

The Ouroboros of the Middle East: What the Latest Offensive Between Israel and Palestine Means for the Region

Alp Tanju

Program Director
Global Relations Forum

The 'ouroboros' is an ancient symbol of possibly Egyptian origin, depicting a serpent or a wingless dragon forming a circle by eating its own tail. The symbol is used often in both Ancient Egyptian iconography and Ancient Greek text as a representation of the disorder that surrounds the orderly world; a never-ending cycle of destruction, renewal, and transformation. It seems an apt comparison to make in the wake of what has been happening in the Gaza Strip region since last week.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian militant groups affiliated with Hamas launched a wide-scale attack into Israel. Firing barrages of rockets from Gaza, smuggling its fighters through the border, and going so far as to use paragliders for an aerial assault, the Hamas forces engaged the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in seven different locations around southern Israel.¹ Taking the IDF by surprise, Hamas militants managed to penetrate deep into Israel's southern territory, and even take control of several border towns during the first 2 days of the attack. This was later followed by separate, small-scale missile launches from Hezbollah in Lebanon and militant groups in Syria around Israel's northern border.²

The fighting on the ground has been brutal; on the Israeli side over 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed by the militants and well over 3,400 were wounded. The militants also captured and took around 200 people back to Gaza as hostages. Conversely, the IDF had managed to kill over 1,500 Hamas militants by the time it had re-established control at their border, with an additional reported 687 deaths inside the Gaza Strip as a result of

¹ CNN, "Israel at war with Hamas after unprecedented attacks", October 10, 2023: <https://edition.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-10-10-23/index.html>

² The New York Times, "Along Israel's Borders With Lebanon and Syria, Clashes Raise Fears of Another Front", October 10, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/world/middleeast/israel-syria-lebanon-shelling.html>

Israeli retaliatory airstrikes during the first 3 days of the attack.³ Additionally, as of the writing of this article, the overall death toll in Gaza from Israeli missiles have risen to 1,500.⁴

In response to the attacks, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that Israel is now “at war” with Hamas, vowing the militant group would pay an “unprecedented price”. This was followed by the Israeli Ministry of Defense announcing a “complete siege” of Gaza through increased airstrikes, cutting off water and supplies, and calling up 300,000 army reservists to take part in active combat operations on the border and inside the Gaza Strip.⁵ This was later followed up by Israel issuing only a 24-hour warning to Palestinians in the northern parts of Gaza before beginning what will likely be the biggest ground assault of Gaza in recent memory.⁶



As the dust settles on what has been the deadliest period of fighting between Israel and Palestinian militants since the 1973 Yom Kippur War, questions remain on how such large-scale attack came about, what were Hamas hoping to gain from it, and what it will mean for not just Israeli-Palestinian relations, but also with regards to the broader region.

The ‘How’

One of the biggest questions surrounding Hamas’ latest incursion into Israel is just how Hamas managed to accomplish what is now being called ‘Operation Al-Aqsa Flood’

³ SkyNews, “Israel-Gaza latest: Bodies of 1,500 Hamas militants 'found in Israeli territory' - as IDF warns its offensive 'won't be clean'”, October 10, 2023, <https://news.sky.com/story/israel-gaza-war-latest-hamas-palestine-sky-news-live-blog-12978800>

⁴ Anadolu Ajans, “Palestinian death toll from Israeli attacks on Gaza passes 1,500”, October 13, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/palestinian-death-toll-from-israeli-attacks-on-gaza-passes-1-500/3017761>

⁵ Financial Times, “Israel imposes ‘complete siege’ on Gaza as Hamas threatens hostages”, October 9, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/1569b97d-cd59-4ab4-8180-e826884cc04a>

⁶ Reuters, “Israel prepares ground assault on Gaza as Palestinians flee”, October 15, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/palestinians-face-israeli-deadline-leave-northern-gaza-2023-10-13/>

without the Israeli intelligence services knowing about it. With organizations such as the Mossad (military intelligence) and Shin Bet (domestic security), Israel's intelligence establishment had developed a reputation for competence and diligence, especially when it came to anticipating and subverting attacks on Israeli soil by Palestinian militants. Their reputation has now been shattered in the wake of what has transpired over the past weekend.

This was a complete system failure on the part of Israeli intelligence, comparable to the September 11 attacks for the US in terms of just how badly they underestimated the probability of Hamas getting past their defensive measures with a well-timed and coordinated attack. There are two major factors here that might provide some insight.

One is that the IDF was both overconfident in their defensive capability, and complacent in what they perceived as a period of calm within Hamas-controlled Gaza. The Israelis thought that after the previous offensive in 2021, Hamas had refocused its efforts into economic survival and a long-term strategy of rebuilding its forces. Unofficial talks between Hamas representatives and the Israeli government convinced the Israelis of this enough that Israel sought to capitalize on this potential opportunity by offering economic incentives to migrant workers from Gaza. Just last year, the Israeli government expanded the number of work permits for Gazans to 17,000,⁷ paving the way for more commerce and economic activity to flow through the Erez crossing, the only pedestrian crossing between Gaza and Israel. The thinking was that with more Gazans being able to bring money back home by working in Israel, the Gazans' economic dependence on Hamas would gradually lessen, and the militant group would start bleeding sympathizers.

This proved to be a dangerous miscalculation on the part of Israel, with intelligence as recent as June 2023 showing that Hamas kept training young soldiers under the guise of 'summer camps' to teach children how to defend themselves and educate them on the history of the conflict.⁸ While Israel was focused on defusing Hamas radicalism through economic measures, Hamas was busy training and equipping its fighters, often in plain view of the IDF,⁹ even as it kept its military operations against Israel at a bare minimum.

⁷ Haaretz, "Israel Expands Number of Work Permits for Gazans", September 22, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-09-22/ty-article/.premium/defense-ministry-expands-number-of-israeli-work-permits-for-gazans/00000183-6548-db87-a18f-67fc94e40000>

⁸ The Times of Israel, "'Ensuring jihad will continue': Gaza summer camp teaches youth to fight, hate Israel, June 26, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/gaza-youths-march-and-train-to-fight-israel-at-palestinian-islamic-jihad-summer-camp/>

⁹ Reuters, "Hamas deployed specialised units to attack Israel, says source", October 9, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/hamas-deployed-specialised-units-attack-israel-says-source-2023-10-09/>

Nevertheless, as the argument went, Israel's defensive capabilities were more than enough to repel any organized attack that could come from Hamas. Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system, with its 150 square kilometer coverage per battery, launch capability of up to 20 Tamir interceptor missiles at a time, and up to 95% success rate,¹⁰ had long been considered the gold standard in missile defense systems. It had been very successful in repelling Hamas' rocket attacks over the border for many years. Between the Iron Dome, its intelligence prowess, and the combat-readiness of the IDF, Israel remained confident in its defensive capability.

Unfortunately, each of these pillars were operating below expectations by the time of the Hamas incursion: the Iron Dome, now over a decade old and prone to malfunctioning,¹¹ was overwhelmed by the amount of rockets incoming from both the south (launched by Hamas) and the north (launched by militants affiliated with Hezbollah), and the IDF security forces along the southern border were under-staffed due to having to respond to a recent bout of violence in the West Bank over the killing of a Palestinian girl by Israeli settlers.¹²

The third pillar, and the other factor in explaining why Israel was caught unaware by Hamas aggression, is the fact that coordination between the Israeli intelligence services and the Israeli government had been undergoing something of a crisis. The intelligence community in Israel has been in a bitterly divided struggle with the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over the latter's attempts at overhauling the Israeli Supreme Court.¹³ Although this is perhaps not a direct cause of Israel's security failure, the recent lack of coordination between the intelligence services and the government certainly may have played a part in explaining why Israel was slow to react to the imminent threat.

The 'Why'

As for why the attack happened, right now there is little concrete evidence to go on. Certainly, there are exacerbating factors which might explain both the choice of timeline

¹⁰ Military Today, "Iron Dome Missile Defense System", https://www.militarytoday.com/missiles/iron_dome.htm

¹¹ The Times of Israel, IDF: "'Technical error' caused Iron Dome to malfunction during flare-up with Gaza", May 4, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-technical-error-caused-iron-dome-to-malfunction-during-flare-up-with-gaza/>

¹² Al-Jazeera, "Palestinian killed as Israeli settlers attack West Bank town of Huwara", October 6, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/6/palestinian-killed-as-israeli-settlers-attack-west-bank-town-of-huwara>

¹³ The Washington Post, "Hamas attack is an intelligence failure that may take Israel years to unravel", October 8, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/10/08/hamas-israel-intelligence-failure/>

and the scale of Hamas' success in penetrating into Israel proper. The name Hamas gave their military operation, 'Al-Aqsa Flood' is most certainly in reference to the clashes between Palestinian worshippers and Israeli security forces over the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem back in April 2023,¹⁴ where the Israeli police violently cracked down on



protesting Palestinians during the evening Ramadan prayer. If not the timing, then certainly the name suggest retaliation for the April events.

The attack coincided with the end of the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, when businesses were closed and people were mostly at home or gathered in

mass, making it easier for the militants to advance into population centers and cause higher casualties. Likewise, a music festival very close to the border between Gaza and Israel provided Hamas with ample targets for killing or taking hostages. This is evidenced by the fact that a big chunk of the casualties reported by Israel, over 260 people, is from Hamas militants paragliding down into the festival grounds and opening fire indiscriminately.¹⁵

On a more macro level, Hamas' attack comes at a transformative time for Israel's relations with the Arab world. Before the attacks, ties between Israel and its neighboring Arab states had been on a tenuous path to normalization. The Abraham Accords, one of the few major diplomatic accomplishments of the Trump years in the US, had done an admirable job in normalizing Israel's relations with other Middle Eastern powers,¹⁶ such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain.

A major development came in September of this year, when Saudi Arabia and Israel announced that they have been engaging in intensive talks led by the Biden administration in the US, and were looking into the possibility of normalizing relations.¹⁷ In the lead-up to the attack, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman and Prime

¹⁴ BBC, "Al-Aqsa mosque: Violence as Israeli police raid Jerusalem holy site", April 5, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-65184207>

¹⁵ APNews, "Israeli survivors recount terror at music festival, where Hamas militants killed at least 260", October 10, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-gaza-hamas-music-festival-6a55ae2375944f10ecc4c52d05f2ffe>

¹⁶ The Wilson Center, "The Abraham Accords: A Three-Year Success Now at a Crossroads", September 14, 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/abraham-accords-three-year-success-now-crossroads>

¹⁷ France24, "Could Hamas's attack on Israel pose a threat for the region and Saudi-Israeli normalisation?", October 8, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20231008-could-hamas-s-attack-on-israel-pose-a-threat-for-the-region-and-saudi-israeli-normalisation>

Minister Netanyahu had both made public statements praising the fruitful nature of the negotiations, and that the countries were getting closer to reaching a 'substantial' agreement.

Normalized relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia would constitute perhaps the biggest step in achieving at least a sense of stability and peace in the Middle East. This stability, however, would also most certainly come at the expense of decreased public support for Palestine's cause *vis-à-vis* reclaiming Palestinian lands through the 'destruction' of Israel, the stated ultimate goal of Hamas and a common refrain within the Arab world's more hawkish circles. Disrupting this rapprochement between Israel and its neighbors by goading Israel into renewed hostilities with the Palestinians at such a critical time is a possibility that cannot be ignored.

Cui Bono?

Yet there is a greater player in the region which stands to lose massively from normalized relations between the two countries: Iran.

A Shia Muslim regional power with a long history carving out space for itself through playing its enemies against each other, warmer relations between the Sunni Muslim Saudi Arabia and rabidly anti-Iranian Israel would most certainly be an outcome that Iran wishes to avoid.¹⁸

Although Israel was careful to avoid pointing fingers to Iran in the aftermath of Hamas' attack, senior officials within both the US and Israel have stated that between the conflict in 2021 and this recent incursion, Iran had supplied regional militant organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas with considerable cash infusions, as well as weapons and training.¹⁹ Furthermore, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard had been taking part in biweekly meetings in Beirut with the Hamas leadership since August, at least one of which had been attended by the Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian.²⁰ The

¹⁸ Foreign Policy, "What is Iran's Role in the Hamas Attack on Israel?", October 8, 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/08/iran-irgc-role-involvement-hamas-attack-israel-gaza-war-hezbollah/?tpcc=recirc_trending062921

¹⁹ The Washington Post, "Hamas received weapons and training from Iran, officials say", October 9, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/10/09/iran-support-hamas-training-weapons-israel/>

²⁰ The Guardian, "No evidence yet of Iran link to Hamas attack, says Israeli military", October 9, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/09/no-evidence-yet-of-iran-link-to-hamas-attack-says-israeli-military>

frequency of these summits suggest at least some level of coordination between the Iranian regime, Hezbollah, and Hamas when it comes to future military operations.

Of course, all of this is currently circumstantial and the Iranian leadership has denied any involvement in Hamas' attack. However, it is reasonable to surmise that Iran has a vested interest in once again heating up the cycle of Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and stands to benefit from the potential diplomatic fallout between Israel and the Arab world.

An indirect beneficiary of the renewed hostilities between Israel and Hamas will most likely be Russia. Currently stuck fighting in Ukraine after invading it over a year ago and spending every dime it has on military equipment just to be able to reach a stalemate with the NATO-supported Ukrainian forces, a crisis in the Middle East is exactly what President Vladimir Putin may be counting on. Should Israel's retaliation for Hamas' attack provoke other militant groups or Arab countries to fight, then the US' need to supply its Middle Eastern partner with military equipment will undoubtedly start eating away at its ability to supply Ukraine.²¹

In a more morbid sense, perhaps Israel's Netanyahu could also be considered a short-term beneficiary of this tragic event. Hamas' attack was a major blow to Netanyahu's 'strongman' image and there will certainly be an accounting in the near future about the governmental failure he's presided over, but that was the least of his worries. Having spent the majority of the past few years both in and out of office with a bribery and corruption case on his head, Netanyahu's popularity further tanked this year when his government's proposed constitutional changes brought about unprecedented public backlash.²²



A deeply divisive figure on the outs with the more secular elements in the Israeli state and with a shaky governing coalition, Netanyahu's chances for political survival were looking

²¹ Bloomberg, "Israel-Hamas Conflict Adds Dangers for Ukraine's War Effort", October 10, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-10-10/israel-hamas-conflict-may-help-russia-in-war-against-ukraine?leadSource=verify%20wall>

²² Haaretz, "Netanyahu Is Taking Israel to Unknown Peaks of Hatred", July 6, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-07-06/ty-article/.premium/netanyahu-is-taking-israel-to-unknown-peaks-of-hatred/00000189-2bd5-d145-a1e9-3bf71b4e0000>

increasingly slim. The October 7 attacks has presented Netanyahu with an opportunity for a political reset: he has formed a unity government with his former political rivals,²³ and ramped up the fervor for retaliation against Hamas in an effort to regain his strongman image. However, this will most likely prove to only be a brief respite for Israel's embattled Prime Minister, and he will start facing increased pressure to explain his government's lack of preparation, the fallout from his rhetoric against the Palestinians, and calls for resignation.

Whoever the winners and their motives may be, it is clear who will ultimately lose the most from the fallout of Hamas' attack; the Palestinian people. Having been cut off from much-needed medical supplies and basic utilities like electricity or water, the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip are now paying the price of Hamas' actions against Israel. What was feared in the immediate aftermath of the attack has already come to pass, as the Israeli military has seemingly thrown restraint out the window and started conducting widespread aerial bombardment of the region. The death toll currently numbers in around 5,300 wounded and over 1,500 dead, with at least 700 of them children.²⁴

The 'siege' of Gaza by the Israeli army in the immediate aftermath of the attacks has already drawn concerns from the UN about the illegality of Israel's response and possible evidence of war crimes being committed against the Palestinians.²⁵ Whether they were supporters of Hamas or just regular people trying to survive in what has been called the biggest open prison in the world, the Gazans will now suffer together the full wrath of a vengeful Israel, looking to settle scores.

The severity of the breakdown in regional relations will be dependent on a number of things; whether Israel manages to rein in its counterattack in the coming days; whether the neighboring Arab states prioritize maintaining their nascent diplomatic ties with Israel over a 'fire and fury' response; and whether influential outside actors like the US manage to act as both mediator and security guarantor to deter other regional players like Hezbollah from exacerbating the crisis – which would likely necessitate increased US

²³ Politico, "Bibi's Big Chance", October 8, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/10/08/israel-war-benjamin-netanyahu-legacy-00120532>

²⁴ CNN, "October 14, 2023 Israel-Hamas war news", October 14, 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-news-hamas-war-10-14-23/h_8dea4914b4178c1507b3dabb55c51d33#:~:text=More%20than%20700%20Palestinian%20children%20reportedly%20killed%20in%20Gaza%2C%20UNICEF%20says,-From%20CNN's%20Lauren&text=More%20than%20700%20children%20have,Children's%20Fund%2C%20citing%20local%20sources.

²⁵ Reuters, "UN rights chief condemns Israeli 'siege' of Gaza, militants' taking of hostages", October 10, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/israeli-air-strikes-hit-residences-schools-across-gaza-un-rights-chief-2023-10-10/>



engagement with the region. There is already discontent amongst the Arab states over Israel's attacks on northern Gaza.

No matter how this period is managed, it is clear that the Hamas attack has already put the prospect of calmness in the region into grave jeopardy once again. All the diplomatic overtures that have been accomplished within the past few years, only to end up in the same place once again. The dynamics and actors may have changed, but this is an all too familiar story. And thus, the snake eats its own tail, and the ouroboros turns once more in its place, beginning a new cycle of uncertainty in the Middle East.