

THE EVOLVING DYNAMICS OF THE ISRAEL-HAMAS CONFLICT

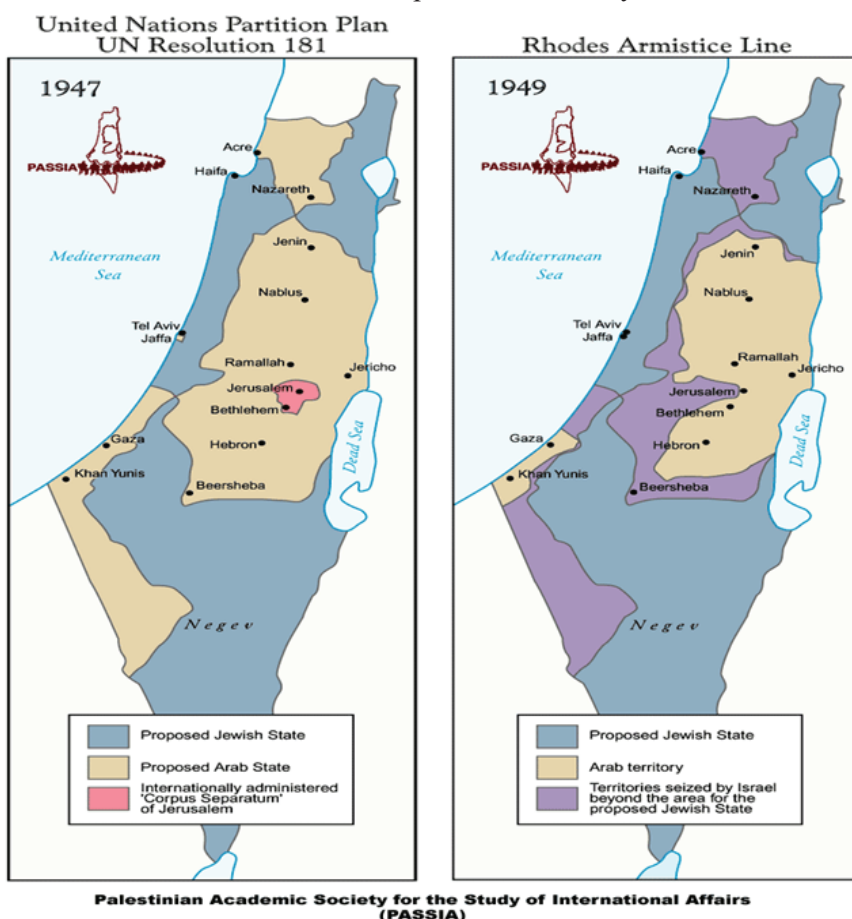
Author(s):
Furqan Khan

On October 7, conflict broke out between Israel and Hamas, an armed Palestinian group that has controlled Gaza since 2006. The comprehensive attack by Hamas, involving aerial, ground, and naval assets, took Israel by surprise as Hamas fighters stormed Israeli cities, towns, and villages. This resulted in death of more than 1400 Israelis and the capture of more than 200 hostages, prompting Israel to declare war on Hamas and a complete siege of Gaza, an act that amounts to a war crime. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warns of a “long and difficult war” as his military claims to have recaptured the border areas and has been conducting indiscriminate retaliatory bombing of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank killing at least 5000 Palestinian civilians and displacement of more than one million others. The conflict represents the most dangerous escalation between Israel and Palestine in decades, happening exactly 50 years after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. The United States, along with most of the Western countries, supports Israel and condemns Hamas. Russia and China criticize America’s “destructive” approach to the region while urging restraint and reiterating their support for a Two-State solution.

Background of the Conflict

The Israel-Palestinian conflict dates back to 1947 when the United Nations Resolution (181) divided the British mandate of Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state. The Palestinians, who were 67

percent of the population and owned 94 percent of the land, resisted the Partition Plan, sparking the first Arab-Israeli war.¹ The War displaced 750,000 Palestinians (half of the total population) and divided the territory into the State of Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. During the War, Israel occupied more territory than was awarded to



Source: PASSIA (2023)

it under the UN Partition Plan, including the West half of Jerusalem (shown in the map).

Tensions between Israel and Arab neighbours escalated during the 1956 Suez Canal Crisis, when Israel briefly invaded parts of the Egyptian Sinai, but withdrew under pressure from the US shortly thereafter.² In 1967, in response to blockade of Aqaba Port by Egypt and aggressive mobilization by an Arab alliance comprising Egypt, Iraq, Jordan

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this Policy Brief are of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect policy of the IPRI.

and Syria, Israel conducted pre-emptive airstrikes against its Arab neighbours, triggering a full-fledged war with Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, known as the Six-Day War. The war allowed Israel to occupy territory four times its original size, including the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria.³

After the 1967 War

■ Land occupied by Israel in 1967



Source: BBC (2023)

The UNSC Resolution 242 (1967) called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied territories back to the 1949 armistice line.⁴ Israel failed to comply. Egypt and Syria tried but failed to regain the lost territories in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The 1979 Camp David Accords ended hostilities between Egypt and Israel, but without resolving the Palestinian issue of self-determination. In June 1980, the UNSC Resolution 476 termed Israel’s claim and control over Jerusalem as “null and void”, terming its administrative measures as a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention.⁵

After the First Intifada (Palestinian uprising against Israel) in 1987, the Oslo Accords I (1993) and Oslo Accords II (1995) set the course for future negotiations on Two-State solution, which was never achieved.⁶ Nevertheless, the Accords facilitated an official recognition of each other by Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. As part of the Accords, the two sides signed agreements that established a limited self-rule under the Palestinian Authority (PA) over parts of the occupied West Bank and Gaza, but also gave Israel control over 60 percent of the West Bank and much of its land and water resources.⁷

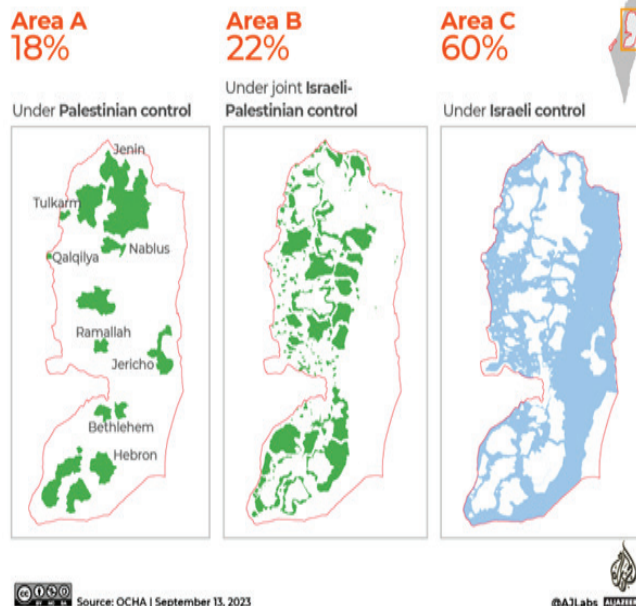
Disregarding the terms of the Oslo Accords, Israel maintained its occupation and started constructing the West Bank separation wall in 2002 to limit freedom of movement, a move deemed illegal by the International Court of Justice (ICJ).⁸ In its advisory opinion in 2004, the ICJ described the territories situated between the Green Line and the former eastern boundary of Palestine

as “occupied”, with Israel having the status of an “occupying power.”⁹ The Israeli Supreme Court concluded the same when in the 2004 Beit Sourik case, the court termed the status of Israeli presence in the West Bank as *occupatio bellica* (belligerent occupation).¹⁰

OCCUPIED WEST BANK

Areas A, B and C

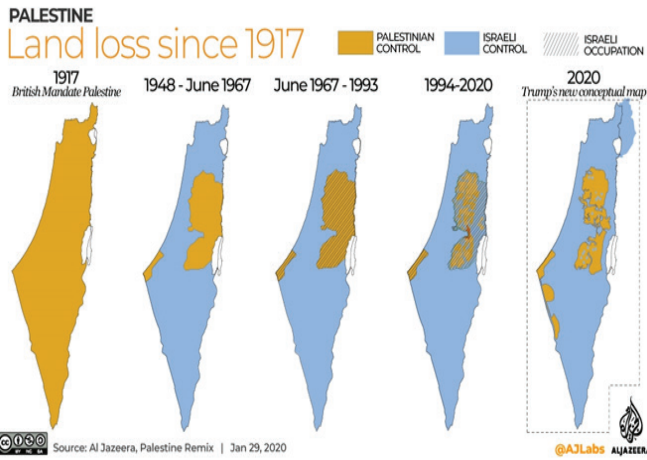
In 1995, as part of the Oslo Accords, the occupied West Bank was divided into three areas: A, B and C.



Source: Aljazeera (2023)

The PLO leader Yasir Arafat died in 2004 and Israel, which had occupied the West Bank and Gaza since 1967, unilaterally withdrew from Gaza and evicted 25 settlements in North Samaria in 2005.¹¹ Factionalism flared up in Gaza when Hamas, an armed political Palestinian group, won over the long-time ruling Fatah party in the 2006 general elections. A Hamas-Fatah Civil War broke out in which Hamas expelled Fatah to the West Bank and gained political and military control over Gaza.

Accusing Hamas of ‘terrorism’ since June 2007, Israel enforced a land, naval, and air blockade of Gaza. Since then, it has launched numerous military assaults in 2008, 2012, 2014, 2018, and 2021, resulting in the killings of thousands of Palestinians, including children. In the meanwhile, Israel continued expanding illegal Jewish settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. In 2016, the UNSC Resolution 2334 denounced and called for ending the “Israeli occupation” as having “no legal validity”,¹² and reminding Israel its responsibilities under Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.¹³ On the contrary, under the watch of the right-wing Israeli leadership, Jewish settlements have been expanding, resulting in encroachment upon Palestinian lands and liberties.



Source: Al-Jazeera (2023)

Analysis of the Conflict

On October 7, Hamas fighters infiltrated the billion-dollar security fence between Gaza and Southern Israel, killing hundreds of Israeli soldiers and civilians while taking several Israelis as hostages, which are reported to be at least 200.¹⁴ Israel responded with indiscriminate airstrikes across Gaza that targeted residential buildings, schools, hospitals, and mosques, killing more than 5000 Palestinian civilians including children. Israel also enforced a “complete siege” of Gaza, cutting off the supply of food, water, and electricity to more than 2.2 million residents, an act that amounts to a war crime. It is important to note that although Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, leaving the PA in power, it had retained control over Gaza’s airspace, maritime access, and has installed an electronic fence along its land border manned by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Moreover, all the major crossing points are within Israeli control, except Rafah crossing that links Gaza with Egypt.

Following Hamas’ attacks, a comprehensive Israeli ground invasion is imminent as Netanyahu hurled threats of turning Gaza into a “deserted Island”, amassing 100,000 troops along the Gaza border.¹⁵ In the wake of the Hamas attacks, the right-wing government of Netanyahu and the Centrist opposition have formed a limited “emergency war cabinet” to navigate the crisis.¹⁶



Source: CBS News (2023)

The Hamas attacks exposed Israel’s security and intelligence apparatus, as was admitted by the Israeli intelligence chief.¹⁷ Israel failed to prevent the attacks because of the excessive deployment of IDF forces to protect Israeli settlers in the West Bank amidst violence, leaving a “thin, underprepared presence” in the Southern border with Gaza.¹⁸ Israel also perceived greater threat from Hezbollah (based in Lebanon) and had underestimated Hamas’ capacity to execute such a large-scale offensive. Just a week before the attack, Israeli intelligence briefed senior security officials over the dangers posed by Hezbollah, without even mentioning Hamas.¹⁹ Domestic political turmoil in Israel due to conflict on curtailing judiciary’s powers could be another reason why Hamas wanted to exploit the window of opportunity for launching the attacks.²⁰

The current crisis follows rising violence in the Israeli-Occupied West Bank, military raids, the unchecked expansion of Jewish settlements, and street assaults by Jewish settlers on native Palestinians. Moreover, the open racism in Israel including by some members of Netanyahu’s coalition has infuriated the Palestinians, along with the provocative Israeli actions, such as in the Al-Aqsa mosque (Islam’s third holiest place), which Hamas’ leader, Muhammad Al-Deif, explicitly pointed out as the reason behind these unprecedented attacks.²¹ Therefore, while Hamas’ attacks on Israel are being widely termed as ‘unprovocative’, it is a mistake to ignore the contextual dynamics within which the Palestinian group made its move.

Hamas’ attack appears to be long-planned, without having a single trigger. The group may have found the deepening domestic divisions in Israel and lack of vigilance on the barrier as an opportune time to attack. Also, the attack is well-timed to disrupt a potential US-led rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which according to Hamas calculations might have resulted in further marginalization of Palestinians. With an attack of this scale, Hamas may also hope to draw Israeli forces into Gaza and engage in protracted urban warfare, a costly move that the far-right Israeli politicians may want to avoid.

The Israel-Hamas hostilities also display failure of the diplomatic initiatives, such as the Abraham Accords, which aim to achieve peace without addressing the question of Palestinians right to self-determination. The current crisis is a reminder that a peace process involving a few Arab States and Israel, bypassing Palestinians, has very little chances of success.

Reactions from the International Community

Most of the Western countries including the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy condemned Hamas attacks and supported Israel’s

right to defend itself. The European Union (EU) has also strongly condemned attacks on Israel and even pledged to freeze development aid to Palestine, a move that was later reversed.²²

Russia blamed America's "destructive" regional approach as the reason behind the crisis, whereas China has taken a cautious position urging both Hamas and Israel to cease hostilities while stressing the Two-State solution as a way out of the conflict.

The UN Security Council displayed deep divisions amongst the veto wielding powers over Israel-Hamas crisis. On October 9, the UN Security Council debated the conflict but failed to issue a joint statement, as the US pushed all 15 members of the UNSC to condemn Hamas.²³ The US also vetoed two UNSC resolutions – sponsored by Russia and Brazil – condemning all violence against civilians and advocating for a humanitarian ceasefire.²⁴ On his visit to Israel, the US President Joe Biden expressed solidarity with Tel Aviv, but also announced a \$100 million aid for Gaza. He also claimed to have secured a deal with Egypt and Israel for allowing humanitarian aid into Gaza, as aid delivery awaits at Rafah crossing with Egypt.²⁵

On October 18, the OIC in an emergency meeting called for an end to the "barbaric aggression" of the Israeli occupied forces against the Palestinian people.²⁶ The joint statement also described Israel's targeting of Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital, which killed more than 500 people, as a "war crime". The Arab League in an emergency meeting urged Israel to return to "serious" negotiations on the Two-State solution that provides for a viable Palestinian state.²⁷ The crisis elicited mixed responses from the Arab states. Saudi Arabia has called for de-escalation and stressed the Two-State solution, while the UAE and Bahrain slammed Hamas attacks but avoided criticism of the brutal Israeli actions in Gaza. Kuwait and Qatar held Israel solely responsible for the crisis and urged the cessation of its occupation and expansion of Jewish settlements.

Mediation efforts by Egypt, Turkey, and Qatar are at an embryonic stage, as they are aiming to contain the escalating crisis.²⁸ Previous conflicts between Israel and Hamas had ended with successful mediation efforts. However, experts believe that the scale of the Hamas assault could make diplomatic efforts difficult to succeed.²⁹

Potential Outcomes and Prospects of Escalation

Israel has responded to the attacks with indiscriminate bombing, and a complete blockade of Gaza, creating conditions for an imminent ground invasion. According to Israeli officials, the stated objective of the operation is the destruction of Hamas' military capabilities.³⁰ However, the conflict could escalate if Israel proceeds with a ground invasion, potentially drawing different

armed groups including Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed armed group far more sophisticated than Hamas, into the war. In that case, Israel's campaign in Gaza would be protracted and costly, as it will have to manage the threat escalation in two other key areas; the northern border with Lebanon, and the West Bank.

Hezbollah has not formally declared joining the war, but its fighters have reportedly launched rockets from Southern Lebanon into Israel.³¹ Moreover, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, despite having not so-cordial relations with Hamas, has also joined the war, claiming responsibility for the rocket attacks on Israel from Lebanon.

Israel's ground invasion could bring about a humanitarian disaster in Gaza, leading to a potential mass exodus of Palestinians. Israel has already asked over a million Palestinians to "evacuate" northern Gaza,³² but as they have no access to Egypt, on one side, and Israel on the other, the innocent civilians are trapped in the besieged enclave. The UN has asked Israel to rescind its call as evacuating more than a million people are "impossible".



Source: BBC (2023)

Deployment of the two aircraft carriers by the US in the Eastern Mediterranean could lead towards a broader escalation if it takes part in military action.³³ For now, the US backs Israeli plans and has put its special forces on alert at a nearby European country to assist.³⁴ The stated US position on its naval deployment is that of an attempt to prevent broadening of the conflict through involvement of other Arab states and Iran into the conflict in support of Palestinians. However, much like the Ukraine conflict, the Israel-Palestine conflict will escalate if the US joins Israel and may become a source of geopolitical tension with China and Russia. While the trajectory of the war is uncertain, further escalation after an Israeli ground invasion will inevitably be catastrophic for civilians.

Roadmap to De-Escalation and Sustainable Peace

Despite calls for peace and de-escalation, the conflict appears to have entered an advanced phase with no prospects of a ceasefire in sight. At a time when the US and other Western powers should call for restraint and de-escalation, they are providing active military support to Israel, encouraging the latter to escalate. The US should support the mediation efforts by Egypt, Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia and bring an immediate end to the hostilities.

Since the Western countries, including the United States, take a lopsided position in favour of Israel, the role of China and Russia in the mediation process is crucial, both of which see the widely accepted “Two-State Solution” as a long-term way out of the conflict. Hence, establishing an independent state of Palestine based on the pre-1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital is inevitable for achieving lasting peace in the region.

The OIC countries need to forge a unity to exert maximum diplomatic pressure on Israel and the USA to put an end to hostilities to avert the unfolding humanitarian crisis where over a thousand children have already died due to Israeli bombings.

Notes

- ¹“What’s the Israel-Palestine conflict about? A simple guide,” Al-Jazeera, October 9, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/9/whats-the-israel-palestine-conflict-about-a-simple-guide>
- ²“Sinai Peninsula: The Years of Conflict,” New York Times, April 26, 1982. <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/04/26/world/sinai-peninsula-the-years-of-conflict.html> (accessed October 19, 2023)
- ³Avner Cohen, “The 1967 Six-Day War: New Israeli Perspective, 50 Years Later,” Wilson Center, 2017. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-1967-six-day-war> (accessed October 19, 2023)
- ⁴Security Council Resolution 242 (1967), United Nations, November 22, 1967. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/IP%20SRES%20242.pdf> (accessed October 14, 2023)
- ⁵Security Council Resolution 476 (1980), United Nations, June, 1980. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/IP%20SRES%20476.pdf> (accessed October 14, 2023)
- ⁶“What’s the Israel-Palestine conflict about? A simple guide,” Al-Jazeera, October 9, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/9/whats-the-israel-palestine-conflict-about-a-simple-guide>
- ⁷Ibid
- ⁸Lina Alsaafin, “Israel’s separation wall endures, 15 years after ICJ ruling,” Aljazeera, July 9, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/7/9/israels-separation-wall-endures-15-years-after-icj-ruling>
- ⁹“Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory,” Advisory Opinion, I. C. J. Reports 2004, p. 136. <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/131/131-20040709-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf> (accessed October 14, 2023)

- ¹⁰Beit Sourik Village Council vs. The Government of Israel, HCJ 2056/04, The Supreme Court of Israel, 2004. <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/national-practice/beit-sourik-village-council-v-governm-ent-israel-et-al-hcj-205604-supreme-court-20> (accessed October 15, 2023)
- ¹¹“Israel’s Disengagement from Gaza and North Samaria (2005),” Israeli Missions Around the World, 2005. <https://embassies.gov.il/MFA/AboutIsrael/Maps/Pages/Israels%20Disengagement%20Plan-%202005.aspx#:~:text=By%2022%20September%202005%2C%20Israel's,Strip%20from%20the%20Palestinian%20Authority.> (accessed October 19, 2023)
- ¹²Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016), United Nations, December 16, 2016. <https://www.un.org/webcast/pdfs/SRES2334-2016.pdf> (accessed October 15, 2023)
- ¹³Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits “transfers of the population of an occupying power to occupied territories.” <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-49>
- ¹⁴Gianluca Pacchiani, “Hamas: We hold 200 hostages, other factions have about 50; ground op ‘doesn’t scare us,’” Times of Israel, October 16, 2023. https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/hamas-says-it-holds-200-hostages-other-factions-have-about-50-ground-op-doesnt-scare-us/
- ¹⁵Joshua Askew, “We will change the Middle East, vows Israeli PM Netanyahu,” Euronews, October 9, 2023. <https://www.euronews.com/2023/10/09/live-death-toll-continues-to-climb-as-israel-pummels-gaza>
- ¹⁶Hiba Yazbek, Nicholas Casey and Patrick Kingsley, “Israel Forms Unity Government and Bombs Gaza in the Wake of Hamas Attack,” New York Times, October 11, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/11/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-gaza-unity-government.html>
- ¹⁷Emanuel Fabian, “IDF intel chief says he ‘bears full responsibility’ for not warning of Hamas attack,” Times of Israel, October 17, 2023. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-intel-chief-says-he-bears-full-responsibility-for-not-warning-of-hamas-attack/>
- ¹⁸Samia Nakhoul and Jonathan Saul, “How Hamas duped Israel as it planned devastating attack,” Reuters, October 10, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/how-israel-was-duped-hamas-planned-devastating-assault-2023-10-08/>
- ¹⁹Ronen Bergman and Patrick Kingsley, “How Israel’s Feared Security Services Failed to Stop Hamas’s Attack,” New York Times, October 10, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-security-failure.html>
- ²⁰“Second October War in Israel-Palestine”, International Crisis Group, October 9, 2023. <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-10/q%26a-israel-palestine-09x23.pdf>
- ²¹Alexander Palmer and Daniel Bayman, “What’s Next for Hamas and Israel?,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), October 10, 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/whats-next-hamas-and-israel>
- ²²“Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on the attacks against Israel,” European Commission, October 8, 2023. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-high-representative-behalf-european-union-attacks-against-israel-2023-10-08_en
- ²³Edith M. Lederer, “US demands condemnation of Hamas at UN meeting, but Security Council takes no immediate action,” AP News, October 9, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/un-security-council-israel-palestinians-hamas-us-424d0e859ca5a815f86203208416e51d>
- ²⁴Edith M. Lederer, “US vetoes UN resolution condemning all violence against civilians in Israel-Hamas war,” AP News, October 19, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/un-security-council-resolution-gaza-hamas-1c23913f8552f5379b2c158a83493835>
- ²⁵Julian Borger, “Biden says aid could enter Gaza on Friday, as Israel and Egypt give go-ahead,” Guardian, October 19, 2023.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/19/gaza-aid-rafah-crossing-joe-biden-israel-egypt-agreement>

²⁶“Final Communiqué of the extraordinary open-ended meeting of the OIC Executive Committee at the level of Foreign Ministers on the brutal Israeli military aggression against the Palestinian people,” Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), October 18, 2023. https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=39767&t_ref=26705&lan=en

²⁷Patrick Wintour, “Arab ministers urge Israel to resume talks on two-state solution,” Reuters, October 11, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/11/arab-ministers-urge-israel-to-resume-talks-on-two-state-solution>

²⁸Tom Hussain, “Why Qatar, Egypt and Turkey are struggling to mediate the Israel-Hamas war,” South China Morning Post, October 13, 2023. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3237704/israel-hamas-war-why-qatar-egypt-and-turkey-are-struggling-mediate-conflict>

²⁹“Scale of Hamas Israel assault to thwart mediation efforts: analysts,” France 24, October 9, 2023. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231009-scale-of-hamas-israel-assault-to-thwart-mediation-efforts-analysts>

³⁰Margherita Stancati and Dion Nissenbaum, “Israel Aims to Destroy Hamas. What Comes Next for Gaza Is Unclear,” Wall Street Journal, October 14, 2023. <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israel-aims-to-destroy-hamas-what-comes-next-for-gaza-is-unclear-90962ed2>

³¹“Hezbollah fires on Israel after several members killed in shelling,” Aljazeera, October 9, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/9/hezbollah-fires-on-israel-after-several-members-killed-in-shelling>

³²John Reed, Rehul Srivastava and Mai Khaled, “Residents flee Gaza City as Israel tells 1.1mn to leave,” Financial Times, October 13, 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/8ea2374e-c21c-4232-bc69-615e36b26caa>

³³“Biden pledges military, political support for Israel amid Gaza war,” Aljazeera, October 10, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/10/biden-pledges-military-aid-political-support-for-israel-amid-gaza-war>

³⁴James LaPorta, “US Sends Hostage Rescue Experts to Israel and Puts Special Ops ‘Door Kickers’ on Alert,” The Messenger, October 12, 2023. <https://themessenger.com/news/us-sends-special-operations-israel-hostage-rescue>