

2023 HOSTILITIES AND ESCALATING VIOLENCE IN THE OPT | FACTUAL ACCOUNT OF EVENTS

This account of events is based on available and verified facts at the time of writing, on 15 October 2023.
Further updates will be made available to reflect unfolding developments on the ground.

In the early morning hours of 7 October 2023, Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups in Gaza launch an attack against Israel, firing barrages of rockets towards the southern and central part of the country. Fighters cross the Gaza border fence into Israeli territory by land, air, and sea, where they injure and kill Israeli forces and Israeli and foreign civilians, including more than 260 attendees of a music festival near Re'im and residents of kibbutzim Kfar Azza and Be'eri. Over the course of three days, there are gun battles and hostage situations in southern Israeli towns, with the Israeli army only regaining control on 9 October. An estimated 1,500 Hamas fighters are reportedly killed, and between 130 and 150 Israeli and foreign hostages taken to Gaza. Rocket attacks on Israeli cities, including Ben Gurion Airport near Lod (formerly Lydda), continue. As of 14 October, the total number of casualties from attacks by Palestinian armed groups is 1,300 dead and 3,261 injured, most during the initial onslaught and the vast majority of them civilians. According to reports, first responders encounter "horrific scenes, including the slaughter of elderly people and finding bloody rooms crowded with massacred civilians". An Israeli army spokesperson calls 7 October "by far the worst day in Israeli history".

On the day of the initial attack, shortly before 11 am local time, Israel launches a large-scale counteroffensive on the Gaza Strip, with Prime Minister Netanyahu proclaiming that the country is "at war"; the government declares a state of war the following day. The Israeli military conducts an intense, "unprecedented" bombardment of Gaza, which as of 14 October 2023 leaves 2,228 Gaza residents killed and a further 8,744 injured. The military asserts that it is targeting the political and military leadership of Hamas, with a military spokesperson claiming on 8

October that "Israeli intelligence indicates that Hamas are hiding among Gazan civilians, inside Gazan homes and schools, hospitals and mosques". Strikes hit high-rise buildings, including those housing apartments, the Rimal neighbourhood in Gaza City, the Jabalia and Shati refugee camps, and in close proximity to the Rafah crossing with neighbouring Egypt, amongst others. The total number of buildings and housing units destroyed is 1,324 and 5,540, respectively, as of 14 October 2023. There are also reports about damage to hospitals, water and sewage facilities, telecommunications lines, schools, and mosques, as well as fatal attacks on journalists, healthcare workers and ambulances, and humanitarian workers, including staff of the United Nations (UN) Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

On 10 October, an Israeli military spokesperson proclaims that in his view the parliament and civilian ministries in Gaza constitute legitimate targets "if there's a gunman firing rockets from there" and indicates a lesser "level of fidelity" as regards warnings given to civilians prior to an attack. On the same day, the military announces that "the emphasis is on damage, not precision" in the bombardment. Hamas threatens to start executing hostages in retaliation for attacks resulting in civilian deaths that are carried out without warning. On 12 October, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports, and Amnesty International later suggests as well, that the Israeli military has used white phosphorus, an incendiary weapon, prompting grave concerns about harm to civilians. The Israeli military denies the claim.

On 9 October, Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant orders a "complete siege" of Gaza, specifying "no electricity, no food, no water, no fuel, everything is closed". He claims that Israel is "fighting human

animals and we are acting accordingly". The evening of 7 October, Israel had already cut off the electricity. As of 11 October at 2 pm local time, Gaza is without electricity. On 11 October, Prime Minister Netanyahu, Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, and Netanyahu rival Benny Gantz – the leader of the opposition Kahol Lavan party who is also a former chief of staff of the Israeli military and Defence Minister – form an emergency war cabinet, with Gallant vowing to "wipe [Hamas] off the face of the Earth". Israel mobilizes around 360,000 reservists and amasses 100,000 troops near Gaza, raising the spectre of a ground invasion. On 12 October, the Israeli military's chief of staff, Herzl Halevi, pledges that "Gaza will never look the same". On the same day, Israel Katz, Israel's Energy Minister, threatens that no "electrical switch will be turned on, no water hydrant will be opened and no fuel truck will enter" until the hostages are released, a position reportedly shared by Defence Minister Gallant. On 13 October, Hamas asserts that Israel's attacks on Gaza have killed 13 of the hostages; the Israeli military denies this, and furthermore announces that it has carried out "localized raids within Gaza". Hamas reportedly fires a long-range missile towards the Galilee. On 14 October, the Israeli military announces that it is getting ready for a new phase, including "significant ground operations". On the same day, UNRWA warns that "[c]lean water is running out in the Gaza Strip, after its water plant and public water networks stopped working".

The destruction of homes and infrastructure, shortage of water, food, electricity, and fuel, as well as the threat of continuous bombardment leads to the displacement of more than 423,000 Gazans, a majority of whom reportedly shelter in UNRWA premises. On 10 October, Egypt closes the Rafah crossing to Gaza residents for an indefinite time period; the Israeli military had suggested previously that Gazans should leave through there to escape the bombardment, only to reverse course. As of 14 October, the Rafah crossing remains closed (with the Egyptian Foreign Ministry denying a closure and clarifying that the crossing was damaged by Israeli airstrikes), while the Erez and Kerem Shalom crossings have been closed since the start of hostilities on 7 October. On 13 October, the Israeli military reportedly directs the more than 1 million residents of northern Gaza to 'evacuate' south, prompting concerns of an imminent land offensive. Gaza's biggest hospital Al-Shifa is located in this area, in Gaza City. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres observes that such an 'evacuation' is "extremely

dangerous" and may not be "possible", while many Palestinians fear a second Nakba, a majority of Gaza residents being refugees or descendants of refugees who were displaced during the 1948 war that led to the establishment of the State of Israel and concomitant mass exodus of over 700,000 Palestinians from their homes across Mandatory Palestine. One resident interviewed by Amnesty International remarked: "We went to sleep in 2023 and woke up in 1948".

UNRWA reportedly relocates its foreign staff and central operations centre to the south of Gaza, urging the Israeli military "to protect all civilians in UNRWA shelters including schools". The World Health Organization (WHO) says that moving critically ill patients from hospitals in north Gaza "is a death sentence" and that "[a]sking health workers to do so is beyond cruel". On the same day, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reports being given two hours for an 'evacuation' of Al-Awda Hospital in north Gaza, which is then postponed until 6 am local time on 14 October. Hamas instructs Gazans to "remain steadfast in [their] homes and to stand firm in the face of this disgusting psychological war waged by the occupation". On 12 October, Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi had reportedly said that Palestinians in Gaza should "stay steadfast and remain on their land". At present, humanitarian operations inside Gaza face significant challenges, and there is no operative humanitarian corridor allowing for the passage of relief and assistance. Gazans are seemingly left with two options: mass displacement, which for many of them calls to mind painful memories of the Nakba, or staying in their homes under bombardment. UNRWA cautions in stark terms that Gaza is "becoming a hell hole and is on the brink of collapse". On 14 October, the Israeli military announces that it will allow Gazans to safely travel southwards until 4 pm local time; thousands reportedly make their way south. There are some indications that fleeing civilians may have come under attack.

The Israeli-Lebanese border has become another "area of operations", with rocket fire from southern Lebanon and reported infiltration drawing Israeli shelling and raising fears of a wider regional conflagration, including the entry into the war of the Iran-sponsored Lebanese armed group Hezbollah, deemed to be amongst the best equipped and most powerful militias in the world. On 10 October, shells and missiles are reportedly launched from Syria, drawing responding fire by the Israeli military. On 12 October, Israel strikes the airports in Damascus and Aleppo. On 13 October, reports indicate that Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein

Amir-Abdollahian met with Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut, with the former warning that the war could spill over to other parts of the region should Israel's attacks on Gaza continue. On the same date, it is reported that a journalist is killed and six others are injured during Israeli shelling of southern Lebanon. On 14 October, rockets are reportedly fired from Syrian territory, drawing Israeli artillery fire; the Israeli military again strikes Aleppo airport.

Outrage about the catastrophic consequences of hostilities in Gaza and Israel have sparked violent altercations between Israeli forces and Palestinians in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, leaving 49 Palestinians dead and more than 1,150 injured, including 13 and 106 children, respectively, as of 14 October. Furthermore, there are reports about continued attacks by violent settlers, resulting in five deaths since 7 October. On 13 October, it is reported that a settler shot a Palestinian at point blank near Hebron, with an Israeli soldier standing by. Hamas calls for a 'day of rage' on 13 October; overnight and on this day alone, 13 Palestinians, amongst them four children and one woman, are reportedly killed by Israeli forces in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, most during protests. Access and movement restrictions for residents of the West Bank are reported as well.

A number of Israel's Western allies declare their solidarity in the wake of the Hamas attacks. On 9 October, United States (US) President Biden, United Kingdom (UK) Prime Minister Sunak, French President Macron, German Chancellor Scholz, and Italian Prime Minister Meloni release a joint statement indicating their "steadfast and united support to the State of Israel, and ... unequivocal condemnation of Hamas and its appalling acts of terrorism". The US moves "the USS Gerald R Ford aircraft carrier, a missile cruiser and four missile destroyers" as well as fighter jets to the Eastern Mediterranean and starts sending military equipment and ammunition to Israel. On 14 October, the US sends another aircraft carrier to the region. Germany and the UK follow suit with shows of military assistance. The European Union (EU) announces that it will review development aid to Palestinian authorities, revising an earlier announcement that such payments had been suspended – a step taken at the national level by Germany and Austria.

The outbreak of the most severe hostilities in decades – which risk escalating into all-out regional war – comes against the backdrop of longstanding concerns

about increasing violence and oppression in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), the latter since the beginning of Israel's now 56-year-old prolonged occupation in June 1967. The situation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, has deteriorated markedly since the beginning of the year, with the UN documenting that 2023 has been the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank since the start of incident recording in 2005. Furthermore, the months of January to August 2023 saw "the highest daily average of settler-related incidents" ever recorded, leaving 1,105 Palestinians displaced. The Israeli military referred to a particularly gruesome settler rampage in the town of Huwara near Nablus in February as a "pogrom". Meanwhile, the most far-right government in Israel's history pushed ahead with annexationist policies, with Finance Minister and Minister in the Defence Ministry Bezalel Smotrich announcing in May this year plans to accommodate another 500,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem). Tensions have been running high in Jerusalem as well, with several controversial visits to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif by ultranationalist National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir and violent police raids at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, amongst other grounds for concern. On 9 October, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres remarked to the press that "[t]his most recent violence does not come in a vacuum. The reality is that it grows out of a long-standing conflict, with a 56-year long occupation and no political end in sight".

In the Gaza Strip, which is home to more than 2 million Palestinians, around half of whom are below the age of 18, the humanitarian and economic situation has been catastrophic since Israel's imposition of a land, air, and sea blockade in the summer of 2007, following the Hamas takeover of the territory. Since then, there have been hostilities between Israel and Palestinian armed groups in Gaza in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014, 2021, and 2022. The then-UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the oPt, Michael Lynk, had warned in October 2018 that "[w]ith an economy in free fall, 70 per cent youth unemployment, widely contaminated drinking water and a collapsed health care system, Gaza has become 'unliveable'".

This note is part of a series. As the situation continues to evolve, further analysis will be made available as relevant.

Jerusalem, 15 October 2023

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