



ROLES INSIGHTS

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What the October 7 attack and the Israel-Hamas War means for the Middle East and the World

Number 2023-5

October 12, 2023

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1. Introduction

A half-a-century after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israel was once again struck by a surprise attack on October 7, 2023. The horrific images of Hamas terrorists infiltrating the Israeli-Gazan border, brutally murdering innocent civilians, and kidnapping dozens of Israeli civilians and soldiers to Gaza shocked the world. As of writing this article, the total death toll of both Israelis and Palestinians have reached 2400. In addition to relentless retaliatory air strikes, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) appears to be preparing to launch a ground offensive into Gaza. As Israel and the world grapple with the scale and magnitude of this unprecedented assault, it is certainly premature to predict how these events may unfold in the coming weeks and months. Nevertheless, given the potential regional and global consequences of the October 7 attack, the underlying context that shaped this unprecedented terrorist attack as well as how that may shape the trajectory of this war deserves our attention.

Barely over a week prior to this devastating attack, U.S. National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan [observed](#) that the Middle East “is quieter today than it has been in two decades”. A sense of

complacency or even hubris existed among policymakers and observers both in Israel and beyond, including the United States. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was seemingly under control with Hamas being reduced to a "manageable nuisance". A possible normalization of diplomatic ties between Israeli-Saudi in the horizon had also offered a sense of optimism that the region could finally enjoy some degree of stability. This potential peace settlement brokered by the United States was part of the Biden administration's attempt to create a favorable strategic environment in the Middle East to enable Washington's gradual downsizing of its regional presence so as to refocus its attention on great power competition in the western Pacific and Europe. The attacks on October 7 seem to have been designed to disrupt, if not upend, this emerging status quo, including a potential peace settlement between Israel and Saudi Arabia. As a preliminary analysis, this article examines the factors that led to this deadly attack and some of the important flashpoints in assessing how this war may reshape global politics.

2. The Erosion of the Two-State Solution

The so-called "two-state solution" that envisions a Palestinian state co-existing with the state of Israel has been assumed as the desired endgame of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the end of the Cold War. Since the 1993 Oslo Accord, Israel and Palestine had been engaged in a peace-process where both parties sought to bridge their differences for a shared goal to create two states that peacefully coexists in the west of the Jordan River. This peace process reached an impasse at the 2000 Camp David Summit where Israel and the Palestinian Authority failed to come up with an agreed framework to realize the two-state solution. While the Oslo Process had seemed obsolete, the two-state solution was, nevertheless, assumed as the ultimate endgame. However, as a result, as some scholars [articulate](#), the two-state solution has become no longer reflective of the realities on the ground. Israel is a liberal democracy yet its identity as a Jewish state also plays a central role in their statehood. These two concepts are not easily reconcilable. As the aspirational two-state framework reached a stalemate, Israel's Jewish identity produced an "one-state reality" which eroded the prospect for the Palestinians to exercise their right to self-determination.

The series of normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab states—chief among them the Abraham Accord signed between Israel and the United Arab Emirates—further undermined the two-state solution. A peace settlement between Israel and Saudi Arabia was particularly regarded as a game-changer in further accelerating this new momentum for rapprochement. As Israel’s diplomatic isolation in the Middle East recedes, it further diminished Israel’s incentive to reengage with the peace process based on a two-state framework that recognizes a certain degree of self-determination for the Palestinian people. Indeed, the Palestinian side also has their faults. The split between Fatah and Hamas within the Palestinian Authority in 2007 which eventually led to Hamas’ takeover Gaza became a hurdle for the Palestinians to negotiate under an unified voice which is a contributing factor behind the consolidation of the one-state reality.

The strategic importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for Middle Eastern politics gradually diminished since the 1980s after Israel signed Peace Treaties with Egypt and Jordan. As the conflict turned into a bilateral matter, it allowed the stagnated progress of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process—namely the two-State solution—to solidify into a tacitly accepted status-quo. The Hamas attack may go far as challenging this status quo by bringing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict back to the forefront of Middle Eastern politics.

3. Hamas’ Political Objective: Disruption through Escalation?

Hamas’ political objectives in this brutal yet sophisticated operation remains unclear. As many commentators point out, derailing the Israeli-Saudi peace deal negotiation was certainly one of their important objectives. However, it is not difficult to predict the scale of Israel’s response to such an attack that will incur heavy casualties on the people of Gaza as we have already been witnessing through retaliatory air strikes. It is still puzzling why Hamas conducted this attack despite the fact that it would certainly backfire with a fierce and massive retaliation from the IDF that could even lead to a total self-destruction.

States often initiate war when they see a closing window of opportunity. Resonating with political scientist Michael Beckley’s [peak power thesis](#), states in such a position would initiate a

war to derail or transform the unfavorable status-quo by taking any measures necessary. The aforementioned geopolitical trends in the region suggest that Hamas perceived this closing window of opportunity, prompting them to take drastic measures that had considered to be unimaginable. It is premature to determine what Hamas sought to gain from this terrorist attack. Yet, while it may sound grandiose, [Hamas' end goal](#) could be the annihilation of the Jewish state which is, in fact, articulated in their founding charters by inducing a strong retaliatory response from Israel that could escalate into a regional war. On the other hand, the fact that Hamas took dozens of Israeli hostages also suggests that they may be seeking a quick and decisive victory through some sort of a negotiation at an early stage of the war.

Regardless of Hamas' precise political objectives, it is natural to conclude that they sought a decisive attack that significantly changes the status-quo, mostly likely through an escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Confining the scope of the Israeli-Hamas War would be a challenging yet vital aspect of this war which will be conducted under unprecedented circumstances.

4. Exposing the “Shadow-War?”: Escalation Control in the Middle East

As counterterrorism experts Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware [underscore](#), the worst-case outcome of the October 7 attack is a full-scale region-wide war with broad and enduring consequences to the peace and security of the Middle East. Such a conflict will also have serious ramifications for the United States and allies by diverting their attentions back to the Middle East from great power competition in Europe and the western Pacific. The potential involvement of Iran in orchestrating this attack, as the Wall Street Journal [reported](#), suggests the challenges of limiting the scope of Israel's responses to the October 7 attacks.

Israel and Iran has long been engaged in a so-called “[shadow war](#)” where the two states covertly engage militarily with the opponent while being short of an overt and direct military combat. As political scientist Austin Carson [illuminates](#), major powers often covertly intervene into conflicts and even collude with the opponent's preference to keep the conflict covert as a means to control escalation. So far, there has been careful efforts by all parties to limit the scope of the conflict by

denying acknowledgment of Iran's direct role in the October 7 attacks. A spokesman for Iran's mission to the United Nations [denied](#) Iran's direct involvement in the attack and instead, highlighted the autonomous nature of the Hamas-led attack. The Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei also [repudiated](#) Tehran's role in the assault while praising those who planned and executed the cross-border attack. On the other hand, in an interview with CNN, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [emphasized](#) that there was no tangible evidence that Tehran played a direct role in this deadly assault. Nevertheless, given the inherent challenges of urban warfare, a potential ground invasion of Gaza by the IDF could be a deadly and protracted operation that would lead to several opportunities for miscalculation.

The immediate concern for many observers is the possibility of [the opening of a second front](#) in Israel's northern border if Hezbollah decides to intervene which is one of the possible avenues for the war to expand into a region-wide conflagration. A renowned writer on Lebanese politics, Michael Young, however, [argues](#) that all parties including Hezbollah have a shared interest in averting an unpredictable escalation of the conflict into a region-wide war. Hezbollah will especially need to take Lebanese domestic politics into account if they were to enter the war as a belligerent power. Lebanon's domestic economic woes that has already made Hezbollah unpopular means that dragging the country into another war with Israel would impose a heavy political cost on the Shiite militant group. There are reasons for Hezbollah to exercise restraint for now. However, if Israel's ground operation in Gaza turns into a protracted bloody war, Hezbollah may decide to enter the war which will be a consequential juncture in defining the direction of the overall war. The trajectory of the Israel-Hamas war will be an inflection point whether the "shadow-war" turns into a broader regional conflict that could significantly transform the balance of power in the Middle East.

5. Conclusion: The Possible Path Ahead

In parallel with [the Russian invasion of Ukraine](#), the October 7 attack is an attempt to reverse the geopolitical conditions that have been consolidated in the past three decades after the end of the Cold War. The one state reality as well as the growing momentum for rapprochement between Israel and several Arab states, including Saudi Arabia had produced an unacceptable status quo for Hamas

(and for their allies). If the desired endgame for Hamas is to reverse these growing geopolitical trends, it is unsurprising if the escalation into a border regional conflict is one of their immediate goals.

This unprecedented terrorist attack carries the same weight as 9/11 for Israel. A massive retaliatory response is seemingly a natural course of action. Nevertheless, Israeli leaders will need to carefully measure their political endgame in their war against Hamas to find the culminating point of victory. For example, the total destruction of Hamas will not necessarily be helpful for Israel in achieving a political victory that brings about long-term peace and stability due to the massive power vacuum that will be left in the Gaza Strip. In addition, while regional actors are cautiously engaged in escalation control, the sheer scale of the tragic events on October 7 suggests that a prolonged war could present several opportunities for unexpected misperceptions and miscalculations that could easily spin out of control. A broader escalation of this war is what Hamas might be seeking so as to severely undermine Israel's security, including opening a second front if Hezbollah decides to intervene as a result of a protracted war in Gaza.

The magnitude of the October 7 attack also suggest that it will likely have [a dire impact](#) on the Biden administration's strategy to divert Washington's attention from the Middle East, especially if the war escalates into a regional war. In other words, the trajectory of the Israeli-Hamas War is consequential not only for the region but also for U.S. allies elsewhere such as Japan who are at the geopolitical frontline of great power rivalry. The war is at an early and unpredictable stage. Nevertheless, the trajectory of this war—especially whether the relevant actors are able to skillfully engage in escalation control to confine the scope of the war—will undoubtedly have a considerable impact on international relations in an age of great power competition.

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