

MIDDLE EAST

The Hamas-Israel Conflict and Its Global and Regional Implications - 1

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In this Expert Panel Series, we gathered perspectives from various subject experts on the Hamas-Israel conflict and its global and regional impact on geopolitics. This first paper of the Expert Panel Series features Dr. Suleyman Ozeren's insights in response to our inquiry.

Hamas' attacks on civilians have drawn comparisons to the atrocities committed by ISIS, leaving the world in shock. While some attempted to justify these attacks based on the historical treatment of Palestinians by Israel, the level of brutality displayed by Hamas is unparalleled, even within the broader Palestinian conflict. Most Palestinians disapprove of these attacks. Yet Hamas' tactics have set a new precedent, provoking Israel to employ extreme measures in response.

Hamas aims to achieve several objectives. Firstly, to demonstrate to Israel that it can engage in extensive attacks, Hamas aims to provoke extensive military action by Israel, leading to devastation and destruction in Palestine in order to disrupt the ongoing rapprochement between Israel and the regional countries. This situation would make it extremely challenging to continue rapprochement. Thirdly, Hamas aims to dominate the Palestinian issue. Finally, Hamas may seek to globalize its war of attrition, labeled by the former Hamas leader as "the global day of anger" – against Israel.

The international community, which strongly criticized Israel's indiscriminate targeting of civilian populations in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in the past, has opted to refrain from pressuring Israel for more restraint. President Biden and several key officials emphasized that Israel should act in accordance with the rule of law and uphold the laws of war. Biden's remarks serve a dual purpose: to impose some restraint on Israel and distance the US from Israel's indiscriminate targeting of civilians. Despite historical instances of the United States exerting influence to restrain Israel, the attacks by Hamas led the US to adopt its unequivocal support for Israel. The United States has been pivoting toward Asia and preparing the region to maintain its own security for some time. Does this commitment imply a return to the Middle East? In the case that the conflict cannot be contained, the region might demand increased US involvement.

Similarly, the European Union has conveyed its steadfast support for Israel and reiterated "Israel's right to defend itself" in accordance with international law. Initially, the EU responded to the Hamas attacks by announcing an immediate suspension of development aid for Palestinian authorities, a decision that was later reversed. On the other hand, member states are increasing pressure on pro-Palestinian groups, signaling stronger support for Israel and concerns about the potential spread of violence in Europe.

Israeli military operations could potentially result in mass civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip, escalating tensions in the Middle East. Without a clear exit strategy, Israel might risk alienating itself in the region, especially jeopardizing its improving relations with the Gulf states- in particular Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The governments of these countries have adopted a cautious approach to the crisis, and a protracted conflict might compel a shift in dynamics, potentially leading

them to severe diplomatic ties with Tel Aviv.

To begin with, the spoiler effect of the Hamas-Israel conflict will exert pressure on the ongoing rapprochement between Israel and regional countries in the Middle East. Countries like Saudi Arabia will find it difficult to improve their relationship with Israel, while Palestinians suffer due to the Israeli military's operations. Turkey's approach is also notably more restrained compared to its actions in recent years, such as seeking a more Islamist agenda in the region and its strong relations with Hamas. Trying not to mobilize his voter base against Israel, Erdogan appears more focused on criticizing the Biden administration, suggesting that the United States may engage in a massacre in the Gaza Strip.

The conflict has the potential to spread to other areas in the Middle East. Iran may seek to entice Israel to prolong its military campaign by utilizing its proxies stationed in various countries across the region. This type of mission creep would bring more insecurity and war to the region. Lebanese Hezbollah has already initiated symbolic attacks against Israel, and several Iran-backed militias in Iraq, as well as groups in Yemen, have expressed their support for Hamas and the Palestinians. Describing themselves as the 'Axis of Resistance' these groups seem determined to join the struggle against Israel, awaiting Iran's approval. Instead of direct involvement in the Hamas-Israel conflict as an alternative, Iran might seek to use its proxies to target US interests in Iraq and Syria.

The potential for the internationalization of the Israel-Hamas conflict should not be underestimated. In recent years, al-Qaeda has amplified its anti-Israel rhetoric. The actions of Hamas, coupled with potential developments in the coming weeks, could provide the 'moment' that al-Qaeda and like-minded groups have been eagerly

anticipating. Given heightened awareness, indiscriminate targeting of Palestinians by Israel might lead al-Qaeda and sympathizers to engage in terrorist attacks elsewhere.

Besides actively facilitating negotiations for hostage release, Egypt maintains a relatively passive position regarding engagement with Hamas and providing support to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, primarily due to concerns about a potential influx of displaced Palestinians into Egypt.

Russia stands to benefit significantly from the new Israel-Hamas conflict, as the United States is now compelled to focus on this crisis, diverting attention from Ukraine, at least temporarily. Similarly, the Assad regime in Syria seems to take advantage of the situation by going after the opposition in Idlib.

The transformation of the geopolitical landscape in Palestine and the broader region in the Middle East, following the Hamas terror attacks and Israel's subsequent military response, is inevitable.

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