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“Massacre in Israel: A Transformational Moment, or More of the Same?”

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On 7 October 2023, the Palestinian militant group Hamas shocked the world by launching attacks by land, air, and sea, all along the border of Gaza and beyond. Many parts of the events unfolded live on social media, adding to the trauma experienced by those in Israel and elsewhere. In an era that has seen so many shocking occurrences, you could almost say it was surprising to be surprised. Less unexpected, of course, was the Israeli reaction: a bombing campaign that has already devastated large parts of the densely populated Gaza Strip at enormous humanitarian cost, as well as preparations for a ground attack into the territory that could harm exponentially more.

Such moments may feel like a massive historical shift, something “transformative” or “game changing.” How are we to determine whether, and how, significant change is taking place? History can help us to do so by considering the long view. Ultimately, an event is only a turning point if it truly marks a departure from what came previously. The more we consider events of the previous days, the clearer it seems that the attack and its aftermath seem to be exacerbating existing trends rather than marking a new direction. Still, there is little question that these developments have the potential to transform the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Middle East regional system.

This article discusses the implications of Hamas attacks and the Israeli military campaign that is taking place in response, with a special consideration of how that connects to the past. It begins by outlining what we know about the goals of the attacks and the clear Israeli military and intelligence failures that allowed them to occur. It then examines Israel’s ongoing military response. Finally, it attempts to evaluate the extent to which these attacks and their aftermath can truly be said to be transformative.

## **The Hamas Attack and Israeli Intelligence Failure**

The course of the gruesome events has become clearer, even if some aspects remain murky. At around 6:00 am on October 7, Hamas launched Operation Al-Aqsa Deluge. Militants fired hundreds of rockets from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory. Several thousand fighters from Hamas and Islamic Jihad blasted through border posts, destroyed electronic surveillance equipment, and captured unprepared military stations. Militants attacked kibbutzim and a large dance party that was taking place in the desert near the Gaza border, killing hundreds of civilians and soldiers, while capturing and taking hostage scores of them, including the elderly, women and children. Thus far, the Israeli death toll stands at more than 1,300.<sup>1</sup> Since that time, Israel

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<sup>1</sup> Emanuel Fabian, “Israel Girds for Long War as Death Toll since Hamas Terror Onslaught Passes 1,300,” *Times of Israel*, Oct. 12, 2023, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-girds-for-long-war-as-death-toll-from-hamas-terror-onslaught-passes-1300/>.

has retaken land captured by the militants, opened a bombing campaign in Gaza itself, and mobilized more than 300,000 troops in preparation for a ground invasion.

While the Hamas attack displayed equal parts initiative, innovation, and cruelty, the plan would not have succeeded without major lapses in Israeli preparedness, including in intelligence. As Richard Betts has written, “the most crucial [intelligence] mistakes have seldom been made by collectors of raw information, occasionally by professionals who produce finished analyses, but most often by the decision makers who consume the products of intelligence service.”<sup>2</sup> This may well be the case here. Just as during the 1973 war, Israel received warnings from high-level Egyptian sources about the likelihood of war.<sup>3</sup> Front-line leaders may have also failed to heed warnings about increased Hamas activity.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, nearly all of the Israeli military was deployed to the West Bank in response to an upsurge in violence there, rather than the Gaza Strip.<sup>5</sup> Had even a small number of additional soldiers been deployed near the border, many civilian deaths might have been prevented.

In addition to intelligence failure, the attack revealed significant defects in Israeli civil and security planning. It is unclear why planners thought it appropriate or safe to hold a dance party in such close proximity to the Gaza Strip. Moreover, kibbutz residents under attack sought refuge in underground bomb shelters and safe rooms without locks. While effective against missile attacks, these seem to have trapped civilians where they could be targeted by militants dropping grenades and other explosives.

Placing the blame on Israel, however, ignores the heinous nature of these killings. No civilians should have to suffer the way that Israelis did during these attacks. Nor should Palestinian civilians have to suffer the Israeli response.

## The Israeli Response

Israel has begun a military campaign against Hamas that in some ways mirrors those of the past. Since before its founding, Israel’s leaders have relied on a strategy that historian Avi Shlaim called the “Iron Wall”: the use of overwhelming military strength to impose political conditions on its opponents.<sup>6</sup> One manifestation of this strategy is the cycle of Palestinian attacks and Israeli reprisals, a practice employed since the origins of the state.<sup>7</sup> Reprisals aim to degrade military capacity, but also to deter further attacks by inflicting punishment. Recent Israeli military campaigns against the Gaza Strip in 2009, 2014, 2019, and 2021 have also followed this pattern of attack and reprisal, each time causing large numbers of civilian casualties. Yet, the goal was to deter and degrade, not to destroy, Hamas’ military. On some occasions, such during campaigns against the PLO in

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<sup>2</sup> Richard K. Betts, “Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable,” *World Politics* October 1978, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Oct., 1978): 61-89.

<sup>3</sup> See Ahron Bregman, “Ashraf Marwan and Israel’s Intelligence Failure,” in Asaf Siniver, ed., *The Yom Kippur War: Politics, Diplomacy, Legacy*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2013), 95-208. Israel also received warnings from King Hussein of Jordan. Bruce Riedel, “Enigma: The Anatomy of Israel’s Intelligence Failure almost 45 Years Ago”, Brookings Institution, September 25, 2017, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/enigma-the-anatomy-of-israels-intelligence-failure-almost-45-years-ago/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ronen Bergman, and Patrick Kingsley, “How Israel’s Feared Security Services Failed to Stop Hamas’s Attack,” *New York Times*, Oct. 10, 2023, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-security-failure.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Rory Jones and Dion Nissenbaum, “Israel Was Prepared for a Different War,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 10, 2023, available at <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israel-military-preparedness-gaza-west-bank-ad1a6313>.

<sup>6</sup> Avi Shlaim, “The Iron Wall Revisited,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* Volume 41, Issue 2, (2012), 80-98.

<sup>7</sup> On early reprisals, see Benny Morris, *Israel’s Border Wars, 1949-1956: Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation, and the Countdown to the Suez War*, (London: Clarendon Press and Oxford, 1993): 173-199, esp. 183. Morris in fact calls this infiltration and retaliation the “core phenomena” of the Arab-Israeli conflict between 1948 and 1956 (page v). It is worth noting that some challenge the use of the term reprisal, since viewing Israeli actions as “responses” ignores the role that violence plays in provoking Palestinian attacks.

Lebanon in 1978 and 1982, the Israeli military has aimed to stop operations in particular geographic areas. However, in all such cases, the campaigns have ultimately failed to permanently stop the violence.

The current situation departs from this pattern. Israeli leaders have stated that the situation in Gaza is different from previous occasions over the past twenty years: the country is now “at war.” But their goals remain ambiguous. The Cabinet has declared the aim to be wiping Hamas “off the face of the earth.”<sup>8</sup> Other sources, however, indicate that priority is stopping the “military capabilities” of Hamas, which does not require the group’s total elimination.<sup>9</sup> The gap between these two perspectives points to the difficulty of achieving either task.

Further complicating matters is the status of the hostages—97 confirmed at the latest Israeli count, but 150 by other estimates.<sup>10</sup> Rescue operations are notoriously tricky, and despite the Israeli track record (notably at Entebbe in 1976, when over 102 hostages were rescued), Hamas will have dispersed their captives in a variety of locations, likely underground. The Israeli military campaign could risk killing hostages inadvertently. In fact, Hamas claims (without evidence) that bombing has already killed 13 hostages. Moreover, the group has stated if Israel bombs civilian locations without warning, it will begin executing hostages.<sup>11</sup>

There are simply no good precedents for eliminating a terror group in a heavily populated urban area not under the control of a state. During Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon, the government initially proclaimed that it sought to push the PLO 40 km back from their northern border; it then changed their goal to expelling the PLO from Lebanon. Following the siege of Beirut, the PLO ultimately agreed to evacuate Lebanon.<sup>12</sup> Still, the PLO eventually returned fighters to that country, while the invasion also sparked the birth of the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, a perhaps even formidable opponent. In any case, there is no talk at the moment of evacuating Hamas from Gaza, only destroying it.

Nor do other countries provide good examples of anti-terror campaigns along these lines. Analysts have made reference to other historical cases of eliminating terrorist groups, such as the 2009 Sri Lankan campaign against the Tamil Tigers, which succeeded at a cost of some 20,000 lives.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the Islamic State in Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) was driven from the city of Mosul in 2016-17 in fighting that might resemble what could take place in Gaza.<sup>14</sup> Yet neither of these situations is comparable. In both cases, the ultimate aim was to reintegrate these areas and their populations into the state. This goal is not shared by the Israeli government, which has no desire to see Palestinians integrated into Israel. Carl von Clausewitz’s adage that

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<sup>8</sup> “Israel’s New War Cabinet Vows to Wipe Hamas off the Earth,” Reuters, Oct. 11, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/netanyahu-gantz-agree-form-emergency-israel-government-statement-2023-10-11/>.

<sup>9</sup> Yonah Jeremy Bob, “Senior Diplomatic Source: IDF Will Eliminate Hamas’ Military Capabilities”, Jerusalem Post, Oct. 9, 2023, available at <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-767436>.

<sup>10</sup> See “97 Hostages’ Families Have Been Notified, IDF Says,” CNN, Oct. 12, 2023, available at [https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-news-hamas-war-10-12-23/h\\_44263c7fa300567015fb85bfd7061816](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-news-hamas-war-10-12-23/h_44263c7fa300567015fb85bfd7061816); Dan De Luce, Tom Winter and Carol E. Lee, “Here’s Why Any Israeli Attempt to Rescue the 150 hostages in Gaza will be ‘Brutal’ and Painful,” *NBC News*, Oct. 12, 2023, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/israeli-rescue-hamas-hostages-gaza-brutal-painful-rcna120061>.

<sup>11</sup> Tara Suter, “Hamas Claims 13 Hostages Killed in Israeli Airstrikes,” *The Hill*, Oct. 13, 2023, available at <https://thehill.com/policy/international/4253982-hamas-claims-13-hostages-killed-in-israeli-airstrikes/>.

<sup>12</sup> On shifting war aims during Israel’s invasion of Lebanon, Ze’ev Schiff and Ehud Ya’ari, *Israel’s Lebanon War* (London : George Allen & Unwin, 1985), , 41-44; 53-54, 152; Seth Anziska, *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Bruce Hoffman, “Israel’s War on Hamas: What to Know,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Oct. 9, 2023, available at <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/israels-war-hamas-what-know>.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., “Mosul,” *Frontline*, PBS, no date, available at <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/mosul/>.

war is a “continuation of policy by other means” applies here; disputes over the ultimate political goals for Gaza will make establishing clear military aims difficult.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, domestic Israeli factors will affect the military campaign. The fate of the hostages is perhaps the most important. *Haaretz* and some victims’ family members have already begun to call for an exchange of hostages.<sup>16</sup> At the top of their minds are deals in 1985 and 2011 that each saw more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners exchanged for three hostages and one hostage respectively.<sup>17</sup> Such a deal would almost certainly require a ceasefire, which would be interpreted as a Hamas victory. The Israeli government is therefore unlikely to consider this in the short term. Indeed, an Israeli Minister has even urged that his colleagues “to be cruel now and not to think too much about the hostages.”<sup>18</sup> The Israeli government has declared a “complete siege,” cutting off all food, water, and electricity to the territory until the hostages are returned.<sup>19</sup> The public outcry this comment provoked suggests that in the medium to long term, the Israeli government will experience increasing pressure to resolve their status.

On the other hand, military campaigns have their own logic. Once begun, they are difficult to stop, especially when goals are unclear or changing. Moreover, many Israeli political leaders have strong personal incentives to focus on the military campaign rather than shifting to diplomatic negotiations. Even prior to the attack, Israeli domestic politics was deeply fractured. Netanyahu’s coalition with extreme-right wing parties pushed the country further away from a negotiated solution with the Palestinians, violence between settlers and Palestinians in the West Bank was on the rise, and a new law has taken away much of the Supreme Court’s power to limit the government.<sup>20</sup> Once the fighting stops, the Israeli public will focus its anger inwards. Members of the political and military establishment are already being blamed for their part in events, and accountability may come swiftly, once Israeli anger shifts from Gaza to Jerusalem.

### A Transformative Event?

Whether or not this is a turning point depends on whether it will change key elements of the conflict, including the perspectives of the parties, regional actors, and international powers.

For Palestinians, this is just more of the same—a lot more. Certainly the Palestinian public is deeply concerned about the Israeli campaign in Gaza, as well as violence in the West Bank, where 29 Palestinians have been killed by settlers or the Israeli military since the Hamas attacks.<sup>21</sup> Hamas might seem to be emboldened. The group publicly celebrated the attack, claiming a huge victory. Behind the scenes, the organization’s leaders may be less enamored of the results than expected, since it has brought on stronger

<sup>15</sup> See Raymond Aron, *Clausewitz, Philosopher of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), viii, 58.

<sup>16</sup> “An Israel-Hamas Prisoner Exchange Now,” *Haaretz*, Oct. 11, 2023, available at <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/2023-10-11/ty-article-opinion/an-israel-hamas-prisoner-exchange-now/0000018b-1d77-d465-abbb-1df773680000>.

<sup>17</sup> Isabel Debre, “Israeli Hostage Crisis in Hamas-ruled Gaza Becomes a Political Trap for Netanyahu,” *AP*, October 8, 2023, available at <https://apnews.com/article/palestinians-israel-military-prisoners-hostage-hamas-soldiers-e75729364f8c0b453da272365c16d136>.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Lis, “Israel Believes Hamas Holding Dozens Captive in Gaza,” *Haaretz*, Oct 8, 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Aya Batrawy and Daniel Estrin, “Power Goes out in Gaza, as Israel Tightens Siege and Bombs the Palestinian Territory,” *NPR*, Oct. 11, 2023, available at <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/11/1205036361/israel-strikes-neighborhoods-across-gaza-as-the-war-with-hamas-intensifies>.

<sup>20</sup> “The Growing Chaos Enveloping the State of Israel,” *Haaretz*, Oct. 6, 2023, available at <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/2023-10-06/ty-article-opinion/the-growing-chaos-enveloping-the-state-of-israel/0000018b-0128-dcd7-a3cf-97b989970000>.

<sup>21</sup> Kamal Tabikha, “West Bank Palestinians Face Increased Israeli Violence after Hamas Attack,” *The National*, Oct 12, 2023, available at <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/palestine-israel/2023/10/12/west-bank-palestinians-face-increased-israeli-violence-after-hamas-attack/>.

repercussions than anticipated.<sup>22</sup> For its part, Hamas's main Palestinian opponent—the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)—is largely marginalized from events, having its center of power in the West Bank, calling for renewed talks towards a two-state solution.<sup>23</sup> Still, for better or worse, not much about these groups has changed.

By contrast, Israeli attitudes towards Palestinians have been deeply affected by the attacks. This is particularly the case with Hamas. Some in Israel and beyond may have hoped that Hamas might be more “pragmatic” than its extreme ideology suggested, perhaps even reaching a long-term peace.<sup>24</sup> Others have suggested that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and others had cynically embraced Hamas' radicalism, since it undermined the two-state solution that they opposed.<sup>25</sup> The attacks forced reassessment in both these camps. Any talk of engagement with Hamas is now off the table. Netanyahu has compared Hamas's tactics to those of ISIS, painting the group as beyond the pale. Whatever tolerance Israel had for Hamas is for the moment over.

The death of 1,300 Israelis may also impact that country's willingness to strike a peace deal with the Palestinians under any circumstances. Faith in the possibility of a two-state solution was already at an all-time low amongst Israelis.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, scholars increasingly describe Israel as being in the process of becoming a two-tiered, apartheid-like state whose geographic and political reality makes a two-state solution impossible, leaving a “one state reality.”<sup>27</sup> Yet, while it may be too early to measure public sentiment, Israeli social media commentators seem to have taken the attack as evidence that it is not possible to co-exist with Palestinians. What implications this will have is unclear, but it is not an encouraging sign for the resolution of the conflict.

The new regional environment created by the Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and five Arab states, has also been drawn in question. Most of these new Arab partner governments have not taken Israel's side, issuing statements that were neutral or blamed Israel for the violence.<sup>28</sup> The United Arab Emirates has perhaps been the most supportive, labeling Hamas's actions a “serious and grave escalation.”<sup>29</sup> The Arab League called for a resumption of negotiations towards a two-state solution.<sup>30</sup> Negotiations

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<sup>22</sup> Ben Caspit, “Israel's Netanyahu Has Little Choice but to Launch Gaza Ground Operation,” *Al-Monitor*, Oct. 10, 2023, available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/10/israels-netanyahu-has-little-choice-launch-gaza-ground-operation>

<sup>23</sup> Miriam Berger, “With Gaza and Israel at War, Palestinian Authority Struggles to be Heard,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 11, 2023, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/11/israel-gaza-war-abbas-pa/>.

<sup>24</sup> Hannah Allam, “Gambling on a ‘Pragmatic’ Hamas Was a Deadly Mistake,” *New York Times*, Oct. 11, 2023, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/10/11/hamas-strategy-israel-containment/>.

<sup>25</sup> Tal Schneider, “For Years, Netanyahu Propped up Hamas,” *Times of Israel*, Oct. 8, 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Steven Klein, “Israeli-Palestinian Poll Shows Support for Two-state Solution at All-time Low,” *Haaretz*, Jan. 25, 2023, available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-01-25/ty-article/.premium/israeli-palestinian-poll-shows-support-for-two-state-solution-at-all-time-low/00000185-e461-d109-a7af-e571a7330000>.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Barnett, Nathan Brown, Marc Lynch, and Shibley Telhami, “Israel's One-State Reality: It's Time to Give Up on the Two-State Solution,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2023, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/israel-palestine-one-state-solution>.

<sup>28</sup> “Across the Mideast, a Surge of Support for Palestinians as War Erupts in Gaza,” *New York Times*, Oct. 9, 2023, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/09/world/middleeast/mideast-palestine-support-gaza.html>.

<sup>29</sup> “UAE calls Hamas Attacks on Israel a 'Serious and Grave Escalation,’” *Reuters*, October 8, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-calls-hamas-attacks-israel-serious-grave-escalation-2023-10-08/>.

<sup>30</sup> Patrick Wintour, “Arab Ministers urge Israel to Resume Talks on Two-State Solution,” *The Guardian*, Oct. 11, 2023, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/11/arab-ministers-urge-israel-to-resume-talks-on-two-state-solution>.

between Israel and Saudi Arabia on normalization appear to be on hold.<sup>31</sup> Suddenly, the warm welcome many Israelis perceived in the Gulf States may feel a bit frostier.

Not all regional states welcomed the new acceptance of Israel. The conflict in Gaza brings the risk of a broader regional war with the so-called “Resistance Axis” that includes Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas. Immediately following the attack, there was widespread speculation that Iran had approved it.<sup>32</sup> Initial reporting seemed to confirm this cooperation, though there has since been extensive pushback.<sup>33</sup> Without question, Iran had been cultivating cooperation amongst its proxies, including Hezbollah and Hamas, for some time, and it seems likely that there was shared coordination and military training. Still, Iran and Hezbollah have denied knowing of the attack in advance.<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless, groups in neighboring states have begun to participate in the war. Hezbollah had previously declared an Israeli invasion of Gaza to be a “red line” that would provoke its retaliation. There may other red lines, too, such as US military intervention or the forcing of civilians into Egypt.<sup>35</sup> However, these red lines remain vague. Hezbollah has started to participate in the conflict, first by allowing fire across the border line, then by allowing Palestinian guerillas to infiltrate the country, killing three Israeli soldiers. Israel responded by attacking Hezbollah positions, killing several of their members.<sup>36</sup> After armed groups fired across the Syrian border in the Golan Heights, Israel destroyed the runways at the Damascus and Aleppo airports, just a day before the Iranian Foreign Minister was supposed to arrive on a visit.<sup>37</sup> While none of these parties appear to be seeking escalation, the logic of reprisals seems to demand it.

Finally, on an international level, there is a question of how the world will react to the events in Gaza. The US, France, Germany, Great Britain, and Italy have lined up behind Israel, issuing a joint statement of support without any qualifications. The United States has even sent in a naval carrier strike group as a sign of

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Kalin, “Saudi Arabia Calls for De-Escalation Amid Talks on Normalization With Israel,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 8, 2023, available at <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/israel-hamas-gaza-rockets-attack-palestinians/card/saudi-arabia-calls-for-de-escalation-amid-talks-on-normalization-with-israel-dlOw0NP66IGNaMq7U0Yk>.

<sup>32</sup> Kim Ghattas, “A Message From Iran,” *The Atlantic*, Oct. 8, 2023; Arash Azizi, “Is Israel at War With Iran?” *The Atlantic*, October 8, 2023.

<sup>33</sup> E.g., Summer Said, Benoit Faucon, and Stephen Kalin, “Initial Reports Included Iran Helped Plot Attack on Israel Over Several Weeks,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 8, 2023, available at <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iran-israel-hamas-strike-planning-bbe07b25>; Mounir Rabih, “How Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran carefully planned an unprecedented offensive in Israel,” *L’Orient-Le Jour*, Oct. 9, 2023, available at <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1352100/how-hamas-hezbollah-and-iran-carefully-planned-an-unprecedented-offensive-in-israel.html>.

<sup>34</sup> “Inside Story: Iran’s Supreme Leader Strongly Rejects Role in Hamas Attack,” *Ammaj*, Oct. 10, 2023, available at <https://ammaj.media/media-monitor/inside-story-iran-s-supreme-leader-strongly-rejects-role-in-hamas-attack>; Farnaz Fassihi and Ronen Bergman, “Hamas Attack on Israel Brings New Scrutiny of Group’s Ties to Iran,” *New York Times*, Oct. 13, 2023, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/13/world/middleeast/hamas-iran-israel-attack.html>.

<sup>35</sup> See David Gritten, “Israeli Soldiers and Militants Killed in Confrontation on Lebanon Frontier,” *BBC News*, Oct. 11, 2023, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67065338>; Jennifer Holleis, “How Gaza Siege Could Escalate Israel-Hezbollah Conflict,” *Deutsche Welle*, Oct. 11, 2023, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/how-gaza-siege-could-escalate-israel-hezbollah-conflict/a-67065364>; Gianluca Pacchiani and AFP, “Hezbollah Threatens US, as Russia Sees ‘High Risk’ of 3rd Party Entering Conflict,” *Times of Israel*, Oct. 9, 2023, available at [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/hezbollah-threatens-us-as-russia-sees-high-risk-of-3rd-party-entering-conflict/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/hezbollah-threatens-us-as-russia-sees-high-risk-of-3rd-party-entering-conflict/).

<sup>36</sup> Anna Foster, “Israel Sends Soldiers to North Fearing Attack from Hezbollah in Lebanon,” *BBC*, Oct. 12, 2023, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67087828>.

<sup>37</sup> Laurence Peter, “Syria says Damascus and Aleppo Airports Hit by Israeli Missiles,” *BBC*, Oct. 12, 2023, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67093081>.

support.<sup>38</sup> This suggests that these countries are willing to tolerate an Israeli campaign of significant length. However, there may still be limits to Western willingness to tolerate civilian loss of life, should the death toll grow too high.

Russia and China have taken more circumspect positions, calling for a ceasefire and the renewal of talks on a two-state solution, while refusing to condemn Hamas.<sup>39</sup> Although they have crushed real and perceived Islamic terrorism at home, these countries see themselves as engaged in a global struggle for influence with the United States, which at the moment enjoys a relative monopoly of influence on Israel. Instead, they may hope to curry favor with Arab countries that are frustrated that their views are not well received in Washington or Jerusalem. Still, should the situation remain intractable, Russia or China may find a way to mediate with Iran, Hezbollah, or Hamas, none of which will likely talk with Western countries.

Thus, the coming days and weeks will show how transformative these events will be. A few scenarios are possible. First, high levels of civilian casualties in Gaza or injury to Israeli hostages could increase pressure on Israel to stop its invasion. However, given the extent of US and European support and Israeli commitment to a ground campaign, it will be some time before this happens. Second, an Israeli reoccupation of Gaza may produce a stream of refugees, which could have repercussions for Egypt's stability. Either of these scenarios may lead to a diplomatic crisis in Israel's relations with Arab countries, which could use their ties to pressure Israel. Third, if the conflict spreads to Lebanon or Syria, Israel could potentially enter a massive new military confrontation that could draw in the United States, Iran, and other countries. While Israel would be unlikely to lose militarily, a meaningful victory would be difficult to achieve, and the price will undoubtedly be high for all.

The future does not have to be bleak. There is still a chance, however remote, that international mediation may stop the violence at some point. There are potential diplomatic solutions to some issues, even those that seem on the surface to be intractable. Hamas leaders, for instance, might be convinced to evacuate the Gaza Strip as part of a broader deal. The Arab League has the potential to send in a peacekeeping force. The PLO may be able to take on a new political and or security role in the Gaza Strip, which Israel does not want to govern. While these are not necessarily likely outcomes, they are tools that should be explored. To find solutions, it is essential not to allow imagination to once again become a casualty of the vicious cycle in which both sides are now consumed.

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<sup>38</sup> George Petras and Janet Loehrke, "See How US Navy Ships in the Mediterranean are Positioned to Support Israel," *USA Today*, Oct. 13, 2023, available at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/graphics/2023/10/11/us-navy-warships-mediterranean-sea-israel-gaza-war/71140256007/>.

<sup>39</sup> Mansur Mirovalev, "Not pro-Israeli?: Decoding Putin's Muted Response to Hamas attacks," *Al-Jazeera*, Oct. 12, 2023, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/12/russia-israel-hamas>; Nectar Gan, "China Wants to be a Peace Broker in the Middle East. How Has it Responded to the Israel-Gaza war?", *CNN*, Oct. 11, 2023, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/11/china/china-response-israel-hamas-war-intl-hnk/index.html>.