²⁴⁷ The six abstentions included Albania, Brazil, Ecuador, Ghana, Malta, and Switzerland.

brutalizes innocent civilians. It is outrageous, it is hypocritical, and it is indefensible.”²⁴⁸

- The October 18 resolution, proposed by Brazil, would have, among other things, condemned all violence and hostilities against civilians and all acts of terrorism; rejected and condemned the terrorist attacks by Hamas and the taking of civilian hostages; called for the immediate release of all civilian hostages; and strongly urged the continuous and unhindered provision of goods and services to civilians; and called for “humanitarian pauses” to allow full access for humanitarian organizations.²⁴⁹ Twelve Council members voted in favor of the resolution, one member voted against (the United States), and two abstained (Russia and the United Kingdom). After the vote, U.S. Permanent Representative Thomas-Greenfield stated that “this resolution made no mention of Israel’s right of self-defense. Like every nation in the world, Israel has the inherent right of self-defense, as reflected in Article 51 of the U.N. Charter. Following previous terrorist attacks by groups such as al-Qaida and ISIS, this Council reaffirmed that right. This text should have done the same.” She also stated, “Yes, resolutions are important. And yes, this Council must speak out. But the actions we take must be informed by the facts on the ground and support direct diplomacy efforts that can save lives. The Council needs to get this right.”²⁵⁰

Several U.N. entities and officials have condemned the Hamas attacks and emphasized the importance of protecting civilians in both Israel and Gaza and providing access to humanitarian organizations. For example:

- The U.N. Human Rights Council’s Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory stated that it has been “collecting and preserving evidence of war crimes committed by all sides.” It emphasized that “reports that armed groups from Gaza have gunned down hundreds of unarmed civilians are abhorrent and cannot be tolerated. Taking civilian hostages and using civilians as human shields are war crimes.” The Commission also expressed “grave concern” over Israel’s strikes in Gaza.²⁵¹
- On October 9, U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres expressed “utter condemnation of the abhorrent attacks by Hamas and others.” He recognized the “legitimate grievances of the Palestinian people,” but noted that “nothing can justify these acts of terror and the killing, maiming and abduction of civilians.”²⁵² He further stated: “While I recognize Israel’s legitimate security concerns, I also remind Israel that military operations must be conducted in strict accordance with

²⁴⁸ U.S. Mission to the United Nations (USUN), “Explanation of Vote by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield on a Russia Drafted UN Security Council Resolution on the Situation in the Middle East,” October 16, 2023.

²⁴⁹ See U.N. document S/2023/773.

²⁵⁰ USUN, Explanation of Vote by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield on a UN Security Council Resolution Drafted by Brazil on the Situation in the Middle East, October 18, 2023.

²⁵¹ Drawn from U.N. Human Rights Council (HRC) Press Release, “Commission of Inquiry collecting evidence of war crimes committed by all sides in Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territories since 7 October 2023.” The 47-member HRC is the primary U.N. intergovernmental body tasked with addressing human rights situations. In May 2021, it established the aforementioned commission. The Biden Administration and some Members of Congress opposed the commission due in part to what they viewed as the HRC’s disproportionate focus on Israel and the commission’s open-ended nature.

²⁵² U.N. document, SG/SM/21984, “‘It’s Time to End This Vicious Circle’ of Bloodshed, Hatred with Negotiated Peace Fulfilling Aspirations of Palestinians, Israelis, Secretary-General Stresses,” October 9, 2023.

international humanitarian law. Civilians must be respected and protected at all times. Civilian infrastructure must never be a target.”²⁵³ On October 18, the Secretary-General called for “an immediate humanitarian ceasefire to provide sufficient time and space ... to ease the epic human suffering we are witnessing.”²⁵⁴

- In response to the “IDF’s call” for the population in northern Gaza (including U.N. staff) to evacuate to southern Gaza, the spokesperson for the Secretary-General issued a statement saying: “The United Nations considers it impossible for such a movement to take place without devastating humanitarian consequences [The United Nations] strongly appeals for any such order, if confirmed, to be rescinded avoiding what could transform what is already a tragedy into a calamitous situation.”²⁵⁵

What are the considerations for Congress and U.S. policy?

What are some consular, diplomatic, and security issues involving U.S. citizens in Israel and Gaza?²⁵⁶

Over 160,000 Americans are estimated to be in Israel; Americans in Gaza are estimated to be in the hundreds. On October 19, 2023, President Biden stated that at least 32 American citizens in Israel were killed in the Hamas attacks.²⁵⁷ Others remain unaccounted for and may be hostages.²⁵⁸ It is not known at this time if Americans may be among those killed or injured in Gaza or how many may seek safe passage.

The State Department has long provided consular services to American citizens around the world pursuant to laws passed by Congress. Following Hamas’s attacks, the State Department released a Security Alert on October 7, 2023, stating that U.S. citizens in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza were “reminded to remain vigilant and take appropriate steps to increase their security awareness as security incidents, including mortar and rocket fire, often take place without warning.”²⁵⁹ By October 19, the State Department had issued at least 10 additional Security Alerts.²⁶⁰

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ United Nations, “Secretary-General’s remarks at the 3rd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation,” October 18, 2023.

²⁵⁵ Statement by Spokesman for the U.N. Secretary-General Stéphane Dujarric “Note to correspondents on Gaza,” October 12, 2023.

²⁵⁶ Prepared by Cory R. Gill, Analyst in Foreign Affairs.

²⁵⁷ White House “Remarks by President Biden on the United States’ Response to Hamas’s Terrorist Attacks Against Israel and Russia’s Ongoing Brutal War Against Ukraine,” released October 20, 2023.

²⁵⁸ White House, “Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby En Route Tel Aviv, Israel,” October 17, 2023.

²⁵⁹ U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem, “Security Alert: U.S. Embassy Jerusalem,” October 7, 2023, <https://il.usembassy.gov/security-alert-u-s-embassy-jerusalem-october-7-2023/>.

²⁶⁰ The State Department has posted these Security Alerts on the “Alerts and Messages” section of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem’s website, <https://il.usembassy.gov/u-s-citizen-services/security-and-travel-information/>.

Section 103 of the Omnibus Diplomatic Security and Antiterrorism Act of 1986 requires the State Department to provide for the safe and efficient evacuation of U.S. citizens when their lives are endangered abroad.²⁶¹ In practice, when the State Department advises private U.S. citizens on available means to leave a country, it calls for them to use existing commercial transportation options whenever possible. In cases where U.S. citizens seeking to return to the United States lack the financial means to do so, Section 4 of the BAA authorizes the State Department to provide loans to such persons.²⁶² This policy initially was reflected in a statement President Biden provided on October 9, 2023, which said in part that, “[f]or those [U.S. citizens] who desire to leave, commercial flights and ground options are still available.”²⁶³ On October 12, the State Department shifted its approach, announcing that it would begin arranging charter flights the following day to assist U.S. citizens and their immediate family members who wished to depart Israel as several major airlines continued to suspend flights to Israel.²⁶⁴ The first charter flight landed in Athens, Greece on October 13.²⁶⁵ As of October 18, the State Department has indicated that charter flights for U.S. citizens will remain available through at least October 22.²⁶⁶ The State Department has also evacuated U.S. citizens by ferrying them from the port of Haifa, Israel to Cyprus.²⁶⁷ Upon arrival, passengers are required to arrange for their own transportation to their final destination.

U.S. officials are continuing work on potential options for U.S. citizens to depart Gaza. As of October 17, several hundred U.S. citizens in Gaza were reportedly awaiting safe passage into Egypt.²⁶⁸ The Department of State has advised Americans to go to the border, stating that “there may be very little notice if the [Rafah] crossing opens, and it may only open for a limited time.”²⁶⁹ National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has indicated that the United States is communicating with Israeli and Egyptian counterparts about the safe passage of civilians currently in Gaza.²⁷⁰ In general, the Department advises U.S. citizens to not travel to Gaza, stating

The U.S. government is unable to provide routine or emergency services to U.S. citizens in Gaza as U.S. government employees are prohibited from traveling there. Hamas, a U.S. government-designated foreign terrorist organization, controls the security infrastructure in Gaza. The security environment within Gaza and on its borders is dangerous and volatile. Sporadic mortar or rocket fire and corresponding Israeli military responses may occur at any time. During periods of unrest or armed conflict, the crossings between Gaza with Israel and Egypt may be closed. If you decide to travel to Gaza: Be prepared for an indefinite stay as the crossings between Gaza with Israel and Egypt can close without

²⁶¹ Section 103 is codified as amended at 22 U.S.C. §4802.

²⁶² Section 4 is codified as amended at 22 U.S.C. §2671. See subsection(b)(2)(B) and (d).

²⁶³ White House, “Statement from President Joe Biden on American Citizens Impacted in Israel,” October 9, 2023.

²⁶⁴ State Department, “U.S. Government to Assist U.S. Citizens in Departing Israel,” October 12, 2023; and State Department, “Information for U.S. Citizens in Israel,” October 12, 2023, at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/ea/situation-in-israel-2023.html>.

²⁶⁵ David Shepardson and Phil Stewart, “First US charter flight out of Israel arrives in Athens,” Reuters, October 13, 2023.

²⁶⁶ State Department, “Information for U.S. Citizens in the Middle East,” October 18, 2023, at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/ea/situation-in-israel-2023.html>.

²⁶⁷ “First batch of U.S. citizens leaving Israel arrive in Cyprus by boat,” Reuters, October 17, 2023.

²⁶⁸ The U.S. Department of State estimates that there are 500 to 600 U.S. citizens and permanent residents in Gaza.

²⁶⁹ Yasmine Salam, Mirna Alsharif and Anna Schechter, “Doubts, fears run high for Palestinian Americans stuck in Gaza,” NBC News, October 16, 2023.

²⁷⁰ White House, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan,” October 10, 2023.

advance notice and for long periods during times of unrest and armed conflict. Have a plan for entering and departing Gaza that does not rely on U.S. government assistance.²⁷¹

On October 19, the State Department recommended that U.S. citizens in Lebanon make appropriate arrangements to leave the country and that U.S. citizens who choose not to depart prepare contingency plans for emergency situations.²⁷²

What roles might (or might not) the U.S. military play?

On October 9, President Biden announced that the United States would reposition the U.S.S. *Gerald R. Ford* Carrier Strike Group, already operating in the Mediterranean Sea, closer to Israel. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, the *Ford* strike group “will conduct maritime and air operations in order to assure allies and partners throughout the region and ensure regional stability. The *Ford* strike group is prepared for the full range of missions.”²⁷³ According to unnamed defense officials, the U.S.S. *Dwight D. Eisenhower* carrier group reportedly also was previously scheduled to reach the Middle East region in late October and may relieve or join the *Ford* group.²⁷⁴ U.S. military officials also have ordered additional F-35, F-15, F-16, and A-10 aircraft to the Middle East region. According to one report, “combined with the four squadrons of F/A-18 jets aboard each of the two carriers, the United States will have an aerial armada of more than 100 attack planes.”²⁷⁵

On October 16, the Biden Administration announced the repositioning of the U.S.S. *Bataan* Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), consisting of up to 2,400 Marines from the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, to the eastern Mediterranean Sea.²⁷⁶ The President also dispatched the amphibious dock landing ship U.S.S. *Carter Hall*, which can launch watercraft to assist in an evacuation. On October 16, a third amphibious Navy vessel, the U.S.S. *Mesa Verde*, left its home port in Spain for the eastern Mediterranean.

As noted above, U.S. military and intelligence personnel are engaged with Israeli counterparts in assessing and responding to hostages taken from Israel, which may include U.S. nationals. Consultations on meeting Israeli equipment needs, whether from U.S. stocks or through the expediting of production orders, also are ongoing.

On October 10, President Biden said, “Let me say again—to any country, any organization, anyone thinking of taking advantage of this situation, I have one word: Don’t.”²⁷⁷ Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin repeated this formulation—“Don’t.”—on October 13 in Israel. A senior U.S. defense official said U.S. “posture increases were intended to serve as an unequivocal demonstration in deed and not only in words of U.S. support for Israel’s defense and serve as a deterrent signal to Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, and any other proxy across the region who might be

²⁷¹ U.S. State Department, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Travel Advisory, October 11, 2023.

²⁷² U.S. Embassy Beirut, “Security Alert – U.S. Embassy, Beirut, Lebanon,” October 19, 2023.

²⁷³ Jim Garamone, “U.S. Helps Israel Defend Against Hamas Attacks,” DOD News, October 9, 2023.

²⁷⁴ Nancy A. Youssef and Gordon Lubold, “U.S. Weighs Deploying Second Aircraft Carrier Group,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2023.

²⁷⁵ Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Expanding Military Presence Near Israel,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2023.

²⁷⁶ Paul Mcleary, “2 more warships, capable of evacuating civilians, head toward Israeli coast,” *Politico Pro*, October 16, 2023.

²⁷⁷ White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Terrorist Attacks in Israel,” October 10, 2023.

considering exploiting the current situation to escalate conflict. Those adversaries should think twice.”²⁷⁸

According to some accounts, the Administration may be deliberating about what might or might not “trigger U.S. military involvement” beyond the aforementioned presence operations.²⁷⁹ John Kirby, National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications, said on October 10 that “there’s no intention to put U.S. boots on the ground.”²⁸⁰ The Administration has not publicly shared its view of the President’s authority to use military force in this case. If the President chooses to assert that his Article II authorities are sufficient for some actions, he might cite deaths already suffered by American citizens and ongoing threats to U.S. citizens and personnel in the region.

On October 19, the Pentagon press secretary said that the guided missile destroyer U.S.S. *Carney*, “operating in the Red Sea, shot down three land-attack cruise missiles and several drones that were launched by Houthi forces in Yemen ... heading north along the Red Sea, potentially towards targets in Israel.”²⁸¹ In the same remarks, he said that U.S. military forces in Iraq and Syria have come under attack by missiles and drones since October 17, a civilian contractor died of a related cardiac incident in Iraq, and some U.S. troops have been injured.²⁸²

Use of U.S. Armed Forces in Hostilities and War Powers²⁸³

Any possible involvement of U.S. armed forces in hostilities related to the current conflict or any expansion of such conflict raises issues related to the constitutional war powers shared by Congress and the President and the congressional role in decisions to use military force. The executive branch has claimed that the President can order the U.S. military to use force pursuant solely to Article II constitutional executive power for “important national interests,” including rescuing and safeguarding U.S. nationals abroad²⁸⁴ and preserving the security and stability of foreign allies.²⁸⁵ Congress, in the War Powers Resolution, set out more circumscribed presidential war powers, however, stating that the President is permitted to “introduce United States Armed Forces into hostilities ... only pursuant to (1) a declaration of war, (2) specific statutory authorization, or (3) a national emergency created by attack upon the United States, its territories or possessions, or its armed forces.”²⁸⁶ While four authorizations for use of military force (AUMFs) are recognized as currently in force, it does not seem that any forms the basis of presidential authority to use military force in the context of the current conflict, or its possible expansion.²⁸⁷ Federal law concerning the protection of U.S. citizens abroad specifically states that the President is

²⁷⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, “Senior Defense Official Holds a Background Briefing on U.S. Force Posture Changes in the Middle East,” October 9, 2023

²⁷⁹ Vivian Salama, “U.S. Looks at Risks of Deeper Involvement with Israel’s War on Hamas,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 11, 2023.

²⁸⁰ White House, “Virtual On-the-Record Gaggle by NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby on Hamas Terrorist Attacks in Israel,” October 10, 2023.

²⁸¹ U.S. Department of Defense, “Pentagon Press Secretary Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder Holds an On-Camera Press Briefing,” October 19, 2023.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ Prepared by Matthew C. Weed, Specialist in Foreign Policy Legislation.

²⁸⁴ See Department of Justice Office of Legal Counsel, *Presidential Power to Use the Armed Forces Abroad Without Statutory Authorization*, Memorandum Opinion for the Attorney General, 4A Op. O.L.C. 185, 187 (1980).

²⁸⁵ See Department of Justice Office of Legal Counsel, *Authority to Use Military Force in Libya*, Memorandum Opinion for the Attorney General, 35 Op. O.L.C. 20, 33-34 (2011).

²⁸⁶ Section 2(c) of P.L. 93-148 (50 U.S.C. § 1541(c)).

²⁸⁷ The four AUMFs are a 1957 provision relating to the use of the U.S. military in maintaining Middle East peace and security (1957 AUMF; section 2 of P.L. 85-7; 22 U.S.C. § 1962); the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution (1991 AUMF; P.L. 102-1; 50 U.S.C. § 1541 note); the Authorization for Use of Military Force (2001 AUMF; P.L. 107-40; 50 U.S.C. § 1541 note); and the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002 (2002 AUMF; P.L. 107-243; 50 U.S.C. § 1541 note). The 1957 AUMF, which applies to the “general area of (continued...) ”

authorized to take action “not amounting to acts of war and not otherwise prohibited by law.”²⁸⁸ Section 3 of the War Powers Resolution states that the President “in every possible instance shall consult with Congress before introducing United States Armed Forces into hostilities or into situations where imminent involvement in hostilities is clearly indicated by the circumstances.”²⁸⁹ Congress might desire to avail itself of this consultation requirement in order to better inform itself as U.S. armed forces are deployed in response to the current conflict.

How has the Biden Administration acted to support Israel?

On October 18, President Biden became the first U.S. President to visit Israel during a time of war. The United States has been Israel’s principal external military supporter for decades.²⁹⁰ In 2016, the United States and Israel signed their third Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on foreign assistance, which is a non-binding executive-level agreement in which the United States government pledged, subject to congressional appropriation, to provide \$38 billion in military aid (\$33 billion in Foreign Military Financing grants, plus \$5 billion in defense appropriations for missile defense programs) to Israel from fiscal year (FY) 2019 through FY2028. P.L. 116-283, the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2021, authorizes “not less than” \$3.3 billion in annual FMF to Israel through 2028 per the terms of the current MOU. Appropriators have matched that authorization level each year since its passage.

In emergency circumstances, the MOU also provides for bilateral U.S.-Israeli agreement to go above and beyond the \$500 million in annual missile defense funding. After Israel’s 2021 military operation in Gaza, Congress appropriated \$1 billion in the FY2022 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 117-103) for Iron Dome for FY2022-FY2024. The funding was mainly to support the U.S.-Israeli co-production of Iron Dome’s Tamir interceptors, some of which are manufactured in the United States at Raytheon’s missiles and defense facility in Tucson, Arizona.

As mentioned above, President Biden is urgently requesting that Congress appropriate \$14 billion in security assistance to Israel as part of a larger emergency budget package, in order to bolster Israel’s “qualitative military edge” in the region and deter actors hostile to Israel from joining the ongoing conflict.²⁹¹

Expedited arms deliveries

On October 8, the Biden Administration announced that it was expediting the provision of munitions to Israel that were already purchased.²⁹² Expedited shipments were reportedly for small-diameter bombs (250 pounds) made by Boeing under a 2021 \$735 million Direct Commercial Sale.²⁹³ On October 10, President Biden said “We’re surging additional military

the Middle East,” states that if the President so determines, “the United States is prepared to use armed forces to assist any such nation or group of such nations,” but only “against armed aggression from any country controlled by international communism.”

²⁸⁸ Section 9 of P.L. 100-222 (22 U.S.C. § 1732; reenacting Section 3 of P.L. 40-429 (R.S. § 2001)).

²⁸⁹ Section 3 of P.L. 93-148 (50 U.S.C. § 1542).

²⁹⁰ For additional background, see CRS Report RL33222, *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

²⁹¹ “Biden declares Israel and Ukraine support is vital for US security, will ask Congress for billions,” Associated Press, October 19, 2023; White House “Remarks by President Biden on the United States’ Response to Hamas’s Terrorist Attacks Against Israel and Russia’s Ongoing Brutal War Against Ukraine,” released October 20, 2023.

²⁹² U.S. Department of Defense, “Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III’s Call with Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant,” October 8, 2023.

²⁹³ Anthony Capaccio, “Boeing Sped 1,000 Smart Bombs to Israel After Hamas Attacks,” *Bloomberg*, October 10, 2023.

assistance, including ammunition and interceptors to replenish Iron Dome.”²⁹⁴ On October 11, Israel’s Ministry of Defense announced on X (formerly Twitter) that the expedited U.S. equipment purchased by the ministry’s Directorate of Production and Procurement, US Procurement Mission, and International Transportation Unit had landed in Israel.²⁹⁵ On October 12, U.S. defense officials acknowledged that expedited shipments of Tamir Interceptors for Iron Dome had been shipped to Israel.²⁹⁶ On October 17, the Defense Department affirmed that since the outbreak of hostilities, there have been five U.S. C-17 aircraft which have landed in Israel carrying expedited munitions for the Israel Defense Forces.²⁹⁷

What support does the United States provide to the Palestinians?

In 2021, the Biden Administration resumed some economic development, security, and humanitarian aid for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. In 2019, the Trump Administration had suspended all U.S. aid to the Palestinians,²⁹⁸ after a number of measures by the Administration and Congress in 2018 to halt or limit various types of aid.²⁹⁹ Some of these measures reflected Trump Administration policies that unsuccessfully sought to compel Palestinian leaders to resume dialogue with U.S. officials (which the Palestinians had cut off following President Trump’s 2017 recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital) and accept U.S. and Israeli negotiating demands. Additionally, the Taylor Force Act (TFA) prohibits most economic aid that “directly benefits” the PA. The TFA does not further define what constitutes a direct benefit. The law does not restrict economic aid for the Palestinian people or apply to non-lethal security assistance for the PA or humanitarian contributions (mentioned below) via UNRWA.

Under the Biden Administration, total bilateral U.S. aid to the Palestinians has approached pre-Trump Administration levels (see **Figure 4**), though the TFA’s enactment in 2018 has limited the allocation of funding for certain purposes due to restrictions against aid directly benefitting the PA.

In its FY2023 congressional budget justification, the State Department outlined the following as one of five strategic goals for U.S. foreign aid policy in the Middle East and North Africa region:

Achieving a comprehensive and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians is a long-standing U.S. national security goal. The United States seeks to advance equal measures of freedom, security, and prosperity for Israelis and Palestinians alike and work toward a negotiated two-state solution in which Israel lives in peace and security alongside a viable Palestinian state.... U.S. assistance to the West Bank and Gaza creates sustainable opportunities for market-oriented growth, strengthens accountability and transparency in governance through civil society development, and improves the quality of life for the Palestinian people.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁴ White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Terrorist Attacks in Israel,” October 10, 2023.

²⁹⁵ X, Israeli Ministry of Defense (@Israel_MOD), October 11, 2023, https://twitter.com/Israel_MOD/status/1711974862623813999.

²⁹⁶ Anthony Capaccio, “US Gives First Iron Dome Interceptors to Israel,” *Bloomberg*, October 12, 2023.

²⁹⁷ Natasha Bertrand, “Pentagon says ‘steady flow of weapons’ to Israel will continue,” CNN, October 17, 2023.

²⁹⁸ For more information on this development and subsequent legislative amendments that facilitated renewed congressional appropriations of bilateral aid for the West Bank and Gaza starting in FY2020, see archived CRS Report R46274, *The Palestinians and Amendments to the Anti-Terrorism Act: U.S. Aid and Personal Jurisdiction*, by Jim Zanotti and Jennifer K. Elsea.

²⁹⁹ See, for example, Sections 7037-7040, and 7041(l) of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328).

³⁰⁰ State Department, FY2023 Congressional Budget Justification, Appendix 2, p. 23.

Past presidential administrations have used similar rationales to justify U.S. aid to the Palestinians. After the peace process began between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1990s, U.S. bilateral aid to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip supported U.S. efforts to incline the newly established PA toward better governance and economic development, and away from violence against Israel. Congress routinely attaches a number of conditions to aid to the Palestinians in annual appropriations language.³⁰¹

In addition to bilateral aid for the Palestinians, the Biden Administration has regularly provided voluntary contributions to UNRWA.³⁰² U.S. contributions generally come from the Migration and Refugee Assistance account (MRA), which is administered through the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. UNRWA provides education, health care, and other social services to more than five million registered Palestinian refugees in the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. It is funded almost entirely through voluntary contributions from governments and other donors.

Official U.S. government and UNRWA statements indicate that U.S. contributions to UNRWA that likely came from the MRA account for FY2023 totaled at least \$207.1 million.³⁰³ Additionally, Congress specifically appropriated \$75 million in FY2023 funding from the International Organizations and Programs account "to maintain food assistance to vulnerable Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza in response to rising food and transport costs."³⁰⁴ For historical information on U.S. contributions to UNRWA and congressional oversight, see CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

What are some possible options for Congress?

On October 10, President Biden announced that he would formally ask Congress "to take urgent action to fund the national security requirements of our critical partners."³⁰⁵ According to unnamed officials, Israel has requested that the United States provide it with \$10 billion in emergency aid.³⁰⁶ According to several reports, the Israeli government has asked the President for precision-guided bombs (such as small-diameter bombs), Joint Direct Attack Munitions, or JDAMs (a kit that converts unguided armaments into satellite-guided bombs), and additional Iron Dome Tamir interceptors.³⁰⁷

Several Members of Congress have proposed bills in response to the conflict. A bipartisan proposed resolution in the House (H.Res. 771) would support Israel's right to self-defense and support U.S. assistance to Israel broadly, denounce the Hamas attacks, and urge full enforcement of sanctions on Iran and aid conditions to prevent funding for "Palestinian terrorists." A bipartisan

³⁰¹ See, for example, Sections 7037-7040, and 7041(l) of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022 (P.L. 117-103).

³⁰² For information on UNRWA, U.S. contributions to it, and congressional oversight, see CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

³⁰³ Department of State, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas After Their Meeting," January 31, 2023; UNRWA, "UNRWA chief thanks U.S. for US\$3.4 million contribution to 2023 Syria-Lebanon earthquake appeal," May 4, 2023; UNRWA "The United States contributes US\$153.7 million to UNRWA in support of Palestine refugees," June 1, 2023.

³⁰⁴ Joint explanatory statement accompanying Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328), pp. 50-51, at <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Division%20K%20-%20SFOPS%20Statement%20FY23.pdf>.

³⁰⁵ Op.cit., White House, October 10, 2023.

³⁰⁶ Karoun Demirjian, "Israel-Hamas War," *New York Times*, October 16, 2023.

³⁰⁷ Michael Birnbaum, John Hudson and Ellen Nakashima, "Biden administration scrambles to deter wider Mideast conflict," *Washington Post*, October 8, 2023; "U.S. Rushes Weapons to Israel—With More to Come," Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, Flash Brief, October 10, 2023.

proposed resolution in the Senate would condemn Hamas for its attacks on Israel, and demand that Hamas immediately release all hostages and return them to safety, among other things.³⁰⁸ One bipartisan group of lawmakers has proposed a bill (H.R. 5918) to provide Israel with \$2 billion in supplemental emergency funding for Iron Dome to remain available through FY2025. On October 10, a bipartisan group of Senators wrote a letter to Secretary of Defense Austin urging him to transfer two Iron Dome batteries purchased by the United States to Israel.³⁰⁹

Presidential Drawdown Authority

Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA) authorizes the President to allow for the immediate transfer of defense articles and services from U.S. stocks, up to a funding cap established in law, in response to an “unforeseen emergency” (22 U.S.C. §2318(a)(1)). For FY2024, the general cap for all countries is currently \$100 million.³¹⁰ In the context of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Biden Administration has authorized 47 drawdowns initially valued at nearly \$25 billion.³¹¹ Section 5505 of the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for FY2023 (P.L. 117-263) added paragraph 3 to 22 U.S.C. 2318(a) (FAA, Sec.506(a)), which created a separate drawdown category for Taiwan with its own dollar value cap. One option for Congress would be to consider whether or not to do the same for Israel.

Additional foreign military financing for Israel

According to the current MOU, “Both the United States and Israel jointly commit to respect the FMF levels specified in this MOU, and not to seek changes to the FMF levels for the duration of this understanding.” However, because appropriations are subject to the approval of Congress, some lawmakers have indicated that they would favor exceeding annual MOU-delineated FMF limits. Under Israel’s second MOU and during the 115th Congress, Senator Lindsey Graham led an effort to amend P.L. 114-254, the “Further Continuing and Security Assistance Appropriations Act, 2017,” and Congress enacted this amendment in the FY2017 omnibus act (P.L. 115-31) to provide \$75 million in FMF for Israel in FY2017 only. That amount was above the \$3.1 billion in FMF Congress regularly appropriated for Israel in FY2017. Congress could consider whether or not to do so similarly again, including in association with President Biden’s request for \$14 billion in security assistance for Israel.

Use of U.S. stockpile in Israel

Since the 1980s, the United States has stockpiled military equipment in Israel, but only “single-use” armaments that could not be used by the IDF. Section 514 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (22 U.S.C. §2321h) allows U.S. defense articles stored in war reserve stocks to be transferred to a foreign government through Foreign Military Sales or through grant military assistance, such as FMF. Congress limits the value of assets transferred into War Reserves Stocks for Allies (WRSA) stockpiles located in foreign countries in any fiscal year through authorizing legislation. The FY2022 Consolidated Appropriations Act extended the authorization of WRSA-

³⁰⁸ Text of proposed resolution at https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/resolution_standing_with_israel_against_terrorism.pdf.

³⁰⁹ Available online at <https://www.rosen.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Letter-to-Secretary-Austin-on-Transferring-Iron-Dome-Batteries-to-Israel-10.10.23.pdf>.

³¹⁰ For FY2022, Congress increased the PDA funding cap (22 U.S.C. §2318(a)(1)) from \$100 million up to \$11 billion via P.L. 117-128. For FY2023, Congress established a PDA funding cap of \$14.5 billion via P.L. 117-328.

³¹¹ For Ukraine, on October 3, 2023, the U.S. Department of Defense confirmed that \$5.4 billion remained available in PDA authority.

Israel (WRSA-I) through FY2025. Since 1989, Israel has requested access to the stockpile on at least two occasions, and Congress has called on successive Administrations to ensure the WRSA-I contains adequate supplies of precision-guided munitions to be made available to Israel in emergency situations.³¹² Congress could consider whether or not to engage the Administration on use of the WRSA-I.

Emergency arms sales

In the event that Israel requests the immediate use of U.S. equipment not on hand, U.S. law provides for emergency sales of U.S. equipment without congressional review. Per provisions in the Arms Export Control Act (AECA), Israel, along with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand (commonly referred to as NATO+5) already have shorter congressional review periods (15 days instead of 30) and higher dollar notification thresholds than other countries for both Foreign Military Sales and commercially licensed arms sales, or Direct Commercial Sales. In more urgent situations, the AECA authorizes the President to declare, in a formal notification to Congress, that “an emergency exists” requiring that a sale of U.S. equipment to a foreign partner is “in the national security interests of the United States,” thereby waiving mandatory congressional review. At times, past presidential administrations have used AECA emergency authorities to immediately sell arms to foreign partners, which generated debate in Congress over the cases in question and the broader availability and use of the authorities by the executive branch.³¹³

On October 13, 38 House Members asked Secretary Blinken to “expedite the provision of Foreign Military Sales cases that are currently on track for Israel.”³¹⁴ Defense industrial base capacity constraints and schedules may affect U.S. responsiveness to Israeli requests for expediting arms transfers.

Monitoring conditions on the use of U.S. defense articles

U.S. aid and arms sales to Israel, like those to other foreign recipients, are subject to U.S. law, such as the Arms Export Control Act (AECA) and Foreign Assistance Act (FAA). It is the statutory responsibility of the Departments of State and Defense, pursuant to the AECA, to conduct end-use monitoring (EUM) to ensure that recipients of U.S. defense articles use such items solely for their intended purposes.³¹⁵ In addition, in summer 2023, the U.S. Department of State announced the formation of the Civilian Harm Incident Response Guidance (CHIRG), a process whereby U.S. officials will “investigate reports of civilian harm by partner governments suspected of using U.S. weapons and recommend actions that could include suspension of arms sales.”³¹⁶

On October 16, U.S. Defense Department spokesperson Sabrina Singh answered a question about EUM in both Ukraine and Israel saying:

³¹² Op.cit., CRS Report RL33222.

³¹³ See CRS Report R44984, *Arms Sales in the Middle East: Trends and Analytical Perspectives for U.S. Policy*, coordinated by Clayton Thomas.

³¹⁴ “Wittman Urges Secretary Blinken to Expedite Military Aid to Israel,” Press Releases, Representative Rob Wittman, October 13, 2023.

³¹⁵ CRS In Focus IF11197, *U.S. Arms Sales and Human Rights: Legislative Basis and Frequently Asked Questions*, by Paul K. Kerr and Michael A. Weber; CRS Report R46814, *The U.S. Export Control System and the Export Control Reform Act of 2018*, by Paul K. Kerr and Christopher A. Casey.

³¹⁶ Missy Ryan, “Biden administration will track civilian deaths from U.S.-supplied arms,” *Washington Post*, September 13, 2023.

Of course, we monitor and we keep track of the assistance that we're providing. But once it is in the hands of, whether it's the Ukrainians on how they want to deploy on the battlefield, or whether it's in the hands of the Israelis on how they want to use, it's – it's really their decision.... So how the Israelis choose to use the supplies capabilities that we give them is really not up to us.³¹⁷

Congress may examine and debate end use monitoring requirements in the context of the conflict and seek additional information from the executive branch about current efforts to monitor the use of U.S. defense articles provided to Israel and other U.S. partners.

Humanitarian assistance

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, other conflicts, and increased global hunger, among other factors, have placed considerable demands on U.S. assistance resources. A prolonged Israel-Palestinian conflict in the Gaza Strip would create additional humanitarian needs in an already strained region, and may generate appeals for additional U.S. assistance. The uncertain scope and duration of conflict and the security and political environment in the Gaza Strip create challenges for the United States and others in providing support to the civilian population without strengthening armed terrorist groups.

As mentioned above, during President Biden's October 18 visit to Israel, he confirmed a U.S.-Israel plan to facilitate international aid to Gaza through Egypt, saying it was "based on understanding that there will be inspections, and aid should go to civilians, not to Hamas."³¹⁸ He also announced \$100 million in U.S. humanitarian assistance for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. According to a White House statement, the funding will "help support over a million displaced and conflict-affected people with clean water, food, hygiene support, medical care, and other essential needs" via "trusted partners including UN agencies and international NGOs."³¹⁹

Congress may be asked to consider additional humanitarian response funding, including through UNRWA or other international organizations, via foreign operations appropriations accounts that could include Economic Support Fund (ESF), International Disaster Assistance (IDA), and/or Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA). Legislation pertaining to such funding could be a component of a regular or supplemental appropriations request (such as the Administration's October reported plan to request mentioned above for \$10 billion in general humanitarian assistance), and Congress may debate the scope and conditions under which current or any new humanitarian assistance should be allocated. The United States also may consult with other international actors to identify resources and establish consensus practices for the provision of humanitarian assistance during and after the conflict.

Calls for a cease-fire and respect for international law

Some lawmakers may seek to call on Biden Administration officials to work toward a cease-fire. On October 16, a group of House Members proposed a resolution H.Res. 786 that, among other things, "urges the Biden administration to immediately call for and facilitate de-escalation and a cease-fire to urgently end the current violence."³²⁰ On October 13, a larger group of Representatives also wrote a letter to the Administration urging U.S. officials to, among other

³¹⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, Press Gaggle with Sabrina Singh, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary, October 16, 2023.

³¹⁸ Brett Samuels, "Biden announces humanitarian aid deal for Gaza," *The Hill*, October 18, 2023.

³¹⁹ White House, "U.S. Announcement of Humanitarian Assistance to the Palestinian People," October 18, 2023.

³²⁰ Available online at <https://bush.house.gov/imo/media/doc/bushceasefirenowresolution.pdf>.

things, “communicate that Israel’s response in Gaza must be carried out according to international law and take all due measures to limit harm to innocent civilians.”³²¹

Iran: Transfer of \$6 billion

The Hamas attacks on Israel and resulting conflict have prompted an increase in congressional scrutiny of U.S. policy towards Iran, a longtime Hamas backer. Specifically, some Members have criticized the September 2023 U.S.-approved transfer of \$6 billion in blocked Iranian funds from South Korea to Qatar, have posited a possible connection between the transfer and Iranian support to Hamas and other armed groups, and are seeking to prevent use or transfer of the funds.

In September 2023, the United States and Iran concluded an informal agreement involving a mutual prisoner exchange and the U.S.-approved transfer of \$6 billion in blocked Iranian assets, accumulated from petroleum sales to South Korea. South Korean authorities agreed to the transfer of the funds from that country to Qatar.³²² Iran and the United States reached the agreement in the context of broader steps to de-escalate tensions, including reported diplomatic engagement related to a halt to Iran-backed attacks against U.S. forces in Syria and a halt to the U.S. seizure of tankers carrying Iranian oil (see below).³²³ Secretary of State Antony Blinken exercised waiver authority to enable banks in Germany, Ireland, Qatar, South Korea, and Switzerland to participate in related transactions that would otherwise be sanctionable under U.S. law to facilitate the transfer.³²⁴ The funds were to be available only to fund the purchase of agricultural commodities, medicine, and medical devices in line with longstanding provisions in U.S. law (including Iran-related authorities) to exempt humanitarian trade from U.S. sanctions.

Secretary Blinken has reiterated that “the money in question – Iranian money, not American taxpayer dollars – is money that was allowed to accrue in a bank account from the sale of Iranian oil.”³²⁵ U.S. Treasury Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson wrote on X (formerly Twitter) on October 7, 2023, “All of the money held in restricted accounts in Doha as part of the arrangement to secure the release of 5 Americans in September remains in Doha. Not a penny has been spent.”³²⁶ Asked about the funds in question on October 11, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen reiterated that the funds “have not been touched” and that “I wouldn’t take anything off the table in terms of future possible actions.”³²⁷ An October 12 press report said that Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo had told legislators that, in the wake of Hamas’s assault on Israel, U.S. and Qatari officials had agreed to prevent Iran from accessing the funds for

³²¹ Available online at <https://jayapal.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Letter-Expressing-Concern-on-the-Humanitarian-Situation-in-Gaza.pdf>.

³²² For more, see CRS Report R47321, *Iran: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Clayton Thomas.

³²³ See, for example, Karen DeYoung et al., “U.S. and Iran in indirect talks over nuclear program and prisoners,” *Washington Post*, June 20, 2023; Chase Winter et al., “What’s driving Biden’s Iran sanctions policy,” *Energy Intelligence*, September 7, 2023.

³²⁴ The waivers were exercised pursuant to Section 1245(d)(5) of the FY2012 NDAA (22 U.S.C. § 8513(d)(5)) and Sections 1244(i) and 1247(f) of the Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act of 2012 (IFCA) (22 U.S.C. §§ 8803(i) & 8806(f)). See <https://s.wsj.net/public/resources/documents/IranWaiverLetter.pdf>. According to the State Department, these waivers were necessary to persuade European and South Korean banks to participate in the transactions necessary to move the funds into the supervised account in Qatar for what the Treasury Department is calling the humanitarian channel in Qatar. U.S. State Department, Press Briefing, September 12, 2023. Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, “Frequently Asked Questions, #1134. What is the humanitarian channel in Qatar?” September 18, 2023.

³²⁵ U.S. Department of State, Secretary Antony J. Blinken with Lester Holt of NBC Nightly News, October 12, 2023.

³²⁶ X, Under Secretary Brian Nelson (@UnderSecTFI), October 7, 2023, <https://twitter.com/UnderSecTFI/status/1710706779980464482?s=20>.

³²⁷ C-SPAN, “Treasury Secretary holds news conference on priorities for IMF and World Bank,” October 11, 2023.

an unspecified period of time.³²⁸ The United States arguably already has a de facto veto over the use of the funds in so far as it could impose sanctions on financial institutions or entities involved in future transactions involving the funds, including restricting such entities' access to the U.S. financial system. The Qatari prime minister said, on October 13, that Qatar is "committed to any agreement" that Qatar has entered into, a likely reference to the Qatari government's position that it has made commitments both to the United States and Iran in relation to the transfer and potential future use of the funds. If Qatar or the United States act with regard to the funds in ways that the government of Iran perceives as violating the understanding previously reached, Iran could decide to no longer engage Qatar as an intermediary for the United States on issues such as Iran's nuclear program, U.S. nationals unduly detained in Iran, Hamas and other Iran-backed groups, and/or other regional security matters.³²⁹

Though the funds would only be available to fund the purchase of humanitarian goods and reportedly would be transferred from the Qatar-held accounts to non-Iranian third parties, some observers and Members argue that their availability to Iran could free up other Iranian financial resources for other malign activities, including Iran's support for groups like Hamas. These Members are urging or seeking to compel the Administration to re-block the funds in Qatar in some demonstrable, transparent way. On October 9, 2023, 20 Senators wrote to President Biden asking him to rescind the waiver that made the transfer possible and "work with" Qatar to "immediately freeze the accounts."³³⁰ H.Res. 776, introduced on October 11, would urge the Biden Administration to rescind the waivers authorizing the fund transfer; other legislation (H.R. 5961 and H.R. 5947) would rescind the waivers and seek to freeze the funds. In describing H.R. 5961, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Mike McCaul said, "I am introducing a bill to put secondary sanctions on the Doha bank so that it freezes those six billion dollars, not temporarily, but forever."³³¹ The Iranian government has condemned the reported informal re-freezing of the funds; official action to re-freeze the assets could provoke an Iranian response.³³² It is unclear what other impacts the re-freezing of funds might have on U.S. relations with Qatar and other partners.

Sanctions or aid restrictions related to Hamas and PIJ

In addition to existing U.S. authorities prohibiting U.S. persons from transacting with U.S.-designated terrorists, Congress may consider whether or not to add, amend, or remove various sanctions or aid restrictions related to Hamas or its allies and sources of support. The following bills have been introduced in the 118th Congress:

- **Hamas International Financing Prevention Act (H.R. 340)** – Among other things, this bill would require the executive branch to (1) impose secondary sanctions (subject to a presidential waiver based on national security grounds) on foreign persons or governments that transact with or provide certain types of support to Hamas, PIJ, or any affiliates; and (2) report to

³²⁸ Jeff Stein and Jacob Bogage, "U.S., Qatar agree to stop Iran from tapping \$6 billion fund after Hamas attack," *Washington Post*, October 12, 2023.

³²⁹ U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken with Qatari Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad bin Abdulrahman Al Thani at a joint press availability," October 13, 2023.

³³⁰ Text of the letter at <https://www.blackburn.senate.gov/services/files/B5653D28-BA82-4F3B-AC72-BF4443955935>.

³³¹ Chase Williams, "Bill to freeze \$6 billion in Iranian assets introduced by top Republican," *Fox Business*, October 17, 2023.

³³² Michael Crowley and Alan Rappeport, "U.S. and Qatar deny Iran access to \$6 billion from prisoner deal," *New York Times*, October 12, 2023.

Congress on activities of foreign countries that support or have other specified interactions or connections with Hamas, PIJ, or any affiliates.

- **Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad International Terrorism Support Prevention Act of 2023 (S. 1647)** – Similar to H.R. 340, and would broaden the scope of sanctions to some foreign parties that transact with or provide certain types of support to some militant groups in the West Bank and Gaza in addition to Hamas, PIJ, and their affiliates.
- **Stop Taxpayer Funding of Hamas Act (S. 489)** – This bill would (1) prohibit the expenditure of any U.S. government funds in Gaza until the President certifies to Congress that no funding would benefit people who belong to or are “controlled or influenced” by Hamas, PIJ, or another FTO; and (2) prohibit the expenditure of any U.S. government funds in Gaza through any U.N. entity or office unless the President certifies to Congress that such entity or office “is not encouraging or teaching anti-Israel or anti-Semitic ideas or propaganda.”

On October 18, the Department of Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control imposed sanctions “on ten key Hamas terrorist group members, operatives, and financial facilitators in Gaza and elsewhere including Sudan, Türkiye, Algeria, and Qatar. This action targets members managing assets in a secret Hamas investment portfolio, a Qatar-based financial facilitator with close ties to the Iranian regime, a key Hamas commander, and a Gaza-based virtual currency exchange and its operator.”³³³

Efforts to prevent Hamas and PIJ from accessing cryptocurrency resources³³⁴

The U.S. government maintains a robust legal regime and policy apparatus for combating terrorist financing domestically and internationally, which are broadly applicable to illicit financial transactions conducted by Hamas and PIJ.³³⁵ Efforts to counter the financing of terrorism (CFT) are built within the U.S. anti-money laundering (AML) financial regulatory regime and integrated across the law enforcement and national security community to pursue terrorist financing investigations and prosecutions and target the illicit financial flows associated with terrorist group activity. U.S. authorities may draw on AML/CFT authorities to gather financial intelligence, facilitate investigations, and share relevant information with foreign partners to pursue Hamas’s cryptocurrency assets.

Hamas and PIJ are subject to U.S. sanctions as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) and as Specially Designated Global Terrorist entities (SDGTs). Under these sanctions programs, Hamas and PIJ assets are blocked and transactions with these groups by U.S. persons are prohibited. Importantly, U.S. sanctions apply equally to transactions conducted in traditional fiat currencies (e.g., dollars, yen, euros, pounds, renminbi) and transactions conducted in cryptocurrencies or

³³³ Department of Treasury, “Following Terrorist Attack on Israel, Treasury Sanctions Hamas Operatives and Financial Facilitators,” October 18, 2023.

³³⁴ Prepared by Rebecca M. Nelson, Specialist in International Trade and Finance; and Liana W. Rosen, Specialist in International Crime and Narcotics.

³³⁵ U.S. AML/CFT regulations apply to money services businesses (MSBs) involved in convertible virtual currencies (CVCs), including cryptocurrencies that have value that substitutes for currency (e.g., cryptocurrency exchanges, payment platforms, and automated teller machines). In addition to AML/CFT regulatory standards, the financing of terrorism is a federal offense (18 U.S.C. §2339C), as are providing material support to terrorists (18 U.S.C. §§2338A) and providing material support or resources to designated foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs; 18 U.S.C. §§2338B).

other digital currencies. As a result, U.S. persons, including cryptocurrency exchanges located in the United States, are currently prohibited from processing transactions with Hamas and PIJ.

On October 17, some Members of Congress sent a letter to Treasury Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson and the National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan to express concern about Hamas's use of cryptocurrency to finance its activities and to request more information on the Administration's efforts to address the use of cryptocurrency by terrorist organizations. In public remarks on the same day, Under Secretary Nelson noted:

We are closely monitoring how Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) use virtual assets to raise and move funds, one of the many tools they've leveraged to circumvent the traditional financing sectors. We are in active collaboration with our counterparts who have seized hundreds of Hamas and PIJ accounts from virtual asset service providers, and Treasury will continue to establish transparency in the virtual asset ecosystem in order to combat illicit activity by criminals, rogue states, and terrorist financiers.³³⁶

The United States could consider imposing secondary sanctions on cryptocurrency exchanges—that is, sanction any foreign cryptocurrency exchange that transacts with Hamas, PIJ, and/or affiliated groups. Legislation was introduced in the 117th Congress to impose secondary sanctions on foreign cryptocurrency exchanges and related providers that process transactions with sanctioned Russian entities (S. 3867 and H.R. 7429). The legislation was criticized by some in the cryptocurrency industry as too broad.³³⁷

Congress could also consider legislating reporting requirements that seek additional information about the use of cryptocurrencies by Hamas, PIJ, and related groups or a resolution calling for greater international coordination to combat the use of cryptocurrencies to finance terrorism, among other options.

Additional oversight

Congress in its oversight role could consider whether or not to assess: how and why Israeli and U.S. security establishments were surprised by the attacks; efforts to retrieve hostages; the safety and security of remaining U.S. citizens in Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, and surrounding countries; measures to ensure the proper use of U.S.-supplied defense articles; humanitarian needs; planning for post-conflict scenarios in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza; and the longer term implications of the attacks and conflict for U.S. interests in the Middle East region.

How might the conflict affect Israel's government and domestic politics?

Prior to the outbreak of hostilities, Israeli domestic politics were deeply divided between supporters of the Netanyahu government's proposed changes to the judicial system and opponents. After the October 7 attacks, Knesset opposition figures and protest movement leaders suspended their criticism of the government to support national security efforts. On October 11, Prime Minister Netanyahu and major opposition figure Benny Gantz announced the formation of an emergency unity government and "war management cabinet."

³³⁶ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Remarks by Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson at Deloitte's 15th Annual Anti-Money Laundering Conference," October 17, 2023.

³³⁷ Andrew Throuvalas, "Senator Warren's Bill Will Hurt Crypto, Not Russia," *Crypto Potato*, March 20, 2022.

Israel's Emergency Unity Government³³⁸

Under reported terms of agreement between Netanyahu and Gantz, Gantz's National Unity party will apparently join the existing government coalition for the duration of the conflict in Gaza. Israel's war effort is to be the unity government's primary vocation; the agreement apparently stipulates that no unrelated legislation or government resolutions—including on Israel's judicial system—will be advanced during that time.

The war management cabinet will include Netanyahu, Gantz (a former defense minister and chief IDF commander), and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, with Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer and Gadi Eizenkot (another former chief IDF commander) as observers. Surrounding himself with highly experienced members of Israel's security establishment could help Netanyahu generate domestic support for difficult decisions related to the ongoing conflict.

Opposition leader Yair Lapid of the Yesh Atid party has not joined the unity government to date, perhaps because Netanyahu was apparently unwilling to dismiss ultra-nationalist figures from the larger security cabinet. The unity government reportedly has offered to have Lapid in the war cabinet were he to join at a later date.

Some Israelis have called for replacing Netanyahu at least partly because the October 7 Hamas attacks occurred on his watch. Like citizens in most societies, historically, Israelis tend to unite around their leaders during times of national crisis from external threats, but such effects may or may not last. The terms of some past Israeli prime ministers (including Golda Meir in the 1970s after the Yom Kippur War, Menachem Begin in the 1980s after the First Lebanon War, and Ehud Olmert in the 2000s after the Second Lebanon War) may have ended in part due to domestic criticism connected to the outbreak of conflict under their leadership and the findings of investigative committees formed once the conflicts finished. In public opinion polling since October 7, Benny Gantz and his National Unity party have outperformed Netanyahu and his Likud party.³³⁹

What are key long-term considerations for U.S. regional priorities?

The ongoing conflict is shaping regional security conditions. Its course, outcome, and aftermath will influence overall stability in the Middle East, as well as Israel's security and its future relations with the Palestinians, regional countries, and the international community. U.S. use of different tools of statecraft—such as military posture and diplomacy—to shape and respond to events, challenges, and opportunities may affect U.S. influence in the region and beyond. As of October 18, key U.S. objectives and considerations appear to include

- **Avoiding major regional war.** How will the trajectory of the conflict, its possible expansion, and efforts to end it shape the regional climate for the near future? How will it affect Israel's position within the region, and prospects for various alignments between state and non-state actors that could either militate toward or against stability? Can the United States protect its long-standing interests in the region and help maintain equilibrium, and if so, at what cost and with what type and level of U.S. military, diplomatic, and other engagement?
- **Countering the capabilities and reach of Iran and its allies.** Will Iran and allied state and non-state actors be emboldened or chastened by the conflict and its aftermath? Will Hamas emerge strengthened or weakened among Arab governments and populations?

³³⁸ Sources for this text box are Barak Ravid, "Israel's Netanyahu forms unity government with ex-Defense Minister Gantz," *Axios*, October 11, 2023; and Jeremy Sharon, "Netanyahu, Gantz agree to form emergency unity government," *Times of Israel*, October 11, 2023.

³³⁹ "Poll shows backing for Netanyahu imploding, Gantz taking the rudder," *Times of Israel*, October 13, 2023.

- **Great power competition for regional influence with China and Russia.** Will the conflict bolster or diminish U.S. prestige in the region vis-à-vis China and Russia? Will either country seek to play an increased role in the region?
- **Widening and deepening the Abraham Accords and Arab-Israeli normalization.** How will the conflict affect prospects for Israel-Saudi normalization? Will Saudi leaders return to their traditional stance of demanding the formation of a Palestinian state as a precondition to normalization? Will they and other Arab governments that have formal or informal ties with Israel seek more significant concessions from Israel (and potentially the United States) to the PA and the Palestinian people than they had before the outbreak of conflict?
- **Managing and attempting to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.** How will the conflict and its aftermath affect the relative strength and objectives of Israel, the PA, Hamas, and other key stakeholders? If Israel removes Hamas from power in Gaza, what are the likely consequences for these actors and for security, political, economic, and humanitarian outcomes for the people of Gaza, the West Bank, Israel, and Jerusalem? Could Hamas survive in exile and/or as an insurgency movement, and if so, to what effect on the other parties? How will Israel and Palestinian actors interact with one another going forward, and what U.S. and international involvement might they seek? With what implications for domestic politics on both sides, and for moving closer to or farther from a potential two-state solution or other possible scenarios for Israeli-Palestinian coexistence and/or conflict?

Appendix A. What were prevailing conditions (with Gaza, Jerusalem, West Bank, Israel, and regional diplomacy) before the attacks?

Hamas-controlled Gaza

Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas in the world. More than two million people, the majority of whom are registered Palestinian refugees, live in the territory and most of them rely on humanitarian assistance. Hamas, Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA), and several outside actors affect Gaza's difficult security and politics, and its dire humanitarian situation. Since Hamas's 2007 takeover of Gaza, Israeli and Egyptian authorities have maintained strict control over Gaza's border crossings.³⁴⁰ Because Gaza does not have a self-sufficient economy, external assistance largely sustains humanitarian welfare. Gazans face chronic economic difficulties and shortages of electricity and safe drinking water.³⁴¹ Israel justifies the restrictions it imposes as a way to deny Hamas materials to reconstitute its military capabilities. However, the restrictions also limit commerce, affect the entire economy, and delay humanitarian assistance.³⁴² For several years, Hamas compensated somewhat for these restrictions by routinely smuggling goods into Gaza from Egypt's Sinai Peninsula through a network of tunnels. However, after Egypt's military regained political control in July 2013, it disrupted the tunnel system.

Some observers have routinely voiced concerns that prevailing arrangements and dispiriting living conditions that have persisted since Israel's withdrawal in 2005 may feed discontent and radicalization within Gaza and create incentives for Gaza-based groups to increase violence against Israel for political ends.³⁴³ Israel disputes the level of legal responsibility for Gaza's residents that some international actors argue it retains—based on its continued control of most of Gaza's borders, airspace, maritime access, and various buffer zones within the territory.

Adding to relief objectives, the possibility that humanitarian crisis could destabilize Gaza has prompted some efforts aimed at improving living conditions and reducing spillover threats. Within limited parameters amid Gaza's political uncertainties and access restrictions, the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and other international organizations and nongovernmental organizations take care of many Gazans' day-to-day humanitarian needs. These groups play significant roles in providing various forms of assistance and trying to facilitate reconstruction from previous conflicts, while also facing scrutiny for how they carry out humanitarian efforts alongside potential interactions with or acquiescence to Hamas authorities in Gaza.

³⁴⁰ In November 2005, Israel and the PA signed an Agreement on Movement and Access, featuring U.S. and European Union participation in the travel and commerce regime that was supposed to emerge after the IDF withdrew from Gaza in September 2005, but this agreement was never fully implemented. In September 2007, three months after Hamas's takeover of Gaza, the closure regime was further formalized when Israel declared Gaza to be a "hostile entity." Depending on circumstances since then, Israel has eased and re-tightened restrictions on various imports and exports. Gisha – Legal Center for Freedom of Movement, *Gaza Up Close*, September 1, 2021. Widespread unemployment and poverty persist within Gaza.

³⁴¹ For information on the situation, see U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs occupied Palestinian territory (OCHA-oPt), *Gaza Strip: Critical Humanitarian Indicators*, <https://www.ochaopt.org/page/gaza-strip-critical-humanitarian-indicators>.

³⁴² World Bank, *Economic Monitoring Report to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee*, June 2, 2020, p. 24.

³⁴³ See, for example, U.N. OCHA-oPt, *Humanitarian Needs Overview OPT 2021*, December 2020.

Prior to the outbreak of conflict in October 2023, Hamas and Israel reportedly worked through Egypt and Qatar to help manage the flow of necessary resources into Gaza and prevent or manage conflict escalation. Since 2018, Egypt and Hamas (perhaps with implied Israeli approval) have reportedly permitted some commercial trade via an informal crossing that bypasses the formal PA controls and taxes at other Gaza crossings.³⁴⁴

Hamas's security control of Gaza has presented a conundrum for the West Bank-based PA, Israel, and the international community. They have been unable to establish a durable political-security framework for Gaza that assists Gaza's population without bolstering Hamas. Prior to the October 2023 attacks and conflict, no significant breakthrough had occurred to reconcile civilian infrastructure needs with security considerations. Reconstruction outcomes could be different under scenarios featuring (1) a political reunification of Gaza with the West Bank, (2) reduced Israeli and Egyptian restrictions on access and commerce, (3) diminished Hamas presence and power in Gaza, and/or (4) a long-term Hamas-Israel cease-fire. Egypt has played a key role in both Israel-Hamas and Hamas-Fatah mediation.³⁴⁵

Because of the PA's inability to control security in Gaza, to date it has been unwilling to manage donor pledges toward post-conflict reconstruction, leading to concerns about Hamas diverting international assistance for its own purposes.³⁴⁶ With sensitivity to Israel's worries about diversion, Qatar—which had been providing cash assistance to Gaza since 2018—began an arrangement after the 2021 Israel-Hamas conflict to provide money transfers to needy families through the United Nations.³⁴⁷ Qatar and Egypt also established a mechanism—with Israel's tacit approval—to provide assistance toward Gaza civil servants' salaries.³⁴⁸ The future of these arrangements is uncertain in light of the attacks and ensuing conflict.

Israel-controlled Jerusalem: Tensions and symbolic importance

Prior to the October 7 attacks, Israeli-Palestinian tensions persisted over the status of holy sites in Jerusalem. Palestinian and broader Muslim concerns about Israeli actions at Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem are deeply rooted in complicated historical considerations.

The status of Jerusalem and its holy sites has been a long-standing issue of political and religious contention between Jews and Muslims. A number of violent episodes occurred in Jerusalem during the 1920s and 1930s, and control over the city and key areas in and around it was a major strategic consideration in the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967.

Notwithstanding Israel's 1967 takeover and subsequent annexation of East Jerusalem, it allowed the Jordanian *waqf* (or Islamic custodial trust) that had been administering the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif (the "Mount/Haram") and its holy sites before the war to continue doing so, and established a "status quo" arrangement that has been Israel's proclaimed policy since then.³⁴⁹ The Mount/Haram contains some of the most important sites for Abrahamic religions: the

³⁴⁴ Ahmad Abu Amer, "Egypt, Qatar agreement with Israel, Hamas provides boost for Gaza economy," *Al-Monitor*, November 23, 2021; Neri Zilber, "New Gaza Crossing Raises Questions About Blockade Policies," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 23, 2019.

³⁴⁵ Maged Mandour, "Egypt's Shifting Hamas Policies," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 26, 2021.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁷ Aaron Boxerman, "UN to begin dispensing Qatari cash to needy Gazan families Monday under new deal," *Times of Israel*, September 12, 2021.

³⁴⁸ Yaniv Kubovich, "Egypt, Qatar Reach Breakthrough on Hamas Civil Servants Salaries," *Haaretz*, November 29, 2021; Abu Amer, "Egypt, Qatar agreement with Israel, Hamas."

³⁴⁹ The status of Jordan's Hashemite king—who traces his descent to the Prophet Muhammad—as custodian of Muslim (continued...)

foundation of the first and second Jewish temples, the Dome of the Rock, and Al Aqsa Mosque (see **Figure A-1**).³⁵⁰ Under the Israeli status quo policy, Muslims can access the Mount/Haram and worship there, while Jews and other non-Muslims are permitted access but not allowed to worship.

Some Muslims allege that Israel seeks changes to the Mount/Haram that will eventually displace Muslim worship and access, while Israeli officials generally reject this characterization and say they remain committed to the status quo and countering both Jewish and Muslim extremists.³⁵¹ They criticize Hamas and other Islamist groups for allegedly inciting unrest and efforts to disrupt Jewish visits to the Mount/Haram.³⁵² Over the past two decades, Jewish Israelis have increasingly sought to visit the Mount/Haram, triggering debate about the possible erosion of the status quo. Because Israeli practices call for police to escort visiting Jewish groups, the increase in visits has led to more frequent police measures limiting access for some groups of Muslims and Jews during religious holidays and other sensitive times. While Israeli authorities insist that they do not permit Jewish worship, some sources have provided evidence suggesting that at least sometimes the police do not prevent Jewish visitors from praying.³⁵³

In January 2023, Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir visited the city's Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif ("Mount/Haram") a few days after taking office, triggering statements of condemnation or concern from Palestinians and several governments both within the region and globally.³⁵⁴ Netanyahu pledged to maintain the status quo, and downplayed Ben Gvir's visit by referring to previous ministerial visits to the site.³⁵⁵ Expressing deep concern about the potentially provocative nature of Ben Gvir's visit, the State Department spokesperson called on Prime Minister Netanyahu to keep his commitment on the status quo.³⁵⁶ Ben Gvir made additional visits to the Mount/Haram in May and July, and, in the week before the October 7 Hamas attacks, some Jewish people reportedly prayed inside the Al Aqsa Mosque compound on the Mount/Haram during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot.³⁵⁷

holy sites in Jerusalem can be traced to (1) a 1924 decision by Arab authorities in Jerusalem during the British Mandate for Palestine (the Grand Mufti and Supreme Muslim Council) to accept the Hashemite dynasty as custodian of the sites after the formal end of the Ottoman sultan's claim to the Islamic Caliphate, and (2) Jordan's control over East Jerusalem from 1948 to 1967. It was codified in Jordan's 1994 peace treaty with Israel, and reinforced in a 2013 agreement with the PA. Many Christian leaders in Jerusalem also recognize the king to be custodian over Christian holy sites.

³⁵⁰ Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report for 2022, Israel, West Bank, and Gaza.

³⁵¹ Lahav Harkov, "Israel will not change status quo in Jerusalem - Lapid says," *jpost.com*, April 20, 2022.

³⁵² Jacob Magid, "Arab FMs: End Jewish prayer on Temple Mount; Lapid: Israel committed to status quo," *Times of Israel*, April 21, 2022.

³⁵³ Dov Lieber, "Israeli-Palestinian Clashes Intensify as More Jews Visit Jerusalem's Contested Holy Site," *Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2022.

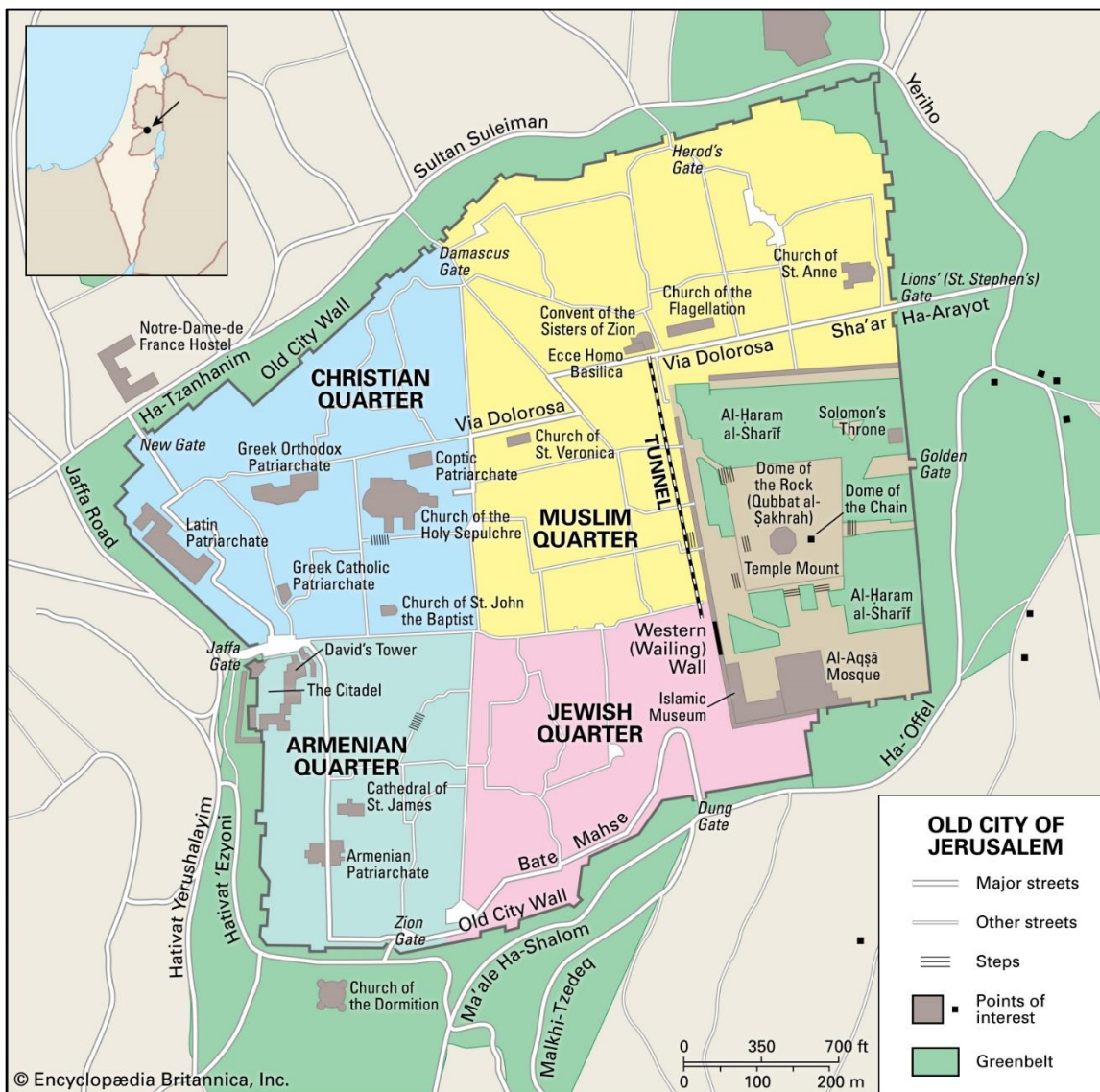
³⁵⁴ Barak Ravid, "Israeli ultranationalist minister visits sensitive Jerusalem holy site, raising tensions," *Axios*, January 3, 2023; U.N. Security Council, "Leaders on All Sides of Palestinian Question Must Help Alleviate Tensions, Maintain Status Quo at Jerusalem's Holy Sites, Senior Peace Official Tells Security Council," January 5, 2023.

³⁵⁵ Transcript: One-On-One with Israel's Netanyahu amid Surging Violence, CNN, January 31, 2023.

³⁵⁶ Department of State Press Briefing, January 3, 2023.

³⁵⁷ Harriet Sherwood, "Israel-Hamas war: what has happened and what has caused the conflict?" *Guardian*, October 8, 2023.

Figure A-1. Old City of Jerusalem



In a proclamation accompanying the October 7 attacks, Hamas's Qassam Brigades commander Mohammed Deif alleged Israeli encroachments on the Al Aqsa Mosque (see **Figure A-1**), and called on Palestinians in Jerusalem (Arabic: "Al Quds"), along with other Arabs, to "expel the (Israeli) occupiers."³⁵⁸ According to one media report, Deif was particularly irritated by a May 2021 incident in which Israeli police used force in entering Al Aqsa during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and ejected a number of Muslims from the mosque.³⁵⁹

U.S. Policy on Jerusalem

The Trump Administration made U.S. policy changes affecting bilateral relations when it recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017 and moved the location of the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 2018.

³⁵⁸ "“Today, the People Claim their Revolution”: This is What Al-Qassam Commander Said in His Speech,” *Palestine Chronicle*, October 7, 2023.

³⁵⁹ Samia Nakhoul and Laila Bassam, “Who is Mohammed Deif, the Hamas commander behind the attack on Israel?”

On the day the Embassy in Jerusalem opened (May 14, 2018), Israeli forces killed dozens of Gazans (and injured over a thousand more) protesting the embassy's opening (among other apparent grievances) when several sought to cross the border fence separating Gaza from Israel.³⁶⁰

These U.S. policy changes could affect future outcomes regarding Jerusalem's status—given Palestinian claims to East Jerusalem as their future national capital—though the Trump Administration did not take a position on the boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in the city. The Biden Administration has said that the embassy will remain in Jerusalem.³⁶¹

West Bank: Israeli-Palestinian unrest and violence

Israeli-Palestinian tensions in the West Bank were increasing even before the outbreak of the October Israel-Hamas conflict: after an upsurge in Israeli-Palestinian violence during 2022, casualties spiked even further in 2023. Through October 6, in 2023, around 30 Israelis and 190 West Bank Palestinians were killed in attacks by militants and/or extremists on both sides or in clashes involving Israeli security forces and Palestinian militants.³⁶² In 2022, some Palestinian Authority (PA) personnel reportedly acted outside their authority by directly targeting Israeli forces or settlers, raising questions about the PA's ability to control individuals' actions.³⁶³

In summer 2023, clashes between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants intensified in the northern West Bank. Reports indicate that Hamas and PIJ may have increased their direct involvement, perhaps helping West Bank militants employ tactics similar in sophistication to those used by Iran-supported groups in Lebanon and Gaza, such as improvised explosive devices.³⁶⁴ After a Palestinian shooting attack in June killed four Israeli settlers, a group of Israeli settlers stormed a Palestinian town, setting fire to multiple homes and cars in a scene reminiscent of a similar reprisal attack by settlers in February.³⁶⁵

In early July, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) launched a major two-day raid into the West Bank city and refugee camp of Jenin, its largest since 2002 during the second intifada. According to one Israeli officer, the scale of the July 2023 challenge was smaller than in 2002, when Palestinian involvement in violence was more widespread.³⁶⁶ After the IDF raid, the PA deployed more security forces in Jenin and elsewhere in the northern West Bank, but their operations have not extended into policing Jenin's refugee camp—where many confrontations with armed groups have occurred.³⁶⁷ Some Palestinians expressed support for PA efforts to maintain order, but

³⁶⁰ David M. Halbfinger et al., "Israel Kills Dozens at Gaza Border as U.S. Embassy Opens in Jerusalem," *New York Times*, May 14, 2018.

³⁶¹ Niels Lesniewski, "White House confirms Biden will keep embassy in Jerusalem," *Roll Call*, February 9, 2021.

³⁶² "Netanyahu huddles with top security chiefs after day of terror violence," *Times of Israel*, October 6, 2023.

³⁶³ Ahmad Melhem, "Palestinian security forces become more involved in resistance in West Bank," *Al-Monitor*, October 12, 2022.

³⁶⁴ Isabel Kershner, "Five Palestinians, Including 15-Year-Old Boy, Are Killed in Israeli Raid in the West Bank," *New York Times*, June 20, 2023; Ben Caspit, "Israel increasingly fears West Bank chaos, rise of Hamas," *Al-Monitor*, June 20, 2023; Emanuel Fabian, "After roadside bomb during Jenin raid, Gallant says 'all options on the table,'" *Times of Israel*, June 20, 2023.

³⁶⁵ Euronews with Associated Press, "Hundreds of Israeli settlers torch Palestinian homes and cars after deadly shooting at settlement," June 21, 2023; Emanuel Fabian, "Palestinian killed as settlers rampage in Huwara after deadly terror attack," *Times of Israel*, February 26, 2023.

³⁶⁶ Ben Caspit, "Can Israel's operation in Jenin restore IDF deterrence in West Bank?" *Al-Monitor*, July 4, 2023.

³⁶⁷ Isabel Debre, "After Israeli raids, Palestinian police struggle in militant hotbed, reflecting region on the brink," Associated Press, August 18, 2023.

warned that increased Israeli raids in the area made PA personnel look like collaborators with Israel against their own people.³⁶⁸

Israel: Domestic challenges and turmoil

The October 2023 Hamas attacks took place during a complicated and contentious period in Israeli politics. Those events appear to have significantly altered the Israeli political landscape, at least in the near term.

In December 2022, Israel's legislature, the Knesset, voted to reinstall Likud party leader Benjamin Netanyahu for a third stint as prime minister (his previous terms were 1996-1999 and 2009-2021). He heads a coalition that includes ultra-nationalist and ultra-Orthodox parties. The 2022 election was the fifth held in Israel since a legal process regarding corruption allegations against Netanyahu began in December 2018; his criminal trial is ongoing and could last for months or years. Netanyahu's inclusion of ultra-nationalist figures within this government triggered debate about the implications for Israel's democracy, its ability to manage tensions with its Arab citizens and with Palestinians, and its relations with the United States and other countries.

Shortly after Netanyahu's government took office, it advanced proposals aimed at reducing the power of the judiciary—particularly Israel's Supreme Court (SC, also known as the High Court of Justice)—to check actions approved by Israel's government.³⁶⁹ The proposals prompted several months of highly charged national debate and major protests. Reportedly, thousands within Israel's military reserves had threatened to suspend serving, which one observer noted at the time could have potential consequences for performance, cohesion, or readiness.³⁷⁰ The discourse highlights Israel's challenge in respecting the actions of its elected government while protecting minority rights, with broad implications for national political and economic cohesion. Opponents of the proposals tended to argue that they unduly weaken the judiciary's important role of checking majority opinion, especially at a time when the prime minister's criminal trial gives him a personal stake in judicial outcomes. Supporters of the proposed changes generally asserted that the SC needs corrective balance because Israel lacks a constitution providing explicit boundaries to judicial review.

Despite appeals from President Biden for Netanyahu to pursue compromise, in July the coalition enacted legislation that would prevent Israeli courts from using a "reasonableness" standard to invalidate government actions. Weakening judicial review could allow the government to take actions that the SC might have previously resisted. Such actions could include expanding Israel's West Bank control at Palestinians' expense, increasing economic preferences and military service exemptions for ultra-Orthodox Jews, or changing the religious-secular balance in Israel.³⁷¹ Some observers debated whether Israel might face heightened condemnation and legal prosecution in international fora if the independence of its judiciary eroded. In September, the SC held hearings on petitions challenging the July reasonableness law. Prior to the October 2023 attacks, it

³⁶⁸ Shayndi Raice and Fatima Abdulkarim, "Palestinian Authority Fights Its Own," *Wall Street Journal*, September 6, 2023.

³⁶⁹ Jeremy Sharon, "Justice minister unveils plan to shackle the High Court, overhaul Israel's judiciary," *Times of Israel*, January 4, 2023.

³⁷⁰ David S. Cloud and Dov Lieber, "Israel Faces New Security Threats if Protesting Military Reservists Refuse to Serve," *Wall Street Journal*, July 26, 2023.

³⁷¹ Dov Lieber, "Israel's Court Plan Deepens Divisions," *Wall Street Journal*, January 24, 2023; Associated Press, "Israel unveils controversial plans to overhaul judicial system," January 4, 2023.

appeared that if the SC were to issue a ruling that is adverse to the Knesset majority's support for the law, a national crisis could be possible.³⁷²

After the outbreak of conflict with Hamas in October, the opposition and protest movement suspended criticism of the government and voiced support for united national efforts in the conflict.

Regional diplomacy and the Abraham Accords³⁷³

Some observers, including some Biden Administration officials, have speculated that Hamas's decision to perpetrate its October 7 attacks was intended, in part, to disrupt or weaken U.S.-backed efforts to pursue the type of diplomatic normalization efforts between Israel and Arab states that is exemplified by Israel's 2020-2021 Abraham Accords with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. Specifically, Hamas may have sought to disrupt reported momentum in autumn 2023 for U.S.-brokered efforts toward Saudi-Israeli normalization. While Saudi-Israeli normalization talks may have shaped the immediate context in which Hamas was considering its options, Hamas figures have suggested that their planning and preparations for the attacks spanned several years.³⁷⁴ Even if potential Saudi-Israeli normalization was not a specific instigating factor, it seems likely that Hamas's attacks were intended to reassert the immediate relevance of Palestinian movements that (1) reject normalization, (2) insist on an end to Israeli control over Palestinian life, and (3) favor direct confrontation and the use of violence over diplomacy.

As of October 13, reports attributed to an unnamed source claimed the kingdom had informed the U.S. government it was putting further normalization talks on hold.³⁷⁵ In an October 15 interview, National Security Advisor Sullivan said, "There's not some kind of formal pause. ...the long-term goal of a more peaceful, more integrated Middle East region, including through normalization, remains very much a focus of U.S. foreign policy."³⁷⁶ Saudi official statements did not address the reports through October 17.

The conduct of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas—and any other regional parties that might become involved—will shape the context for future consideration of the viability and likelihood of pro-normalization diplomacy. Even if Israel's military operations end Hamas's political control of Gaza, they do not appear likely to resolve underlying questions regarding the future political status and potential sovereignty of the Palestinians. The nature and consequences of the October 7 Hamas attacks may reduce popular support among some Israelis for any solution to the underlying Israeli-Palestinian conflict that might reduce Israeli control over the West Bank and Gaza, or empower groups that may have been involved with or sympathetic to the attacks. Similarly, negative effects of ongoing Israeli military and security operations on Palestinian civilians may erode confidence among Palestinians and others in the Middle East region that negotiation and compromise offer a viable path to a just solution for the Palestinians, while in the

³⁷² Neri Zilber, "Will Israel's Supreme Court Fight Back?" *Foreign Policy*, July 28, 2023.

³⁷³ For more information on the Abraham Accords, see CRS Report R44245, *Israel: Major Issues and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

³⁷⁴ Some sources indicate that Hamas conducted a subterfuge campaign, whereby it gave "a public impression that it was not willing to go into a fight or confrontation with Israel while preparing for this massive operation." Samia Nakhoul and Jonathan Saul, "How Hamas duped Israel as it planned devastating attack," Reuters, October 10, 2023.

³⁷⁵ Sam Dagher and Fiona MacDonald, "Saudis Put Israel Normalization on Hold in Blow to US Goals," Bloomberg, October 13, 2023.

³⁷⁶ "National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan Interviewed on NBC," *CQ Newsmaker Transcripts*, October 15, 2023.

near-term potentially leading Arab governments and international actors to increase pressure on Israel to end or shorten its military operations.

Appendix B. Previous major Israel-Hamas conflicts

Previous Israel-Hamas conflicts in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021 (see text box below) have had various durations, have featured varying weapons and tactics, and in total have killed thousands of Palestinians and dozens of Israelis, including civilians on both sides. In the aftermath of each conflict, international attention focused on the following unfulfilled goals:

- improving humanitarian conditions and economic opportunities for Palestinians in Gaza; and
- preventing Hamas and others from rearming and rebuilding military capacity.

Past rounds of Israel-Hamas fighting have included indiscriminate Hamas rocket fire into Israel, Israeli air strikes in Gaza, humanitarian concerns on both sides, and Israel's deployment of the Iron Dome anti-rocket system—features similarly occurring in the current conflict. Israel launched some ground operations in the 2008-2009 and 2014 conflicts but ultimately withdrew its forces. On October 13, Israel appeared prepared to initiate a major ground operation into Gaza. An Israeli attempt to permanently end Hamas's presence in and control of Gaza would differ from previous Israeli responses and presumably would result in a prolonged conflict with higher casualties on both sides.

Israel-Hamas Conflicts, 2008-2021

December 2008-January 2009

- Key features: Three-week duration; first meaningful display of Palestinians' Iranian-origin rockets; Israeli air strikes; Israeli ground operation
- Political context: Impending leadership transitions in Israel and United States; struggling Israeli-Palestinian peace talks (Annapolis process)
- Fatalities: More than 1,100 (possibly more than 1,400) Palestinians, 13 Israelis (three civilians)

November 2012

- Key features: Eight-day duration; Palestinian projectiles of greater range and variety; Israeli air strikes; prominent role for Israel's Iron Dome anti-rocket system (which became operational in 2011)
- Political context: Widespread Arab political change, including rise of Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt; three months before Israeli elections
- Fatalities: More than 100 Palestinians, six Israelis (four civilians)

July-August 2014

- Key features: About 50-day duration; Palestinian projectiles of greater range and variety; Israeli air strikes and ground operations; extensive Palestinian use of and Israeli countermeasures against tunnels within Gaza; prominent role for Iron Dome
- Political context: Shortly after an unsuccessful round of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and the prominent killings of Israeli and Palestinian youth in the West Bank and Jerusalem
- Fatalities: More than 2,100 Palestinians, 71 Israelis (five civilians), and one foreign national

May 2021

- Key features: 11-day duration; unprecedented Palestinian rocket barrages into central Israel; Israeli air and artillery strikes; prominent role for Iron Dome; major Arab-Jewish unrest within Israel for much of the conflict
- Political context: Tensions over Jerusalem during Ramadan; new U.S. presidential Administration; significant domestic political uncertainty for both Israelis and Palestinians (including recent postponement of Palestinian Authority elections).
- Fatalities: More than 240 Palestinians, 12 in Israel (including two foreign nationals)

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