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EVOLVING GAZA AND WEST BANK CRISIS

*If the root causes of the conflict are not addressed, out of the rubble of the destroyed buildings will arise another group more determined and motivated than Hamas
(Queen Rania of Jordan)*

Latest Developments

Since the Hamas attacks on October 7, Israel has continued its brutal assault on the Gaza Strip, and in the West Bank. The conflict began when Hamas gunmen launched an unprecedented attack on Israel, killings more than 1400 Israelis and taking 240 hostages. Since then, Israeli forces have imposed a complete siege on Gaza and conducted indiscriminate bombardments, which have massacred more than 10000 Palestinians including 4104 children and 2641 women.¹

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have declared an evacuation area in the Northern Gaza (shown in the map), forcing 1.4 million Palestinians to evacuate to southern Gaza, as it launched ground incursions into Gaza on the night of October 27. As of November 6, 29 Israeli troops, including a battalion commander, have been killed in Gaza, bringing the total military casualties to 345 since the conflict began.² The IDF is expanding its ground operations in Gaza, saying that its ultimate aim is to dismantle Hamas' military capability. Israeli

Defence Minister has called for creating a "new security regime" in Gaza after the war, with no Israeli responsibility for daily life in the besieged enclave.³ The present conflict is more virulent in scale and intensity as it is for the first time that Hamas is claiming to have attacked 20 villages and the Israeli nuclear installation at Dimona. Due to above, the Israeli response is also unprecedented, although it is facing stiff resistance from the Hamas' militant wing Al-Qassam Brigade's counter attacks and

anti-tank raids, using underground tunnels.⁴

On the other hand, settlers' violence and Israeli attacks on Palestinians have also soared in the occupied West Bank, which is controlled by the Palestinian Authority (PA). Israel is carrying out regular air raids in the occupied West Bank killing dozens, while ground forces have arrested hundreds of others including a Fatah leader.⁵ According to the UN agency OCHA, an average of 7 settlers-related violent incidents are being daily reported in the West Bank, which has



Source: Ocha, Israel Defense Forces

Source: BBC (2023)

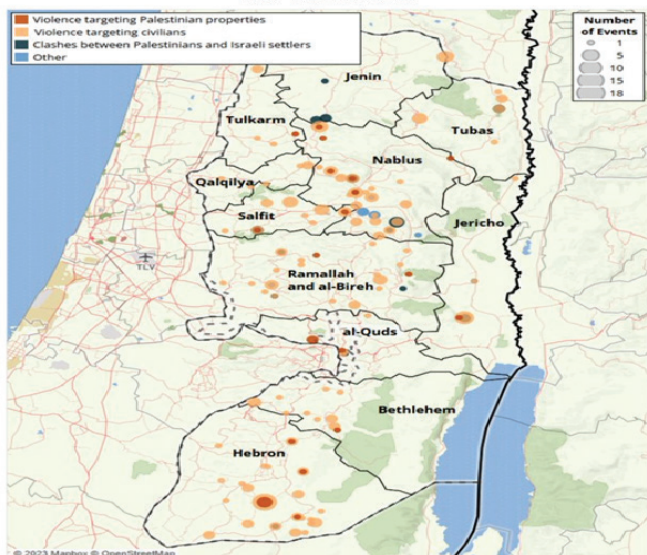
resulted in the killings of more than 132 people, including 41 children, which is more than one third of all Palestinian fatalities in 2023.⁶ Also, in different settlers' related incidents, 111 Palestinian families, comprising 905 people, have been displaced from their homes. This rising violence in the West Bank breaks the myth behind Israel's aggression in Gaza, claiming that it is solely a fight against Hamas, as the group has no presence in the West Bank.

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Settler Violence in the West Bank

7-27 October 2023



Source: Armed Conflict Location & Data Event Project (2023)

During his Middle East visit, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met Mehmoud Abbas, President of the PA, in the occupied West bank.⁷ The meeting ended without a joint statement, highlighting disagreements over Abbas’ call for a ceasefire while Blinken emphasized a humanitarian pause in the conflict.

The conflict on Israel’s northern border with Lebanon appears not to be broadening so far except the limited border skirmishes and sporadic exchange of fire.⁸ The Lebanon-based Hezbollah has targeted numerous Israeli military positions across the border in the Israeli-occupied Shebaa Farms (shown in the map), while Israel retaliated with airstrikes and artillery attacks.⁹



Source: The National News (2023)

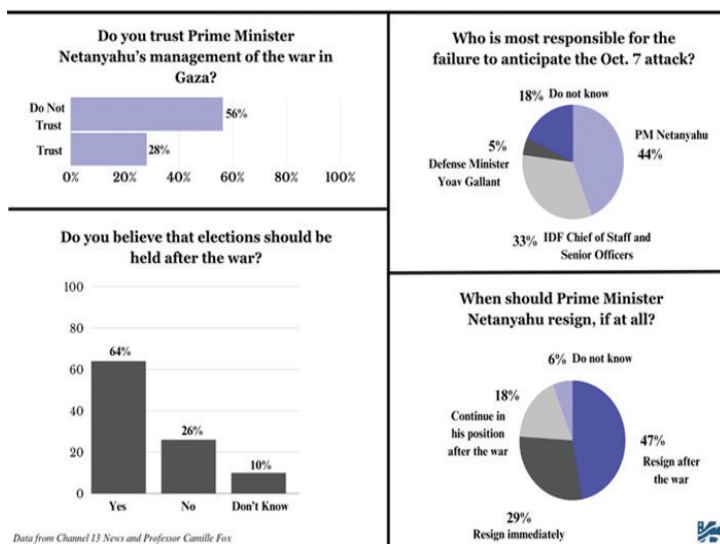
On November 3, Hezbollah’s chief, Syed Hasan Nasrullah, warned that all options were “on the table” in fight against Israel, but he did not announce an all-out escalation against Tel Aviv.¹⁰ Some observers ascribe his caution to fears of a strong retaliatory response by Israel

and the US, which might undermine the precarious deterrence against Israeli aggression, maintained since last 17 years.¹¹ USA has already deployed two aircraft carriers, along with an Ohio-class nuclear submarine, in the region to deter Hezbollah and Iran from joining the war.

Nonetheless, the Yemeni Houthis have declared war on Israel, claiming three ballistic and cruise missile attacks on Tel Aviv.¹²

Domestically, as Netanyahu announces the “second stage” of the war, his cabinet remains divided, with more than half of the Israelis demanding his resignation after the conflict is over.¹³ A poll for Israel’s Channel 13 Television shows that 76 per cent of Israelis believe that Netanyahu should resign while 64 per cent demand a fresh election soon after the war.

Israel TV Channel 13 Poll: Nov. 3, 2023
Israeli Public Attitudes about the War



Data from Channel 13 News and Professor Camille Fox

Source: Channel News 13

According to the same survey, 44% of the Israelis blamed Netanyahu directly for mishandling the Gaza issue.¹⁴ Hence, for Netanyahu and his right-wing allies, the war in Gaza is not only about defending Israel, but also about their political survival.

Humanitarian Catastrophe

Israeli military strategy that prefers “damage over accuracy” is wreaking a humanitarian disaster in Gaza.¹⁵ Ignoring calls to obey the laws of war, Israel has been targeting refugee camps, hospitals, and international medics with impunity. On October 31, Israel targeted the “Jabalia Refugee Camp”, killing hundreds of civilians.¹⁶ Hours before President Biden landed in Israel on October 17 an Israeli airstrike hit Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital in Gaza, killing hundreds of Palestinian civilians. Earlier on November 4, an Israeli airstrike struck an ambulance convoy near Al-Shifa hospital in Gaza, which killed at least 15 people.¹⁷

UN experts have called for a ceasefire as the Palestinians

face a “grave risk of a genocide.”¹⁸ In a rare joint statement, the heads of eighteen UN agencies have called for an immediate ceasefire, expressing “shock and horror” over the rising death toll from the Israeli raids.¹⁹ Moreover, a leaked document prepared by the Israeli intelligence suggests relocating 2.3 million Palestinians in Gaza to the Egyptian Sinai, clearly an act of ethnic cleansing.²⁰ A top UN official i.e Craig Mukhiber has stepped down calling the Israeli actions as the “textbook case of a genocide”, and accuses the US, UK, and much of Europe as “wholly complicit in the horrific assault.”²¹

Secretary Blinken met with the Israeli Prime Minister in Tel Aviv on 3rd November and urged for a humanitarian “pause”, which Netanyahu rejected, linking it to the release of all the hostages held by the Palestinian group.²² Hamas has announced the release of all civilian hostages in exchange for a five-day humanitarian pause in the war. It is worth mentioning that the Palestinian group has released four hostages – two Americans and two Israelis – as a result of effective hostage negotiations in Qatar.²³

Israel’s Invasion of Gaza: Emerging Conflict Scenarios

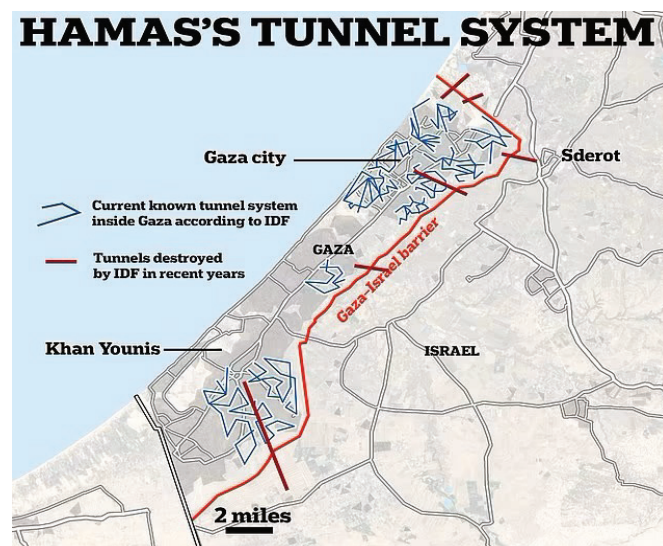
On the night of October 27, after two limited-scope incursions into Gaza, the Israeli forces launched a combined aerial, naval, and ground assault against Hamas.²⁴ According to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, there are two stated goals of the “second stage” of war i.e destroying the military and governing capabilities of Hamas, and rescuing the hostages.²⁵ The Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant has set out its main objectives in the three-phase ground war.²⁶ The first phase, involving airstrikes and limited ground raids, has ended. The war has now entered a second phase, where low-intensity fighting will “eliminate pockets of resistance” in Gaza, while the third phase will create a “new security regime” in Gaza Strip and remove “Israel’s responsibility for day-to-day life” in the coastal strip.²⁷



Source: Reuters (2023)

Israel’s Gaza invasion has commenced, but with all its ambitious objectives, the invasion could turn protracted and costly due to Hamas, which is well entrenched and ready for a messy urban warfare. In 2014, the Israeli infantry battalions suffered heavy losses in Gaza, especially from anti-tank mines, ambushes, and snipers. The Hamas fighters have already started using the tunnel network to appear behind the Israeli lines near Erez crossing to target their armoured vehicles. As the IDF expands its ground offensive, similar ambushes have started taking place, which have killed 31 Israeli soldiers and destroyed at least 4 Merkava tanks so far.²⁸ Drawing on the US experiences in Afghanistan, the US President Biden has also warned Israel against getting bogged down in Gaza, describing the potential reoccupation of Gaza as a “big mistake”.²⁹

Israeli officials call for total annihilation of Hamas, but weakening Hamas appears to be more realistic goal than dismantling it altogether. This is because the Palestinian group is believed to have more than 25000 members, deployed in a network of underground tunnels stretching out for about 310 miles (500 kms) and connected to command and control centres.³⁰ Israel has shut down the communications channels including internet across Gaza but this appears to be of little impact. Palestinians sources confirm that Hamas, aware of Israeli tactics, has installed “Israel-proof” communication infrastructure across its extensive network of underground tunnels (shown in the map).³¹



Source: Daily Mail (2023)

For now, Israel appears to be aiming to destroy Gaza’s infrastructure, push the population towards the Egyptian Sinai, and go after Hamas by destroying its underground tunnels. However, it does not have a clear exit strategy or a post-war future plan.

Currently, Israel is unclear about the time and effort required to eliminate Hamas completely. But even if Israel achieves its stated objective of getting Hamas

out of Gaza, it will leave the overcrowded enclave leaderless, which is already suffering from violence and poverty. Israel's plan of creating a "new security regime" in Gaza could involve transferring control of the region to the Palestinian Authority (PA). However, the moderate PA, which controls parts of the West Bank, is seen weaker and would lack legitimacy in Gaza.



Source: *The Telegraph* (2023)

Another scenario could be Israel's occupation of the Northern half of Gaza, cutting it off from the populated South Gaza (shown in the map) and keeping it under Israeli control as a buffer zone. The IDF has already divided the besieged coastal strip into North and South, while surrounded the Gaza City for a potential ground assault.³² Other than that, Israel may also seek full occupation of Gaza, which would bring the much feared second Nakba (mass exodus) for Palestinians. However, the Israeli President has ruled out a total occupation of Gaza, something the PA also strongly opposes and President Biden has warned against as a "big mistake."³³

Role of the International Community

The United Nations

Despite being the UN's most powerful body, the Security Council remains divided over the Israel-Hamas conflict. On October 25, the UNSC failed to adopt rival resolutions drafted by Russia and the United States. Both the resolutions would have called for a temporary halt of hostilities, but the US resolution was not adopted as it asserted Israel's right to defend itself, while Russian resolution was rejected by the US and UK as, along with Hamas, it also condemned "indiscriminate" attacks on civilians in Gaza.³⁴ Following failures in the UNSC, on October 27, the UN General Assembly adopted a non-binding resolution calling for an "immediate, durable, and sustained humanitarian truce" between the IDF and Hamas.³⁵ Such toothless blandishments of UN do not redound well to the image of the institution as an efficacious conflict resolution body.

US and Western Position

The US, along with most of the Western countries, remains steadfast in its support for Israel, deploying career strike groups, a nuclear submarine, and other naval assets to deter Hezbollah and Iran from entering the conflict.³⁶ The Biden administration has announced \$14.3 billion aid for Israel's on going war.³⁷ However, after weeks-long failure to advocate for a ceasefire, President Biden, for the first time, also called for a humanitarian "pause" in the conflict, which the US officials previously rejected branding it as "not the right answer now."³⁸ Nevertheless, the Biden administration's unconditional support to Israel, encompassing funding and armaments, is already fuelling the violence that is resulting in a macabre massacre in Gaza.

Arab Countries

Saudi Arabia has called Israel's recent strike on a densely populated refugee camp as "inhuman," Jordan's King stressed the need for a ceasefire, while four South and Central American countries including Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, and Honduras have either cut diplomatic ties with Israel or recalled their ambassadors.³⁹ Many Arab countries even those who are US allies and at peace with Israel, have expressed outrage over Israel's brutal massacre of the Palestinians. Bahrain, Jordan, and Turkey have recalled their ambassadors from Israel to protest its war crimes in Gaza.⁴⁰ However, the Saudi Defence Minister Khalid Bin Salman, in a meeting with USA's National Security Advisor i.e Jake Sullivan, has shown interest in returning to the Washington-backed normalization process after the end of Israel-Hamas conflict.⁴¹

China and Russia

China and Russia have taken a careful position on the conflict. Both are most vocal proponents of a ceasefire in the UNSC. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi has met the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, where he called for preventing a humanitarian catastrophe and stressed the "Two-State Solution" as the fundamental way out of the conflict.⁴² China has also sent its special envoy to the Middle East to meet Arab leaders.⁴³ Having relatively balanced relations with all the stakeholders in the conflict, China is better suited to play the role of a peace broker in the conflict. Unlike the Western countries, Russia has not condemned Hamas, but urged both sides to put down their arms and advocated for an independent Palestinian state. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has criticized Israel's approach towards Palestinians, calling its bombardment of Gaza a violation of international law.⁴⁴ Russian President Vladimir Putin has also compared Israel's blockade of Gaza to Nazi Germany's siege of Leningrad, during which thousands of Russians were killed. Russian Ambassador to UN, Vassily Nebenzia, has stated that

the USA “bears responsibility for the looming war in the Middle East.”⁴⁵ According to Putin, Russia has the best credentials for the mediatory efforts due to its good relations with Qatar, Palestinian Authority, Hamas and Israel.

Mediation Efforts

International pressure is building up on both Israel and Hamas to end hostilities, release hostages, and allow the flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza. Indirect negotiations are also underway in the Qatar’s capital, Doha, involving representatives from the United States, Israel, and Hamas.⁴⁶ Qatar is acting as a mediator, while the US is represented by Barbara Leaf, the State Department’s Assistant Secretary for Near East. Officials from Mossad, Israel’s external intelligence agency and Hamas leaders including Ismail Haniyah and head of its diaspora affairs Khaled Meshaal, have also travelled to Doha for negotiations.

Global Implications

Like all the past conflicts in the Middle East, the Israel-Hamas war carries potential economic implications. The Bloomberg Economics estimates that if Israel and Iran come in direct conflict, which will also draw the United States into the war, the oil prices may soar up to \$150 per barrel and cause a decline in global growth by 1.7%.⁴⁷ This is because Middle East is a crucial supplier of energy and a key route for global shipping. Market observers are keeping a close eye, especially on the Strait of Hormuz (shown in the map), which is the world’s most important oil transit point and is vital channel for about one fifth of the global oil production.⁴⁸

has warned of the repeat of the 1973 Arab oil embargo, when Arab countries imposed oil embargo on the US for supporting Israel in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war.⁴⁹ In a similar scenario, the oil prices will drive up by 56% to 75% or range from \$140 to \$157 per barrel.⁵⁰

There are risks of the widening of the conflict involving the regional countries. Major Iran-backed groups in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen have started targeting American military assets across the region and carrying out missile attacks on Israel. The US has also carried out airstrikes against Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps in Syria. According to the Bank of America’s recent note, an Israeli attack on Iran, which is a major oil producer in the region and controls the Strait of Hormuz, could spike oil prices to \$250 per barrel.⁵¹ Iran has already warned Israel of a combined response from its “axis of resistance,” if the bombardment of Gaza sees no end.⁵² The Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi has clearly stated that Israeli action have “crossed the red line” and may “force everyone” to join the conflict.⁵³

Peace Prognosis

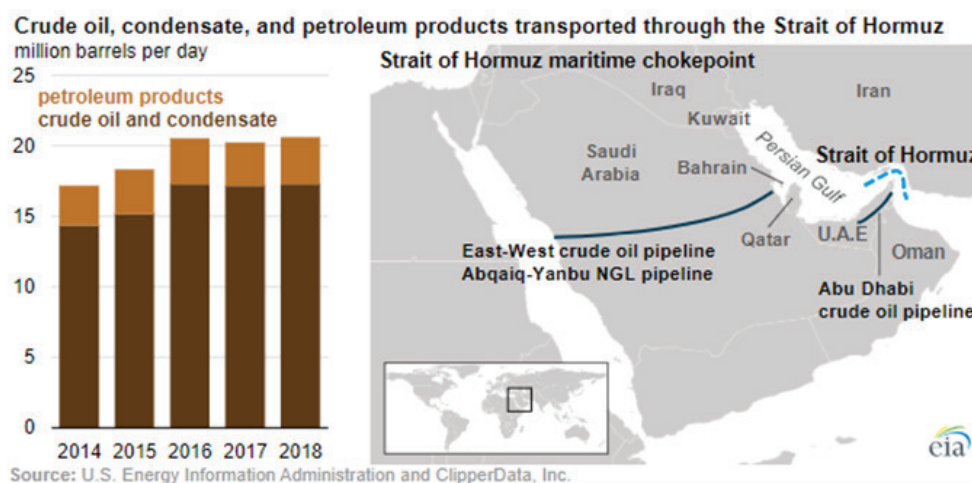
The Israel-Hamas conflict continues to linger as Gaza and the West Bank grapples with Israeli raids and bombardments, resulting in the rise of civilian casualties. Despite worldwide calls for the end of hostilities, Israel is stepping up its ground invasion with no prospects of a ceasefire in sight. However, pressure is building up on Israel, especially from the United States, to agree to a humanitarian pause in the interest of civilian lives. Both President Biden and Secretary Antony Blinken, along with the American senators and congressmen, have called for a pause in hostilities so that humanitarian assistance can flow to Gaza.⁵⁴

Therefore, a humanitarian truce as a temporary measure is essential to prevent further loss of civilians on mass scale. While the pause could be temporary, it may be extended to build space for a regular peace process to end hostilities and develop a long-term roadmap to address the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

The Israel-Hamas war is built on a history of perpetual Israeli occupation of the stateless Palestinians. Two-State solution is the most viable and widely accepted alternative to the perpetual violence between Israel and Palestine. Looking

past the conflict, the US President Joe Biden has stated that “when this crisis is over, there has to be a vision of what comes next, and in our view it has to be a two-state

The Strait of Hormuz is the world's most important oil transit chokepoint



Source: US Energy Information Administration (2019)

The World Bank’s Commodity Markets Outlook report

solution.”⁵⁵ China and Russia, along with most of the international community, are also strong proponents of the Two-State solution.

Israel can either subject Palestinians to a perpetual occupation or ensure a secure Israel. In fact, the idea of foreseeing a secure and stable Israel while depriving Palestinians of their lands and an independent state is fated to fail. Former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon acknowledged this fact when he said that, “It is impossible to have a Jewish democratic state, at the same time to control all of Eretz Israel. If we insist on fulfilling the dream in its entirety, we are liable to lose it all.”⁵⁶ Therefore, a peace process aimed at achieving sustainable peace and stability should include the establishment of a sovereign and independent state of Palestine.

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