

Hamas has upended the status quo

[Omar Karmi](#) [The Electronic Intifada](#) 28 October 2023



A woman mourns as bodies of her relatives are carried for burial from the al-Aqsa hospital morgue in Deir al-Balah, Gaza on 24 October.

Omar Ashtawy/APA images

As Israel enters [phase two](#) of its attack on Gaza, there is much speculation as to what the Israeli military will face on the ground.

The answer depends on the extent to which Hamas foresaw what Israel's response would be to its 7 October Operation Al-Aqsa Flood.

That in turn begs the question why Hamas did what it did when it did.

Hamas officials have said they saw little choice but to act. Having seen Palestinian aspirations to end Israel's occupation regress over the past decades amid international apathy, something had to change.

"We knocked on the door of reconciliation and we weren't allowed in," senior Hamas leader Musa Abu Marzouk [told](#) *The New Yorker* earlier this month.

"We knocked on the door of elections and we were deprived of them. We knocked on the door of a political document for the whole world – we said, 'We want peace, but give us some of our rights' – but they didn't let us in. We tried *every* path. We didn't find one political path to take us out of this morass and free us from occupation."

Certainly, the background to the attack bears out Abu Marzouk's explanation.

Seventy-five years after being forcibly displaced from Palestine in 1948, 56 years of living under military occupation, 30 years of a "peace process" that has merely allowed Israel to consolidate its occupation in the West Bank, and 16 years of a Gaza blockade that has rendered normal life and a normal economy impossible there, generations of Palestinians have lived and died without any hope for a better future.

The West's acquiescence with Israel's dangerous delusion that it could manage its occupation indefinitely has been equally instrumental in the current situation.

Despite unanimous international consensus behind a two-state outcome since the Oslo accords were signed in 1993 – shared by the US, the UK, the EU, the UN, the Arab League, the African Union, Russia, China – there has never been any serious pressure on Israel to draw down its occupation, roll back its settlement project and end its military rule over Palestinians of the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

If not now?

Quite the contrary. Even as the circumstances on the ground for Palestinians deteriorated dramatically, as Israeli leaders were quite clear that they [opposed](#) Palestinian statehood, as settlements [expanded](#) and extremist settlers [were empowered](#) to go on violent rampages, as human rights organizations all over the [world](#) denounced Israel as an [apartheid state](#), as Gaza's population [sunk deeper](#) into the mire of poverty and de-development, as [out-and-out racists](#) populated the most senior positions of the Israeli government, the West remained uninterested to the point of complicity.

The so-called [Abraham Accords](#) were also pivotal. That Arab countries would seek normalization agreements with Israel when there were no signs of any progress toward ending the occupation or settling the Palestine issue suggested they too were prepared to leave Palestinians isolated.

That prospect was sharpened by reports that a normalization agreement with Saudi Arabia was also [in the cards](#).

Every indication was that Israel was successfully managing its occupation.

It had largely quelled any armed threat from the West Bank, where it is helped in no small measure by the Palestinian Authority. It had confined Hamas to Gaza where it believed it had found a modus operandi whereby cash from Qatar and some extra work permits would keep the area quiet enough to be sustainable.

Meanwhile, the only political plan that seemed to be gaining ground was that of Israeli finance minister Bezalel Smotrich, who in 2017 penned what he called a [“decisive plan.”](#)

That plan would see Israel annex all occupied territory after massive settlement expansion, and leave Palestinians with the choice to either stay as second class citizens or leave. Those “terrorists” who choose to stay but not accept subservience, will “be dealt with” by the Israeli military.

In effect, the plan is a formalization of the present reality.

The entry of Smotrich and [fellow supremacist](#) Itamar Ben-Gvir into senior government positions in 2022, only signaled public Israeli support for

continued occupation – if they thought about it at all. In the five elections Israel has held in the last four years, the issue of occupation [barely featured](#).

Something had to change.

Months in the making

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood had clearly been months in the planning and was by all accounts conducted in utmost secrecy, with even Hamas' political leaders [unaware](#) of what or when.

Using [drones](#) to knock out surveillance cameras and diversionary tactics such as rocket fire and motor cycles fixed on motorized paragliders, on 7 October Hamas succeeded [in breaching](#), in unprecedented numbers, the “smart wall” Israel had finished erecting around Gaza in 2021 in dozens of places at the same time.

The first targets seemed clear. Fighters attacked several military bases around Gaza, killing and capturing soldiers with a view to bringing them back to Gaza to exchange for Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

What the plan was after that is less clear. The Israeli military response was [unpredictably slow](#), and once news spread in Gaza of the wall breaches, others, including other resistance groups, started streaming across the boundary.

Hamas has [denied](#) that it targeted civilians. But while some of the more lurid claims of what happened then – the 40 [beheaded babies](#) report, for instance – have been [quietly dropped](#), and while the extent to which Israelis were [killed in crossfire](#) once the Israeli military [did turn up](#) is yet to be determined, it is clear that hundreds of Israeli civilians lost their lives on 7 October.

Certainly, Israel has [weaponized claims](#) of atrocities to whip up war fervor in Israel and to shield itself from outside criticism or calls for restraint.

The number of Israeli officials, military or political, [former](#) or [current](#) who have reached for [genocidal language](#), must have been quite eye-opening for at least some foreign journalists and officials.

Equally certain is that Hamas would [have expected](#) a massive Israeli response to restore its deterrence after what the group had clearly planned to be an unprecedented dent in Israel's armor.

You don't have to look back far to see the kind of outsized violence Israel often reaches for.

Lessons from 2014

In 2014 – after three Israeli settlers were captured and killed in the West Bank – Benjamin Netanyahu, then as now, Israel's prime minister, blamed Hamas; Hamas [denied](#) any involvement – Israel unleashed what was at that point its most brutal assault on Gaza, killing 2,251 people of whom, [according to the UN](#), 65 percent, or more than 1,400 people, were civilians.

The 2014 war featured a two-week Israeli ground invasion of Gaza, from which Hamas will have learned lessons for this time. Abu Obeida, the spokesperson for Hamas' military wing, the Qassam Brigades, has been clear that Hamas is prepared for a [long battle](#).

The capture of more than 200 people, moreover, has provided Hamas a valuable means by which to exercise some control over the Israeli response. The presence of a number of foreign captives has complicated matters for the Israeli government, which has been under both domestic and foreign pressure to secure their release before any major ground invasion.

The staggered release of [some captives](#) has also slowed down the Israeli military and allowed space for slow but growing calls for an [immediate ceasefire](#).

Regional tensions were a given once Israel began its attack, and have only grown as Israel's massive and indiscriminate bombardment of Gaza has exacted a grueling cost in lives, over 7,000 at time of writing.

So far, while Arab publics have protested in great numbers in their own countries, they have not yet rebelled to the extent Hamas has called for. On 19 October, for instance, Abu Obeida [urged](#) people to “march to the borders of Palestine, unite and (do) everything in their power to overthrow the Zionist project.”

Nevertheless, Jordan, with its large Palestinian population, sees daily protests. Jordanian riot police had to be [deployed](#) to prevent demonstrators from reaching Jordan’s border with the West Bank, while protestors also had to be [forcibly removed](#) from outside the Israeli embassy in Amman.

Saudi-Israeli normalization talks have been shelved indefinitely, though [calls](#) on other Arab countries to end their normalization deals with Israel have so far been ignored.

In Lebanon, Hizballah has kept up just enough [military pressure](#) on Israel to suggest a ground invasion of Gaza would invite a much stronger conflagration there.

The Lebanese Shiite group will have to factor in the US Navy in its calculations, after Washington sent two aircraft carriers to the area in an explicit attempt to deter any other actors from getting involved.

Israel’s decision to cut fuel supplies, electricity, food and water to all Gaza’s 2.3 million people, moreover, has left Israel’s supporters in the West [struggling](#) to [explain](#) how their unqualified support squares with international law, so often invoked over Ukraine.

Game changer

Inevitably, diplomacy is beginning to make a comeback. Hamas officials [visited Moscow](#), which has twice seen the UN Security Council vote down its proposals for a full ceasefire, on 26 October.

And Al Jazeera [has reported](#) that Qatar-mediated Hamas-Israel ceasefire talks have reached an “advanced” stage.

The central negotiation, according to Al Jazeera, appears to be over a prisoner exchange, one of Hamas' central aims with the 7 October operation. Israel has engaged in a large arrest campaign in the West Bank since then, netting more than [1,500](#) Palestinians.

Hamas will also want to see an end to the Gaza blockade, which has blighted the lives of so many for so long.

Any diplomatic breakthrough, however, is contingent on whether Israel feels it can avoid paying any price through military action on the ground.

Israeli troops are massed at the Gaza boundary in unprecedented numbers. Israeli military leaders say they are ready and prepared to do battle.

Much depends on public pressure.

Public support in Israel for an immediate ground invasion is [shrinking](#), and Israeli military planners will be wary that public discourse among Israel's Western allies has also [subtly shifted](#), likely narrowing the window of opportunity for a large scale invasion.

A full ground invasion will be bloody and lengthy. It will inflict even more pain on Gaza's population.

What it will not do is end Hamas, as Israel has been insisting is its aim. Hamas is a political movement with a military wing.

It is primarily a national liberation movement, rather than an ideological religious group.

When asked about the sacrifices Palestinians might make as a result of its 7 October operation, Khaled Meshaal, one of Hamas' senior political leaders, [cited](#) Soviet resistance to Nazi German invaders, Vietnam's war against first France then the US, and Algeria's struggle for independence from French colonialism as inspirations, placing Hamas firmly in the anti-imperialist camp.

Defeat on the battleground does not equate to political defeat.

And regardless of what happens in any ground invasion, the 7 October operation has irrevocably shifted the situation in Palestine in any day-after scenario.

Hamas has succeeded with a number of aims.

It has damaged Israel's deterrence image. It has undermined any Israeli-Saudi pact for now.

And it has refocused world attention on the bleeding wound that is Palestine.

That might signal renewed and serious efforts to address Israel's occupation and end Israel's military rule over the Palestinian people.

But it also threatens to hit [fast forward](#) on Smotrich's genocide plans.

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