

Resources

Israel & Palestine

- “Explainer: Israel, annexation and the West Bank” *BBC*, 25 June 2020, Packet Page 4-10 (6 pages).
- “Who Governs the Palestinians?” Kali Robinson, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 28 May 2024, Packet Page 11-22 (11 pages).
- “The Human Costs of the Gaza War Are Even Greater Than You Think” William Hartung, *Forbes*, 15 October 2024, Packet Page 23-28 (5 pages).
- “Israel’s economy is paying a high price for its widening war” Hanna Ziady, *CNN*, 4 October 2024, Packet Page 29-35 (7 pages).
- “Israel and the Coming Long War: To Defeat Iran’s Resistance Axis, the IDF Needs a New Strategy—and a Unified Country” Assaf Orion, *Foreign Affairs*, 12 September 2024, Packet Page 36-53 (16 pages).

The United States & GPC in the Middle East

- “U.S. Troops in the Middle East: Mapping the Military Presence” Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 1 October 2024, Packet Page 54-56 (3 pages).
- “The Complex Reality of Great Power Competition in the Middle East” Amr Hamzawy and Rain Ji, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 10 September 2024, Packet Page 57-61 (4 pages).
- “Explainer: What Middle East conflict means for the global economy” Mark John, *Reuters*, 3 October 2024, Packet Page 36-53 (4 pages).

POV: Egypt

- “Five Factors Shaping the Future of Egypt-Israel Relations” Hesham Youssef, *United States Institute of Peace*, 13 June 2024, Packet Page 66-69 (4 pages).

POV: European Union

- “The EU in the Middle East: Challenges and Opportunities” Timothy Hopper, *Geopolitical Monitor*, 30 April 2024, Packet Page 70-73 (4 pages).

- “The Middle East crisis” European Commission, Packet Page 74-77 (4 pages).

POV: Hamas

- “Israel and Hamas Conflict In Brief: Overview, U.S. Policy, and Options for Congress” Jim Zanotti and Jeremy Sharp, Congressional Research Service, 15 September 2024, Packet Page 78-93 (16 pages).
- “What is Hamas?”Kali Robinson, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 17 October 2024, Packet Page 94-107 (10 pages).

POV: Hezbollah

- “What is Hezbollah?”Kali Robinson, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 4 October 2024, Packet Page 108-117 (10 pages).
- “Iran and Hezbollah: Proxy Power Play” Irfan ul Haq, *Institute for Security and Development Policy*, 26 March 2024, Packet Page 118-119 (2 pages).

POV: Iran

- “What is the Shia Crescent?” Patrick Clawson, Hanin Ghaddar, and Nader Uskowi, *The Washington Institute*, 17 January 2018, Packet Page 120-123 (4 pages).
- “Timeline: Iran and Hezbollah”*United States Institute of Peace*, 19 October 2023, Packet Page 123-128 (5 pages).
- “Iran-Supported Groups in the Middle East and U.S. Policy” Congressional Research Service, 1 August 2024, Packet Page 129-131 (2 pages).

POV: Jordan

- “Jordan’s Three Balancing Acts: Navigating the Post-October 7 Middle East” Farah Bdour, *United States Institute of Peace*, 11 September 2024, Packet Page 132-135 (4 pages)

POV: Saudi Arabia

- “The future of Saudi-Israeli relations is a balancing act between Palestinian and regional interests”R. Clarke Cooper, *The Atlantic Council*, 22 February 2024, Packet Page 136-138 (2 pages).

Background: Yemen & the Houthis

- “Iran’s Support of the Houthis: What to Know” Kali Robinson, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 1 March 2024, Packet Page 139-145 (6 pages).

Explainer: Israel, annexation and the West Bank

25 June 2020



Benjamin Netanyahu has long championed Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank

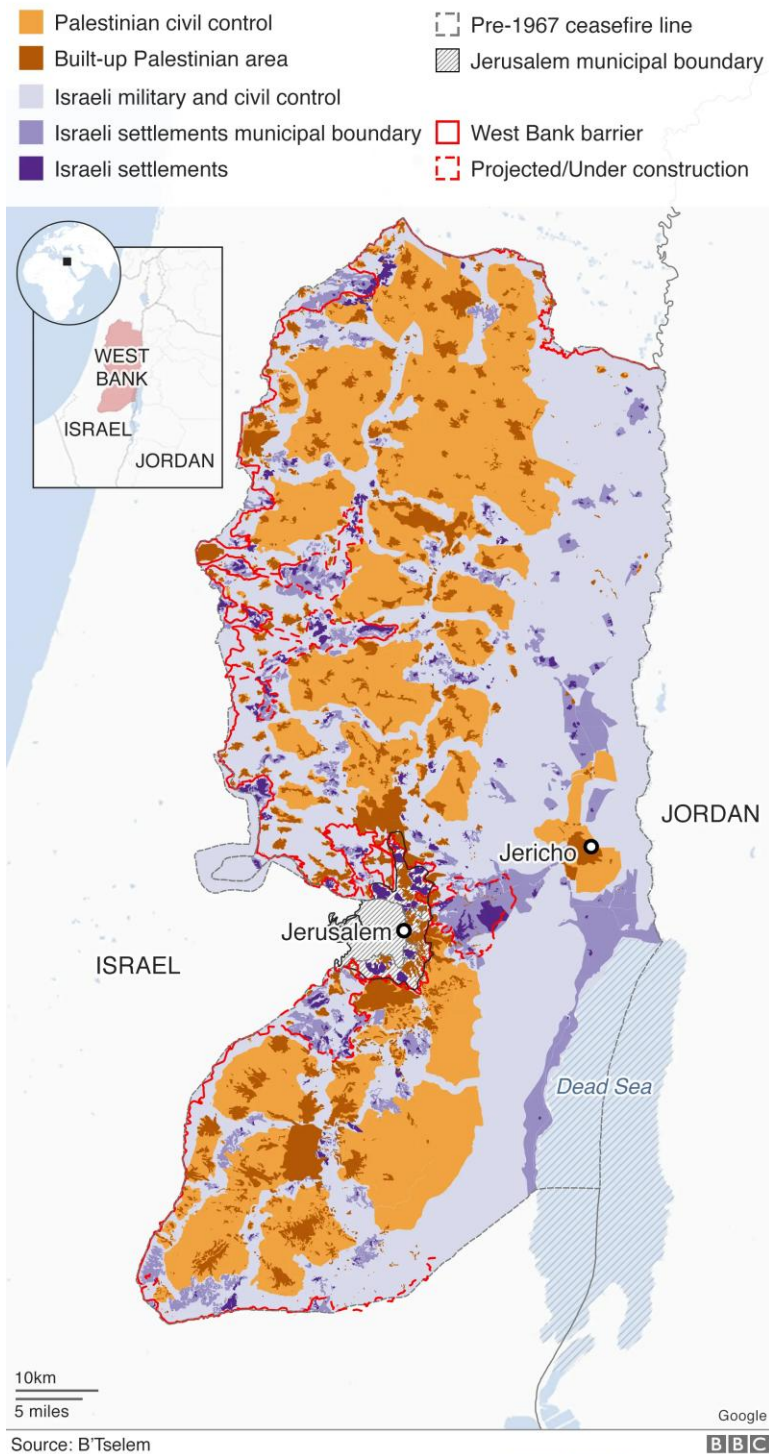
Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says he is planning to effectively annex parts of the occupied West Bank in what would be a major - and highly controversial - act.

What is the West Bank?

It is a chunk of land located - as the name suggests - on the west bank of the River Jordan and bounded by Israel to the north, west and south. To its east lies Jordan.

The West Bank has been occupied by Israel since the 1967 Middle East war, but decades of difficult on-off talks between Israel and the Palestinians - both of whom assert rights there - have left its final status unresolved.

West Bank settlements



West Bank 1 under both British and Israeli (sources vary) Palestinian Arabs live in the

The West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem) is also home to some 430,000 Israeli Jews who live in 132 settlements (and 124 smaller "outposts") built under Israel's occupation.

The vast majority of the international community considers the settlements illegal under international law, though Israel and the US under the Trump administration dispute this interpretation.

What is "annexation" and why does it matter here?

Annexation is the term applied when a state unilaterally proclaims its sovereignty over other territory. It is forbidden by international law. A recent example was Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula in 2014.



Reports suggest Israeli sovereignty would not be applied to Palestinians living in annexed areas

Mr Netanyahu has said the plan is "not annexation", although it involves applying Israeli sovereignty to the parts of the West Bank which contain Jewish settlements, as well as most of a swathe of land along the West Bank's boundary with Jordan, known as the Jordan Valley.

The move could result in some 4.5% of Palestinians in the West Bank living in enclaves within annexed territory. Mr Netanyahu has said Israeli sovereignty will not be applied to Palestinians in the Jordan Valley, and reports say the same exclusion will extend to Palestinians in other annexed parts of the West Bank.



0:44

Palestinian President Abbas says Mr Trump's "conspiracy deal won't pass"

The areas earmarked for annexation (the precise contours of which are being mapped by Israel and the US) may comprise about 30% of the West Bank, according to reports. Mr Netanyahu may initially act to annex just the settlements, which could amount to only 3% of the West Bank. The remaining 27% may have to wait until the boundaries are agreed with Washington.

However, the Palestinians seek the whole of the West Bank - to which they claim an historical right - for a future independent state, along with the Gaza Strip. Any annexation by Israel, they argue, would leave Palestinian areas fragmented and the Palestinian people with considerably less land for a country of their own.

If it's so controversial, why does Israel want to do it?

Israel claims historical and religious rights to the West Bank as the ancestral land of the Jewish people. It also says its presence there - especially in the Jordan Valley - is strategically vital for its self-defence.

It says settlements are not an obstacle to peace and that they would remain part of Israel under any peace deal with the Palestinians, whether they are annexed now or not.

Mr Netanyahu has long championed the settlements and through annexation wants to remove any doubt as to their fate, something which strongly appeals to his political base.

Why is this being talked about now?

Until recently, Mr Netanyahu would have faced solid opposition among the international community to such a move.

However, Donald Trump's Israeli-Palestinian peace plan, unveiled in January, allows for Israel to "incorporate" all the settlements - something no previous US administration had countenanced.

- Trump plan: Key points
- Analysis: Trump's deal a huge gamble

It is possible that Mr Netanyahu wants to get it done before the US presidential election in November in case Mr Trump's rival Joe Biden - who opposes annexation - is elected and reverses US policy.

An agreement which returned Mr Netanyahu to office as head of a national unity government in May set 1 July as the date from which the annexation process could be initiated.

What would change with annexation?

Assuming it happens (Israel and the US are still deliberating exactly when and how), the settlements and surrounding areas will become permanent parts of Israel (at least, from Israel's position). Reversal would require the support of a large majority of Israeli MPs, something which is very unlikely.

In practice, Israeli laws already apply to settlers, though not to Palestinians, who are subject only to Israeli military orders and Palestinian laws, so there would be little noticeable change in that respect.

Construction in settlements could become easier if they officially become part of Israel

One of the most significant differences annexation would likely make is in settlement construction - long one of the thorniest issues between Israel and the Palestinians.

Currently, building and zoning in the West Bank requires the approval of Israel's defence minister and prime minister, and can take months or years. Following annexation, it would become a local matter and consequently easier for Israel to build there.

Beyond the annexed areas, the Israeli military will continue to exercise overall authority - something Palestinians say has deprived generations of their basic civil rights.

What is the global response to Israel's plan?

By and large, Israel has been warned by friend and foe alike not to go ahead with annexation. There are fears that such a move will put peace between Israel and the Palestinians even further out of reach.

The Palestinians are calling for international pressure to thwart Mr Netanyahu's plans, and their prime minister has said they could declare their own independent state on almost all of the West Bank if Israel annexes land there.

The issue of settlements has long been a source of friction between Israelis and Palestinians

The UN's Middle East envoy has warned that Israeli annexation and Palestinian counter-steps "would dramatically shift local dynamics and most likely trigger conflict and instability in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip". However, the US is likely to block any attempts to pass resolutions at the UN Security Council condemning Israel.

Jordan, one of only two Arab states to have signed peace treaties with Israel, has said it would be forced to review its relations with Israel if annexation goes ahead. But while the Arab world has sharply criticised Israel's plans, declarations of solidarity with the Palestinians may be as far as Arab states - especially those in the Gulf that have unofficial relations with Israel - will go.

The EU - Israel's biggest trading partner - says it will use diplomatic means to "discourage" Israel from carrying out its plans. Although some member states have called for tougher action, including possible sanctions, there appears little support for such a move at the moment.

Join CFR and Grand Valley State University for a U.S. Election Foreign Policy Forum on Monday, October 21, at 6:00 p.m. (EDT).



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Backgrounder

Who Governs the Palestinians?

Power in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, the so-called Palestinian territories, has been divided among three entities: a governing body called the Palestinian Authority, the militant group Hamas, and the state of Israel. But as Israel now seeks to destroy Hamas, it is unclear who would administer Gaza instead.

WRITTEN BY
Kali Robinson

UPDATED
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Summary

Millions of Palestinians live under the control of a mix of authorities in the Palestinian territories and in refugee camps across the Middle East.

In recent decades, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has controlled parts of the West Bank, and the militant group Hamas has run the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, Israel has exercised power over both areas in different ways.

Amid the latest Israel-Hamas war, the PA is facing heightened scrutiny about its ability to run Gaza if Israel destroys Hamas.

Introduction

A complex mix of authorities governs the 5.5 million Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip and West Bank territories. Palestinians, like Jews, trace their ancestry to the geographic area that now forms the state of Israel and the two Palestinian territories. Yet, the Palestinians do not have a universally recognized state, with their aspirations to create one depending not just on Palestinian leadership, but also on Israel and recognition by foreign powers.

Officially, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) represents Palestinians worldwide at international fora, while the Palestinian Authority (PA), a newer institution led by a PLO faction known as Fatah, is supposed to govern most of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In reality, the PA has overshadowed the PLO, and both are deeply troubled; Israel has exercised significant control over the Palestinian territories, de facto and official; and Gaza has been ruled by the militant Palestinian group Hamas, which Israel and multiple other countries have designated as a terrorist organization. Palestinian leaders will have to grapple with these and other challenges—including succession concerns and yet another war between Israel and Hamas—to deliver their peoples' dream of an independent Palestinian state.

Who's in charge in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank?

It depends on the location. In the 1990s, the PLO and Israel signed the Oslo Accords and the Gaza-Jericho Agreement, deals that divided areas of control in Gaza and the West Bank (East Jerusalem excluded) between Israel and the newly created Palestinian Authority, with the expectation that the two territories would eventually constitute a Palestinian state. But with the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict still unresolved, the territories remain formally divided into three areas of control:

Area A, which consists of most of Gaza and about 17 percent of the West Bank, is the most densely populated and urbanized. It is designated as fully Palestinian controlled under Oslo, including for civil affairs and internal security issues. However, Israel has waged an extensive military campaign in Gaza since October 2023 with the goal of eliminating Hamas, and it has therefore imposed more-stringent movement controls in the territory.

Area B covers nearly a quarter of the West Bank and mostly comprises villages and rural areas. Israelis and Palestinians cooperate on security here, but the PA manages all civil affairs. Israel also controls the movement of goods and people. Areas A and B have a combined Palestinian population of about 2.8 million.

Area C makes up the remaining land and mostly consists of pastoral areas. It contains most of the West Bank's natural resources and is under full Israeli control, though the PA provides education and medical services to the area's 150,000 Palestinians. The area is home to most of Israel's settlers, who total some 700,000 people spread across the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Most live near the border with Israel, though international law dubs their settlements illegal.

Since 2006, the Gaza Strip has been controlled by Hamas, an armed group and political party that was founded during the first Palestinian “intifada,” or uprising, against Israeli rule in 1987–93. (The name Hamas is an acronym for “The Islamic Resistance Movement” in Arabic.) The organization was created out of the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood to compete with Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), a militant faction that simultaneously aims to destroy the state of Israel and create a Palestinian state governed by Islamic law. Hamas explicitly opposes Israel's existence and has perpetrated grievous acts of violence against Israelis. Its October 7, 2023, rampage through southern Israel killed more than 1,200 people and spurred the massive Israeli military response aimed at eradicating Hamas. Governments including the United States, Israel, Japan, and the European Union (EU) have designated Hamas a terrorist organization.

Hamas briefly joined the PA, rising to the head of the authority in 2006 after winning general elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. But it split from the authority months later, when the rival faction Fatah, which has long dominated the PA, refused to recognize Hamas's election victory. The two went to war, and though Fatah was able to oust Hamas from the West Bank and maintain its sway over Palestinian affairs there, Hamas's forces prevailed in the Gaza Strip,

securing the group's control over the territory. The Gaza-West Bank schism is severe enough that some experts considered Gaza to be “practically a separate state” before the most recent war with Israel devastated the territory.

Who governs Palestinians in Jerusalem?

Straddling the border of Israel and the West Bank, the city of Jerusalem has been populated by both Arabs and Jews for centuries. It holds some of the most sacred sites in Christianity and Islam as well as the holiest sites in Judaism. Today, it is home to many Palestinians and Israelis, though Israel has political control. The peace deal that ended the first Arab-Israeli War in 1949, which was triggered by Israel's founding the previous year, divided the city between Israeli rule in the west and Jordanian rule in the east. Israel captured East Jerusalem in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, and considers the “complete and undivided” city of Jerusalem as its capital due to the Jewish people's deep historical and religious ties to the city. The United States, Guatemala, Honduras, Kosovo, and Papua New Guinea have constructed embassies to Israel in the western part of Jerusalem. Other countries keep their missions in Tel Aviv because of Jerusalem's disputed status.

Meanwhile, Palestinians claim East Jerusalem as the capital of their state, given its centrality to the Palestinian economy, its significance to Muslims in particular, and its Palestinian population of more than 360,000. Nonetheless, Israel's de facto annexation of East Jerusalem makes it subject to Israeli law. Most Palestinians there are designated as permanent residents of Israel—status that can be revoked punitively. Most are not citizens of any country; having largely refused Israeli citizenship offered in 1967 or lost Jordanian citizenship after Amman renounced its claim to the West Bank in 1988.

Who oversees Palestinian refugee populations?

The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) established in 1949, manages Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and Syria in connection with local authorities. These camps house Palestinians displaced by the 1948 and 1967 Arab-Israeli Wars, as well as their descendants. Some camps, such as the Rafah and

Jabalia camps in Gaza, have evolved into built-up cities. Yet, they remain dependent on UN aid even though some have populations that exceed one hundred thousand. Close to six million registered refugees are under UNRWA's remit, though not all reside in camps.

Host governments handle security in the camps, while UNRWA provides health care, housing, education. UNRWA itself is officially nonpolitical, but experts say [PDF] Fatah wields significant influence over residents in some West Bank refugee camps, as Hamas has done in certain Gaza camps. Additionally, UNRWA has for years faced accusations [PDF] that Hamas has co-opted some of its employees and facilities. In 2024, the agency suffered deep funding cuts when the United States pulled its support due to Israeli allegations that UNRWA employees participated in Hamas's October 7 attack. Around a dozen other countries initially followed the United States' example, but most soon resumed funding after separate reviews by the agency and independent experts said that Israel did not provide evidence for the allegations.

How does the Palestinian Authority govern?

The PA is headquartered in the West Bank, where it operates from the city of Ramallah. Officially named the Palestinian National Authority, it comprises most major Palestinian factions, such as Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), but excludes militant groups such as Hamas and PIJ. The authority's responsibilities are spelled out in the 2002 Basic Law [PDF] that serves as an interim Palestinian constitution. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas simultaneously serves as leader of the PA, the PLO, and his party, Fatah, which has the greatest representation in the PA of any faction. In March 2024, Abbas's longtime economic advisor Mohammad Mustafa replaced Mohammad Shtayyeh as PA prime minister, a position that gives him little power compared to Abbas. His appointment comes as Washington and other governments push for PA reforms that would improve living conditions in the West Bank and so that the authority could responsibly govern Gaza after the Israel-Hamas war.

The PA has become synonymous with "corruption, nepotism, and inefficiency," writes Ghaith Omari, a former PA official and current senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Many experts say governance began to seriously erode after Abbas became PLO chair

in 2004. Now nineteen years into what should have been a four-year presidential term, Abbas concentrated power by dissolving parliament, entrenching his control over the judiciary, introducing laws only by decree, and purging political rivals. In 2021, he blocked presidential and legislative elections that would have been Palestinians' first since 2006. Abbas blamed the move on Israeli restrictions on voting in East Jerusalem, though experts say he likely feared he and his party would lose to Hamas. International rights watchdog Freedom House classifies the PA as "authoritarian" and the West Bank as "not free" due to poor Palestinian governance and Israeli occupation.

Abbas also oversees the West Bank's security forces, which consist of police and other security officers but cannot constitute a conventional military, per the Oslo Accords. They work in coordination with the Israeli military, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), to stamp out Hamas and other armed groups and have also faced accusations of brutality against Palestinian civilians. As a result, many Palestinians view the security forces as instruments of Israel's occupation, rather than as protectors of the rule of law. In addition, Israeli and Palestinian observers alike blame the weakness of the PA and its security forces for the proliferation of new armed groups that increasingly targeted Israel starting in 2022.

Without full autonomy over Gaza and the West Bank, the PA's powers of economic policy are limited. The authority relies on international aid, which is generally conditioned on the PA's recognition of Israel and commitment to nonviolence. However, some donor countries have cut aid in recent years, citing mismanagement by the PA. Meanwhile, Hamas has been blocked from U.S. and EU aid given its status as a terrorist entity, though it has various other funding sources, both legal and illicit.

How has Hamas governed the Gaza Strip?

After taking control of Gaza, Hamas established political, military, and legal institutions entirely separate from those in the West Bank. Though Hamas set up its seat of government in Gaza City, many top officials have chosen to live abroad full time, including political chief Ismail Haniyeh and diaspora affairs leader Khaled Meshaal, who both live in Qatar. As with the PA and West Bank, Freedom House has also labeled Hamas's government as "authoritarian" and Gaza as "not free." Before the current war shattered all semblance of day-to-day life in Gaza, Hamas had nominal

followed the PA's Basic Law, but also implemented a restrictive interpretation of Islamic law that used to repress the rights of women, the LGBTQ+ community, and other marginalized groups. In addition, the Hamas government had removed most checks on its power, having suppressed opposition from Gazan media outlets, politicians, civilian activists, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), often through violence and arbitrary arrest.

How much control does Israel have over Palestinians?

West Bank. Israel officially controls only Area C of the West Bank in full, implementing policy through its Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), which also liaises with the PA. However, Israeli legal and military powers extend to all three areas. Israel also has full legal jurisdiction over all Jewish settlers, who total about five hundred thousand people in the West Bank and two hundred thousand in East Jerusalem. (A 2016 UN Security Council resolution reaffirmed that Israel's settlements are illegal under international law. The United States, which frequently uses its veto power on the council to block resolutions censuring Israel, abstained from the vote, helping it to pass.) Israeli civil law covers settlers, while Palestinians, even where subject to PA laws, are tried in the IDF's military courts.

Additionally, the Oslo Accords authorized Israel to collect Palestinian taxes for the PA in the areas that Israel controls. However, Israel deducts money from the payments based on a sum that Israeli government experts calculate that the PA spends funding terrorism. This amount usually refers to PA payments to families of "martyrs," meaning civilians and combatants killed in violence related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and payments to the families of Palestinians imprisoned in Israel. Israel says the payments incentivize terrorism and therefore withholds [PDF] approximately \$100–\$185 million in Palestinian taxes annually, an amount equal to around 2–4 percent of the PA's budget.

To protect its own national security, Israel has imposed stringent movement restrictions in both territories. These include numerous military checkpoints in the West Bank, as well as a barrier wall that spans hundreds of miles across that territory. An onerous part of daily life for many Palestinians, Israel's security measures "limit Palestinian development in the West Bank while creating conditions akin to a nearly closed economy on Gaza," according to the World Bank.

Gaza Strip. Israel captured Gaza during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and militarily occupied the territory until 2005, when it pulled out its troops and settlers. In the years before its 2023 invasion, Israel implemented various controls over Gaza that it said were needed to prevent terrorism against Israelis. It restricted Gaza's airspace, borders, cellular frequencies, coastal waters, and electricity supply, among other areas. It had also barred locals from entering buffer zones on the border with Israel, which cover around 20 percent of Gaza. Wary that Hamas had been found to divert imported goods and foreign aid to bolster its military capabilities, Israel also prevented Gaza from importing "dual-use" items, meaning items with potential military as well as civilian purposes. The import blacklist had at times included certain foods, medical equipment, and construction materials. Similar but less stringent restrictions still apply to the West Bank. It is unclear what restrictions Israel would maintain on Gaza if it succeeds in dismantling Hamas.

Israel's controls in the Palestinian territories are highly controversial. Proponents of the extensive security apparatus say it has fortified Israeli national security, while critics say the policies violate Palestinian rights and disrupt essential services. In a 2022 report, the UN-appointed special rapporteur on human rights in the Palestinian territories went so far as to argue that Israel's two-tiered legal system in the West Bank qualifies as apartheid, a position that has spurred intense debate. Some observers, including U.S. and Israeli officials, have said the report reflects a history of anti-Israel bias by the United Nations. Since the UN document's release, independent human rights organizations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Israel's B'Tselem, have also published reports accusing Israel of apartheid.

How do Palestinian leaders approach foreign policy?

The Arab League established the PLO as the official representative of the Palestinian people, and it is this body that represents them at many international fora. At the United Nations, the PLO received "observer" status in 1974 and "non-member observer state" status, under the name "State of Palestine," in 2012. It still holds this status but received additional, limited rights and privileges amid a renewed push for full membership in 2024. The United States and Israel both oppose PLO aspirations for full member status. Additionally, 146 of 193 UN member countries have independently recognized Palestinian statehood, with seven doing so in the first half of 2024: the Bahamas, Barbados, Ireland, Jamaica, Norway, Spain, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Meanwhile, 165 UN members recognize Israel, which has been a UN member state since 1949. Most of the countries that deny Israel's sovereignty are predominantly Arab or Muslim. In recent years, Palestinian leaders have urged Arab countries not to normalize relations with Israel under the 2020 Abraham Accords, as Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates have done. Egypt and Jordan established relations with Israel in 1979 and 1984, respectively.

While the Fatah-dominated PLO was the main organ for Palestinian diplomacy until the Oslo Accords, the PA has since overshadowed it to become the de facto representative of Palestinian Foreign governments largely interact with the PA and shun Hamas, providing aid to Gaza through other channels, such as UN agencies. However, a handful of countries, namely Iran, Qatar, Russia, and Turkey, have open relations with Hamas.

Seeking support for the Palestinian national movement, the PLO has pushed for full UN membership and joined multiple international organizations, including the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Most notably, it acceded to the Rome Statute in 2015, making it a party to the International Criminal Court (ICC). At the PA's behest, the ICC has opened a probe into possible war crimes committed by Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem.

How is the PA involved in the Israel-Hamas war?

The aftermath of Hamas's October 7 assault on Israel has reinforced the widely held belief that the PA in its current form has become "basically irrelevant," in the words of CFR Middle East expert Steven A. Cook. The authority sat on the sidelines during the conflict's first few months underscoring its lack of power over violent factions such as Hamas and its inability to stem the Palestinian suffering caused by Israel's retaliation.

The PA's perceived ineffectiveness, plus Israel's pledge to wipe out Hamas over the October 7 attack, has raised the question of who would run Gaza instead. "Trying to establish a Palestinian Authority government in Gaza, with help from Arab states, is probably the least-bad option," writes CFR national security expert Max Boot. Experts have viewed the Shtayyeh government's February 2024 resignation as the first step in a U.S.-backed plan for a reinvigorated PA to

administer Gaza. But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has so far rejected the idea, proposing instead that Israel maintain indefinite control over the West Bank and Gaza after the war.

What challenges do Palestinian leaders face?

Disunity. Political infighting has fractured what was once a fairly unified national movement, precluding Palestinian leaders from negotiating with Israel, organizing elections, and articulating a coherent vision to their supporters. Furthermore, a plurality of Palestinians [PDF] call the Gaza West Bank split the most damaging development for their people since Israel's founding, but previous reconciliation attempts by Hamas and the PA all failed, and Israel's new vow to eliminate Hamas has further complicated the issue.

Eroding legitimacy. President Abbas and the multiple bodies he oversees are widely unpopular, according to polling by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) has shown. More than half the Palestinians whom PCPSR surveyed in June 2023 supported dissolving the PA, which many deride as beholden to Israel. Experts at the International Crisis Group, an independent nongovernmental organization, echoed that sentiment in a February 2023 report: "The [PA] has never lived up to expectations that it would become the foundation of an independent Palestinian state; instead, it has become, as its harshest critics contend, a mere subcontractor to Israel in maintaining the military occupation."

Financial matters. As the top employer in the West Bank, the PA directly funds the livelihoods of around 130,000 public-sector workers. Yet, the deeply indebted authority faces bankruptcy and is unable to pay full salaries. The World Bank reports that the PA needs various reforms to right itself financially, along with additional donor assistance and reduced economic restrictions from Israel.

Succession. Abbas's advanced age and history of health issues have raised concerns about the lack of clear plans for leadership change. Various succession procedures for the PA and PLO exist, but Abbas has disabled the institutions that would uphold them. While he has no clear successor, experts say candidates could include Abbas's aide Hussein al-Sheikh and popular Fatah member Marwan Barghouti. In a hypothetical election, more voters would prefer Barghouti, write Arab Barometer pollsters Amaney A. Jamal and Michael Robbins, despite Barghouti's current imprisonment for orchestrating attacks on Israelis.

A failed leadership transition could trigger clashes for power or even the PA's collapse, which experts say could spell disaster despite the authority's flaws. "Whatever else one may say about the PA and its complicity in Israel's colonisation, dispossession and annexation, it provides vital support in the form of jobs and essential services to millions of Palestinians," the International Crisis Group writes. "A botched succession would thus be harmful for all main players in this conflict, but most of all for Palestinians in the occupied territories themselves."

Recommended Resources

This UN timeline traces pivotal political developments in Palestinian history.

The Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA) offers a more in-depth look at Palestinian governance [PDF].

The European Council on Foreign Relations maps the most prominent individuals and institutions in Palestinian politics.

In a two-part series, *Haaretz*'s David B. Green breaks down Israeli and Palestinian perspectives on Jerusalem's status.

Palestinian economist Raja Khalidi makes a case for establishing Palestinian state amid the war in Gaza in this *Foreign Affairs* article.

For *Foreign Affairs*, former PA official Ghaith al-Omari previews the succession crisis that could unfold once Mahmoud Abbas leaves power.



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Michael Bricknell and Will Merrow created the graphics for this Backgrounder.

For media inquiries on this topic, please reach out to communications@cfr.org.

BETA

The Human Costs of the Gaza War Are Even Greater Than You Think

William Hartung Contributor ⓘ

I am a defense analyst, and cover the economics of Pentagon spending.

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Oct 15, 2024, 01:39pm EDT



GAZA CITY, GAZA - OCTOBER 23: A woman holding a girl reacts after Israeli airstrikes hit Ridwan ...

[+] ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

I am the co-author, along with Linda Bilmes and Stephen Semler, of a new [paper](#) on the costs of U.S. military aid to Israel and its parallel military buildup in the Middle East, issued this week under the auspices of the Costs of War Project at Brown University.

Our results – over \$22 billion in U.S. tax dollars to pay for aid to Israel and the bulking up the U.S. military presence in the region since the start of the Gaza war – have been widely disseminated, largely due to an exclusive article on our paper written by Ellen Knickmeyer of the Associated Press.

Unfortunately, a companion [paper](#) analyzing the full humanitarian costs of the war in Gaza, issued by the Costs of War project on the same day as our paper, has received much less attention. That needs to change. The findings of the paper, by Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins of Bard College, should be taken in by every policy maker in Washington, and every American who cares about the reputation and future influence of the United States.

The direct death toll in Gaza, now estimated at over 40,000 people, most of whom are not members of Hamas, and have no influence over the conduct of Hamas, is hard enough to process. It is as mind numbing as it is frightening and outrageous. But when indirect deaths are taken into account, the picture becomes even darker and more unconscionable.

Stamatopoulou-Robbins estimates that as many as 67,000 Gazans may have died of starvation since the start of the war, and that over 10,000 more may not have been counted in the death toll because they are still buried in the rubble caused by U.S.-supplied aircraft and bombs. This pushes the number of people killed in the war to well over 100,000, with, sadly, more to come as disease increases in a population bereft of adequate clean water, sanitation, or access to medical care. If the bombing

in Gaza stopped tomorrow, deaths caused by the conflict would continue for some time given the awful conditions people are being forced to live in.

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The paper on human costs of the Gaza war is a reminder of the debate over whether Israel's war on Gaza constitutes genocide. The International Court of Justice has said that it is "plausible" that Israel is committing genocide. Other experts, like Human Rights Watch founder Aryeh Neier are less equivocal, [pointing to](#) Israel's blocking of humanitarian aid flows into and through Gaza as a clear marker of a genocide.

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Whether one calls the war in Gaza a genocide or a series of severe violations of the laws of war, the killing needs to stop now. Due to its ongoing role in financing and arming Israel, the United States has more leverage over Israel's conduct than any other nation, if Washington is willing to use it. It's possible that Netanyahu would try to carry on in any

case, but without access to U.S. funds, weapons, and logistical and maintenance support his military reach would be more limited, and his ability to spark a regional war, now well under way, would be stymied.

Further escalation is a distinct and dangerous possibility. The decision to deploy a battery of U.S. THAAD anti-missile systems to Israel, along with 100 U.S. support personnel, is the next step in that process. How will the Biden administration respond if one of those U.S. troops is killed by a missile launched by Hamas or Hezbollah?

In essence, President Biden has given the power over whether or not the war escalates to Benjamin Netanyahu. When Israel attacks Hezbollah or Iran, the Biden administration pledges to help defend it against the inevitable counter-attack. This policy of “Netanyahu right or wrong,” which rewards his reckless behavior with yet more support, must stop.

Without a sharp reversal in U.S. policy, the human and economic costs of supporting Israel’s war could easily spiral out of control. This is not a precise analogy, but the current situation reminds me of the early days of the Bush administration’s 2003 intervention in Iraq, when the White House put out an estimate that the war would [cost](#) “only” \$50 billion. The final price tag was at least \$1 trillion, with further costs to come due to the need to take care of veterans of that war for the rest of their lives. This doesn’t mean the costs of U.S. support for Netanyahu’s reckless and criminal behavior will reach \$1 trillion, but the Iraq case underscores how the costs of an allegedly “limited” conflict can quickly increase to near-unbelievable levels.

There has been real resistance to the administration’s ongoing support for the wars in Gaza and beyond, most notably from the student ceasefire movement, which is moving full speed ahead despite a wave of authoritarian-style crackdowns on protest by presidents of universities

that allegedly stand for free speech. And a few members of Congress have spoken out and attempted to reverse U.S. involvement in the war, most recently by way of a [resolution](#) aimed at blocking a new \$20 billion arms offer to Israel that has been introduced by Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and several colleagues.

In the longer run, continuing on this path will damage the reputation and influence of the United States for years to come. How can any U.S. official speak of the “rules-based international order” with a straight face given Washington’s enabling of the Gaza war? How can Washington press other nations to end systematic abuses of human rights?

We are at what I believe could be an historic turning point in the history of the United States. Will it be a disruptive power, attempting to cling to influence through force and threat of force despite the disastrous failures of that approach during this century, or can we steer the country back onto more positive ground, where we rebalance the tools we use to interact with other countries and people and move towards a more cooperative foreign policy that truly relies on military force and arms supplies only if absolutely necessary. Absent that shift, America’s decline as a world power is likely to accelerate, with great damage done both here and abroad.

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Israel's economy is paying a high price for its widening war



Analysis by [Hanna Ziady](#), CNN

7 minute read

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Hay is being harvested in front of an Israeli army battle tank in southern Israel near the border with the Gaza Strip, as smoke rises above the Palestinian territory in May 2024.

Jack Guez/AFP/Getty Images

LondonCNN —

In late September, as Israel's nearly year-long war widened and its credit rating was downgraded yet again, the country's finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, said that, while Israel's economy was under strain, it was resilient.

"Israel's economy bears the burden of the longest and most expensive war in the country's history," Smotrich said on September 28, a day after Israeli airstrikes killed Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon's capital Beirut, ratcheting fears that tensions with the militant group would turn into a full-blown conflict. "The Israeli economy is a strong economy that even today attracts investments."

Almost a year after Hamas' deadly attack on October 7, Israel is pushing forward on multiple fronts: launching a ground incursion against Hezbollah in Lebanon, carrying out airstrikes in Gaza and [Beirut](#), and threatening retaliation for Iran's ballistic missile attack earlier this week. As the conflict [spills over into the wider region](#), the economic costs will spiral too, both for Israel and other countries in the Middle East.

"If recent escalations turn into a longer and more intense war, this will take a heavier toll on economic activity and growth (in Israel)," Karnit Flug, a former governor of Israel's central bank, told CNN on October 1.

The war has significantly worsened the situation in Gaza, pushing it into an economic and humanitarian crisis long ago, and the West Bank is "undergoing a rapid and alarming economic decline," the United Nations said in a report last month.

The Lebanese economy, meanwhile, could contract by up to 5% this year due to cross-border attacks between Hezbollah and Israel, according to BMI, a market research firm owned by Fitch Solutions.

Israel's economy could shrink even more than that, based on a worst-case estimate by the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University.

Even in a more benign scenario, its researchers also [see](#) Israel's gross domestic product per head — which in recent years overtook the United Kingdom's — falling this year, as Israel's population grows faster than the economy and living standards decline.

Before the October 7 attack and ensuing Israel-Hamas war, the International Monetary Fund forecast that Israel's economy would grow by an enviable 3.4% this year. Now, economists' projections range from 1% to 1.9%. Growth next year is also expected to be weaker than earlier forecasts.

Yet Israel's central bank is not in a position to cut interest rates to breathe life into the economy because inflation is accelerating, propelled by rising wages and soaring government spending to fund the war.

'Long-term' economic damage

The Bank of Israel estimated in May that costs arising from the war would total 250 billion shekels (\$66 billion) through the end of next year, including military outlays and civilian expenses, such as on housing for thousands of Israelis forced to flee their homes in the north and south. That is equivalent to roughly 12% of Israel's GDP.

Those costs look set to rise further as fiercer fighting with Iran and its proxies, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, adds to the government's defense bill and delays the return of Israelis to their homes in the country's north. Israel launched a ground incursion into southern Lebanon targeting Hezbollah on September 30.

Smotrich, the finance minister, is confident that Israel's economy will bounce back once the war ends, but economists are concerned the damage will far outlast the conflict.



Israel's finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, pictured in June 2024.
Menahem Kahana/AFP/Getty Images

Flug, the former Bank of Israel governor and now vice-president of research at the Israel Democracy Institute, says there is a risk the Israeli government cuts investment to free up resources for defense. "That will reduce the potential growth (of the economy) going forward," she said.

Researchers at the Institute for National Security Studies are similarly downbeat.

Even a withdrawal from Gaza and calm on the border with Lebanon would leave Israel's economy in a weaker position than before the war, they said in a [report](#) in August. "Israel is expected to suffer long-term economic damage regardless of the outcome," they wrote.

"The anticipated decline in growth rates in all scenarios compared to pre-war economic forecasts and the increase in defense expenditures could exacerbate the risk of a recession reminiscent of the lost decade following the Yom Kippur War."

The 1973 war, also known as the Arab-Israeli war, launched by Egypt and Syria against Israel's forces in the Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights, ushered in a long period of economic stagnation in Israel, partly as the country massively ramped up defense spending.

Likewise, potential tax hikes and cuts to non-defense spending — some already mooted by Smotrich — to fund what many expect to become a permanently enlarged military, could hurt economic growth. Such measures, coupled with a weakened sense of security, could also spur an exodus of highly educated Israelis, notably tech entrepreneurs, Flug warned.

"It doesn't have to be in very large numbers, because the tech sector is very dependent on a few thousand of the most innovative, creative and entrepreneurial individuals," she said of a sector that accounts for a hefty 20% of Israel's economic output.



A Jewish man walks past closed shops in Jerusalem's Old City on September 11, 2024.

Ahmad Gharabli/AFP/Getty Images

A large-scale departure of high-earning taxpayers would further dent Israel's finances, which have taken a knock from the war. The government has delayed publishing a budget for next year as it grapples with competing demands that make it hard to balance its books.

The conflict has caused Israel's budget deficit — the difference between government spending and revenue, mostly from taxes — to double to 8% of GDP, from 4% before the war.

Government borrowing has soared and become more expensive, as investors demand higher returns to buy Israeli bonds and other assets. Multiple downgrades to Israel's credit ratings made by Fitch, Moody's and S&P are likely to raise the country's cost of borrowing even further.

In late August — a month before Israel [carried out strikes](#) on Lebanon's capital and the ground incursion against Hezbollah in the country's south — the Institute for National Security Studies estimated that just one month of "high-intensity warfare" in Lebanon against the militant group, with "intensive attacks" in the opposite direction that damage Israeli infrastructure, could cause Israel's budget deficit to soar to 15% and its GDP to contract by up to 10% this year.

Uncertainty 'the biggest factor'

To shrink the fiscal hole, the government can't rely on a healthy flow of tax revenue from businesses, many of which are collapsing, while others are reluctant to invest while it's unclear how long the war will last.

Coface BDi, a major business analytics company in Israel, estimates that 60,000 Israeli firms will shut this year, up from an annual average of around 40,000. Most of these are small, with up to five employees.

"Uncertainty is just bad for the economy, bad for investment," said Avi Hasson, the CEO of Startup Nation Central, a non-profit that promotes Israel's tech industry globally.

In a recent report, Hasson warned that the remarkable resilience of Israel's tech sector so far "will not be sustainable" in the face of the uncertainty created by the prolonged conflict and the government's "destructive" economic policy.

Even before the October 7 attack, government plans to weaken the judiciary were prompting some Israeli tech companies to [incorporate in the United States](#). The insecurity created by the war has exacerbated that trend, with most new tech companies formally registered overseas, despite tax incentives to incorporate locally, and a large number considering moving some of their operations outside Israel, Hasson told CNN last month.

He remains bullish on Israeli tech, pointing to robust fundraising, but cautions that the industry's future growth "depends on regional stability and responsible government policies."



Apartment blocks and office buildings under construction in Tel Aviv in August 2024.
Florion Goga/Reuters

Other sectors of Israel's economy, while less important than tech, have been hit much harder. The agriculture and construction sectors have struggled to fill gaps left by Palestinians whose work permits have been suspended since October last year, pushing up prices for fresh vegetables and leading to a steep decline in housebuilding.

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Tourism has also taken a knock, with arrivals down sharply this year. Israel's tourism ministry has estimated that the drop in foreign tourists has translated into 18.7 billion shekels (\$4.9 billion) in lost revenue since the start of the war.

The Norman, a boutique hotel in Tel Aviv, has had to lay off some staff and cut its prices by up to 25%, partly because some of its facilities — including its Japanese rooftop restaurant — remain closed to save on costs.

Occupancy levels have fallen from above 80% before war to below 50% currently, according to the hotel's general manager Yaron Liberman.

“We know the day when the war will finish it's going to be crazy here as far as business coming back,” he told CNN in mid-September, citing correspondence from would-be guests keen to visit Israel but unable to book flights or secure travel insurance.

But for now, “the biggest factor is the uncertainty,” Liberman said. “When is the war going to end?”



Israel and the Coming Long War

To Defeat Iran's Resistance Axis, the IDF Needs a New Strategy
—and a Unified Country

By **Assaf Orion** September 12, 2024



Hezbollah members at the funeral of a Hezbollah fighter killed in an Israeli strike, in southern Beirut, August 2024

Alkis Konstantinidis / Reuters



In the weeks since late July, when Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh was assassinated in Tehran and Hezbollah senior commander Fuad Shukr was killed in Beirut, there has been much speculation about the eruption of a wider conflict in the Middle East. According to this view, if Iran and Hezbollah choose to retaliate through major direct attacks on Israel, they could transform Israel's current campaign in Gaza into a regional war. In this scenario, Israeli forces would then be engaged in high-intensity fighting on multiple fronts against multiple armed groups, terrorist militias, and a nuclear-threshold state's military equipped with a huge arsenal of long-range missiles and drones.

In some ways, this wider regional war is already at hand. From the outset, "the Gaza war" was a misnomer. Ever since Hamas's heinous October 7 attack nearly one year ago, Israel has faced not one but numerous antagonists in what has already become one of the longest wars since Israel's founding. The day after Hamas's assault from Gaza, Hezbollah began attacking Israel from Lebanon, declaring that it would continue its attacks as long as the fighting in Gaza continued. Shortly thereafter, the Houthis in Yemen also joined in, launching continual attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea and launching missiles and drones at Israel, including one that exploded in central Tel Aviv.

Meanwhile, Shiite militias in Iraq, and sometimes Syria, have also menaced Israel with drones and rockets. And in mid-April, after Israel carried out a deadly airstrike near an Iranian diplomatic complex in Damascus, Iran retaliated by launching more than 350 ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones at Israel, creating a new precedent for direct and open combat between the two countries. At the same time, Iran has been flooding the West Bank with funds and weapons to encourage terrorist attacks against Israel and undermine security within Israel itself.

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Nonetheless, so far, this multifront war has been of limited intensity. If Israel or its enemies decide to escalate on any of the other fronts, it would have profound implications for Israeli security and strategy. Not since the 1973 Arab-Israeli war has Israel waged a full-fledged war on multiple fronts simultaneously. Nor has it faced a major offensive from another regional power. For decades, Israel has instead concentrated on addressing the threat of nonstate armed groups. Since its establishment in 1948, Israel's security concept has been based on short wars on enemy territory—an approach that allows it to maximize its military punch and compensate for its basic disadvantages: its small territory and population, as well as its lack of strategic depth and domestic resources to support protracted campaigns.

Nearly a year of high- and medium-intensity fighting in [Gaza](#) and limited-intensity fighting on the northern border with Lebanon has severely strained this paradigm. Years of political turmoil within Israel itself have jeopardized the country's strength. If Iran, Hezbollah, and other Iranian-backed groups move toward high-intensity warfare on other fronts as well, it will be paramount for Israel to put its security strategy on a stronger footing. To triumph in a true multifront war, Israel will have to combine all the tools of national power—political, military, economic, technological, informational, and diplomatic—with the vital help of allies and partners. And it will need to find new ways to endure in a longer, intensive fight. Israel's political-military leadership will need to look ahead to an even more dangerous future but also learn from Israel's own early history—when, with far more limited military resources, it often faced multiple aggressors at once and prevailed.

A SEVEN-FRONT WAR

From the beginning, Israel's current war has been unlike any of its predecessors of recent decades. The day after Hamas's barbaric and murderous [October 7](#) assault—in which the group killed more than 1,200 civilians and soldiers and took more than 200 hostages—Israel formally declared war for the first time in 50 years. From the outset, it was clear that this war would be different from Israel's previous operations in Gaza. To remove the threat and prevent such attacks from being repeated, it needed to destroy Hamas's terror army, end its control over the Gaza Strip, and prevent its rearmament and resurgence in the future.

To achieve these difficult tasks, Israel must dismantle Hamas's army units and governing bodies; destroy its armaments, production sites, tunnels, and command posts; and degrade Hamas's fighting force. It must also safeguard Gaza's borders in the long term, in coordination with Egypt and other partners. And at the same time, Israel has also had to try to prevent other members of Iran's "axis of resistance," such as [Hezbollah](#) and the Houthis, from fully joining into the war.



As Israel's offensive unfolded, the country soon found itself contending with seven fronts across the Middle East. In Gaza, Israeli forces combined airstrikes and ground maneuvers to dismantle Hamas's army units and establish freedom to operate. Along the northern border with Lebanon, they began defensive operations against Hezbollah, which had begun regular missile, drone, and rocket attacks into Israel. Over the following months, Israel also undertook targeted operations against senior Hamas and Hezbollah figures across Lebanon, including in Beirut. Over time, Israel carried out strikes in Iran and Yemen, conducted counterterrorism operations in the West Bank, and targeted Iranian-backed groups and advanced weapons sites in Syria. Assisted by the United States and other partners from the region and the West, Israel has also been able to deploy impressive multinational and multilayered air defenses against threats from all directions.

Despite considerable military successes, the war has come with high human, economic, and political costs. After nearly a year of fighting, Israel needs more weapons, ammunition, and spare parts. In the short term, this means relying more on the [United States](#); in the medium and long term, it will require much higher investment in defense. Since the October 7 attacks, the IDF has also lost over 700 troops, and thousands more have been wounded. The burden on reservists is already heavy. Against this background, there are growing calls to recruit additional segments of Israeli society into the army, in particular the ultra-Orthodox, who are mostly exempt from service and staunchly oppose any new requirement.

To these existing challenges, a full-scale regional war would add new pressures and even higher costs. To prepare for that, Israel needs to undertake a larger rethinking of its security strategy, one that in some ways revives the approach it followed in the early decades of its existence.

"THE CASE OF EVERYTHING"

As the war in Gaza threatens to become a high-intensity regional conflict, it marks a return to the threat posed to Israel during its foundation and through its early decades. In those years,

Israel repeatedly fought against a coalition of Arab forces. The IDF of that time was built around, and prepared to deal with, what was known as the “case of everything”—a situation in which the country was attacked simultaneously by multiple enemies on multiple fronts.

With its comparatively small population and territory, the fledgling state of Israel was surrounded by regular armies belonging to significantly larger Arab countries. The key to its defense, therefore, was the ability to hold off enemy offensives with its small regular forces; quickly mobilize its larger reserve forces; move to the offensive, if possible, on enemy soil; win decisive victories by gaining local superiority, one front at a time; and bring about the defeat of the combined enemy armies, in a brief time. Given the disparities in human and military potential between Israel and its enemies, Israel’s general security concept also tended to emphasize short and decisive wars, fought in enemy territory. By maximizing Israel’s military effectiveness while lowering the risk to Israel’s home front, these kinds of wars played to the IDF’s strengths and allowed the country to quickly return its economy and society to normal.

To enable this strategy, this unwritten security concept was built on three pillars: deterrence, early warning, and decisive victory. (Subsequently added to these were two additional pillars: protection/defense and the imperative of seeking support of a major power.) Deterrence meant using Israel’s formidable record of victories (and enemy defeats) to dissuade any antagonist from attacking the country. Early warning enabled the quick call-up of reserve forces, thus allowing Israel’s large pool of citizen-soldiers to continue contributing to the economy and society until mobilized for active duty. On the military level, it also gave the IDF the capability

to quickly surge its order of battle. Decisive victory sought to remove any existing threat and further bolster deterrence.

Many of the assumptions underlying Israel's existing security doctrine have been contradicted.

The strategy was successful. In the 1948 War of Independence, after nearly two years of fighting, Israel overcame the combined armies of six Arab states and the Palestinian forces. In 1967, Israel again took on the multipronged Arab threat, defeating the armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, plus the air forces of Iraq and Lebanon in the Six-Day War. And in 1973, Israel repulsed and defeated Egypt and Syria after their surprise Yom Kippur offensive.

Precisely because of that success, however, the threat of national armies joining forces against Israel receded. Egypt and Jordan signed peace treaties with Israel, and with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Arabs' major patron, followed by the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the so-called Arab Spring, the relative strength of other states weakened. After 1973, Israel never faced an Arab coalition again. Instead, it fought mainly against nonstate terrorist organizations, including Hezbollah and Palestinian groups in Lebanon; Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and other organizations in Gaza and the West Bank; and global Jihad groups, such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State (also known as ISIS), across the region. Those enemies were indeed sponsored by regional powers such as Iran and Iraq, but except in the 1991 Gulf War, when Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein launched ballistic missiles at Israel, direct fighting between Israel and those countries has been avoided, except with Syria in and over Lebanon.

Meanwhile, the ballistic arms threat to Israel's home front, demonstrated by Iraq's missiles and rockets, encouraged Israel to add the protection pillar to its security concept. In the past two decades, it has developed multitier missile and rocket defenses, including the Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow systems—and new laser systems are in development. Over the years, Israel focused its defense efforts on nonstate enemy groups, adapting some of its original pillars of defense to contend with these weaker but also subconventional enemies. For example, early warning systems have been used far more often to sound alarms about terror attacks rather than enemy invasions.

At the level of military strategy, IDF planners sought to maintain the ability to simultaneously defend Israel from multiple potential attackers while conducting a decisive offensive operation against a single one. In this regard, starting in the early years of this century, Israel viewed the primary land front as southern Lebanon, where Hezbollah, the most heavily armed nonstate group in the region, was based. Hamas in the Gaza Strip was viewed as secondary, while Iran, sharing no border with Israel, was a unique theater. The working assumption of Israeli strategists was that when war comes, dealing with Hamas could wait until Israel had achieved a decisive victory in Lebanon.

THE END OF SHORT WARS

In the current war in Gaza, the inadequacy of the existing security framework has become clear. First, on October 7, 2023, Israel fell short on implementing three of the four pillars: its deterrence proved ineffective, its early warning systems failed, and its feeble ground defense collapsed before the massive Hamas invasion. Equally important, as the war has unfolded, many of the principles and assumptions underlying the existing security doctrine and planning have been contradicted: Israel is fighting a war that began on its own soil, and its border communities in the north and south have been displaced; the primary front has been in Gaza, against Hamas, not Lebanon, the stronghold of the much more formidable Hezbollah; Israel has chosen a long war rather than a short one; and multiple enemies backed by Iran have joined in, including Iran itself, a major regional power.

Following its concept of decisive victory, Israel has set out to defeat Hamas's terrorist army. After nearly a year, it has made significant advances toward this goal, demonstrating high intelligence and operational capabilities, fiercely fighting in densely built-up areas, above and below ground. Most of Hamas's army units have been defeated and dismantled, most of its rocketry and production sites have been destroyed, and more than half its forces—at least 17,000 out of an estimated total of 30,000 fighters—have been killed. Yet Israel is still a long way from eliminating the threat, with Hamas already showing signs of resurging, recruiting new members to its ranks and stubbornly maintaining its grip on the ground.



An Israeli soldier in the southern Gaza Strip, July 2024

Ohad Zwigenberg / Reuters

In the past, Israel has been acutely aware of short domestic and international time horizons —“sand dials”—for its military campaigns and has therefore sought to rapidly maximize gains before being pressed to stop by the United States and other powers. By contrast, the prolongation of the current war, partly by Israel’s choice, has imposed high costs on its army,

society, and economy. The wide devastation of the Gaza Strip and the large civilian casualties reported by Hamas are undermining Israel's reputation and standing, provoking increasing international criticism and initial punitive steps. The long war since October 7 has underscored, by its own liabilities, the importance of Israel's preexisting principle favoring short wars.

If the war becomes wider as well as longer, existing security assumptions will be even further challenged. In an all-out regional war, Israel would be fighting not only terrorist armies and militias sponsored by Iran but also Iran itself. Together, these enemies would be attacking Israel from Gaza, the northern border, and the West Bank, as well as from afar—from the east and south. Just as it took several wars and many decades for Israel to vanquish the threat of Arab coalitions, victory over the Iranian axis would require a prolonged struggle.

THE COMING STORM

A broader war would be far more devastating than anything seen so far. Iran and the axis would likely act with far more operational coordination. Axis forces would also likely attack U.S. forces in the region, as well as Jordan and Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. At least on a political and logistical level, China and Russia might be drawn in as well, thereby opening up another active theater of their great-power competition against the West.

Israel, on the one hand, and Hezbollah, Iran, and perhaps others, on the other, would draw on a far greater range of capabilities, including weapons that haven't yet been employed. The pace of attacks would also grow exponentially. Over the past 11 months, Hezbollah has launched over 7,600 rockets at Israel, and Israel has attacked more than 7,700 Hezbollah targets in Lebanon. In an all-out war, that scale of exchanges could take place within a few days. Combined with thousands of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones fired by Iran, Hezbollah's vast arsenal would significantly challenge Israel's air defenses. In addition, Israel would likely stage a ground offensive into Lebanese territory and Hezbollah would attempt cross-border operations into Israel. Iran's militias would be expected to attack Israel from both Lebanon and Syria, and if they succeeded, through Jordan.

The nature of Israeli and enemy casualties would also change. Apart from combatants, casualties in the war so far include the civilian population of Gaza, which Hamas has used as human shields, and of the border areas of Israel and Lebanon. The Houthis' attacks in the Red Sea have also diverted international shipping, resulting in significant economic hits to Egypt and Jordan but relatively few casualties. In a broad war, the human cost would likely expand to wider parts of the population in the warring countries and territories, and there would be far greater damage to population centers and national infrastructure, including vital energy and oil facilities.

The IDF needs 15 additional battalions to address current and pending missions.

The sheer number of actors would create a tumultuous maelstrom of its own. Just as the decision of a secondary actor in Iran's axis, Hamas, sparked the current chain of events, the insertion of additional players directly into the war, including militias in Iraq and Syria, as well as Hezbollah, will make it even more difficult to anticipate and steer the unfolding conflict. The added complexity of both multiple enemies and partners will also make it harder not only to formulate and implement a common strategy but also to control escalation and bring the war to a close.

In all these issues, conserving military and economic resources will be vital. With multiple threats along Israel's borders, the IDF may be required to operate in Lebanon, Gaza, the West Bank, and perhaps Syria, even as it continues to secure its peaceful borders with Egypt and Jordan. Manpower will be in even higher demand. Critical voices within Israel have decried the fact that in previous years the government faced budget shortfalls that resulted in large cuts in Israel's defense budget, shutting down tank brigades, air squadrons, and other units. Now, Israel's military leaders say that the IDF needs 15 additional battalions, or about 10,000 soldiers, to be able to address current and pending missions, including the ability to carry out simultaneous offensives on several fronts. As of now, IDF land forces that are deployed in Gaza will be needed in Lebanon if the war expands, and already hard-pressed reservists will be required to shoulder an even heavier burden.

Israel's endurance is becoming as important as its ability to throw a decisive military punch. The IDF has been optimized for very high-intensity clashes lasting several weeks. In the current prolonged war situation, Israeli forces require not only more manpower and battle formations but also far greater stocks of weapons, ammunition, and spare parts. For now, Israel has been able to obtain increased supplies from the United States, but in the medium and longer terms, it will need to significantly raise its defense budget and expand its defense industries. The Israeli economy has already been significantly affected by the war, including credit rating downgrades and supply chain disruptions. Small businesses and the high-technology industry have also had to deal with owners and workers being mobilized for many months. These effects will only soar in a large-scale regional war, with the potential for significant enemy strikes on Israel's home front.

TUNNEL VISION

Up to now, the Israeli government has continued to focus on its goals in Gaza: defeating Hamas, removing the threat it poses, and bringing the hostages home. In regard to the war's other theaters, the government's main directive has been only to avoid escalation and prevent actions that would interfere with the main effort in the south. Despite mounting attacks from multiple fronts, Israel has not yet formulated a comprehensive strategy to deal with this broader complex of challenges across the full theater of war. Take the northern border: although Israeli leaders have paid lip service to securing the area and allowing displaced

civilians to safely return home, the government has yet to adopt this goal as a formal war objective.

Compounding the problem, the Israeli government has largely failed to address the legal and political dimensions of the war. The more the war is prolonged, the more Israel faces political isolation and questions about the legitimacy of its operations, even as negative international views of the enemy camp—between Gaza and Tehran—remain fairly stable. One reason for this is that the Israeli government has refused to articulate any positive vision for the “day after” the war beyond Hamas’s defeat. In a broad regional conflict, this problem could be extended to other arenas as well: especially in Lebanon, it will be crucial for Israel to have a clear end game and explain how it will shape relations and security architectures throughout the Middle East, having Iran’s threats in mind.



Israeli protesters calling for government action to release the hostages taken by Hamas, Tel Aviv, September 2024
Florian Goga / Reuters

It is urgent for Israel to recognize the full extent of the strategic challenge it faces. Even if Hamas surprised its axis partners with the timing of its October 7 attack, the current war, and

the regional war that could soon follow, must be seen in relation to Iran's larger, long-term project to bleed out and destroy Israel. Iran and its allies have already shown increasing brazenness in their willingness to attack Israel. They have brandished new weapons systems—including missiles, drones, and advanced antitank missiles—that pose a serious threat to Israel, and they have implemented an array of fighting strategies—tunnel warfare, fighting from among civilian populations, and information and legal warfare—that make it difficult for Israel to maximize its relative strengths. Moving to a high-intensity war would be another major step in the axis campaign.

To contain this broader threat, Israel can no longer rely on raw military strength alone. It must use all the various tools of national power as well as the help of allies and partners—perhaps even of a coalition of forces. Such support would make it possible for Israel to mitigate some of its vulnerabilities, including by offsetting combined enemy resources and compensating for the lack of strategic depth. The potential of a coalition approach was forcefully demonstrated by Israel and its partners' resounding defeat of Iran's missile and drone attack in mid-April.

At the center of such a coalition must be the United States, which leads the security architecture of the Middle East alongside like-minded countries and regional partners. Israel's relations with neighboring countries will also greatly benefit from normalization with Saudi Arabia, but such a step would require significant progress on Israeli-Palestinian relations. Nonetheless, Israel's strategic relationship with Washington is and must remain a central pillar of its national security. In the event of a large-scale regional war, this relationship will be even more critical.

THE EIGHTH FRONT

With Iran as the core of the axis of resistance and Hezbollah the most serious military threat on Israel's borders, Israel's strategy must deal with the threats in the order of their severity and urgency. First, Israel should seek to end the war in Gaza and transition its fighting there to a long campaign. At this point, this is mostly a political step, since military operations have already become more limited. Of course, Israel will need to continue fighting Hamas and seeking its enduring defeat, but that can happen after the release of the hostages.


Gradually, with assistance from international organizations and Arab states, an alternative Palestinian regime must replace Hamas in Gaza, perhaps one area at a time. To prevent Hamas from taking over the West Bank, Israel should stabilize the territory by supporting accountable governance, supporting the economy, and promoting the rule of law, both through its own police and the security forces of the Palestinian Authority. And Israel should advance enabling conditions for resolving the conflict in the long term while avoiding steps that would lead to annexation of the West Bank and a one-state reality.

Years of political turmoil within Israel have jeopardized the country's strength.

Sooner or later, Israel will also have to address the Hezbollah threat in Lebanon, preferably by diplomacy but more probably by war. Optimally, it would do this by means of a carefully planned, preventive attack at a time of its choosing rather than by an uncontrolled escalation or deterioration of the current fighting. Until it is possible to take such a step, Israel should strive to end the fighting in Lebanon and distance Hezbollah from the border through diplomacy, but with no illusions that this will solve the problem. If it becomes clear that Hezbollah is preparing for a major attack on Israel, it would be wise for Israel to consider another preemptive strike, but this time with much stronger signaling, including lethal force against a broader range of targets.

Israel will also have to continue to disrupt Iran's efforts to arm its proxy forces and its pursuit of nuclear weapons. This will require stronger cooperation with Israel's partners, including,

foremost, the United States, but also other like-minded countries in the West and the region. And to truly end the threat posed by the Houthis to international interests will require a collective approach that tackles the problem at its source: by addressing the supply chain that is funneling Iranian support and weapons technology to the Houthis and by weakening the Houthis' power in Yemen by reinforcing their competitors.

To win a long-term, intensive multifront war, Israel would have to increase defense budgets; open new production lines for munitions; harden its critical national infrastructure, such as energy and communication; and expand the IDF's pool of recruitment to additional parts of Israeli society. Most critically, however, it will have to resolve the country's political crisis, which has undermined its resilience, encouraged its enemies, and prevented Israel from developing the broader strategy it needs. The war's most vital front is the eighth one: the home front. Israel's national security begins at home, and until the government can pull its divided house together and restore Israeli unity, it will be impossible to restore security and peace in Israel and in the region. 

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Ed Husain

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COUNCIL *on*
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RELATIONS

U.S. Troops in the Middle East: Mapping the Military Presence

The U.S. military has an extensive footprint in the Middle East, including a collection of permanent bases and various naval assets, such as aircraft carriers and destroyers.

Article by Jonathan Masters *and* Will Merrow

Last updated October 1, 2024 9:00 am (EST)



Service members perform preflight checks at Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar. Trevor T. McBride/DoD

The United States maintains a considerable military presence in the Middle East, with forces in more than a dozen countries and on ships throughout the region's waters. That presence has expanded in 2024 as the United States focuses on deterring and defeating threats from Iran and its network of armed affiliates in the region, including Hamas (Gaza Strip), Hezbollah (Lebanon), the Houthis (Yemen), and several Iraq- and Syria-based militant groups.

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October 2023 outbreak of war between Hamas and Israel, a U.S. ally and defense partner, U.S. forces in the Middle East have been increasingly targeted by some of these groups—and have regularly responded with counterstrikes. Meanwhile, U.S. and coalition ships have been protecting merchant shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, defending against near-daily Houthi drone and missile attacks.

The Pentagon has also responded as hostilities between Israel and Iran, and Israel and Hezbollah have flared in recent months. In April, U.S. warplanes and ships successfully intercepted dozens of drones and missiles fired at Israel in an unprecedented direct attack by Iran. In early October, the United States announced it was sending dozens more aircraft (three squadrons) to the region, as Israel commenced a ground incursion against Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Iran launched another, larger barrage of missile strikes against Israel. U.S. naval forces reportedly shot a dozen interceptors at the Iranian missiles.

U.S. troop levels in any given region can fluctuate greatly, depending on the particular security environment, national defense priorities, and various other considerations. As of October 2024, U.S. defense officials said there were some forty-thousand service members in the Middle East, many on ships at sea in the region. In total, the United States has military facilities across at least nineteen sites—eight of them considered to be permanent by many regional analysts—in countries including Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan,

Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates. The U.S. military also uses large bases in Djibouti and Turkey, which are part of other regional commands but often contribute significantly to U.S. operations in the Middle East.

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countries have basing agreements with the United States, except Syria, where U.S. forces are opposed by the government. Qatar hosts U.S. Central Command's regional headquarters. Bahrain hosts the most permanently assigned U.S. personnel and is home to the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet. As of early August, the navy had multiple large warship formations conducting operations in the region, including a carrier strike group and an amphibious assault group.



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The Complex Reality of Great Power Competition in the Middle East

Four indicators show trends of engagement, but the region remains immune to sweeping generalizations.

By _____ and _____

Published on September 10, 2024

In the collective memories of people across the Middle East and North Africa, great power rivalries have shaped the region's fate at multiple critical junctures. In the first part of the twentieth century, following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, colonial competition between Britain and France created the modern borders and nation-states of the Middle East. Toward the end of the century and after five Arab-Israeli wars, crucial peace treaties and multilateral negotiations were mediated by great powers, particularly the United States.

The 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait precipitated the permanent stationing of U.S. troops in the Middle East. A chain of subsequent events—including the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—culminated in the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and established the United States as the dominant power in the Middle East and North Africa. However, Washington soon found itself drowning in successive geopolitical crises resulting from growing Iranian influence, the rise of nonstate actors, the persistence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and increasing doubts among America's allies about its security commitments.

Today's Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is at the core of the

competition between the United States and its great power rivals, China and Russia. China has grown increasingly preoccupied with securing energy supplies from the Gulf. Russia has been invested in protecting the few allies it has in the region and in disrupting the U.S.-led regional security architecture.

All three powers understand both the geostrategic significance of the region and the risks it poses to world peace and security, as well as the economic opportunities and young populations that will shape its future. All of this has drawn the world's great powers to the region in search of military presence, security allies, trade partners, market shares, and investment opportunities.

The powers' successes have varied, creating a complex geostrategic map that does not lend itself to sweeping generalizations. But in a new project for Carnegie, we **compiled and examined** a variety of data sources to explore the ways that the United States, China, and Russia have bilaterally engaged Arab League countries as well as Iran, Israel, and Türkiye between 2012 and 2022. We focused on four indicators—trade, foreign direct investment, arms exports, and military deployment—to show trends of engagement. Overall, the project presents a unique, comprehensive view of the great power competition within MENA that further illustrates the region's textured, nuanced relationships.

FEATURE

Navigating Influence: Great Powers in the Middle East and North Africa

In recent years, much talk in U.S. policy circles has centered around the pivot to Asia and the low return on America's continued involvement in

the MENA region. Conventional wisdom in Washington has often described recent U.S.–Middle East posturing as signaling “**retreat**” or “**withdrawal**,” while wary of how China or Russia may take advantage of the “**vacuum**” left behind.

The 2023 Beijing-brokered détente between Iran and Saudi Arabia is often **cited** as evidence for the shift. However, our database reveals the need for a more nuanced analysis, as different engagement patterns have emerged that vary from one MENA country to another and from one MENA subregion to another.

Take the Arabian Peninsula. From oil-exporting Saudi Arabia to war-torn Yemen, this MENA subregion has been in the global spotlight in recent years. It is home to international trading chokepoints such as the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Strait of Hormuz, **vital yet vulnerable undersea cables** in the Red Sea, and top oil-producing countries. Recent attacks on international shipping from Ansar Allah (also known as the Houthis) on have illustrated the peace and security challenges emanating from this subregion. Disruptions in the Red Sea have had significant implications for all great powers: The **United States** and its **allies** have seen shipping costs from China to ports along the Mediterranean Sea rise by **44 percent in December 2023**, as a result of the Houthi attacks. Russia’s oil exports to India have also been impacted as a result of hindered access to the Suez Canal.

In this subregion, the influence of the three great powers and their interactions with regional actors defy any simplistic explanation. While Washington does not need to worry about its diplomatic and security engagement with the Gulf countries, other elements of geostrategic influence are becoming spheres of contestation with Beijing and Moscow.

The sheer number of state-to-state interactions such as bilateral visits—including in either country or at a third location—between the United States and Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and Yemen between 2012

to 2022 exceeded the combined number of visits between Russia, China, and these aforementioned states. Even as Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that his country's relations with the UAE were at an **"unprecedented high level,"** the number of bilateral meetings between the two still trailed behind the United States.

Yet, the economic ties—especially in terms of trade—between China and the subregion have significantly increased. Many factors may help explain this jump: Increased trade relations may not necessarily correspond to warmer diplomatic relations but may stem from practical needs. Chinese President Xi Jinping has repeatedly **stressed** the importance of energy security, as Chinese oil demand continues to **grow**. The decrease of trade volume between the United States and many Gulf countries, on the other hand, may be partly explained by the **U.S. shale boom**.

Aside from trade relations, U.S. security ties with the Arabian Peninsula have certainly strengthened between 2012 and 2022. U.S. arms exports to Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE in 2022 far exceeded its exports to these countries a decade ago. The estimated volume of arms transfers from the United States to Kuwait was more than ninety times greater in 2022 compared to 2012. Comparatively, arms exports from China to the subregion remained relatively stagnant. On top of arms exports, the United States is the only country out of the three with military bases and significant troop deployment to the region.

Despite perceptions of a U.S. retreat from the Middle East and concerns over a vacuum potentially filled by China or Russia, the reality of engagement is more textured and complex. The data show varied patterns of influence and interaction, revealing that while trade with China has indeed surged, the United States retains robust diplomatic and security ties across the Arabian Peninsula. Moreover, the ongoing strategic importance of the region to global peace and security calls for a nuanced understanding of the multi-aligned Middle East.



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Explainer: What Middle East conflict means for the global economy

By Mark John

October 3, 2024 2:09 PM EDT Updated 18 days ago



Palestinians inspect the site of Israeli strikes on houses, amid the Israel-Hamas conflict, in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, October 2, 2024. REUTERS/Hatem Khaled [Purchase Licensing Rights. opens new tab](#)

Oct 3 (Reuters) - Rising tensions in the Middle East add new uncertainties for the global economy even as policymakers start to congratulate themselves on having steered it out of a bout of high inflation without triggering recession.

Israel, which has been fighting with Hamas in Gaza for almost a year, has [sent](#) its troops into southern Lebanon after two weeks of intense airstrikes, escalating the conflict in the Middle East.

The following sketches what we know about how this could play out on the world economy in the weeks ahead.

WHAT IMPACT, IF ANY, HAS BEEN FELT SO FAR?

Very little beyond the immediate region, with the main effects limited to financial markets as investors hedge their portfolios with safe-haven assets. The U.S. dollar has been a beneficiary since Iran's ballistic missile attack on Israel: the dollar index, which measures the U.S. currency against the euro, yen and four other top currencies, is [trading](#) around three-week peaks.

Oil prices rose around 2% on Thursday on concerns a wider conflict could disrupt crude oil flows from the region - for example if Israel chose to target Iranian oil infrastructure which in turn could trigger retaliation from Iran.

But it is not clear that this will translate into the kind of sustained, sharper rises that motorists start to notice at the fuel pump. Analysts [point out](#) that the United States has high levels of crude oil inventories while OPEC producing nations have enough spare capacity to smooth out the impact of disruptions, at least in the short term.

HOW ARE ECONOMIC POLICYMAKERS REACTING?

As always, central bankers stress that their job is to look beyond unpredictable, one-off shocks to the economy and instead focus on the deeper, underlying trends. But they cannot afford to totally ignore geopolitical events either.

Bank of England Governor Andrew Bailey [told](#) The Guardian newspaper that the bank could move more aggressively to cut interest rates if inflation pressures continue to weaken - suggesting central bankers for now did not see the Middle East conflict as a major threat to their attempts to temper inflation. Bailey said there seemed to be a commitment to keep oil markets stable but he also said the conflict could yet push up oil prices if things keep escalating.

Sweden's Riksbank Deputy Governor Per Jansson delivered a similar message, saying the effects of the Middle East conflict were not yet enough to warrant scratching economic forecasts.

The International Monetary Fund [said](#) on Thursday an escalation of the conflict in the Middle East could have significant economic ramifications for the region and the global economy, but commodity prices remain below the highs of the past year. It was too early to predict specific impacts on the global economy, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said.

WHEN WILL ANY IMPACT BECOME MORE EVIDENT?

For context, Brent crude futures are currently around \$75 a barrel, well below their \$84 level at the time of Hamas' Oct. 7 strike on Israel nearly a year ago and far off the \$130 highs reached after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Europe would be exposed to rising oil prices because, unlike the United States, it has no major domestic oil production. But even there, policymakers estimate a durable 10% rise in prices would be needed to push up inflation by just 0.1 percentage point.

The economic impacts of an all-out war that led to wider attacks on energy infrastructure throughout the Middle East and Gulf regions plus further disruptions to trade routes through the Red Sea, would be more tangible.

Oxford Economics estimated such a scenario would spike oil prices up to \$130 and knock 0.4 percentage points off global output growth next year, which the International Monetary Fund currently sees at around 3.3%.

(This story has been corrected to change the year to 2022, not 2023, in paragraph 14)

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<https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/06/five-factors-shaping-future-egypt-israel-relations>

Five Factors Shaping the Future of Egypt-Israel Relations

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Any further Egypt-Israel tensions may spell danger for an already troubled region.
- The Egyptian-Israeli relationship will undoubtedly be critical in shaping Gaza's future.
- Egypt remains a key player not just in Gaza but also the wider conflict's next stages.

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- The Egyptian-Israeli relationship will undoubtedly be critical in shaping Gaza's future.
- Egypt remains a key player not just in Gaza but also the wider conflict's next stages.

Thursday, June 13, 2024

/READ TIME: 11 minutes

By: [Ambassador Hesham Youssef](#)

The Gaza war has strained Egyptian-Israeli relations to an unprecedented level and raised questions about the future of their 1979 peace treaty that has been a cornerstone of Arab-Israeli peace. U.S. officials met recently in Cairo with their Israeli and Egyptian counterparts against a backdrop of mutually diminishing confidence between the two parties, particularly following Israel's ground offensive in Rafah. This comes on the heels of a shooting incident between Israeli and Egyptian forces that left at least one Egyptian soldier dead, and Egypt joining South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Along with Qatar, Egypt is a key broker in the current Israel-Hamas cease-fire efforts and engages in extensive security cooperation with the U.S. and Israel.



People gather on the Gaza side of the closed Rafah border crossing with Egypt on Monday, Oct. 16, 2023. (Samar Abu Elouf The New York Times)

Moving forward, the answers to five key questions will affect the future of Egyptian-Israeli relations, and in turn, the political and security dynamics across the region.

Will confidence between the parties continue to diminish?

Many Egyptians have long feared that Israel's ultimate objective is to transfer "the Gaza problem" to Egypt through mass displacement of Gazans into Egypt and now through an effort to hand Egypt (among others) responsibility for Gaza's future security and governance, including confronting the remaining Hamas forces after the war ends.

Egypt, understanding Israel's need to respond to Hamas' October 7 attack, adopted a restrained approach, particularly compared to other regional countries like Turkey and Jordan. But Cairo felt this restraint was not appreciated, nor were Egyptian sensitivities around Rafah and the Philadelphi Corridor — a strip of land running the length of the Egyptian-Gaza border that Israel controlled until its 2005 disengagement from Gaza — taken into account by Israel. Tensions reportedly grew to the point that Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi [refused](#) to take a call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Egypt's joining the ICJ case against Israel is another strong signal of Cairo's frustration.

Many are wondering whether the Israel-Egypt peace treaty could be in jeopardy. Indeed, as far back as January, the head of Egypt's State Information Service [warned](#) that Israel taking control of the Philadelphi corridor would be a violation of the 1979 peace treaty. The Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) — the organization responsible for monitoring its implementation — is expected to issue a report outlining any violations of the treaty during the war.

Despite these tensions, both sides are clear in their commitment to the Israel-Egypt peace treaty, and it is not in any imminent danger.

Still, despite these tensions, both sides are clear in their commitment to the treaty, and it is not in any imminent danger. It is expected that any violation will be dealt with according to the treaty's dispute settlement provisions, as was the case in a 1982 dispute between Egypt and Israel on the demarcation of the border in the Taba area.

After taking over the Philadelphi Corridor, Israel announced that it has discovered at least [50 tunnels](#) in the area although it is not clear how many of them led to [Sinai](#). This continues to be a point of serious Israeli concern.

On the economic front, Egypt has been importing natural gas from Israel since 2020 following a decrease in its own production. At the outset of the war, Israel suspended its gas exports to Egypt — later to be [resumed](#) but in smaller quantities. [Plans](#) were announced in August 2023 to increase future Israeli gas exports to Egypt, starting in July 2025 for the next 11 years, by an additional 4 billion cubic meters, which is three times the current export levels. Rolling power outages have been on the rise in Egypt causing public dismay and the government indicated that this is due to shortages in [gas supplies](#) as well as foreign currency requirements. It is not clear whether Egypt's position regarding Gaza will have an impact on Israel cutting gas exports because the implications of such an action may be devastating to both sides, particularly Egypt.

What will happen on the Israel-Gaza-Egypt Border?

The control, security, humanitarian assistance and movement of people around the Egyptian-Gaza border is another major point of contention. In the first weeks of the war, an official [spokesman](#) for the Israeli army indicated that Palestinians should head to Egypt, which Cairo strongly [criticized](#). Israel responded by indicating that the border crossing was [closed](#). Egypt carried out a diplomatic campaign explaining why it could not accept refugees, resulting in a firm pushback from Western powers.

Around [100,000](#) Palestinians have fled from Gaza to Egypt since the beginning of the war. The fear of mass displacement was heightened during the beginning of the attack on Rafah. But, a staggering [one million](#) Palestinians fled Rafah, mainly heading north to Khan Younis and were not forced to go to Egypt, reducing tension over mass expulsion.

Israel's operation in Rafah has been another major stressor in the relationship. For weeks, the international community — including the U.S., the EU, and Arab states — urged Israel not to attack Rafah, particularly since there was no plan to protect the 1.4 million civilians that were living there, to no avail. However, this campaign clearly affected the extent of the severity of the attack.

A secondary result of the Rafah operation was Israel taking control of the Palestinian side of the Rafah crossing and the Philadelphi corridor, leading Egypt to close the Rafah crossing. Egypt has refused to reopen it and allow humanitarian aid to pass through as long as Israeli forces maintain control over the Palestinian side of the crossing, and Israel objects to the Palestinian Authority (PA) taking control of the crossing indicating that it can go through the Kerem Shalom border crossing. The U.S. has been working to resolve this impasse and is [expected](#) to soon present a proposal for reopening the crossing.

The issue of tunnels has become particularly fraught. In a statement before the ICJ, Israel indicated that it had discovered at least 50 tunnels in the Gaza-Egypt border area, but it was not clear how many of them crossed the border into Egypt. Egypt has been working to make sure that all these tunnels are destroyed. A recent report indicated that [secret military documents](#) reveal that more than 2,000 tunnels were destroyed by Egyptian military engineers in the Rafah area between 2011 and 2015. An Egyptian [official](#) also indicated that Egypt had destroyed over 1,500 tunnels over the years. It was also [reported](#) that Egypt flooded the tunnels and relocated people living close to the border to other areas and a buffer zone was established to deal with the problem. Still, Israel publicly aired its distrust surrounding this issue.

As the war continues, the risks of friction increase as Israeli and Egyptian forces continue to operate in close proximity in a tense environment.

As the war continues, the risks of friction increase as Israeli and Egyptian forces continue to operate in close proximity in a tense environment. There have already been two dangerous incidents. The [first](#), two weeks into the war, was an Israeli attack on the Egyptian side of the Rafah crossing that Israel claimed was accidental. And, as noted above, an Egyptian [soldier](#) was killed after an exchange with Israeli forces on the border. While both sides downplayed these incidents, there are real risks that a future incident could spiral out of control.

How will humanitarian aid access play out?

For most of the war, the Rafah crossing was the main route for providing humanitarian assistance to Gaza. But the crossing was designed only for the movement of people, and not for goods. Not a single truck has entered Gaza without Israeli approval. Not grasping this point, the Arab public has been critical of Egypt for not doing more to push aid into Gaza. For its part, Egypt has been quite critical of Israel's efforts around humanitarian assistance for Gaza since the early days of the war, with the [Egyptian president](#) publicly criticizing Israel for hindering aid flows.

This has also been the position of numerous other countries, including the United States. In his first phone call with Netanyahu after the expanded Israeli ground operation in Gaza, [Biden](#) “underscored the need to immediately and significantly increase the flow of humanitarian assistance.” A recent U.S. State Department [report](#) said that Israel initially did not cooperate with U.S. and international aid groups to allow humanitarian aid and thus contributed significantly to the lack of aid, but acknowledged that has changed over time.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza remains critical. A U.N. [report](#) indicated that Israeli authorities' [restrictions and denials](#) of planned aid movements continue to hamper the delivery of life-saving assistance to Gaza. In March, [more than half](#) of U.N.-coordinated food missions to high-risk areas requiring coordination with Israeli authorities were either denied or impeded. A more recent U.N. [report](#) indicated that the already insufficient flow of humanitarian assistance to meet the soaring needs of Gaza has dropped by 67% since May 7.

Egyptian-Israeli cooperation will be critical in addressing Gaza's dire humanitarian situation.

Whither the Israeli-Palestinian peace process?

Despite the daunting current challenges, resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is now front and center for those hoping to make the October 7 war the final war between Israelis and Palestinians. Biden has reiterated the need to move toward the two-state solution numerous times since the war started. Yet, Egypt and several Arab countries have indicated to Israel, the U.S., and European countries that progress will be predicated on action and not just rhetoric. The Arab world sees a credible linkage between necessary near-term steps and a clear diplomatic endgame toward a two-state solution as an absolute necessity.

Despite the daunting current challenges, resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is now front and center for those hoping to make the October 7 war the final war between Israelis and Palestinians.

Netanyahu has rejected the idea of a Palestinian state for many years and the broader Israeli public is also increasingly skeptical of a two-state solution in the wake of the October 7 attack. However, he and his coalition partners have no alternative visions regarding how to end the conflict writ-large, or even to avoid a quagmire in Gaza. Going forward, the linkage of a political endgame and postwar reconstruction will need to be tackled, as virtually all donors will be unwilling to finance reconstruction without assurances that their contribution will not be destroyed in a few years.

If the political will is there, particularly in the U.S., regional partners would be more than ready for heavy lifting in a meaningful manner, including through the normalization track with Saudi Arabia. Egypt, as the neighbor with the most at stake in Gaza and a 45-year peace with Israel, remains a key player not just in Gaza but also the wider conflict's next stages.

How will Gaza's governance, security and reconstruction proceed?

For years before the war, Egypt, Jordan and other regional countries disapproved of Netanyahu's [policy](#) of weakening the PA and allowing Hamas to be strengthened. While Israel's objective is to defeat Hamas, these countries believe that this is not an achievable goal and that Hamas cannot be dealt with solely through force. The group has been heavily degraded militarily and can no longer govern Gaza, but there is no agreement on who will replace Hamas in Gaza. Egypt is understandably concerned about a vacuum there leading to a wave of radicalization and extremism. Cairo sees speedy recovery and reconstruction as a way to reduce this risk.

The Arab world — and much of the rest of the world — maintains that a reformed [PA](#) is the only credible option for Palestinian governance in postwar Gaza. Despite having worked with the PA for years, the Israeli government objects to this proposal. Cairo sees no real alternative other than a path in that direction. Regional leaders are stressing that Israel and the United States should commit to Palestinian self-determination in Gaza and the West Bank and support that effort to enable the region to take on heavy lifting.

Israel and Egypt have to do their utmost to ensure that their relationship is put on a constructive path.

There are also the questions of how reconstruction will take place. If the provision of humanitarian assistance has proven difficult, reconstruction — particularly the issue of “dual-use materials” — will be more so. The Biden administration's May 2024 [National Security Memorandum](#) acknowledged that Israel “has, on occasion, stretched dual-use issues to a concerning degree.” In tackling recovery and reconstruction, new processes will be needed. The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism established after the 2014 war is no longer fit for purpose, and Egypt is not confident that a more effective mechanism can be established in time to address Gaza's critical recovery and reconstruction needs. The Egyptian-Israeli relationship will undoubtedly be critical in shaping Gaza's future.

Israel and Egypt have to do their utmost to ensure that their relationship is put on a constructive path. Further deterioration will have hugely negative implications for both countries and the region at large. An active U.S. role in addressing these fissures will be instrumental.

PHOTO: People gather on the Gaza side of the closed Rafah border crossing with Egypt on Monday, Oct. 16, 2023. (Samar Abu Elouf The New York Times)

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s).

The EU in the Middle East: Challenges and Opportunities

SITUATION REPORTS - April 30, 2024

By **Timothy Hopper**



The Middle East is a region of strategic importance for the European Union due to its geographical proximity and historical, economic, and political ties. However, the region is also a source of instability and conflict, which pose serious threats to the security and interests of the EU member states. The recent escalation of the war between Israel and Hamas, the ongoing violence in the occupied West Bank, and the clashes between Israel and Hezbollah at the Lebanon border have added to the complexity and urgency of the situation. How can the EU play an active and effective role in the Middle East, by adopting a new global strategy and changing its political and security approach? What are the tools, challenges, and opportunities that the EU has in the region?

EU Policy in the Middle East

The EU has pursued two main strategies toward the Middle East region in the past two decades: the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). These strategies have aimed to prevent the spread of security crises in the Union's neighboring countries by promoting European norms, such as liberal democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. However, these strategies have proven to be ineffective and insufficient in dealing with fast-changing and dynamic developments in the region. The ENP and the EMP have failed to address the root causes of the problems and conflicts in the region, such as the lack of political and economic reforms, the marginalization and oppression of people, the interference of external actors, and the unresolved issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Recent regional events, such as the Arab Spring and the emergence of new power structures and transnational actors, have shown the limitations and inefficiencies of these strategies. They have also highlighted the need for the European Union to review and redefine its role in the international system, especially in the Middle East region.

The EU acknowledged this need in its global strategy document of 2016, where it stated that internal and external security are interlinked and that the current challenges and threats, such as terrorism and violence, in the Middle East and North Africa region are a common opportunity for EU countries to build a stronger Europe based on interests and principles. The EU also declared its intention to enhance its security and defense policy by developing more military capabilities and increasing its cooperation with NATO and other partners. Finally, Brussels expressed its commitment to support the political and economic transitions in the region by providing more financial and technical assistance, fostering dialogue and cooperation, and promoting regional integration and stability.

EU Challenges in the Middle East

However, the EU faces three barriers to playing an active and effective role in the Middle East. Firstly, there is a lack of a coherent and comprehensive approach toward the region at the Union level. This stems from the divergent interests and perspectives of the major European countries, which make it hard to reach a common policy in dealing with the complex and diverse issues and actors in the region. This problem has led to the independent policies of large and powerful European countries, such as France and Germany, who pursue bilateral interactions with regional actors to gain influence and geostrategic position. Another factor that limits the EU's role is the economic crisis, which has reduced the financial capacity of the Union to manage and respond to the needs of this crisis-stricken region. The EU's structural weakness, the lack of a judicial mechanism to enforce its decisions and resolutions, and its insufficient foreign policy levers are other factors that undermine the Union's decision-making capacity.

Secondly, the Middle East has diverse and complex political structures, problems, crises, and actors. The governments in the region are not mainly based on the will and vote of the people, but rather on various forms of authoritarianism, sectarianism, nationalism, and tribalism. The region also faces various types of crises, such as civil wars, ethnic conflicts, humanitarian disasters, terrorism, and extremism. The actors in the region are not only states but also non-state actors, such as militias, rebel groups, religious movements, and regional powers. These factors make it difficult for the Union to adopt a fixed and specific policy for the region, as it has to deal with each case separately and independently.

Lastly, trans-Atlantic issues have also hindered the EU's active and effective role in the Middle East, as the United States and Israel have often opposed the EU's independent role, instead preferring that the EU play a complementary role within the framework of their policies. The United States and Israel have different interests and perspectives from the EU on various issues in the region, such as the Iranian nuclear program, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Syrian crisis, and the role of regional powers.

EU Opportunities in the Middle East

Despite these challenges, the EU also has some opportunities to play a positive and constructive role in the Middle East, by using its soft power and diplomatic tools, as well as its economic and humanitarian aid. The EU can leverage its reputation and credibility as a neutral and honest broker, as well as its experience and expertise in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, to mediate and facilitate dialogue and cooperation among the conflicting parties in the region. The EU can also support the political and economic reforms and transitions in the region by providing more incentives and conditionality, as well as more flexibility and differentiation, to the countries that are willing and able to implement the European norms and values. The EU can also promote regional integration and stability by supporting the existing regional organizations and initiatives, such as the Arab League and the Arab Peace Initiative, and by creating new platforms and mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation, such as the Union for the Mediterranean and the 5+5 Dialogue.

The EU can also cooperate and coordinate with other international and regional actors, such as the United States, Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran, to address the common challenges and threats in the region, such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, global terrorism, climate change, and migration. Finally, the EU can use its trade and energy relations with the region, as well as its development and humanitarian assistance, to foster economic and social development, reduce poverty and inequality, and improve the living conditions and human rights of the people in the region.

The Middle East crisis

Background

The EU has unequivocally condemned, in the strongest possible terms, the violent and indiscriminate terrorist attacks across Israel carried out on 7 October 2023 by Hamas. It has expressed its solidarity with Israel and emphasised its right to defend itself in line with humanitarian and international law.

It has equally reiterated the importance of ensuring the protection of all civilians at all times in line with international humanitarian law.

In the aftermath of these attacks, the humanitarian situation of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip has sharply deteriorated due to the continued intensification of hostilities and the consequent Israeli military operation, along with the blockade of Gaza.

In focus

Commission announces additional €30 million of humanitarian aid to Lebanon

3 October 2024 - As the escalation of hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel continues, the European Commission has announced a further €30 million in humanitarian aid to help those most in need in Lebanon. This brings total EU humanitarian assistance to the country to over €104 million this year. This new emergency aid package will provide urgent food assistance, shelter and health care amongst other essential support. The Commission is also facilitating the delivery of material assistance via the EU Civil Protection Mechanism to Beirut.

[Read more](#)



Over 20 years of EU humanitarian and development support to Palestinians

The EU has always been the largest international donor to the Palestinian people. Moreover, the EU has been providing humanitarian assistance to Palestinians in need since 2000.

Following Hamas' recent terrorist attacks, the EU has:

- [quadrupled its humanitarian support to Palestinians in Gaza to over €103 million in 2023](#)
- [launched an EU Humanitarian Air Bridge operation](#) to bring lifesaving supplies to humanitarian organisations on the ground in Gaza
- stepped up [humanitarian aid for Palestinians](#) for 2024

As of October 2024, thanks to the Humanitarian Air Bridge, at least 60 flights have delivered over 3,000 tonnes of aid. The operations aim to facilitate the prepositioning of aid in support of fast delivery of assistance to people in need in Gaza.



UNICEF

Through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) the EU also support the Cyprus Maritime Corridor with an EU logistics hub in Cyprus that facilitates channeling the aid from Member States to Gaza. We also work with World Health Organization (WHO) to medically evacuate Palestinian patients from Gaza to Europe, in a Team Europe approach.

In July 2024, the EU announced short-term emergency financial support to the Palestinian Authority to help address its most pressing financial needs and support its reform agenda. Worth €400 million in grants and loans and subject to progress in the implementation of the reform agenda, this support will pave the way for a Comprehensive Programme for Palestinian recovery and resilience. €272 million has already been disbursed.

Humanitarian support

€238 million
of humanitarian aid committed* in 2024
Over €103 million
in humanitarian funding, in response to the dramatic increase of needs in 2023
More than €1.1 billion
in humanitarian assistance to help meet their basic needs since 2000

* including the additional top-up of €45 million announced by President von der Leyen in September 2024, subject to the approval of the Budget Authority.

Development support

€2.2 billion
allocated for 2014-2020
Almost €1.36 billion
allocated for 2021-2024, out of which over €920 million approved

- 16 OCTOBER 2024

More about the EU support to Palestinians - Factsheet

English

(6.33 KB - HTML)

[Download](#)

Diplomatic efforts in conflict resolution

The European Union remains committed to a lasting and sustainable peace based on the two-state solution through reinvigorated efforts in the Middle East Peace Process.

The EU remains in contact with regional leaders and continues its diplomatic efforts including by:

- Calling for protection of civilians in line with international humanitarian law
- Redoubling its humanitarian engagement in the region
- Calling for dialogue between Israel and its neighbours to continue to keep stability and peace in the region
- Seeking a long-term solution that brings peace and security to everyone.

Addressing terrorist, illegal and harmful content on social media

Following the terrorist attacks by Hamas against Israel, and in view of illegal and harmful content circulating on social media, the Commission is in contact with major platforms to ensure they respect their obligations.

- [Digital Services Act](#): requires large online platforms to remove illegal content and to take measures to tackle the risks to public security and civic discourse.
- [Terrorist Content Online Regulation](#): enables Member States to send removal orders for platforms to take down terrorist content within one hour.

No place for hate: Europe united against hatred

The Commission is also stepping up its efforts to [fight antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred](#) in all its forms, by reinforcing action across a variety of policies, including security, digital, education, culture and sport. This includes additional funding to protect places of worship and will be backed up by the designation of Envoys with an explicit mandate to maximise the potential of EU policies to combat hatred.



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Israel and Hamas Conflict In Brief: Overview, U.S. Policy, and Options for Congress

Updated October 4, 2024

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Israel and Hamas Conflict In Brief: Overview, U.S. Policy, and Options for Congress

Since October 7, 2023, Israel has been at war with the Palestinian Sunni Islamist group Hamas (a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, or FTO), which led an attack that day from the Gaza Strip into Israel. More than 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals (including 46 U.S. citizens in Israel) were killed on October 7, and Hamas and other groups also seized some 251 hostages. Iran has provided material support to Hamas for decades, but the Office of the Director of National Intelligence assessed in February 2024 that “Iranian leaders did not orchestrate nor had foreknowledge of” the attack. The conflict that has ensued in the past year has posed major challenges for U.S. policymakers.

Conflict, humanitarian situation, and international action. In the conflict to date, more than 41,000 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed, according to the Hamas-controlled health ministry there. Additionally, about 90% of Gaza’s some 2.1 million residents have been displaced, with most facing unsanitary, overcrowded conditions alongside acute shortages of food, water, medical care, and other essential supplies and services. Obstacles to transporting aid through crossings and Israeli checkpoints and then safely delivering it have contributed to high levels of food insecurity. According to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) as of August 2024, humanitarian aid was probably preventing famine, but “hunger and malnutrition remain dire, and hunger-related mortality is likely still occurring.”

In May, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered Israel to immediately “halt its military offensive, and any other action in the Rafah Governorate [at the southern tip of Gaza], which may inflict on the Palestinian group in Gaza conditions of life that could bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.” The ICJ does not have an enforcement mechanism, and Israel insisted its operations did not “risk the destruction of the Palestinian civilian population.” Also in May, the International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor applied for arrest warrants for alleged war crimes against Israeli and Hamas leaders, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, triggering denunciations from Biden Administration and Israeli leaders, and efforts by some Members of Congress to advance sanctions against ICC officials.

U.S.-Israel cooperation and tensions (including supplemental appropriations and oversight). The Biden Administration has provided political and material support for Israeli efforts to end Hamas rule in Gaza and secure the return of hostages. In Israel, debate is ongoing about the achievability of, and possible tension between, these objectives. While continuing most U.S. support, the Administration increased criticism of Israel during the first half of 2024, in apparent connection with Israel’s prosecution of the war, questions about how military operations may or may not advance the Israeli government’s stated objectives, and the conflict’s impact on Palestinian civilians. It has continued most U.S. support to Israel, with one shipment of 2,000 bombs paused as of July. The Administration has pushed for a multi-phase cease-fire and hostage-prisoner exchange (working with Qatari and Egyptian mediators) and increases in humanitarian aid and civilian protection. Both Israel and Hamas have reportedly resisted various cease-fire proposals, and there appears to be division within the Israeli government over how to prioritize war aims—including whether or not keeping troops at the Gaza-Egypt border because of smuggling-related concerns may justify delaying a cease-fire that could return some hostages. Some media reports suggest Israel might consider withdrawing from this border if Egypt (with possible U.S. help) installs certain security measures.

In April, Congress appropriated the President’s requested supplemental funding for Israel (\$8.7 billion in Foreign Military Financing and missile defense) and global humanitarian assistance (over \$9 billion) in P.L. 118-50. Congress also included provisions aimed at preventing the \$1 billion of humanitarian aid intended for Gaza from diversion, misuse, or destruction. A February presidential memorandum (an executive document, not standing law) set forth oversight mechanisms for Israel’s compliance with international law as a U.S. arms recipient, and the Administration provided an initial report on Israeli compliance to Congress in May. Also in May, the Administration paused some weapons shipments to Israel, triggering debate in Congress. In August, the Administration formally notified Congress of potential arms sales to Israel for more than \$20 billion, including up to 50 new F-15 fighter aircraft.

Gaza transition planning. U.S. officials have sought to work with Israeli and Palestinian leaders and some Arab governments to plan for a transition of governance and security in Gaza, though they are likely to confront a number of political, security, and logistical obstacles to preventing a Hamas resurgence, establishing law and order, and enacting long-term recovery. U.S. officials have expressed support for a resumption of Palestinian Authority (PA) rule in Gaza after the PA undertakes certain reforms, as part of efforts to move toward a two-state solution; PA and other Arab leaders insist on progress toward a Palestinian state during such a transition. Prime Minister Netanyahu has insisted that Israel have full security control of “all territory west of the Jordan River,” and “overriding security control” in Gaza for the “foreseeable future.”

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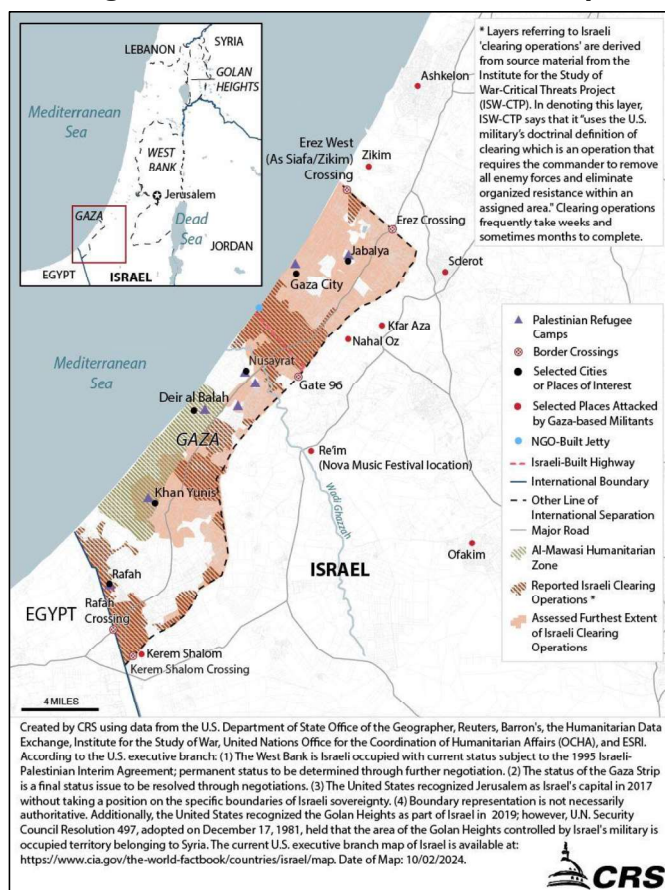
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Overview

Since October 7, 2023, Israel has been at war with the Palestinian Sunni Islamist group Hamas (a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, or FTO), which led attacks on that day from the Gaza Strip into Israel (see **Figure 1**). The nature and extent of the October 7 assault stunned Israelis and many others, and includes allegations of sexual violence.¹ Iran has long provided material support to Hamas, but the Office of the Director of National Intelligence assessed in February 2024 that “Iranian leaders did not orchestrate nor had foreknowledge of” the attack.² Israeli officials may have missed signals, over-relied on technological solutions, overestimated their own defense capabilities, and/or misread Hamas’s intentions and capabilities.³

Figure 1. Israel and Gaza: Conflict Map



The Israel-Hamas war has presented several challenges for U.S. policy in the Middle East. These include how to bolster Israel’s security from attacks and threats posed by Iran-supported actors

¹ UN News, “‘Clear and convincing information’ that hostages held in Gaza subjected to sexual violence, says UN Special Representative,” March 4, 2024.

² Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, February 5, 2024. For more information on Hamas, its possible reasons for the attacks, and Iranian material support for Hamas, see CRS In Focus IF12549, *Hamas: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy*, by Jim Zanotti.

³ Yaniv Kubovich, “Disdain, Denial, Neglect: The Deep Roots of Israel’s Devastating Intelligence Failure on Hamas and October 7,” *Haaretz*, May 9, 2024; Ronen Bergman and Adam Goldman, “Israel Knew Hamas’s Attack Plan More Than a Year Ago,” *New York Times*, November 30, 2023.

near its borders, how to prevent the spread of conflict in the region and manage relationships among Israel and its neighbors, how to provide security assistance for Israel without endangering civilians, how to provide humanitarian aid for civilians displaced or otherwise affected by the fighting, how to help the parties reach a cease-fire agreement that secures the return of hostages (some of whom are U.S. citizens), and how to reconcile Palestinian desires for statehood and post-conflict recovery with Israeli efforts to eliminate Hamas as a political and military force in Gaza.

This report focuses on selected major aspects of the war and issues for Congress. Other CRS products address some related matters, including Israeli domestic politics, developments affecting the West Bank, and broader historical context regarding Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁴ Additional CRS products address elements of broader regional struggle involving Israel (with help from the United States and some Arab states) against Iran and its various allies in Lebanon, Yemen, and elsewhere.⁵

Ongoing Conflict and Related Issues

Israel's war effort and U.S.-Israel cooperation and tensions. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly stated that Israel seeks “total victory” over Hamas,⁶ including by destroying Hamas's military and governing capabilities in Gaza and recovering all hostages. Debate has ensued among Israeli officials and citizens about the achievability of, and possible tension between, these objectives. War cabinet minister Benny Gantz resigned and left the governing coalition in June 2024, asserting that Prime Minister Netanyahu had not sufficiently planned for a post-war transition. Defense Minister Yoav Gallant has called for an agreement that could at least pause fighting for six weeks and allow the return of some hostages.⁷

Defining the success or sufficiency of Israeli operations in Gaza may also be complex and potentially divisive. As Israeli officials have debated the issue, some have asserted that a complete eradication of Hamas from Gaza or Palestinian politics is unlikely.⁸ In September, Defense Minister Gallant said, “Hamas as a military formation no longer exists. Hamas is engaged in guerrilla warfare and we are still fighting Hamas terrorists and pursuing Hamas leadership.”⁹ *New York Times* reports in September cited U.S. officials saying that Hamas's control over Gaza has been “loosened but not broken,” and a former Israeli military commander stating that no one “can challenge Hamas there after Israeli forces leave.”¹⁰

⁴ CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti; and CRS Report R44245, *Israel: Major Issues and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

⁵ CRS Insight IN12347, *Escalation of the Israel-Iran Conflict*, coordinated by Jeremy M. Sharp; CRS In Focus IF12587, *Iran-Supported Groups in the Middle East and U.S. Policy*, by Clayton Thomas; CRS Insight IN12301, *Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea: Issues for Congress*, by Christopher M. Blanchard; CRS Insight IN12309, *Iraq: Attacks and U.S. Strikes Reopen Discussion of U.S. Military Presence*, by Christopher M. Blanchard.

⁶ Israeli Prime Minister's Office, “PM Netanyahu's speech at UNGA in New York,” September 28, 2024.

⁷ “Gallant: Hamas as ‘military formation’ in Gaza is gone, IDF focus shifting to north,” *Times of Israel*, September 10, 2024.

⁸ “IDF spokesman says Hamas can't be destroyed, drawing retort from PM: ‘That's war's goal,’” *Times of Israel*, June 20, 2024. One U.S.-based analyst provided additional perspective on the issue. Bruce Hoffman, “How Much of a Threat Does Hamas Still Pose to Israel?” Council on Foreign Relations, June 14, 2024.

⁹ “Gallant: Hamas as ‘military formation’ in Gaza is gone, IDF focus shifting to north,” *Times of Israel*.

¹⁰ Julian E. Barnes et al., “Hamas Uses Brutal Tactics to Keep Its Grip on Gaza,” *New York Times*, September 15, 2024; Adam Rasgon, “Hamas Is Surviving War with Israel,” *New York Times*, September 17, 2024.

The United States has continued to provide political and material support for Israeli efforts to end Hamas rule in Gaza and secure the return of hostages. However, during the first half of 2024, the Biden Administration increased criticism of Israel in connection with Israel's prosecution of the war, questions about the extent to which military operations may or may not advance the Israeli government's stated objectives, and greater casualty counts and reported humanitarian challenges among Palestinian civilians.¹¹ The Administration also has pushed for a multi-week cease-fire that it asserts would facilitate the release of hostages, more humanitarian aid, and civilian protection.

After a Year of War: Key Information

Casualties and hostages. Reportedly, as of October 2, 2024, more than 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals (including 46 U.S. citizens in Israel) had been killed as a result of the October 7 attacks, more than 41,000 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed, and at least 346 Israeli soldiers have died in battle since Israel's military began ground operations in Gaza.¹² Israel claims it has killed around 17,000 of Hamas's some 25,000-30,000 fighters, including half the leadership of its military wing.¹³ Hamas and other groups reportedly seized some 251 Israeli and foreign national hostages on October 7, including some Americans.¹⁴ To date, 117 hostages have reportedly been returned alive from Gaza, many in exchange for 250 Palestinian prisoners during a week-long November 2023 pause in fighting.¹⁵ Some 37 additional hostages have been "recovered dead or killed in encounters."¹⁶ About 97 (including some U.S. citizens)¹⁷ reportedly remain in Gaza, though at least 33 of these are presumed dead.¹⁸ Prime Minister Netanyahu reportedly estimated in September 2024 that half the remaining hostages are alive.¹⁹

Humanitarian situation. The humanitarian impact of conflict on Gaza's some 2.1 million Palestinian residents has been dire—with around 90% displaced, and most facing threats from the fighting, overcrowding and unsanitary conditions, and acute shortages of food, water, medical care, and other essential supplies and services.²⁰ According to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) as of August 2024, humanitarian aid was probably preventing famine, but "hunger and malnutrition remain dire, and hunger-related mortality is likely still occurring."²¹ UN officials assess that, as of September 30, various states have provided about half of the \$3.4 billion projected as required for calendar year 2024 to meet the most critical needs of populations in Gaza and parts of the West Bank.²² During summer 2024, the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed the reemergence of the polio virus in Gaza, leading to an emergency vaccination campaign for children there.²³ As

¹¹ "Read the Full Transcript of President Joe Biden's Interview with TIME," *Time*, June 4, 2024.

¹² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA), "Humanitarian Situation Update #224 | Gaza Strip," September 30, 2024; "Reported impact snapshot | Gaza Strip," October 2, 2024; White House, "Remarks by President Biden Before the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly | New York, NY," September 24, 2024. Palestinian casualty figures, which presumably include combatants and civilians, come from the Hamas-controlled health ministry in Gaza.

¹³ Emanuel Fabian, "IDF assesses Hamas defeated militarily in all of Gaza, is now a guerrilla terror group," *Times of Israel*, September 27, 2024; "Israeli military says half the leadership from Hamas' military wing eliminated," Reuters, July 16, 2024. Israel reportedly killed another 1,000 militants inside Israel on October 7, 2023.

¹⁴ Chantal Da Silva, "Who are the American hostages still held by Hamas?" NBC News, September 23, 2024.

¹⁵ "Who are the hostages freed during the Israel-Hamas conflict?" CNN, August 27, 2024; Erin Banco, "Gaza hostage talks hit roadblock, raising fears of prolonged captivity" *Politico*, December 7, 2023.

¹⁶ Da Silva, "Who are the American hostages still held by Hamas?"

¹⁷ Reportedly, "There are seven hostages with dual US-Israeli citizenship; four of them have been declared dead." "Father of US-Israeli hostage denies American families pushing Biden to make separate deal," *Times of Israel*, September 5, 2024.

¹⁸ Da Silva, "Who are the American hostages still held by Hamas?" Hamas also holds two hostages and the bodies of two slain Israeli soldiers from before October 7.

¹⁹ Noa Shpigel, "Netanyahu Reportedly Tells MKs Half the Hostages Held by Hamas in Gaza Are Alive," *Haaretz*, September 22, 2024.

²⁰ UN-OCHA, "Humanitarian Situation Update #224 | Gaza Strip," September 30, 2024; "Reported impact snapshot | Gaza Strip," October 2, 2024.

²¹ FEWS NET, *Gaza Strip Targeted Analysis, August 2024*, published September 26, 2024.

²² UN-OCHA, "Humanitarian Situation Update #224 | Gaza Strip," September 30, 2024.

²³ WHO, "Around 560 000 children vaccinated in first round of polio campaign in Gaza," September 13, 2024.

winter approaches, UN officials have said that “flooding in or near displacement sites and medical points will increase the risk of disease spread and further shrink access to healthcare and sanitation.”²⁴

Obstacles to transporting aid through crossings and Israeli checkpoints and safely delivering it to Gazans have contributed to high levels of food insecurity. In a May 2024 report to Congress (according to a document released online by an advocacy group stating that it is a copy), the Department of State said, “During the period since October 7, and particularly in the initial months, Israel did not fully cooperate with USG efforts and USG-supported international efforts to maximize humanitarian assistance flow to and distribution within Gaza. There were numerous instances during the period of Israeli actions that delayed or had a negative effect on the delivery of aid to Gaza.”²⁵ The report also noted with concern Israeli strikes on humanitarian workers and facilities, including an April 1 Israeli drone strike that killed seven humanitarian workers from the World Central Kitchen organization (including a U.S. citizen); the Israeli government described that strike as a “grave mistake.” In June, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that Israel had taken some steps to address obstacles to aid delivery, while calling on it to do more.²⁶ Israeli officials have stated that they have not limited aid, instead placing responsibility for delays on security-related issues (such as looting) and UN distribution problems.²⁷ Incidents in which aid convoys have come under fire amid disputed or uncertain circumstances highlight continued challenges that Israel and aid providers face in coordinating and deconflicting activities.²⁸

Damage and estimated costs. According to one economist, “Rebuilding Gaza could cost far more than \$80 billion, when taking into account hidden expenses like the long term impact of a labor market devastated by death, injury and trauma.”²⁹ More than 60% of residential buildings in Gaza have reportedly been damaged or destroyed.³⁰ Meanwhile, Israel’s central bank has estimated (before the September escalation in Lebanon) that the war could cost Israel \$67 billion through 2025,³¹ and Israel’s gross domestic product has reportedly contracted 4.1% since October 7.³²

Impact on Gaza and international responses. Casualties, widespread damage and destruction, and a precarious humanitarian situation in Gaza during Israeli military operations have fueled charged international debates and regional reactions that often sharply criticize Israel, seek punitive measures, and/or call for an end to conflict.

- In January 2024, the **International Court of Justice (ICJ)** found that it had jurisdiction over allegations by South Africa that Israel may have committed acts of genocide. In May, during continuing deliberations on the case, the ICJ ordered Israel to, among other things, immediately “halt its military offensive, and any other action in the Rafah Governorate [at the southern tip of Gaza], which may inflict on the Palestinian group in Gaza conditions of life that could bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.”³³ The ICJ does not have an

²⁴ UN-OCHA, “Humanitarian Situation Update #223 | Gaza Strip,” September 27, 2024.

²⁵ Just Security, “State Department Submits Key Report to Congress on Israel’s Use of US Weapons,” May 10, 2024.

²⁶ Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken At the ‘Call for Action: Urgent Humanitarian Response for Gaza’ Conference,” June 11, 2024.

²⁷ Israeli Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories “Food and food security in the Gaza Strip—response to IPC report,” at <https://govextra.gov.il/media/ns2jsy0f/cogat-assessment-food-and-food-security-in-the-gaza-strip-response-to-ipc-report-1.pdf>.

²⁸ Mehul Srivastava and Neri Zilber, “Israeli air strike on Gaza aid convoy kills at least 4 Palestinians,” *Financial Times*, August 30, 2024.

²⁹ Daniel Egel of the RAND Corporation, cited in Fadwa Hodali et al., “Gaza Reduced to 42 Million Tonnes of Rubble. What Will It Take to Rebuild?” *Bloomberg*, August 15, 2024.

³⁰ UN-OCHA, “Reported impact snapshot | Gaza Strip,” October 2, 2024.

³¹ Rachel Chason, “As the war widens and costs mount, Israel’s economy is in ‘serious danger,’” *Washington Post*, September 27, 2024.

³² Dana Stroul, “Israel and Hezbollah Are Escalating Toward Catastrophe,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 23, 2024.

³³ ICJ Order, Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel), May 24, 2024. For more detail on the ICJ, see CRS Report R48004, *The International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court: A Primer*, by Karen Sokol.

enforcement mechanism, and Israel insisted that its operations did not “risk the destruction of the Palestinian civilian population.”³⁴

- In May 2024, **International Criminal Court (ICC)** Prosecutor Karim Khan applied for arrest warrants for alleged war crimes against top Israeli and Hamas leaders, including Prime Minister Netanyahu, triggering strong denunciations from Biden Administration and Israeli leaders who insist that the ICC has no jurisdiction in the matter, and efforts by some Members of Congress to advance sanctions legislation against ICC officials.³⁵
- The **UN Security Council** has adopted four resolutions since October 7 that have called for pauses to the conflict, the release of all hostages, and urgent efforts to expand the flow of humanitarian aid and reinforce the protection of civilians in Gaza.³⁶ The United States abstained from the first three and voted for the fourth in June, which urged both Israel and Hamas to implement a three-phase cease-fire proposal (discussed below).

Regional sentiment and Israel-Arab state relations. The regional reaction to Israel’s military operations in Gaza has been predominantly negative.³⁷ Nevertheless, no Arab country with either peace treaties or normal diplomatic relations with Israel has suspended its treaty or severed diplomatic ties. U.S. negotiations with Saudi Arabia over a series of security and other agreements intended to incentivize Saudi diplomatic normalization with Israel were put on hold following the October 7 attacks and onset of the Israel-Hamas war, but resumed in 2024, with the U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia referring to some possible progress in August.³⁸ In September 2024, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said, “The kingdom will not stop its tireless work towards the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, and we affirm that the kingdom will not establish diplomatic relations with Israel without that.”³⁹ Later that month, the Saudi foreign minister announced the launch of a new joint Arab-European initiative to garner support for a two-state solution.⁴⁰

Cease-Fire Talks

After a number of efforts to reach a multi-week Israel-Hamas cease-fire, President Joe Biden announced on May 31, 2024, that Israel had offered a three-phase cease-fire proposal, and expressed U.S. support for continued Egyptian-Qatari mediation to achieve it:⁴¹

³⁴ “Israel Insists Rafah Operation Does Not Risk ‘Destruction of Palestinians,’” Agence France Presse, May 24, 2024.

³⁵ CRS Insight IN12366, *Israel and Hamas: Possible International Criminal Court (ICC) Arrest Warrants*, by Matthew C. Weed and Jim Zanotti. See H.R. 8282 and S. 224.

³⁶ Resolution 2712 (November 15, 2023), Resolution 2720 (December 22, 2023), Resolution 2728 (March 25, 2023), and Resolution 2735 (June 10, 2024).

³⁷ Laura Kelly, “Arab world holds overwhelmingly negative view of the US over support for Israel: Poll,” *The Hill*, February 8, 2024.

³⁸ Abdulhadi Habor, “Ratney: US Expediting Strategic Agreements with Saudi Arabia,” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, August 26, 2024. See also, CRS Report R48162, *Possible U.S.-Saudi Agreements and Normalization with Israel: Considerations for Congress*.

³⁹ “Saudi Arabia will not recognise Israel without Palestinian state, says Crown Prince,” Reuters, September 18, 2024.

⁴⁰ Joseph Haboush, “Saudi Arabia announces new global coalition to establish Palestinian state,” *Al Arabiya*, September 27, 2024.

⁴¹ White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Middle East” and “Background Press Call on President Biden’s Remarks on the Middle East,” May 31, 2024. An unofficial version of the Israeli proposal is available at (continued...)

- **Phase 1.** A six-week cease-fire, during which Israel and Hamas would negotiate the terms of advancing to Phase 2. Other features included Israel military withdrawal from densely populated areas of Gaza, a limited hostage-prisoner exchange, a surge in humanitarian aid, and the return of Gazan civilians to their home areas.
- **Phase 2.** Hostage-prisoner exchange for all living hostages, Israeli military withdrawal from Gaza, and “permanent cessation of hostilities” so long as Hamas keeps its commitments.
- **Phase 3.** Major Gaza reconstruction plan would begin.

U.S. efforts to promote this proposed cease-fire agreement have not resulted in a deal to date. Hamas supposedly indicated a possible willingness to consider the proposal in a July response.⁴² Later that month, Prime Minister Netanyahu’s office stated that he continued to insist on the following four principles as part of any cease-fire, perhaps partly due to influence from ultra-nationalist members of his coalition who could trigger new Israeli elections:

1. Any deal will allow Israel to resume fighting until all [objectives] of the war have been achieved.
2. There will be no smuggling of weapons to Hamas from Egypt to the Gaza border.
3. There will be no return of thousands of armed terrorists to the northern Gaza Strip.
4. Israel will maximize the number of living hostages who will be released from Hamas captivity.⁴³

Various July 2024 strikes and attacks, including the killings of top Hamas leaders Ismail Haniyeh in Iran and Muhammad Deif in Gaza, may have complicated the course of cease-fire talks.⁴⁴

In an apparent effort to close gaps between Israel and Hamas, in August the White House announced that “the United States with support from Egypt and Qatar, presented to both parties a bridging proposal that is consistent with the principles laid out by President Biden on May 31, 2024.”⁴⁵ Both Israel and Hamas have reportedly resisted various proposals, and there appears to be division within the Israeli government over how to prioritize war aims. On the issue of a continued Israeli military presence at the Philadelphi Corridor along Gaza’s border with Egypt, Netanyahu and Defense Minister Gallant appeared at odds in September—with Netanyahu insisting that Israel needs to maintain control of the Corridor, and Gallant reportedly saying that prioritizing the Corridor “at the cost of the lives of the hostages is a moral disgrace.”⁴⁶ A White

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-israeli-hostage-release-ceasefire-proposal-submitted-on-may-27/>. An Israeli official acknowledged agreeing to the proposal in early June, while saying Israel’s conditions for ending the conflict were unchanged. Christina Lamb, “Netanyahu aide brands Biden peace plan a ‘political speech,’” *Sunday Times* (UK), June 2, 2024.

⁴² Jon Gambrell, “Gaza destruction likely helped push Hamas to soften cease-fire demands, several officials say,” Associated Press, July 8, 2024.

⁴³ Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, “Prime Minister’s Office Statement,” July 7, 2024.

⁴⁴ Peter Baker, “Assassinations in Middle East Scramble Biden’s Hopes for Peace,” *New York Times*, August 1, 2024.

⁴⁵ White House, “Joint Statement from the United States, Egypt, and Qatar,” August 16, 2024. See also, White House, “Background Press Call on Ceasefire Negotiations and Joint Statement from the Leaders of the United States, Egypt, and Qatar,” August 16, 2024; Barak Ravid, “U.S. puts new proposal on table to try to close Gaza deal gaps,” *Axios*, August 16, 2024.

⁴⁶ Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, “PM Netanyahu’s Remarks from his Press Conference,” September 3, 2024; “Gallant said to call Philadelphi demand a ‘disgrace,’ drawing fury from PM, ministers,” *Times of Israel*, September 2, 2024.

House spokesperson called Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar “the big obstacle” to a deal, saying, “It’s tough to get him to say yes to things that he’s already said he wants.”⁴⁷

Israel-Egypt Tensions over Gaza-Egypt Border

In May 2024, Israel reportedly gained control of Gaza’s nine-mile border with Egypt, also known as the Philadelphi (or Salah al Din) Corridor.⁴⁸ Israel’s seizure of this area has heightened bilateral tensions with Egypt and seemingly exacerbated Egyptian security concerns, including in relation to troop deployments per the longtime Israel-Egypt peace treaty.⁴⁹ Israeli authorities cited in May said that controlling the corridor is essential to prevent Hamas from accessing weapons and contraband they say have long been smuggled into Gaza from Egypt,⁵⁰ despite Egyptian officials’ insistence that their forces had previously cut off smuggling routes.⁵¹ As domestic Israeli debate on the subject intensified in September, some Israeli officials or former officials were cited as saying that in the wake of Egyptian anti-smuggling efforts, most of Hamas’s weapons were locally made, and most smuggling came via sea or above ground at the Rafah (Egypt-Gaza) or Kerem Shalom (Israel-Gaza) crossings.⁵²

Although Prime Minister Netanyahu’s office has insisted that Israel will not withdraw from the corridor in connection with a possible cease-fire,⁵³ some media outlets have reported that Israel and Egypt have discreetly discussed a possible Israeli withdrawal if Egypt will agree to anti-smuggling measures including security cameras, electronic sensors, and/or an underground barrier.⁵⁴ Some reports suggest that Egypt might seek U.S. funding and support to install any such measures.⁵⁵

Gaza Transition Planning

U.S. officials have sought to work with Israeli and Palestinian leaders and some Arab governments to plan for a transition of governance and security in Gaza. Any such effort is likely to face tensions between Palestinian aspirations for self-governance and statehood, and demands by Israel for security from future threats. One media outlet has expressed skepticism “that there will be a clear line between war and its aftermath,” describing a number of political, security, and logistical obstacles to preventing a Hamas resurgence, establishing law and order, and enacting long-term recovery for Gazan civilians.⁵⁶ Such challenges may resemble those that Israel, Palestinians, and other international actors faced after the four previous Israel-Hamas conflicts in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021—though on a significantly greater scale.

⁴⁷ Greta Reich, “Hamas’ Sinwar is ‘big obstacle’ in cease-fire talks, John Kirby says,” *Politico*, September 22, 2024.

⁴⁸ “Israel’s military says it’s taken control of a strategic corridor along Gaza’s border with Egypt,” Associated Press, May 29, 2024.

⁴⁹ Jared Malsin and Summer Said, “Israel’s Rafah Offensive Puts Egypt in a Dangerous Bind,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2024.

⁵⁰ Steven Erlanger et al., “Condemnation Slows, but Does Not Stall, Israel’s Assault on Rafah,” *New York Times*, May 25, 2024; Benny Avni, “Jerusalem-Cairo Relations in Jeopardy Over Disagreements Regarding Gaza and the Hamas War,” *New York Sun*, May 13, 2024.

⁵¹ “Egypt replies to ‘false Israeli allegations’ about smuggling weapons through borders with Gaza,” *Egypt Today*, April 22, 2024.

⁵² Vivian Yee et al., “How Control of One Gaza Border Has Stalled a Cease-Fire and Upset Egypt,” *New York Times*, September 14, 2024.

⁵³ “Netanyahu’s office denies report Israel open to pullout from Gaza-Egypt border,” *Times of Israel*/Reuters, July 12, 2024.

⁵⁴ Patrick Kingsley et al., “Israel Is in Talks to Withdraw from the Egyptian Border, Officials Say,” *New York Times*, July 16, 2024; Barak Ravid, “Israel toughens Gaza ceasefire demands just as optimism for deal growing,” *Axios*, July 11, 2024.

⁵⁵ Rina Bassist, “Are Israel, Egypt inching closer to deal on Gaza’s Philadelphi Corridor?” *Al-Monitor*, July 24, 2024; “Netanyahu’s office denies report Israel open to pullout from Gaza-Egypt border,” *Times of Israel*/Reuters; “Report: Egypt will work with US to build underground barrier at Gaza border if deal reached,” *Times of Israel*, July 8, 2024.

⁵⁶ “Optimistic plans for post-war Gaza have little basis in reality,” *Economist*, July 18, 2024.

The Biden Administration has publicly expressed hope that a cease-fire could eventually facilitate the orderly handover of governance to a “reformed” PA and “an over the horizon process that includes a vision for a demilitarized Palestinian state.”⁵⁷ The Administration has also asserted that Arab states open to relations with Israel have a key role to play in post-conflict transition efforts, and that addressing Palestinian aspirations is necessary to securing their involvement.⁵⁸ West Bank-based PA President Mahmoud Abbas said in September 2024 that the PA is willing to exercise full jurisdiction over Gaza—which Hamas forcibly seized from the PA in 2007—as part of a broader plan that would include holding “an international peace conference ... within a year to implement a two-state solution.”⁵⁹ The League of Arab States has publicly called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza and “irreversible steps” toward a two-state solution.⁶⁰ While Hamas might disclaim formal governing responsibilities in Gaza, some observers expect it may seek to intimidate the PA or any potential alternative entity in hopes of maintaining indirect control.⁶¹ The U.S. Security Coordinator for Israel and the PA (USSC), a multilateral mission headed by a three-star U.S. flag officer, could conceivably conduct training in Jordan or the West Bank for a local Palestinian force for Gaza.⁶²

Prime Minister Netanyahu has insisted Israel have full security control of “all territory west of the Jordan River,” and said that his years-long stance on the subject has prevented the establishment of a Palestinian state.⁶³ He has publicly rejected having the PA replace Hamas in Gaza, arguing that the PA enables terrorism against Israel rhetorically and financially.⁶⁴ In his July 2024 speech to a joint session of Congress, Netanyahu said that Israel does not seek to resettle Gaza, but “must retain overriding security control” for the “foreseeable future,” while also stating that “Gaza should have a civilian administration run by Palestinians who do not seek to destroy Israel.”⁶⁵

U.S. Foreign Aid and Arms Sales to Israel

In the immediate aftermath of the Hamas-led October 7 attacks against Israel, President Biden announced that his Administration would surge “additional military assistance, including ammunition and interceptors to replenish Iron Dome” so that “Israel does not run out of these critical assets to defend its cities and its citizens.”⁶⁶ (See **Table 1** for recent U.S. aid to Israel.)

⁵⁷ U.S. Embassy in Israel, “Ambassador Lew’s Remarks to the National Israel Mission of the Conference of Presidents,” February 18, 2024.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ “President Abbas at UN General Assembly: We demand suspension of Israel’s UN membership,” Wafa News Agency, September 26, 2024.

⁶⁰ Bahrain News Agency, “Bahrain Declaration of 33rd Arab Summit issued,” May 17, 2024.

⁶¹ “Optimistic plans for post-war Gaza have little basis in reality,” *Economist*. Matthew Levitt, “What Hamas Wants in Postwar Gaza,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 10, 2024.

⁶² Neri Zilber, “Israel tests Hamas-free ‘bubbles’ plan for post-war Gaza,” *Financial Times*, July 1, 2024. For background on the USSC and U.S. security assistance for the PA, see CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

⁶³ Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, “Statement by PM Netanyahu,” January 21, 2024. See also, Andrew Carey, “Israeli lawmakers vote overwhelmingly against Palestinian statehood, challenging US policy,” CNN, July 18, 2024.

⁶⁴ Benjamin Netanyahu, “Israel’s Three Prerequisites for Peace,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 26, 2023; Jacob Magid, “Netanyahu privately showing openness to PA involvement in postwar Gaza—officials,” *Times of Israel*, July 2, 2024. The PA and Palestine Liberation Organization have made payments for decades to alleged militants and their families that many U.S. and Israeli officials and lawmakers argue provide incentives for terrorism against Israel, while the PA has also engaged in regular security coordination with Israel and the United States since 2007 to counter Hamas and other militants in the West Bank.

⁶⁵ Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, “PM Netanyahu’s Address to a Joint Meeting of the US Congress,” July 24, 2024.

⁶⁶ White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Terrorist Attacks in Israel,” October 10, 2023.

President Biden’s order resulted in (as of August 2024) over 500 aircraft deliveries and 107 sea shipments to Israel of over 50,000 tons of munitions and weapons systems.⁶⁷ Amongst the U.S. defense articles delivered to Israel, the United States shipped (as of June 2024) 14,000 MK-84 2,000-pound bombs; 6,500 500-pound bombs; 3,000 Hellfire precision-guided air-to-ground missiles; 1,000 bunker-buster bombs; and 2,600 air-dropped small-diameter bombs.⁶⁸

Table 1. U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel: Appropriations Since March 2024

(in millions of current U.S. dollars)

Law	Foreign Military Financing	Missile Defense	Missile Defense - Iron Beam	Other
P.L. 118-50, Division A—Israel Security Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2024	\$3,500.00	\$4,000.00	\$1,200.00	n/a
P.L. 118-47, Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024	\$3,300.00	\$500.00	n/a	\$95.50
P.L. 118-42, Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024	n/a	n/a	n/a	\$13.00
Total	\$6,800.00	\$4,500.00	\$1,200.00	\$108.50

Source: Congress.gov.

Note: The “Other” column includes Department of Defense appropriations for counter-tunnel and counter-drone programs, U.S. contributions to binational foundations, and support for migrants.

When U.S. resupply operations began in October 2023, President Biden emphasized “the critical need for Israel to operate by the laws of war. That means protecting civilians in combat as best as they can.”⁶⁹ In January 2024, as the war continued and Palestinian civilian casualties mounted, the United States and Israel set up a bilateral channel to investigate reports of civilian harm.⁷⁰

Then, amidst continued international scrutiny of Israel’s conduct during the war, the Biden Administration took additional steps aimed at promoting adherence to international law and accountability for U.S. arms deliveries to Israel. On February 8, President Biden issued NSM-20, a National Security Memorandum (an executive branch policy document, not standing U.S. law) that required that prior to the transfer of any U.S. defense article, the Departments of State and Defense must obtain “credible and reliable” written assurances from the recipient country that it will use any such defense articles in accordance with international humanitarian law and, as applicable, other international law. It also required that in any area where such defense articles are used, the “recipient country will facilitate and not arbitrarily deny, restrict, or otherwise impede the transport or delivery” of humanitarian assistance.⁷¹ NSM-20 also required the Secretaries of

⁶⁷ Yonah Jeremy Bob, “US sends 500th aircraft to Israel as airlifts of weapons, equipment continue,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 26, 2024.

⁶⁸ Humeyra Pamuk and Mike Stone, “US has sent Israel thousands of 2,000-pound bombs since Oct. 7,” Reuters, June 28, 2024.

⁶⁹ White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the United States’ Response to Hamas’s Terrorist Attacks Against Israel and Russia’s Ongoing Brutal War Against Ukraine,” October 20, 2024.

⁷⁰ “Gaza: US sets up channel with Israel seeking answers on civilian casualties,” Reuters, January 25, 2024.

⁷¹ White House, “National Security Memorandum on Safeguards and Accountability with Respect to Transferred Defense Articles and Defense Services,” February 8, 2024. Section 620I of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended (22 U.S.C. 2378-1) says that “[n]o assistance shall be furnished under this chapter or the Arms Export Control (continued...)”

State and Defense to assess for Congress whether U.S. defense articles have been used after the memorandum's issuance in a manner not consistent with international law. In late March, Israel provided its recipient country assurances to the United States.

Following the issuance of NSM-20, there was continued scrutiny from some lawmakers,⁷² additional reports of U.S. munitions used in airstrikes which resulted in Palestinian and other civilian casualties,⁷³ and Israel's errant April 1 targeting of World Central Kitchen aid workers. In April, President Biden reportedly toughened his calls for increased humanitarian access and protection of aid workers.⁷⁴ During his April 4 phone call with Prime Minister Netanyahu, according to the White House readout, President Biden "made clear that U.S. policy with respect to Gaza will be determined by our assessment of Israel's immediate action" on steps to address civilian harm, humanitarian suffering, and the safety of aid workers.⁷⁵ Some analysts assessed that President Biden had implicitly threatened "to slow U.S. arms transfers to Israel or to temper U.S. support at the U.N." if Israel did not take certain steps.⁷⁶

In May 2024, the Administration released its report to Congress under Section 2 of NSM-20, concluding (according to a document released online by an advocacy group stating that it is a copy) that "given Israel's significant reliance on U.S.-made defense articles, it is reasonable to assess that defense articles covered under NSM-20 have been used by Israeli security forces since October 7 in instances inconsistent with its IHL [International Humanitarian Law] obligations or with established best practices for mitigating civilian harm."⁷⁷ Despite the concerns raised, the report, as it appeared online, assessed Israel's March assurances (along with those of the other countries covered in the report) to be "credible and reliable so as to allow the provision of defense articles covered under NSM-20 to continue."

Also in May, after Israel launched major ground operations in Rafah, U.S. officials confirmed reports that the Administration was "reviewing some near-term security assistance" for Israel and had paused a shipment of 2,000-pound and 500-pound bombs, based on concern about their potential use in Rafah.⁷⁸ Though the Administration later released the shipment of 500-pound bombs, as of July 2024, it was reportedly continuing to review the 2,000-pound bomb shipment.⁷⁹

In August 2024, during a congressional recess, the Administration formally notified Congress of five potential Foreign Military Sales (FMS) to Israel for over \$20 billion, including

- up to 50 new F-15A fighter aircraft and F-15 upgrades (\$18.82 billion);
- 32,739 120 mm tank rounds (\$774.1 million);

Act [22 U.S.C. 2751 et seq.] to any country when it is made known to the President that the government of such country prohibits or otherwise restricts, directly or indirectly, the transport or delivery of United States humanitarian assistance."

⁷² Senator Chris Van Hollen, "Van Hollen, Schatz, Colleagues Press Administration on Concerns with New Arms Sales to Netanyahu Government, Request Assurances Prior to Proceeding," February 23, 2024.

⁷³ Stephen Semler, "Gaza breakdown: 20 times Israel used US arms in likely war crimes," *Responsible Statecraft*, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, August 25, 2024.

⁷⁴ Yasmeen Abutaleb, "Biden cease-fire push falters again after new demand by Hamas," *Washington Post*, September 7, 2024.

⁷⁵ White House, "Readout of President Joe Biden's Call with Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel," April 4, 2024.

⁷⁶ "Biden ultimatum to Netanyahu: protect Gaza civilians, or else," Reuters, April 5, 2024.

⁷⁷ Just Security, "State Department Submits Key Report to Congress on Israel's Use of US Weapons," May 10, 2024.

⁷⁸ Department of Defense, "Pentagon Press Secretary Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder Holds a Press Briefing," May 9, 2024.

⁷⁹ Nancy A. Youssef and Jared Malsin, "U.S. Agrees to Ship 500-Pound Bombs," *Wall Street Journal*, July 11, 2024.

- modified Medium Tactical Vehicles (\$583.1 million);
- 30 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM) (\$102.5 million); and
- 50,000 120 mm high explosive mortar rounds (\$61.1 million).⁸⁰

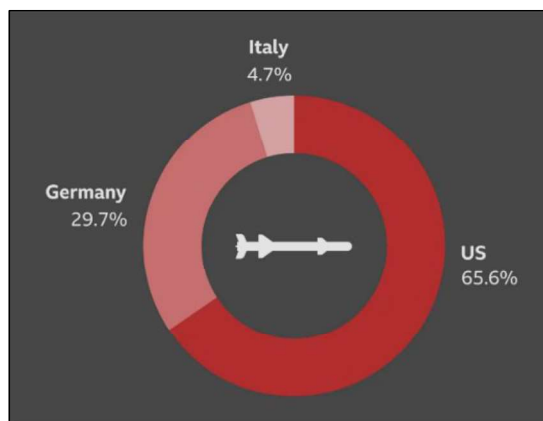
On September 25, 2024, Senator Bernie Sanders introduced six joint resolutions of disapproval, or JRDs (S.J.Res. 111, S.J.Res. 112, S.J.Res. 113, S.J.Res. 114, S.J.Res. 115, and S.J.Res. 116). Five of these JRDs correspond to the five FMS sales mentioned above;⁸¹ a sixth resolution corresponds to a Direct Commercial Sale (DCS) to Israel of Joint Direct Attack Munitions, or JDAMs.⁸² Per Section 36(b)(2) of the Arms Export Control Act, Senate consideration of the JRDs shall receive expedited congressional consideration⁸³ when the Senate reconvenes in November 2024. According to media reports, foreign affairs committee leaders in the House and Senate, after a period of consideration, signed off on the FMS sales mentioned above in summer 2024.⁸⁴

Also on September 25, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and Senator Tom Cotton wrote a letter to President Biden saying, “We have reason to believe your administration is currently delaying” three weapons sales to Israel, including MK-84 bombs, Apache attack helicopters, and Caterpillar D9 tractors.⁸⁵

On September 26, Israeli officials said that they agreed with U.S. counterparts on technical details for the use of \$8.7 billion in U.S. assistance on various U.S., Israeli, and coproduced weapons systems.⁸⁶ As **Table 1** indicates, via P.L. 118-50, Congress appropriated \$8.7 billion in security assistance for Israel.

Multiple countries (e.g., the United Kingdom and Canada) have suspended or reduced some of their arms exports to Israel over the past year. Over the past decade, the United States and Germany have been Israel’s main weapons suppliers (see **Figure 2**). In September 2024, media reports noted that Germany has put a hold on approving new weapons export licenses to Israel until it can resolve legal challenges contesting that Germany’s arms exports to Israel violate international humanitarian law.⁸⁷

Figure 2. Who Supplies Arms to Israel?
(% of Total Weapons Sold to Israel)



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, estimated volume of major arms transfers, 2013-2023.

⁸⁰ See <https://www.dsca.mil/tags/israel>.

⁸¹ Senators Peter Welch, Jeff Merkley, and Brian Schatz have each cosponsored one or more of the JRDs.

⁸² Senator Bernie Sanders, “Sanders and Colleagues Move to Block Arms Sales to Israel,” September 25, 2024.

⁸³ See CRS In Focus IF10392, *Foreign Military Sales Congressional Review Process*, by Paul K. Kerr.

⁸⁴ Robert Jimison, “After Delay, Top Democrats in Congress Sign Off on Sale of F-15 Jets to Israel,” *New York Times*, June 17, 2024.

⁸⁵ Senator Tom Cotton, “Cotton, McConnell to President Biden: Weapons Delays Cost Lives and Embolden Iran,” September 25, 2024.

⁸⁶ “Israel says it has secured \$8.7 billion U.S. aid package,” Reuters, September 26, 2024.

⁸⁷ “Germany has stopped approving war weapons exports to Israel, source says,” Reuters, September 19, 2024.

Humanitarian Assistance to Gaza

Prior to enacting P.L. 118-50, Congress deliberated about the scope and conditions of humanitarian assistance for Gaza. Some Members called for a halt to humanitarian aid in Gaza and/or greater monitoring,⁸⁸ while others called for additional aid.⁸⁹ As of September 2024, the United States has announced more than \$1 billion in aid for emergency relief efforts in the region since October 2023.⁹⁰ In April, P.L. 118-50 appropriated more than \$9 billion in supplemental global humanitarian assistance. President Biden said that \$1 billion of this amount will be for Palestinians in Gaza.⁹¹ Provisions accompanying FY2024 regular and supplemental appropriations for Gaza include certification, reporting, and other oversight mechanisms aimed at preventing aid diversion, misuse, or destruction.

Temporary U.S. Dock and Pier (May-July 2024)

In line with an announcement in President Biden's March State of the Union address, the U.S. military built a temporary dock and pier at the Gaza coast that started receiving international aid shipments via Cyprus in May, without having U.S. troops go onshore.⁹² Some aid reached warehouses of the World Food Program (WFP, the lead coordinator for aid delivery), but the flow of goods into Gaza was delayed on a number of occasions by weather and security problems before U.S. officials announced in July that the military would dismantle the pier.⁹³ An August report from the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) Office of the Inspector General (OIG) estimated the construction cost to be \$230 million, and said multiple USAID staff had expressed concerns that the maritime mission—which operated for a total of 20 days and, according to the OIG, fell short of its goal for food delivery by approximately 70%—would detract from USAID's "advocacy for opening land crossings, which were seen as more efficient and proven methods of transporting aid into Gaza."⁹⁴

In January, after allegations emerged that some employees of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) may have been involved in the October 7 attacks, the Department of State announced a temporary pause in U.S. funding to UNRWA, pending further review of the allegations.⁹⁵ Division G, Section 301, of the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024 (P.L. 118-47), prohibits U.S. contributions to UNRWA, notwithstanding any other provision of law, from funds made available by the act (or other acts) for "any amounts provided in prior fiscal years," FY2024, and FY2025, until March 25, 2025.

⁸⁸ House Foreign Affairs Committee, "Committee Republicans Demand Answers After Reports of UNRWA Aid Ending Up in Hamas' Hands," January 17, 2024.

⁸⁹ Senator Bob Casey, "Casey Urges President Biden to Do More to Address Famine in Gaza," March 19, 2024; Sen. Chris Murphy, "Murphy, Van Hollen, Coons, Merkley, 21 Colleagues Urge Biden Administration to Work with Israel to Take 5 Steps to Get More Humanitarian Aid into Gaza," February 2, 2024.

⁹⁰ U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), "The United States Announces Nearly \$336 Million in Humanitarian Assistance to Support Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank," September 30, 2024.

⁹¹ White House, "Remarks by President Biden on the Passage of H.R. 815," April 24, 2024.

⁹² White House, "Remarks by President Biden in State of the Union Address," March 7, 2024.

⁹³ "US military pier for carrying aid to Gaza will be dismantled after weather and security problems," Associated Press, July 17, 2024.

⁹⁴ OIG USAID, *USAID's Gaza Response: External Factors Impaired Distribution of Humanitarian Assistance Through the JLOTS Maritime Corridor*, August 27, 2024.

⁹⁵ CRS Insight IN12316, *The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA): Overview and U.S. Funding Prohibition*, by Rhoda Margesson and Jim Zanotti.

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**COUNCIL *on*
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Backgrounder

What Is Hamas?

The Palestinian militant group struggled to govern the Gaza Strip before launching a surprise attack on Israel in 2023. Now facing Israel's military campaign to destroy it, Hamas's future is in doubt, as is Gaza's.

WRITTEN BY
Kali Robinson

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Summary

Hamas is an Islamist militant group that spun off from the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1980s. It took over the Gaza Strip after defeating its rival political party, Fatah, in elections in 2006.

Governments including the United States and European Union have designated Hamas a terrorist organization over its attacks against Israel, which have included suicide bombings and rocket attacks.

Israel declared war on Hamas following its surprise assault on the country's south in October 2023, the deadliest attack in Israeli history, and has killed many of the group's senior leaders in recent months.

Introduction

Hamas is an Islamist militant movement that has controlled the Gaza Strip for nearly two decades. It violently rejects the existence of Israel, which it claims is occupying Palestine. In October 2023, Hamas attacked southern Israel, killing nearly 1,200 people and taking more than 200 hostages. In response, Israel declared a war aimed at eradicating the group. The conflict has killed more than forty-thousand people as of October 2024, according to Palestinian officials in Gaza.

Dozens of countries, including the United States, have designated Hamas a terrorist organization over the years, though some apply this label only to its military wing. The United States has pledged billions of dollars in new military aid since the Israel-Hamas war began and remains Israel's top weapons supplier.

Hamas's most important ally in the region is Iran, but it has also received significant financial and political support from Turkey. Qatar hosts the Hamas political office and also provides it with financial resources, though with the knowledge and cooperation of the Israeli government. Hamas is meanwhile one component of Iran's so-called axis of resistance, a regional network of anti-Israel partners that includes Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Lebanon's Hezbollah, Yemen's Houthis, and various militias in Iraq and Syria. Given these connections, many security experts fear that the Israel-Hamas war could engulf the region in a wider conflict.

Hamas's rival party, Fatah, which dominates the Palestinian Authority and rules in the West Bank, has formally renounced violence, though it has not always upheld that vow in times of high Israeli-Palestinian tensions. The split in Palestinian leadership and Hamas's unwavering hostility toward Israel diminished prospects for stability in Gaza ahead of the ongoing war, which has only cast the territory into further despair.

What are the group's origins?

Hamas, an acronym for Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya ("Islamic Resistance Movement"), was founded by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, a Palestinian cleric who became an activist in local branches of the Muslim Brotherhood after dedicating his early life to Islamic scholarship in Cairo. Beginning in the late 1960s, Yassin preached and performed charitable work in the West Bank and Gaza, both of which Israel occupied following the 1967 Six-Day War.



*In March 2019, the United States recognized Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, but as of October 2023, it is the only country to do so.

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Yassin established Hamas as the Brotherhood's political arm in Gaza in December 1987, following the outbreak of the first intifada, a Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. At the time, Hamas's purpose was to engage in violence against Israelis as a means of restoring Palestinian backing for the Brotherhood, which was losing political support to Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), a Gaza-based, Iran-sponsored organization that had begun pursuing terrorist operations against Israel.

Hamas published its charter in 1988, calling for the murder of Jews, the destruction of Israel, and, in Israel's place, the establishment of an Islamic society in historic Palestine. In what observers called an attempt to moderate its image, Hamas presented a new document [PDF] in 2017 that removed explicit references to killing Jews but still refused to recognize Israel. The revised charter also hinted that Hamas could accept a future Palestinian state along the borders established before the Six-Day War, which are generally recognized internationally as the borders of the West Bank and Gaza. The new document says only that the matter should depend on "national consensus."

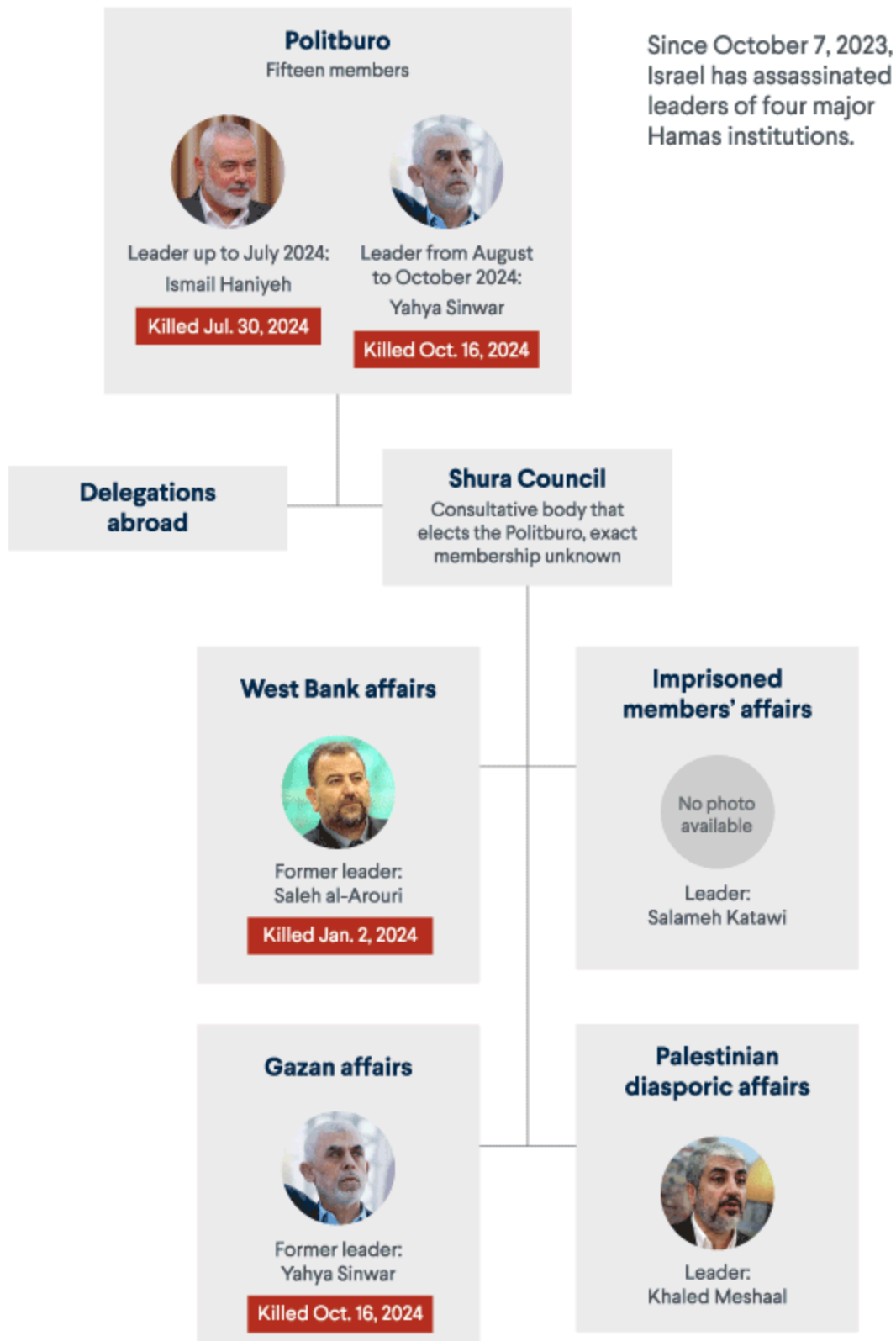
Hamas first employed suicide bombing in April 1993, five months before Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin signed the Oslo Accords. The historic pact established limited self-government for parts of the West Bank and Gaza under a newly created entity called the Palestinian Authority (PA). Hamas condemned the accords, as well as the PLO's and Israel's recognition of each other, which Arafat and Rabin officially agreed to in letters sent days before Oslo.

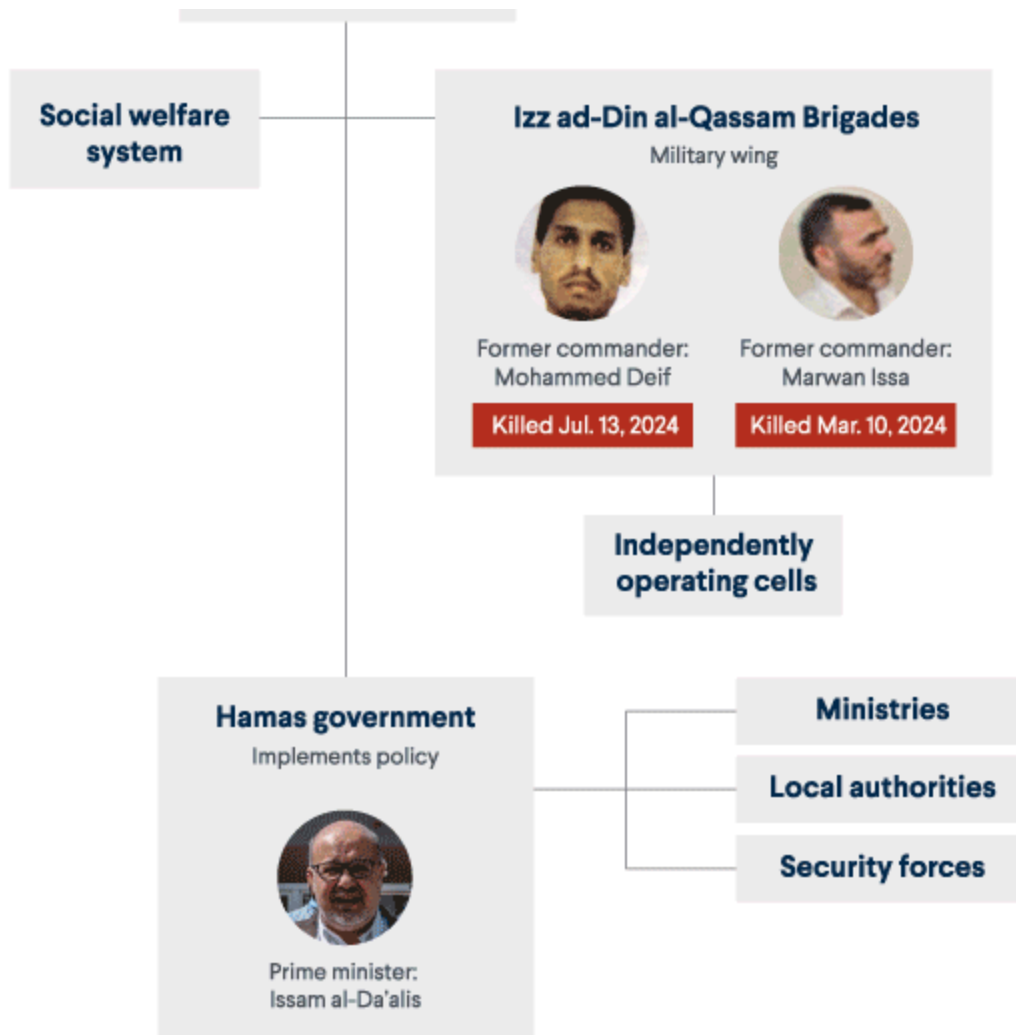
In 1997, the United States designated Hamas a foreign terrorist organization. The movement went on to spearhead violent resistance during the second intifada, in the early 2000s, though PIJ and Fatah's Tanzim militia were also responsible for violence against Israelis.

Who are its leaders?

Hamas has a host of leadership bodies that perform various political, military, and social functions. General policy is set by an overarching consultative body, often called the politburo, which operates in exile. Local committees manage grassroots issues in Gaza and the West Bank.

Hamas's Governing Structure





Sources: Counter Extremism Project; European Council on Foreign Relations; Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center; Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs; CFR research.

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Israel has targeted top Hamas officials since the movement was founded in the late 1980s. Israeli forces killed Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, Hamas's founder, in 2004. In recent months, the war in Gaza has once again thrown the group's leadership into disarray, as several of its high-ranking members

have been killed. Ismail Haniyeh, who served as political chief since 2017, was killed in a suspected Israeli bombing in Tehran in July 2024. Israel also killed Hamas's military leader, Mohammed Deif, in a strike on the southern Gaza city Khan Younis in the weeks prior.

In October 2024, Israel conducted a strike that killed several Hamas militants, including Yahya Sinwar, who replaced Haniyeh as political chief. Sinwar was believed to be an architect of the October 7 attack, along with Deif and Issa, and military analysts say his killing marked a major symbolic and operational success for Israeli forces. Sinwar previously headed Hamas's military wing and served twenty-two years in an Israeli prison for masterminding the killing of two Israeli soldiers in 1988. He was among the more than one thousand Palestinian prisoners freed in 2011 in exchange for an Israeli soldier held by Hamas.

"Yahya Sinwar was a vicious and unrepentant terrorist responsible for the largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. At his direction, Hamas terrorists murdered Israelis, Americans, and citizens of more than 30 countries," said U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a statement following Sinwar's death. "The world is a better place with him gone."

Issam al-Da'alis has been Gaza's de facto prime minister since 2021 and was previously an advisor to Haniyeh. Khaled Meshaal, another senior Hamas figure, is reportedly a top contender to replace Haniyeh. Meshaal led the group's political arm in exile from 2004–2017, when he handed it off to Haniyeh. Khalil al-Hayya, who has led Hamas's mediated negotiations with Israel in Qatar, is also reportedly a possible replacement. Hamas leaders established a presence in Qatar after falling out with their previous host, Syria, when Palestinian refugees participated in the 2011 uprising that preceded the Syrian Civil War. Some senior Hamas figures reportedly operate out of the group's offices in Turkey.

How is Hamas funded?

Historically, Palestinian expatriates and private donors in the Persian Gulf provided much of the movement's funding. Today, Iran is one of Hamas's biggest benefactors, contributing funds, weapons, and training. Though Iran and Hamas briefly fell out after backing opposing sides in Syria's civil war, Iran provides some \$100 million annually [PDF] to Hamas, PIJ, and other

Palestinian groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United States, according to 2021 U.S. State Department estimates. Iran was quick to praise Hamas's assault on Israel in late 2023 and pledge its continuing support for the Palestinian group.

Turkey has been another stalwart backer of Hamas—and a critic of Israel—following President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's rise to power in 2002. Though Ankara insists it only supports Hamas politically, it has been accused of funding Hamas's terrorism, including through aid diverted from the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency.

Egypt and Israel closed their borders with Gaza in 2006–07, restricting the movement of goods and people into and out of the territory. For years after the blockade began, Hamas collected revenue by taxing goods moving through a sophisticated network of tunnels that circumvented the Egyptian crossing into Gaza; this brought staples such as food, medicine, and cheap gas for electricity production into the territory, as well as construction materials, cash, and arms. Egypt shut down most of the tunnels breaching its territory but began to allow some commercial goods to enter Gaza through its Salah al-Din border crossing in 2018. As of 2021, Hamas reportedly collected upward of \$12 million per month from taxes on Egyptian goods imported into Gaza.

Does foreign aid for Gaza go through Hamas?

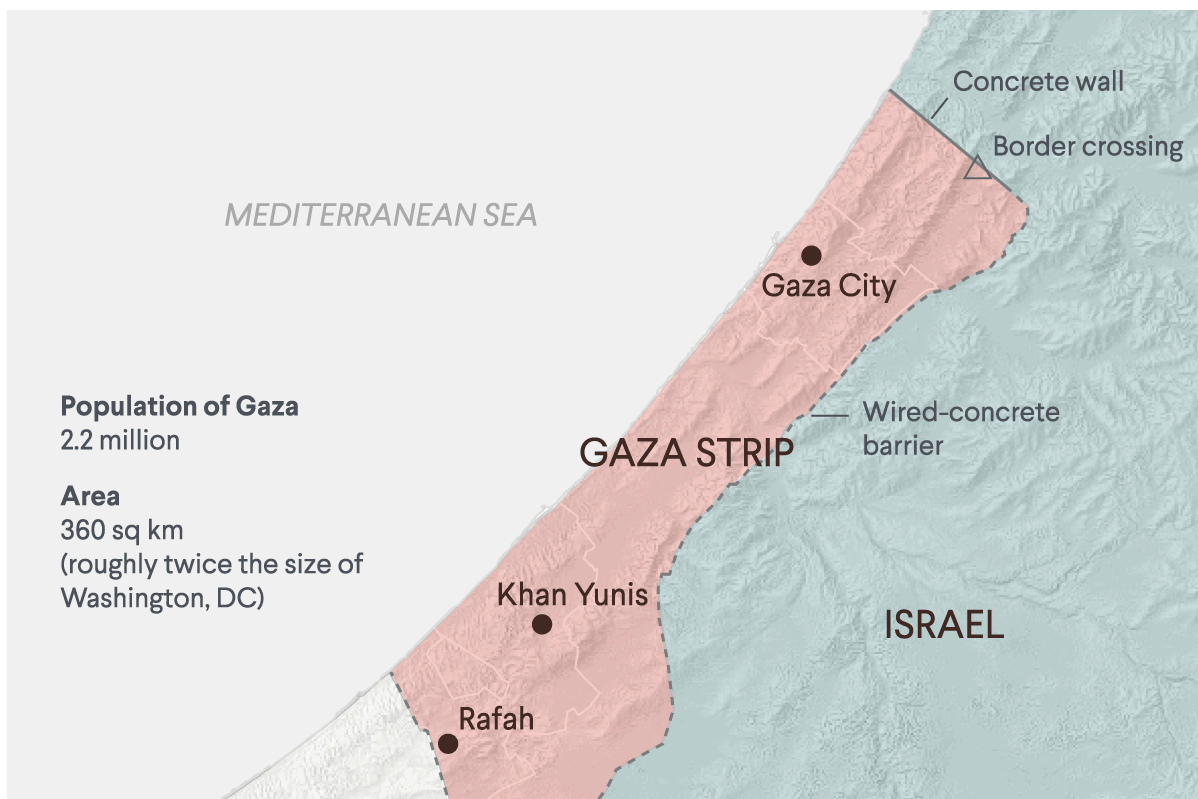
Before the current war, Israel allowed Qatar to provide Gaza with hundreds of millions of dollars in annual assistance through Hamas. But foreign aid generally reaches Gaza via the PA and UN agencies, namely the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), though Hamas has reportedly diverted some of this aid. As a designated terrorist entity, Hamas and its government are cut off from official assistance that the United States and European Union (EU) provide to the West Bank. Some Islamic charities in Western countries have channeled money to Hamas-backed social service groups, prompting the U.S. Treasury to freeze their assets.

The latest Israel-Hamas war has devastated the Gaza Strip, exacerbating the already extreme poverty that existed there before October 7. More than one million people needed aid before the fighting broke out; as a result of the war, some 75 percent of Gaza's more than two million residents have been displaced, and famine conditions are setting in. The Egyptian-Israeli blockade keeps Gaza mostly cut off from the world, reliant on the little international assistance

allowed past Israeli inspectors. UNRWA remains the primary aid distributor, but it suffered a massive funding cut following accusations that it employed Hamas members involved in the October 7 massacre. Its top donor, the United States, paused funding for a year in March 2024, while around a dozen other countries issued their own, open-ended pauses or announced that future UNRWA funding would depend on the results of investigations into the allegations.

How has Hamas governed Gaza?

Hamas became the de facto authority in Gaza shortly after Israel withdrew from the territory in 2005. The following year, Hamas won a majority of seats in the PA's legislature and formed a government. It earned votes for the social services it provided and as a rejection of the incumbent Fatah, which many voters perceived as having grown corrupt at the helm of the PLO and delivering little to Palestinians through its negotiations with Israel. The outcome was unacceptable to Fatah and its Western backers, and the party ousted Hamas from power in the West Bank. In Gaza, Hamas routed Fatah's militias in a week of fighting, resulting in a political schism between the two Palestinian territories. Palestinians have not voted for a legislature since 2006, nor a president since 2008.





Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

As Hamas took over the remnants of PA institutions in the strip, it established a judiciary and placed in place authoritarian institutions. In theory, Hamas has governed in accordance with the PA's sharia-based Palestinian Basic Law; but it has generally been more restrictive than the law requires, including by controlling how women dress and enforcing gender segregation in public. The watchdog group Freedom House found in 2020 that the "Hamas-controlled government has no effective or independent mechanisms for ensuring transparency in its funding, procurement or operations." Hamas also represses the Gazan media, civilian activism on social media, the political opposition, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), leaving it without mechanisms for accountability.

How has Hamas challenged Israel?

For decades, Hamas's attacks on Israel mostly involved rocket and mortar strikes, mass shootings and suicide bombings. Iranian security officials say that Tehran has provided Hamas with some weapons, but that Hamas gained the ability to build its own missiles after training with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and proxies. Israeli security officials estimate that Hamas had about twenty thousand rockets and mortars in its arsenal at the start of its current conflict with Israel. The group has also carried out incursions into Israeli territory, killing and kidnapping soldiers and civilians.

Prior to the 2023 conflict, Hamas and Israel had their deadliest fighting in years in 2021, when Hamas fired rockets into Israel following weeks of tensions between Palestinians and Israelis in Jerusalem. Some analysts say that Hamas wanted to bolster its reputation as the defender of the Palestinian cause after the PA postponed the 2021 elections. During the eleven-day conflict,

Hamas and PIJ fired more than four thousand rockets from Gaza, killing ten Israeli civilians and injuring more than three hundred others. The United States and Egypt brokered a cease-fire to conflict.

How was Hamas's attack on Israel in 2023 different?

Hamas's 2023 assault on southern Israel, "Operation al-Aqsa Storm," was extraordinary in its strategy, scale, and secrecy, analysts say. It began early on October 7, the Jewish Sabbath and a important Jewish holiday, with Hamas launching several thousand rockets into southern and central Israel, hitting cities as far north as Tel Aviv. Hamas militants also breached the heavily fortified Gaza border and infiltrated many southern Israeli towns and villages, killing nearly 1,000 people and wounding and kidnapping scores more. Fighters livestreamed videos of their actions showing that the attack was especially brutal, with some militants appearing to perpetrate what experts say could be ruled war crimes; in March 2024, UN investigators said there were "reasonable grounds to believe" some Hamas members committed sexual violence against hostages and those killed on October 7. Military leader Mohammed Deif said Hamas undertook the assault in response to Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands and its various "crimes" against the Palestinian people.

The October 7 attack is the deadliest in Israel's seventy-five-year history and has inflicted a deep psychological trauma on its people, with some analysts drawing comparisons to the surprise Pearl Harbor and September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States. "It is completely unprecedented that a terrorist organization would have the capacity or the wherewithal to mount coordinated, simultaneous assaults from the air, sea, and land," writes CFR Senior Fellow Bruce Hoffman.

The operation and the ensuing war have also drawn greater Western and international scrutiny of the military and intelligence ties between Hamas and Iran, as well as between Iran and its other "axis of resistance" allies in the region, including Lebanon's Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthis. While it's unclear how much coordination there is among them, all have launched attacks on Israel or Israel-linked targets in the ongoing war, including Iran's first-ever attack on Israeli soil in April 2024. Meanwhile, the Houthis have launched missile and drone attacks at Israel as well as

frequent strikes on shipping in the Red Sea and surrounding waters, trade routes that the U.S. Navy has been tasked with defending. These extraordinary attacks have raised fears that the war in Gaza will balloon into a regional conflagration.

How do Palestinians view Hamas?

Palestinian opinions of Hamas are mixed. Before October 7, the group had been unpopular [PI] in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, though Palestinians in both territories preferred Hamas to other political factions. Many experts say that PA President Mahmoud Abbas canceled the 2021 Palestinian national elections to prevent a likely Hamas victory.

After October 7, support for Hamas in Gaza rose four percentage points and nearly quadrupled in the West Bank, according to a December 2023 survey, though this was not enough for it to gain majority support in either territory. “Palestinians believe that diplomacy and negotiations are not an option available to them, that only violence and armed struggle is the means to end the siege and blockade over Gaza, and in general to end the Israeli occupation,” West Bank–based pollster Khalil Shikaki told CNN. However, he added that “no one should see this as support for any atrocities that might have been committed by Hamas on that day.”

What's next for Hamas?

Israel is seeking to completely eliminate the threat that Hamas poses to Israel, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saying that “total victory” is the objective. Israeli officials have said that Hamas no longer constitutes an organized fighting force in northern Gaza, while its Gaza-based leaders, are thought to be hiding below ground in the south.

“Hamas has suffered a grievous but not a crushing blow as a result of Israel’s military operation in the Gaza Strip,” wrote CFR expert Hoffman in June 2024, noting that U.S. intelligence estimated that Hamas still had several thousand fighters in Gaza, and that a majority of its tunnel networks there likely remained intact.

U.S. President Joe Biden has put forth a phased cease-fire deal that would halt the conflict and bring a return of the around 115 hostages, but the negotiations remained stalled in October 2023.

Hamas and Palestinian Authority negotiators have held talks on cooperating in a technocratic government that administers Gaza once the fighting ends, most recently issuing a joint statement in Beijing in July 2024. But some experts say that the Israeli government is unlikely to accept such an outcome, having so far rejected temporary cease-fires that could have given Hamas time to regroup. “The Israelis are clearly willing to countenance international opprobrium for rejecting what they regard as a bad cease-fire deal that will allow Hamas to survive and fight another day,” CFR’s Cook writes.

Recommended Resources

For *Foreign Affairs*, CFR Distinguished Fellow Martin Indyk discusses why Hamas attacked Israel in 2023 and why Israel was taken by surprise.

These Backgrounders by CFR’s Kali Robinson explain what to know about Palestinian governance beyond Gaza and about U.S. policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Palestinian economist Raja Khalidi makes a case for establishing a Palestinian state amid the war in Gaza in this *Foreign Affairs* article.

The Israeli NGO Gisha maps access to the Gaza Strip [PDF] and documents restrictions on the movement of people and goods enforced by Israel and Egypt.

The European Council on Foreign Relations maps Palestinian politics.

Jonathan Masters, Alice Hickson, and Zachary Laub contributed to this Backgrounder. Will Merrow and Michael Bricknell created the graphics.

For media inquiries on this topic, please reach out to communications@cfr.org.

Join CFR and Grand Valley State University for a U.S. Election Foreign Policy Forum on Monday, October 21, at 6:00 p.m. (EDT).



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FOREIGN
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Backgrounder

What Is Hezbollah?

The Iran-backed Shiite militia was considered the most powerful non-state group in the Middle East, but an Israeli military campaign against Hezbollah in 2024 has considerably weakened it.

WRITTEN BY

Kali Robinson

UPDATED

Last updated October 4, 2024 1:00 pm (EST)

Summary

Hezbollah wields significant power in Lebanon, where it operates as both a Shiite Muslim political party and militant group.

It violently opposes Israel and Western powers operating in the Middle East, and it functions as a proxy of Iran, its largest benefactor.

Israel's killing of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in September 2024 has dealt the militant group a severe blow.

Introduction

Hezbollah is a Shiite Muslim political party and militant group based in Lebanon, where it has fostered a reputation as “a state within a state.” Founded during the chaos of the fifteen-year Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), the Iran-backed group is driven by its violent opposition to Is

and its resistance to Western influence in the Middle East.

Hezbollah is considered a terrorist organization by the United States and many other countries and has deep-rooted military alliances with repressive, anti-Israel regimes in Iran and Syria. Cross-border clashes between Hezbollah and Israel escalated in recent years, particularly amid Israel's ongoing war with Hamas in the Gaza Strip that broke out last year. In a major intensification of its battle with Hezbollah, in late 2024 Israel killed longtime leader Hassan Nasrallah, and launched a ground offensive against the group in southern Lebanon.

Milestones in Hezbollah's History

1943: After twenty-three years as a French mandate, Lebanon gains independence. Its new leaders sign the National Pact, which creates a government system dividing power among the major religious groups.

1970

1971: The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) relocates its headquarters from Jordan to Lebanon.

1975–1990: Lebanon's civil war rages as the country's religious, political, and ethnic sects vie for control, leading to invasions by Israel and Syria and the involvement of the United States and other Western forces, as well as the United Nations.

1980

1983: In April, Beirut's U.S. embassy is bombed, killing 63 people. In October, suicide attacks on barracks housing U.S. and French troops kill 305 people. A U.S. court decides Hezbollah is behind the attacks.

1984: A car bombing attributed to Hezbollah kills dozens of people at the U.S. embassy annex in Beirut.

1985: Hezbollah releases its first manifesto.

1992: In March, the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires is bombed in an attack attributed to Hezbollah. Later this year, Hassan Nasrallah becomes Hezbollah's secretary-general after Israeli forces assassinate his predecessor. Hezbollah

1990

1989: Lebanon's parliamentarians meet in Taif, Saudi Arabia, and sign an agreement to end the civil war and grant Syria guardianship over Lebanon. The agreement also orders all militias except for Hezbollah to disarm.

wins eight seats in Parliament after participating in national elections for the first time. The United States designates Hezbollah a foreign terrorist organization.

1994: Car bombings at Israel's London embassy and a Buenos Aires Jewish community center are attributed to Hezbollah.

2000

2006: Hezbollah abducts two Israeli soldiers, sparking a monthlong war with Israel that leaves more than one thousand Lebanese and fifty Israelis dead.

2005: Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri is assassinated. His death, attributed to Syria, kick-starts the Cedar Revolution. A UN tribunal later implicates Hezbollah in Hariri's death.

2010

2011: Syria descends into civil war. Hezbollah eventually sends thousands of fighters to support Bashar al-Assad's regime.

2009: Hezbollah releases an updated manifesto that expresses more openness to the democratic process.

2012: A suicide bombing targeting a bus carrying Israeli tourists in Bulgaria kills six people. The European Union blames Hezbollah.

2013: The EU designates Hezbollah's armed wing a terrorist organization after considerable debate among the bloc's members.

2018: Israel discovers miles of tunnels into Israel from southern Lebanon that it says belong to Hezbollah.

2019: Economic woes trigger mass protests calling for the political elite, including Hezbollah, to give up power. Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigns.

2020

2020: Hezbollah vows revenge after a U.S. drone strike kills Iranian Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani. Later this year, a top judge begins investigating officials tied to Hezbollah in relation to explosions at a Beirut port that kill hundreds.

2023: Hezbollah launches attacks across the Israel-Lebanon border in a show of support for Palestinians amid the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip. Hezbollah and Israel trade attacks at the border well into 2024, raising fears that Lebanon will be dragged into a full-scale war.

2024: Israel kills longtime Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in an air strike. This follows a series of strikes that kill other leaders and an attack triggering explosions in pagers used by the group's members that results in thousands wounded.

Source: CFR research.

How did Hezbollah originate?

Hezbollah emerged during Lebanon's civil war, which broke out in 1975 when long-simmering discontent over the large, armed Palestinian presence in the country reached a boiling point. Various Lebanese sectarian communities held different positions on the nature of the Palestinian challenge.

Under a 1943 political agreement, political power is divided among Lebanon's predominant religious groups—a Sunni Muslim serves as prime minister, a Maronite Christian as president, a Shiite Muslim as the speaker of Parliament. Tensions among these groups evolved into civil war as several factors upset the delicate balance. The Sunni population had grown with the arrival of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, while Shiites felt increasingly marginalized by the ruling Maronite Christian minority. Amid the infighting, Israeli forces invaded southern Lebanon in 1978 and again in 1982 to expel Palestinian guerrilla fighters that used the region as their base to attack Israel.

A group of Shiites influenced by the theocratic government in Iran—the region's major Shiite government, which came to power in 1979—took up arms against the Israeli occupation. Seeing an opportunity to expand its influence in Arab states, Iran and its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) provided funds and training to the budding militia, which adopted the name Hezbollah meaning “The Party of God.” It earned a reputation for extremist militancy due to its frequent clashes with rival Shiite militias, such as the Amal Movement, and its attacks on foreign targets including the 1983 suicide bombing of barracks housing U.S. and French troops in Beirut, in which more than three hundred people died. Hezbollah became a vital asset to Iran, bridging Shiite Arab-Persian divides as Tehran established proxies throughout the Middle East.

Hezbollah bills itself as a Shiite resistance movement, and it enshrined its ideology in a 1985 manifesto that vowed to expel Western powers from Lebanon, called for the destruction of the Israeli state, and pledged allegiance to Iran's supreme leader. It also advocated an Iran-inspired Islamist regime, but emphasized that the Lebanese people should have the freedom of self-determination.

Who was Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah?

Hassan Nasrallah helped found Hezbollah in the early 1980s and led the group for more than thirty years, until he was killed by an Israeli air strike in September 2024. Many Middle East experts credit the Beirut-born Shia cleric with molding Hezbollah into the most formidable non-state fighting force in the region, and Iran's most powerful anti-Israel proxy.

"Among Nasrallah's most important achievements was enmeshing Israel in an enervating war in May 2000 prompted the unilateral withdrawal of Israeli forces from south Lebanon, ending eighteen-year-long occupation," says CFR Senior Fellow Bruce Hoffman. "Thereafter, Hezbollah effectively supplanted the Lebanese Army as the country's only truly effective military force. Moreover, Nasrallah's commanding authority and popularity among most Lebanese—Sunni, Christian, and Shi'a alike—was cemented.

As leader, Nasrallah oversaw the seven-member Shura Council and its five subcouncils: the political assembly, the jihad assembly (military body), the parliamentary assembly, the executive assembly, and the judicial assembly. "Nasrallah's death is a crushing blow," writes Hoffman, "there are no clear successors to Nasrallah given his unique and unrivaled stature at the top of the movement." Some speculate that Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's deputy secretary-general and acting interim leader, or Hashim Safieddine, another senior leader, could replace Nasrallah atop the group.

How is it organized?

Estimates of Hezbollah's membership are rough, and its actual fighting strength is difficult to assess amid the ongoing conflict with Israel, which has devastated its leadership. In 2021, Nasrallah said the group had 100,000 fighters, although analysts say this could have been an exaggerated figure. In 2022, the U.S. State Department estimated [PDF] that there were "tens of thousands of supporters and members worldwide." Other more recent analysts have put the number at roughly 40,000–50,000.

"With its leadership effectively decapitated and its communications compromised," said Hoffman after Nasrallah's death, "Hezbollah for the time being will have trouble mobilizing to engage in any kind of effective and sustained combat with Israel."

Hezbollah controls much of Lebanon's Shiite-majority areas, including parts of Beirut, southern Lebanon, and the eastern Bekaa Valley region. Although Hezbollah is based in Lebanon, its manifesto states that its operations, especially those targeting the United States, are not confined by domestic borders: "The American threat is not local or restricted to a particular region, and such, confrontation of such a threat must be international as well." The group has been accused of planning and perpetrating acts of terrorism against Israeli and Jewish targets abroad, and there is evidence of Hezbollah operations in Africa, the Americas, and Asia.

Iran provides most of Hezbollah's training, weapons, and funding, sending the group hundreds of millions of dollars each year, according to the State Department. Hezbollah also receives some support from the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, as well as financing from legal businesses, international criminal enterprises, and the Lebanese diaspora.

What role has it played in Lebanese politics?

Hezbollah has been a fixture of the Lebanese government since 1992, when eight of its members were elected to Parliament, and the party has held cabinet positions since 2005. The party marked its integration into mainstream politics in 2009 with an updated manifesto that was less Islamist than its predecessor and called for "true democracy." The most recent national elections, in 2022, saw Hezbollah maintain its 13 seats in Lebanon's 128-member Parliament, though the party and its allies lost their majority.

Hezbollah essentially operates as a government in the areas under its control, and neither the military nor federal authorities can counter this, Arab Barometer analysts MaryClare Roche and Michael Robbins write for *Foreign Affairs*. It manages a vast network of social services that include infrastructure, health-care facilities, schools, and youth programs, all of which have been instrumental in garnering support for Hezbollah from Shiite and non-Shiite Lebanese alike. Even so, Arab Barometer polling in 2024 found that "despite Hezbollah's significant influence in Lebanon, relatively few Lebanese support it."

At the same time, Hezbollah maintains its military arm. Under the 1989 Taif Agreement, which was brokered by Saudi Arabia and Syria and ended Lebanon's civil war, Hezbollah was the only militia allowed to keep its arms. Analyst and Brigadier General (Ret.) Assaf Orion, of Israel's Institute for National Security Studies, says Hezbollah possesses "a larger arsenal of artillery than

most nations enjoy,” and a 2018 report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies called it “the world’s most heavily armed non-state actor.” In June 2024, experts speculated that Hezbollah has 150,000–200,000 rockets and missiles of various ranges.

Critics say Hezbollah’s existence violates UN Security Council Resolution 1559—adopted in 2004—which called for all Lebanese militias to disband and disarm. The UN Force in Lebanon (UNFIL), first deployed in 1978 to restore the central government’s authority, remains in the country and part of its mandate is to encourage Hezbollah to disarm.

What is Hezbollah’s connection to Syria?

Hezbollah finds a loyal ally in Syria, whose army occupied most of Lebanon during Lebanon’s civil war. The Syrian government remained as a peacekeeping force in Lebanon until it was driven out in the 2005 Cedar Revolution, a popular protest movement against the foreign occupation. Hezbollah had unsuccessfully pushed for Syrian forces to remain in Lebanon, and has since remained a stalwart ally of the Assad regime. In return for Tehran’s and Hezbollah’s support, experts say, the Syrian government facilitates the transfer of weapons from Iran to the militia.

Hezbollah publicly confirmed its involvement in the Syrian Civil War in 2013, and it sent some seven thousand militants to assist Iranian and Russian forces in supporting the Syrian government against largely Sunni rebel groups. Hezbollah withdrew many of its fighters in 2019, attributing the decision to the Assad regime’s military success. Analysts say fighting in Syria helped Hezbollah become a stronger military force, while some Lebanese complain that focusing on the war led the group to neglect its domestic duties. Hezbollah’s support from Sunnis in particular waned over the group’s backing of the Assad regime. Hezbollah’s involvement in the war also opened it to further attacks by Israel, which regularly launches air strikes against Iran-allied forces in Syria.

Where does it stand on Israel?

Israel is Hezbollah’s main enemy, dating back to Israel’s occupation of southern Lebanon in 1967. Hezbollah has been blamed for attacks on Jewish and Israeli targets abroad, including the 1994 car bombings of a Jewish community center in Argentina, which killed eighty-five people, and bombings of the Israeli Embassy in London. Even after Israel officially withdrew from southern

Lebanon in 2000, it continued to clash with Hezbollah, especially in the disputed Shebaa Farm border zone. Periodic conflict between Hezbollah and Israeli forces escalated into a monthlong war in 2006, during which Hezbollah launched thousands of rockets into Israeli territory.

The group reiterated its commitment to the destruction of the Israeli state in its 2009 manifesto. In December 2018, Israel announced the discovery of miles of tunnels running from Lebanon into northern Israel that it claimed were created by Hezbollah. The following year, Hezbollah attacked an Israeli army base—the first serious cross-border exchange in more than four years. In August 2021, Hezbollah fired more than a dozen rockets in response to Israeli air strikes in Lebanon; it was the first time the group claimed responsibility for rockets fired into Israel since the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war.

How have the United States and other countries treated the group?

U.S. policymakers see Hezbollah as a global terrorist threat. The Bill Clinton administration designated Hezbollah a foreign terrorist organization in 1997, and several individual Hezbollah members, including Nasrallah, are labeled “specially designated global terrorists,” which subjects them to U.S. sanctions. In the mid-2010s, the Barack Obama administration provided aid to Lebanon’s military with the hope of diminishing Hezbollah’s credibility as the country’s most capable military force. However, Hezbollah’s and the Lebanese military’s parallel efforts to defend the Syrian border from the Islamic State and al-Qaeda-affiliated militants made Congress hesitant to send further aid [PDF], for fear that Hezbollah could acquire it.

In 2015, the U.S. Congress passed the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act, which sanctions foreign institutions that use U.S. bank accounts to finance Hezbollah. Lawmakers amended it in 2018 to include additional types of activities. Additionally, the Donald Trump administration sanctioned some of Hezbollah’s members in Parliament as part of its “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran. While Trump’s approach disrupted Iran’s economy, analysts say the country’s increasingly self-sufficient proxies have weathered the worst of the sanctions.

President Joe Biden's administration has continued sanctioning individuals connected to Hezbollah's financing network, including Ibrahim Ali Daher, head of the group's Central Finance Unit. In 2021, the Treasury Department announced sanctions targeting an international finance network accused of laundering tens of millions of dollars through regional financial systems to benefit Hezbollah and Iran.

The European Union (EU) has taken a less aggressive approach to Hezbollah. The bloc designated Hezbollah's military arm a terrorist group in 2013 over its involvement in a bombing in Bulgaria and its backing of the Assad regime. In 2014, the EU's multinational police agency, Europol, and the United States created a joint group to counter Hezbollah's terrorist activities in Europe. In recent years, several European countries have taken a stronger stance. The United Kingdom deemed all of Hezbollah a terrorist group in 2019, followed by the German government in 2020. Hezbollah has scorned the largely Sunni Gulf Arab countries over their relations with the United States, Israel, and European powers. The Gulf Cooperation Council—comprising the seven Arab states of the Persian Gulf, with the exception of Iraq—considers Hezbollah a terrorist organization. Additionally, Saudi Arabia and the United States co-lead the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center, created in 2017 to disrupt resource flows to Iran-backed groups such as Hezbollah.

What's happened amid the Israel-Hamas war?

Following Hamas's October 2023 assault on Israel, the Iran-backed Palestinian militant group based in the Gaza Strip, Hezbollah began firing rockets, mortars, and drones across the Israel-Lebanon border in a show of what the group's leaders called "solidarity" with its militarily inferior ally. Many experts say that Iran and Hezbollah likely advised and trained Hamas on how to attack Israel, though Hamas maintains that neither was involved in planning its 2023 operation.

Hezbollah-Israel clashes and tensions have only intensified in 2024, fueling concerns of a wide regional war. Israel blamed Hezbollah for a missile strike in the Golan Heights in late July that killed twelve children, an attack that the group denies. Israel responded shortly after by targeting Fuad Shukur, a senior Hezbollah commander in Beirut, in a strike that also reportedly killed three civilians and wounded dozens more. In September, Israel also ramped up air strikes on Hezbollah military infrastructure in Lebanon and is suspected of conducting thousands of coordinated

bombing attacks against Hezbollah members, remotely detonating their private electronic devices. An Israeli air strike killed Hassan Nasrallah on September 27. Days after, Israel launch a ground invasion of southern Lebanon in early October. Analysts say Israel's heavy bombardments had killed about 1,300 people and displaced more than one million since it stepped up its campaign against Hezbollah in late September.

Recommended Resources

CFR's Center for Preventive Action tracks the instability in Lebanon.

CFR Senior Fellow Ray Takeyh unpacks Hezbollah's view of the war in the Gaza Strip.

For *Foreign Affairs*, Arab Barometer's MaryClare Roche and Michael Robbins explain what Lebanon really thinks of Hezbollah.

CFR's Christina Bouri takes a closer look at the history of tensions between Hezbollah and Israel.

This Backgrounder by CFR's Kali Robinson discusses the role of Hezbollah's Palestinian partner Hamas.

This Backgrounder looks at Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Melissa Manno contributed to this report. Will Merrow created the graphic.

For media inquiries on this topic, please reach out to communications@cfrr.org.



IRAN AND HEZBOLLAH: PROXY POWER PLAY

by

Irfan ul Haq

In Middle Eastern geopolitics, the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah is emblematic of the intricacies of regional power dynamics. Rooted in a shared ideology, this alliance has burgeoned into a formidable partnership, wherein Iran has adeptly harnessed Hezbollah as an extension of its strategic interests, pushing its influence beyond its borders without direct military engagements. Yet, as with all alliances built on mutual interests, there are inherent vulnerabilities and questions that arise: Can a relationship founded on geopolitical necessity also be susceptible to evolving regional demands? And what are the risks of over-dependence for Hezbollah, which has to straddle its dual identity as both a Lebanese entity and Iran's most prominent proxy in the region? The nexus is one of ambition and sustainability.

While Iran's relationship with Hezbollah undeniably amplifies its regional clout, it is essential to critically assess whether such a strategy, underpinned by tactical advantages, can indeed fulfil long-term objectives without incurring unintended repercussions. Moreover, as Tehran, China and Hezbollah navigate this multifaceted relationship, their decisions and interdependencies not only shape their individual trajectories but also leave an indelible impact on the broader Middle Eastern political arena. It is, thus, essential to understand and analyze the delicate equilibrium between strategy, risk, and the conjoined destinies of nations and their proxies in an ever-volatile geopolitical landscape.

Historical Legacy of Iran's Regional Aspirations

As the seat of the once-majestic Persian Empire, Iran's legacy is marked by a millennia-long history that few regional counterparts can rival. This unique [historical identity](#) not only cultivates a sense of national pride but also fuels its aspirations to reassert dominance in the contemporary geopolitical arena. However, rather than purely resting on past laurels, the question arises:

how does Iran's history translate into its present-day strategies and ambitions?

Hezbollah, Iran's Strategic Chess Piece

Hezbollah's emergence during Lebanon's tumultuous civil war provided Iran with a timely geopolitical opportunity. While the organization initially grew in response to local Lebanese issues, [Iran astutely recognized its potential as a proxy force](#). Through extensive financing, training, and ideological alignment, Iran transformed Hezbollah from a local militia into a formidable regional actor, serving Tehran's broader geopolitical interests. However one must critically evaluate this relationship. Is Hezbollah merely an instrument of Iranian policy, or does it retain independent agency? Furthermore, what are the implications of this symbiotic relationship for the broader Middle East?

The Dual Facets of Hezbollah

Hezbollah is not merely a militant entity. It possesses a dual character: a hard power arm that undertakes military and strategic operations and a soft power component reflected in its extensive network of social services. While the former extends Iran's strategic reach and influence, the latter embeds and legitimizes both Hezbollah and, by extension, Iran's influence within the [Lebanese socio-political fabric](#). This multi-faceted approach serves Iran's ambitions but also poses risks. Relying heavily on a proxy, even one as influential as Hezbollah, can be a double-edged sword, leading to unpredictable consequences if local dynamics shift.

Iran's Support for Hezbollah

Military and Financial Backing: Iran's support for Hezbollah is no secret. From an initial investment in training and arming the budding militia in the early 1980s, [Iran now reportedly provides an estimated \\$700 million to Hezbollah annually](#), according to the U.S. Department of State. This funding facilitates a spectrum of activities, from military operations against Israel to maintaining a vast network of social services in Lebanon. Additionally, Hezbollah's arsenal, believed to contain more than [100,000 rockets](#), is largely bankrolled by Tehran. Some



experts argue that Hezbollah has grown independent of Iranian funding, citing its various other sources of income, from the global diaspora to criminal enterprises. While these streams are significant, Iran's financial infusion remains Hezbollah's primary lifeline, ensuring its military dominance and facilitating its expansive socio-political initiatives in Lebanon.

Ideological Alignment: More than just a financial or military ally, Hezbollah represents a key ideological partner for Iran. The organization's 1985 manifesto not only calls for the destruction of Israel but also pledges allegiance to the then Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. This shared vision, rooted in [Shiite Islamism, ensures a deep-seated alignment of goals and worldviews](#). However, skeptics highlight instances where Hezbollah's Lebanese-nationalist goals did not perfectly align with Iranian objectives. While minor divergences exist, the overarching ideological congruence between the two entities is undeniable.

Viability of the Proxy Strategy: Iran's use of Hezbollah as a proxy extends its regional influence and furthers its objectives while avoiding direct confrontations. However, this strategy is not without risks. Hezbollah's activities, from its involvement in the Syrian civil war to clashes with Israel, can inadvertently draw Iran into larger regional skirmishes. Further, an over-reliance on proxies can lead to unpredictability. Even with shared ideologies, proxy groups can prioritize their interests, potentially jeopardizing Iranian objectives. Moreover, the Lebanese political landscape is complex, and any [significant shift in internal dynamics could affect Hezbollah's standing](#) and, by extension, Iran's influence. Proponents of the proxy strategy argue that it is a tried-and-tested method, and allows major powers to exert influence without direct involvement. They also point out that Hezbollah, given its ideological alignment and dependency on Iran, is less likely to diverge significantly from Tehran's directives.

Conclusion

Iran's complicated and multifaceted relationship with Hezbollah highlights the broader complexities

of Middle Eastern geopolitics. Through its robust financial and military support, coupled with shared ideological roots, Iran has successfully woven Hezbollah into its regional strategic goals. It extends its sphere of influence without direct confrontations. Yet, the profound interconnectedness of these two entities, while showcasing a formidable alliance, also reveals potential vulnerabilities. The ever-shifting sands of the Middle East demand astute foresight. As Tehran leverages its alliance with Hezbollah, it faces the dual challenge of ensuring that short-term tactical advantages do not jeopardize long-term strategic objectives. Similarly, for Hezbollah, the benefits of Iranian patronage are countered by the risks of over-dependence and the intricate dance of balancing its identity as a Lebanese national entity with its role as Iran's premier regional proxy. In navigating this alliance, both Iran and Hezbollah are not merely shaping their individual futures but also influencing the broader trajectory of the Middle Eastern political landscape. Their alliance is a poignant reminder of the delicate balance between ambition and sustainability, strategy and risk, and the intertwined fates of nations and their proxies in the volatile world of global geopolitics.

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Policy Analysis (/policy-analysis) / Interviews and Presentations

Middle East FAQs Volume 1: What is the Shia Crescent?

by [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](#), [Hanin Ghaddar \(/experts/hanin-ghaddar\)](#),
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Institute experts Patrick Clawson, Hanin Ghaddar, and Nader Uskowi discuss Iran's growing influence from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean and beyond.

In recent years, Iran has taken advantage of disruptions in the Middle East to spread its influence. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, the instability resulting from the Arab Spring, the rise of Sunni extremist movements like Isis all enabled Iran to advance its military and political goals.

Tehran is forming a "land bridge" that connects Iran through Iraq to Syria, Lebanon, to the Israeli border at Golan. This is what's called the Shia Crescent. Shia comprise just 10 percent of the world's Muslim population, yet they hold a massive majority in Iran. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian officials have sought to provide leadership for the global Shia community. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran sought to establish strong presence in Iraq by fostering ties with both the Shia-led Iraqi government and the Iraqi Shia militia groups on the ground. Since 2014, Iran-backed Shia groups have played a significant role in the fight against ISIS. Iran also seeks to cultivate its economic, cultural, and religious influence in Iraq.

In Syria, Iran remains a staunch ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad; Iran is shored up the regime's ground forces, funneling regional proxies Lebanese Hezbollah and other Shia militias to Syria in effort to defend the regime. Iran has also sent Shia refugees and militants from Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight in Syria as well in Lebanon. Iran supports and has had a large degree of control over the Shia militant group Hezbollah since the early 1980s. Iran has fostered this Lebanese proxy as a means of perpetrating attacks against the United States and Israel. Hezbollah's regional clout has grown in recent years with its intervention in places like Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Today, Hezbollah boasts battle-hardened soldiers and an arsenal of over 100,000 rockets.

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The 'Shia Crescent' and Iranian I...

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While Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon form the so-called core of Iran's Shia Crescent in the region, Iran has also taken advantage of Shia movements elsewhere to further its regional influence and challenge Saudi, U.S., and Israeli regional dominance. Basically, the expansion of the Iranian proxy network deters attacks on Iran itself. Potential aggressors across the region know that should they attack Iran, they would likely face retaliatory attacks by Iran's proxies. But more importantly, an expanded regional foothold affords Iran influence and prestige in the face of Western, Israeli, and Saudi power.

There are three main reasons why Iran is interested in this land bridge. First, it's much cheaper to move materiel, soldiers, and arms from Iran to its proxies in the region via land than via air. Second, for now this land bridge is not very important, but it's a good Plan B. In the next

Israeli-Hezbollah war or any conflict in the region, Damascus Airport or any other airport in the region might be bombed. Third, which is much more important than the first two, this will be a very important symbolic victory for Iran and for Hezbollah, because even those who support Hezbollah are starting to doubt Hezbollah's involvement in Syria. A lot of people are tired of the war but when this land bridge is complete, the Iranian will sell it as another divine victory.

This Crescent of course presents challenges for U.S. interest in the region. Chief among these is the threat that the Iranian Network poses to vital trade routes and to the security and stability of key allies, including Israel and Saudi Arabia. It makes intervention in Iranian-dominated areas even more complicated, given the potential for escalation between U.S.- and Iran-backed forces. More broadly, the Iranian presence fuels a growing sectarianism that will pose a threat to regional stability for years to come.

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Timeline: Iran and Hezbollah

July 30, 2024

Since 1982, Hezbollah has embodied Iran's grand strategy to create a network of proxy forces across the Middle East, both to expand Tehran's sphere of influence and promote its security interests and Islamic ideology. The Shiite movement took root after Israel's 1982 invasion and amid the chaos of the Lebanese civil war, which had raged since 1975. Iran fostered and facilitated the embryo of Hezbollah after dispatching some 1,500 Revolutionary Guard trainers and advisers to Lebanon's eastern Bekaa Valley. The Iranians didn't fight Israeli forces, but they mobilized, trained, funded and equipped a new underground militia in Lebanon that evolved into Hezbollah. The early cells attracted Shiites in southern Lebanon as well as the poor southern suburbs, known as the Dahiye, in Beirut.

After the PLO was forced to pull out of Beirut in August 1982, Hezbollah gradually assumed the mantle of chief resistance force against Israel. Under Iran's tutelage, Hezbollah launched a guerrilla campaign, including suicide bombings, against Israeli forces in the south, that lasted until 2000. Lebanon became the most dangerous frontline for Israel.



Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei, Hezbollah Secretary General Nasrallah and Gen. Qassem Soleimani

With growing Iranian support, Hezbollah also evolved from an underground militia into a political party willing to compete in democratic elections. It ran for office in 1992, the first parliamentary elections since the civil war broke out. It won eight seats in the 128-seat parliament, in turn widening Tehran's political influence in Lebanon.

Throughout the 1990s, Hezbollah continued to engage in low-intensity warfare with the Israeli Defense Forces in southern Lebanon. It was blamed for the deaths of more than 900 Israeli soldiers. For Israel, the Lebanon war became increasingly costly and controversial at home, where it was compared to the long U.S. war in Vietnam. In May 2000, Israel voluntarily withdrew from southern Lebanon. It was the first time Israel unilaterally withdrew from Arab territory without concessions or a peace treaty, which effectively gave Hezbollah – and indirectly Iran – more influence and control of territory.

The goals of both Hezbollah and Iran only grew after Israel's withdrawal. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei described Israel in 2000 as a "cancerous tumor" that "must be uprooted from the region." Over the next five years, with Iran's aid, Hezbollah increased its arsenal of rockets and missiles, provided by Iran and Syria, and dug tunnels to facilitate the underground movement of men and arms in southern Lebanon. Clashes between Hezbollah and Israel broke out occasionally along the border.

In 2006, Hezbollah captured two Israeli soldiers at the border to demand the release of three Palestinian and Lebanese prisoners in Israel. Israel responded with a massive air and ground assault. The ensuing 34-day war was Israel's longest conflict with any adversary. It was costly in life and destruction on both sides; hundreds of thousands were displaced on both sides. Nearly 1,200 Lebanese died; more than 170 Israeli soldiers and civilians were killed.

Iran was covertly involved in the 2006 war. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the IRGC commander of the Qods Force, revealed years later that he was in Lebanon for all but one day of the conflict to provide strategic advice. Tehran commended Hezbollah's performance in the conflict. "You imposed your military superiority over the Zionist regime, consolidated your spiritual dominance in regional and international extent, derided the Zionist army's phony invincibility and splendor and portrayed the usurper regime's fragility," Khamenei wrote Nasrallah. In a U.N.-brokered exchange, Israel released five prisoners (including the men that Hezbollah had sought to free), while Hezbollah returned the bodies of two Israelis two years after the war.

Iran was pivotal as Hezbollah rearmed and reconstructed its strongholds after the war. Hezbollah has often boasted about the scope of aid from the Islamic republic. "Hezbollah's budget, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, comes from the Islamic Republic of Iran," Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah said in 2016. But Iran has also exacted a price from its Lebanese ally. In 2011, Iran pushed Hezbollah to get involved in the civil war in neighboring Syria, which was Iran's closest ally and the land route to sustain support for the Lebanese militia. For more than a decade, thousands of Hezbollah fighters rotated in and out of the Syria war to help President Bashar Assad regain control of the country.

Hezbollah has often aligned politically with the Iranian regime. Nasrallah praised the election of President Ebrahim Raisi, a hardline cleric, in 2021. "Your victory has renewed the hopes of the Iranian people and the people of the region who see you as a shield and a strong supporter... for the resistance against aggressors," the Lebanese cleric said on June 20, 2021.

Timeline

June 6, 1982: Israel invaded Lebanon in Operation Peace for Galilee. Within weeks, Iran deployed 1,500 Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) advisers to Lebanon's Bekaa Valley to recruit, train and a new Shiite militia that evolved into Hezbollah.

April 18, 1983: Members of the nascent Hezbollah bombed the U.S. Embassy in West Beirut, killing 63.

Oct. 23, 1983: Members of nascent Hezbollah bombed U.S. and French peacekeepers in Beirut, killing 241 Americans and 58 French.

Dec. 12, 1983: Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for six coordinated bombings in Kuwait City that targeted the U.S. and French embassies, the international airport, oil facilities, and Raytheon.

Sept. 20, 1984: Hezbollah bombed the second U.S. Embassy Annex in East Beirut, killing 23.

June 14-30, 1985: Hezbollah hijacked TWA Flight 847 flying from Greece to Rome. It demanded that Israel release of 700 Shiite Muslims. The hijackers killed a U.S. Navy diver and threatened to kill Jewish passengers. Iran provided logistical support to the hijackers, according to the National Counterterrorism Center.

March 17, 1992: Islamic Jihad, an organization linked to Hezbollah, claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing outside the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina that killed 20 and injured 252. An Israeli investigation in 2003 concluded that "the highest levels of the Iranian regime... had in fact authorized Hezbollah to carry it out."

July 18, 1994: Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for an explosion outside the Argentine-Israeli Mutual Association in Buenos Aires that killed 95 and wounded 200. Argentine intelligence concluded in 2004 that a 21-year Hezbollah operative carried out the attack with Iranian logistical support. The bombing was the deadliest terrorist

attack conducted in Argentina. In 2006, Argentine authorities issued an international arrest warrant for Ali Fallahian, head of Iranian intelligence, for orchestrating the operation. In 2007, INTERPOL placed Ali Fallahian, four other Iranian officials, and one Hezbollah member on its most wanted list for their alleged involvement in the bombing.

May 17, 1995: Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appointed Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and Shura Council member Mohammad Yazbek to be his religious representatives in Lebanon.

June 25, 1996: The bombers detonated a truck packed with 5,000 pounds of explosives parked near Khobar Towers, a U.S. Air Force housing complex in eastern Saudi Arabia, that killed 19 service members and injured 500. Hezbollah al Hejaz, an Iranian proxy in Saudi Arabia, claimed responsibility. In 2001, a U.S. federal grand jury chose not to indict any Iranians for the attack but alleged that “an Iranian military officer” directed the operation. In December 2006, a U.S. federal judge ruled that Iran was responsible for the bombing and ordered the government to pay \$254 million to the families of the Americans who died in the attack.

Aug. 1, 2005: Nasrallah met with Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad in Tehran.

Jan. 20, 2006: Nasrallah visited Damascus, Syria, where he met with Iranian President Ahmadinejad.

May 2008: Hezbollah operatives plotted a bomb attack against the Israeli embassy in Baku, Azerbaijan but it was foiled by Azerbaijani authorities, who later claimed that the IRGC ordered attacks against U.S., Israeli and other Western embassies. It arrested 22 Azerbaijanis for allegedly training to be Iranian agents.

Feb. 26, 2010: Syrian President Bashar al Assad hosted Iranian President Ahmadinejad and Nasrallah.

Oct. 13-14, 2010: President Ahmadinejad visited Lebanon. “The whole world knows that the Zionists are going to disappear,” Ahmadinejad told Hezbollah in Bint Jbeil. He also met Nasrallah.

Dec. 16, 2010: Iran reportedly cut funding to Hezbollah by 40 percent due to biting international sanctions on Tehran over its controversial nuclear program.

Feb. 7, 2012: Nasrallah acknowledged that Hezbollah had received “moral, and political and material support in all possible forms” from Iran since 1982. “In the past we used to tell half the story and stay silent on the other half,” he said in a speech. “When they asked us about the material and financial and military support we were silent.” He denied U.S. allegations that Hezbollah laundered money and smuggled drugs, claiming that Iran satisfied the movement’s financial needs.

Feb. 13, 2012: Israeli embassy personnel were reportedly targeted in coordinated bombing attempts in New Delhi, India and Tbilisi, Georgia. In India, a motorcyclist planted a sticky bomb on an Israeli embassy minivan. In Georgia, a bomb was placed on an Israeli car but it failed to detonate. Israeli officials said the operations appeared to be directed by Tehran. “In all these cases, the elements behind the attacks were Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah,” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said.

July 18, 2012: A suicide bombing at Sarafovo Airport in Burgas, Bulgaria killed six Israeli tourists and a Bulgarian bus driver. Israel blamed Hezbollah and Iran for the attack.

Oct. 11, 2012: Nasrallah confirmed that Hezbollah had flown a drone 25 miles into Israel on October 6. “It penetrated the enemy’s iron procedures and entered occupied southern Palestine,” he said. Israeli forces shot down the aircraft. Nasrallah boasted that the drone’s components were from Iran but that the drone had been assembled in Lebanon.

May 25, 2013: For the first time, Nasrallah confirmed that Hezbollah forces were fighting in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime. “Syria is the backbone of the resistance (in the region) and its main supporter,” he said in a speech. “If the armed groups (rebels) control Syria or specific Syrian provinces, especially those on the Lebanese border, then we consider them a great threat to Lebanon, the unity of the nation and all Lebanese, not just Hezbollah or Shiites in Lebanon.” Hezbollah subsequently deployed thousands of fighters in various parts of Syria. At least 1,300 Hezbollah fighters were killed and another 5,000 fighting rebels, including Islamic State militants, by 2015.

Nov. 22, 2014: Brig. Gen. Sayed Majid Moussavi, an IRGC general, claimed that Iran had provided Hezbollah with Fateh missiles capable of reaching any target in Israel, including the nuclear reactor in southern Dimona. The missiles had a range of 350 kilometers (217 miles) and could carry a 500 kg (1100 pounds). Naim Qassem, the Hezbollah deputy secretary general, said the Israelis “are well aware that Hezbollah is in possession of missiles with pinpoint accuracy, and thanks to the equipment Hezbollah acquired, and with the Islamic Republic’s support and Hezbollah’s readiness for any future war, [the next] war will be much tougher for the Israelis.”

Jan. 18, 2015: An Israeli airstrike killed Mohammad Ali Allah-Dadi, an IRGC general, and six Hezbollah fighters in Syria's Golan Heights.

Dec. 22, 2016: Hezbollah fighters reportedly played a key role when Syrian forces defeated rebels, a decisive battle in Syria's civil war.

Sept. 3, 2019: With Iranian support, Hezbollah was reporting building facility to "convert and manufacture precision-guided missiles" in the Bekaa Valley, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) claimed.

Jan. 5, 2020: Nasrallah pledged to push U.S. forces out of the Middle East to avenge the U.S. murder of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's elite Qods Force, in Baghdad. "All of us in our region and in our nation should seek just retribution," he said.

Feb. 9, 2022: Nasrallah said that Iran was "a strong regional state and any war with it will blow up the entire region." But he denied accusations that Hezbollah automatically took orders from Tehran. "Tell us about a single act that Hezbollah did for the sake of Iran rather than for the sake of Lebanon." Hezbollah, he said, would not necessarily attack Israel in response to a strike on Iran.

Oct. 23, 2022: Over years, Israel had reportedly destroyed some 90 percent of Iran's military infrastructure in Syria.

Sept. 11, 2023: Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant claimed that Iran was building an airport in southern Lebanon – just 12 miles from the Israeli border – that could be used to launch attacks. Iran "is planning to act against the citizens of Israel," he said.

Oct. 12, 2023: Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian met Nasrallah in Beirut to confer on the war between Hamas and Israel. Israel had launched extensive airstrikes on the Gaza strip in response to an unprecedented attack by Hamas and Islamic Jihad that included infiltration into Israeli border communities, murders of civilians and kidnappings. Hezbollah "is in excellent condition and in full readiness to respond to criminal acts by the Zionist entity," Amir-Abdollahian said after the meeting.

February 2024: Iran reportedly warned Hezbollah against sparking a full-scale war with Israel along the Lebanon border. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "is squeezed in the corner now. Don't give him a way out. Let us not give him the benefit of launching a wider war because this would make him a winner," a member of Hezbollah said in summarizing Tehran's message.

February 2024: Nasrallah assured Iran's Qods Force chief Esmail Qaani, who was visiting Lebanon, that Hezbollah would fight Israel alone, without Iran's direct involvement. "This is our fight," Nasrallah reportedly said.

March 14, 2024: Iran had utilized European ports, particularly Antwerp, Valencia, and Ravenna, to mask the smuggling of missiles and bombs to Hezbollah via Syria, according to a report in *The Telegraph*. Iran shipped weapons to the Syrian port of Latakia that were then transferred to Lebanon. The ships continued onto the European ports.

April 1, 2024: An Israeli airstrike on an Iranian consulate building in Damascus, killed General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, the leading Revolutionary Guard commander for covert operations in Syria and Lebanon, and six others, including a Hussein Youssef, a Hezbollah fighter. "Be certain that Iran's response to the targeting of its Damascus consulate is inevitable," Nasrallah said in a televised speech on April 5. He said that the strike marked a "turning point" and that Hezbollah was prepared for "any war."

June 23, 2024: Whistleblowers reported that Hezbollah allegedly utilized Beirut's Rafic Hariri International Airport to store weapons from Iran, including Falaq unguided artillery rockets, Fateh-110 and M-600 short-range missiles, and other munitions.

June 29, 2024: Iran's mission to the United Nations warned Israel of an "obliterating war" if Israel were to launch a ground invasion against Hezbollah in Lebanon. "All options, [including] the full involvement of all Resistance Fronts, are on the table."

July 2, 2024: Kamal Kharrazi, an advisor to Iran's supreme leader, warned that a war between Israel and Hezbollah could quickly engulf the entire region. "All Lebanese people, Arab countries and members of the axis of resistance will support Lebanon against Israel." He added that Iran would "no choice" but to support Hezbollah "by all means."

July 8, 2024: In a letter to Nasrallah, Iranian President-elect Masoud Pezeshkian pledged to maintain Iran's support for groups opposed to Israel. "I am certain that the resistance movements in the region will not allow this regime to continue its warmongering and criminal policies against the oppressed people of Palestine and other nations of the region," he wrote.

July 30, 2024: Iranian President Pezeshkian praised Hezbollah for its resistance in confronting Israel during a meeting with Naim Qassem, the movement's deputy secretary general.



Qassem (left) and Pezeshkian (right)

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Updated September 26, 2024

Iran-Supported Groups in the Middle East and U.S. Policy

Iran has long backed a network of armed groups in the Middle East to advance its regional interests. These groups, which include U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) and which sometimes style themselves the “Axis of Resistance,” have conducted attacks on U.S., Israeli, and other targets for years. The number, pace, and scope of such attacks have surged since the October 7, 2023, Hamas-led assault on Israel from Gaza. Arenas of ongoing conflict include the war between Hamas and Israel in Gaza attacks by the Houthis in Yemen against international shipping and U.S. military vessels in the Red Sea Iraqi group attacks against Israel and escalating strikes between Lebanese Hezbollah and Israel.

U.S. policymakers may evaluate various means of deterring and responding to such attacks (such as diplomacy or military strikes, whether on militia groups, Iranian personnel abroad, or inside Iran), and the potential benefits, costs, and unintended consequences of these options.

Iran’s Foreign Policy

Support for regional nonstate actors has been a pillar of the Iranian government’s foreign policy since the 1979 founding of the Islamic Republic. Iran supports these groups to advance its foreign policy aims, including to position itself as the defender of Shia Muslim communities and other groups that the Iranian government characterizes as oppressed, such as the Palestinians. Perhaps preeminent among these aims is reducing threats that Iran may face stemming from the regional influence of the United States and its regional allies, with which the Iranian government “sees itself as locked in an existential struggle,” according to a public assessment by the U.S. intelligence community. Support for these groups carries strategic benefits and risks for Iran. Iranian leaders might see supporting armed groups as a cost-effective way to project power, given that Iran lacks some key conventional military capabilities. The sometimes-opaque nature of Iranian assistance for these groups suggests Iran may seek to avoid responsibility for its beneficiaries’ actions. At the same time, the United States and others may still hold Iran accountable, including for actions that Iran may not have specifically directed or approved in advance. The increasingly open nature of direct Israel-Iran clashes may indicate that sponsorship of actors abroad may provide less deterrence than Iran has possibly sought as part of what some Iran experts have called a “forward defense” strategy.

The Qods Force (F) of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) coordinates Iranian support to armed groups abroad both the IRGC and IRGC-F are designated for U.S. sanctions under terrorism-related authorities.

Selected Iran-Backed Groups

According to U.S. officials, the groups profiled below are prominent beneficiaries of Iranian government support. The

nature and degree of Iranian support vary: while all share some key interests with Tehran, to differing extents they also may act independently in pursuit of their own interests.

Lebanese Hezbollah

Arguably the most powerful Iranian-backed group and a key player in Lebanese politics, Hezbollah (“Party of God,” alt. Hizballah) most closely represents an Iranian proxy it often aligns directly with, and acts on behalf of, Tehran. Founded in the context of the Lebanese civil war and Israeli invasion, Hezbollah was established in 1982 by Lebanese Shia militants who were inspired by, and received critical assistance from, the new Islamic Republic of Iran. Per the State Department, Iran “continues to provide Hizballah with most of its funding, training, weapons, and explosives, as well as political, diplomatic, monetary, and organizational aid.” Hezbollah attacked U.S. targets in Lebanon during the country’s civil war, and has since targeted Israeli and Jewish targets in several countries. Hezbollah has reportedly provided support to many of the groups below.

Hezbollah (which fought an inconclusive 34-day war with Israel in 2006) has launched projectiles into Israel since October 2023 in stated solidarity with Hamas. Israel has responded with airstrikes in Lebanon, and both sides have taken steps to escalate since July 2024. The conflict has reportedly displaced tens of thousands in Israel and hundreds of thousands in Lebanon. Israeli officials have threatened wider military action seeking to enable the return of evacuated Israelis. Hezbollah has insisted that Israel first halt fighting in Gaza. In September to date, Israeli operations against Hezbollah have killed hundreds in Lebanon. Analysts debate the extent to which those operations have affected Hezbollah’s strategic calculus, military capabilities (including its arsenal of some 150,000 missiles and rockets), and internal cohesion.

Hamas

Iran has aided the Sunni Islamist Palestinian group Hamas for decades, going back nearly to the group’s inception in the late 1980s. Since Hamas took de facto control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, it has engaged in several rounds of conflict with Israel, with material and financial support from Iran. The State Department assesses that Iran provides “up to 100 million annually in combined support to Palestinian terrorist groups, including Hamas.” Hamas has reportedly received additional material support from private entities in other regional countries, and also has secured resources via its governance of Gaza.

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence assessed in February 2024 that “Iranian leaders did not orchestrate nor had foreknowledge of” the October 7 attack. The Biden Administration has contended that Iran is “broadly complicit in these attacks,” as Hamas’s “primary backer for decades.” Top Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh

reportedly was killed in July 2024 in Tehran, where he and senior representatives from other Iran-backed armed groups had gathered for the inauguration of Iran's new president. Iran has blamed Israel and vowed to retaliate.

The Houthis

The Iranian government has long backed the Yemeni Shia militant group *Ansar Allah*, aka the Houthis, and has increased its support since the group took control of Yemen's capital and much of the north in 2014-2015. Iran's support to the Houthis—including ballistic and cruise missiles and unmanned weapons systems—has reportedly enabled the group to attack the territories of U.S. partners, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The Houthis have espoused categorically anti-Israel views for decades, and since October 2023 have claimed several missile attacks against Israel many have been intercepted by Israeli or U.S. forces, but a July 2024 missile attack on Tel Aviv killed one Israeli, prompting Israeli retaliatory airstrikes in Yemen. The Houthis assert that they are demonstrating solidarity with the Palestinians with these strikes, and also by conducting attacks on commercial and naval vessels in the Red Sea since November 2023 that have impacted global trade. The United States and partner nations have deployed military assets to the region to respond to the Houthi attacks, thwarting Houthi hi ackings of commercial vessels and exchanging fire with Houthi forces since January 2024.

Iraqi Militias

Iran has deeply rooted ties in neighboring Iraq, where it works with a number of powerful military and political groups, mostly from Iraq's Shia majority. These groups gained combat experience and deepened their ties with Iran during operations against the Islamic State (IS) starting in 2014, and have leveraged that experience to become prominent actors in Iraq's political system. Since 2017, Iran-backed Iraqi groups have conducted attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria, to which the United States has periodically responded with airstrikes. U.S.-designated

FTOs in Iraq linked to such attacks include **Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH)**, **Harakat al Nujaba (HN)**, and **Asa'ib Ahl al Haq (AAH)**. Attacks by those groups on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria multiplied after October 2023, prompting U.S. strikes. The Iraqi government in turn seeks to end the U.S.-led counter-IS coalition mission in the country. A January 2024 attack claimed by Iran-backed Iraqi militants killed three U.S. servicemembers in Jordan, triggering U.S. retaliatory airstrikes. Attacks and U.S. responses subsided for several months before resuming in July 2024. Iraqi groups have claimed long range strikes targeting Israel.

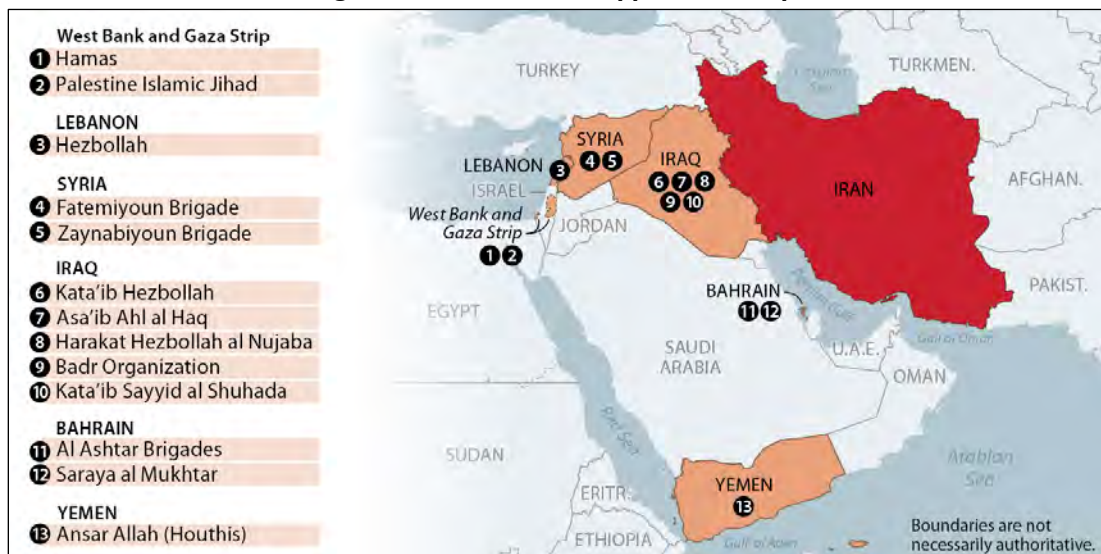
U.S. Policy

The Biden Administration has sought to deter and respond to attacks from Iran-backed groups, and has committed to helping Israel defend itself, while seeking to avoid a deeper regional conflict. It has attempted to help the parties negotiate cease-fires in Gaza and Lebanon. Iranian officials have stated support for attacks and said they will continue until the war in Gaza ends, while denying that they control the groups carrying out those attacks. Iran's new president has blamed Israel for seeking to "create this all-out conflict." U.S. and Iranian officials have stated that messages have been relayed regarding an intention to avoid wider war.

Some Members of Congress have supported the Administration's actions to date. Others have called for direct U.S. strikes on Iran, claiming that operations elsewhere do not deter Iran or the groups it supports. Others assert that the Administration lacks congressional authorization for U.S. forces to target Iran-backed groups.

The U.S. military has struck Iranian assets and personnel abroad (e.g., the 2020 strike that killed then-IRGC- F commander Qasem Soleimani) but has not claimed any strikes within Iran. A broader military conflict with Iran could entail major costs for the United States, and may cause Iran to accelerate its nuclear activities or target U.S. forces and or partners.

Figure 1. Selected Iran-Supported Groups



Source: Created by CRS, based on U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism*, and other public sources.

Clayton Thomas, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

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<https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/09/jordan-three-balancing-acts-navigating-post-october-7-middle-east>

Jordan's Three Balancing Acts: Navigating the Post-October 7 Middle East

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Jordan must balance containing Hamas with its public's support for Palestinians.
- Iran's actions to undermine Jordan's security require Amman to navigate brinkmanship and public opinion.
- The relationship with Israel carries forward on a quiet security track and a strained diplomatic track.

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Wednesday, September 11, 2024

/READ TIME: 11 minutes

By: [Farah Bdour](#)

Jordan sits at the heart of the ever-shifting sands of the Middle East, walking a tightrope between maintaining neighborly relations, advancing national interests and containing threats to ensure its own security and stability.



A protest surrounding the Jordanian Prime Ministry in Amman, Jordan on Feb. 4, 2011. Many Jordanians have protested the Gaza war, but the country still maintains important security ties with Israel. (Andrea Bruce The New York Times)

In the aftermath of Hamas' October 7 attack, and the ongoing set of chain reactions shaking the Middle East, Jordan faces significant political and security challenges in balancing these relationships. The devastation in Gaza and deteriorating situation in the West Bank — coupled with Hamas' October 7 attack and Iran's regional adventurism — will continue to shape its strategic decisions. The [September 8 attack](#) by a Jordanian truck driver on Israeli security at the Allenby Bridge, on the border between Jordan and the West Bank, highlights public frustrations toward Israel, even while Jordan's security and political relationships necessitate working relationships with regional neighbors.

To overcome these challenges, Jordan is pursuing proactive diplomacy, strengthening its security apparatus, and working closely with international allies to seek a sustainable resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Maintaining this balance of political and security necessities is crucial for Jordan's stability in an increasingly complex geopolitical environment. Three principal tightrope acts characterize the Hashemite Kingdom's posture in the current challenging context.

1. Jordan's Effort to Contain Hamas

Jordan's relationship with Hamas is largely shaped by public sentiment toward the Palestinian cause, as well as its domestic security calculations. Home to over 2 million Palestinian refugees — the largest number of any country in the Middle East — Jordan has historically taken a more nuanced stance toward Hamas than [Egypt](#), Saudi Arabia and the UAE, mindful of the Jordanian people's historical, political and demographic relationship to Palestine and the movement's perceived standing as a defender of the Palestinian cause. As such, the Jordanian government has sought to maintain some contact with the group while also seeking to contain its radical influence.

Jordan's relationship with Hamas is largely shaped by public sentiment toward the Palestinian cause, as well as its domestic security calculations.

However, this balancing act is fraught with challenges, given Hamas' history of meddling in Jordan's internal affairs leading to the closure of its office in Amman in 1999, and significant distrust.

The months that followed Hamas' October 7 terrorist attack highlight this dynamic. Devastating images of death and destruction from Gaza sparked massive protests across the kingdom, including calls for the annulment of the 1994 Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty. Hamas leaders were quick to exploit the Jordanian public's outrage, [framing](#) the group's actions on October 7 as a protective measure to defend Jordan against the [Israeli far-right's](#) threats against the country and its efforts to [undermine](#) Hashemite custodianship over Muslim and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem.

Days after the October 7 attack, former Hamas chief and current head of Hamas' diaspora office Khaled Mashaal [urged the Jordanian public to mobilize](#), referring to October 7 as a "moment of truth" and a "moment for action." Mashaal used slogans — such as "land of steadfastness and mobilization" — previously controversial for the implication that Jordan was merely a "platform" for Hamas's operations. The catastrophe in Gaza shifted the focus, with a sense of solidarity subsuming previous concerns about the slogan's interpretation.

Hamas was encouraged by Jordanian public support for Palestinians in the first weeks of the war, and in the months that followed. In April, Mousa Abu Marzouk, the deputy head of Hamas' Political Bureau, reportedly suggested that, should the group be expelled from [Gaza](#), it could relocate to Jordan, as many Hamas leaders hold Jordanian citizenship. The statement was a trial balloon, intended to gauge public sentiment and potentially pressure the Jordanian government to host Hamas. The Jordanian government [reportedly](#) vehemently rejected the idea, with former ambassador to the Palestinian Authority Ziad Ma'ali saying, "Jordan has closed the book on Palestinian cells — and we do not intend to reopen it."

To host Hamas in any way would introduce significant legal and diplomatic challenges for Jordan. Given the International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor's [request](#) for Hamas leaders to be indicted as tried as war criminals, and Jordan's participation in the Rome Statute, the kingdom would be obligated to arrest and surrender indicted individuals, opening a web of processes and controversies the government would like to avoid.

To date, Jordan has managed to contain Hamas, as the Jordanian public has shown an ability to distinguish between sympathy for Gaza and support for the group. The Jordanian public has [shown resentment](#) of Hamas' attempts to mobilize demonstrators to attack Jordanian police forces and security — widely viewed as pillars of national stability — undermining the group's cause and support. How the group seeks to influence the Jordanian public in the future, and how the Jordanian government will balance support for Gaza with containment of Hamas, will be a critical part of Jordan's balancing act.

2. Jordan's Struggle with Iran

For two decades, Iran has grown increasingly sophisticated in how it exerts regional influence and strengthens its negotiating power. Most visibly, Iran has leveraged proxy and allied groups to exert influence and reshape regional dynamics. By supporting groups like Hamas, the Houthis, Hezbollah and other militias in Iraq and Syria, Iran engages in conflicts to safeguard its interests while destabilizing neighboring countries.

Jordan is increasingly a target of Iran's strategy. Since 2013, Jordan has contended with persistent drug and weapons smuggling on its borders, carried out by militants linked to Iran. As a result of these operations, Jordanian security forces [regularly clash](#) with militias on the Jordanian-Syrian border. An [August 2023 survey by NAMA](#) highlights how the war on drugs has led to a shift in public attitudes toward Iran, with the percentage of Jordanians viewing Iran as the region's biggest threat rising from 12% in 2021 to 19.1% in 2023.

Beyond smuggling, Jordan has seen its territory attacked by Iranian weapons, notably in the [January 2024 drone attack](#) on Tower 22, a small U.S. military outpost in Jordan's northeast. Months later, on April 12, Iran [launched](#) a significant air offensive against Israel in response to an [Israeli attack](#) on the Iranian consulate in Syria, which killed two generals. Iran's response — which included over 120 ballistic missiles, 30 cruise missiles and approximately 170 drones — placed Jordan in the middle of a potentially major escalation. Jordan played a pivotal role in intercepting Iranian missiles aimed at Israel.

This defensive action — which Jordan framed as a measure to protect its own airspace, territory and citizens — underscores the kingdom's primary concern for national security. Foreign Minister Ayman Al-Safadi publicly rejected characterizations of Jordan's actions as defensive on behalf of Israel, reiterating that the kingdom's foremost priority was safeguarding its own sovereignty and stability. This diplomatic framing helped to mitigate a potential backlash from Iran, while preserving a balanced relationship with Israel and Western allies.

As a function of geography alone, Jordan is certain to be caught in the middle of any major crisis if tensions between Iran and Israel escalate.

This framing also managed Jordanian public opinion, which stands in solidarity with Gaza and opposes official actions perceived as aligning too closely with Israel. However, the Jordanian public also seemed to have a nuanced understanding of the situation. With little interest in being caught in the crossfire, most conclude that the best way to support Gaza is through diplomacy and humanitarian aid rather than military actions. Consequently, Jordanians began to adopt a narrative that links domestic stability to effective support for Gaza — highlighting that stronger, more stable countries like Jordan are better positioned to aid the Palestinian cause and safeguard their own national interests, than failed and war-torn states like Yemen, Syria and Lebanon.

Iran will continue to attempt to destabilize Jordan. As a function of geography alone, the kingdom is certain to be caught in the middle of any major crisis if tensions between Iran and Israel escalate. Navigating this complex brinkmanship — and public opinion — will likely force Jordan to make difficult and potentially unpopular decisions in the future.

3. Jordan's Balancing Act with Israel

Jordan has a strategic interest in maintaining its peace treaty with Israel, as both countries cooperate on numerous regional security issues that extend beyond the Palestinian file. The Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty includes essential security cooperation — border security, counterterrorism and intelligence sharing, among other things — which is vital for Jordanian national security, given the volatile regional environment. Disrupting these mechanisms could have severe implications for Jordan's stability.

Over the past decade, under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's leadership, the relationship with Jordan has become increasingly strained, as Israel continues to [oppose](#) the possibility of a two-state solution and some extremists promote Jordan as a replacement for a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. With

each outbreak of violence west of the Jordan River, Jordan faces a dual challenge of addressing the consequences that fundamentally weaken the two-state framework — potentially turning Jordan into a de facto homeland for Palestinians — while preserving the strategic alliance with Israel that is crucial for Jordan's national security and stability.

This balancing act also affects Jordan's relationship with the U.S. Although the U.S.-Jordan partnership extends beyond ties with Israel, the fact that both countries are key U.S. allies and partners of CENTCOM that play a critical role in U.S. strategy in the Middle East. Jordan's stability, strategic location, and security cooperation make it vital to U.S. interests, and maintaining strong ties with both Israel and Jordan is essential for Washington's regional posture.

A nuanced approach has allowed Jordan to preserve essential security cooperation with Israel while voicing opposition to policies that threaten its national security.

As a result, Jordan's relationship with Israel has evolved into two streams: the political and the security. In response to the Israeli government's turn toward the hard-right, encapsulated by its current coalition, Jordan has maintained close cooperation with Israel's security establishment (traditionally more attuned to Jordan's stability), while simultaneously downgrading the conduct of relations with Israel's political establishment to mid-level diplomats. Additionally, official communication, including [interviews](#) with the monarch, have cautiously differentiated between the Netanyahu government and those within Israeli society that do not support the extreme rhetoric of [members](#) from the current government. This nuanced approach has allowed Jordan to preserve essential security cooperation while voicing opposition to policies that threaten its national security.

The Gaza war tested this delicate balance. In the aftermath of October 7, Jordan collectively recoiled at Israeli operations which killed Gazan civilians, recalled Jordan's ambassador to Tel Aviv, and conditioned the return of the Israeli ambassador to Amman on the cessation of hostilities. The Gaza crisis hit closer to home as — mirroring [concerns in Egypt](#) about displacement from Gaza to Sinai — [fears](#) rose that West Bank Palestinians may be pushed into Jordan. The kingdom is already host to millions of refugees from Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Somalia, and is highly wary of a new influx of Palestinian refugees, whose predecessors have never been able to return to their original home.

Accordingly, Jordan was quick to denounce any forced transfer of Palestinians as a violation of international law, [going so far as to declare](#) such actions a “red line” and act of war. On October 17, King Abdullah and the crown prince — both wearing military fatigues — chaired an Armed Forces meeting in which the king reiterated Jordan's firm re-jection of any attempt to displace Palestinians in Gaza or the West Bank. The kingdom underlined this message on November 21 by sending [reinforcement](#) forces to the border with Israel.

When asked about this measure, Jordanian Prime Minister Bisher Khasawneh said that Jordan would resort to “all the means in its power” to prevent Israel from implementing any transfer policy to expel Palestinians from the West Bank. The premier also stated that “any displacements or creating the conditions that would lead to it, will be considered a declaration of war and constitutes a material breach of Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty.” Khasawneh [added](#) that “this would lead to the liquidation of the Palestinian cause and to harming the national security of Jordan.”

Diplomatically, Jordan has been clear in its re-jection of any proposals that approach Gaza only militarily or isolate it from the West Bank, instead insisting that all policies regarding Gaza should be framed within a comprehensive political context. Jordan has worked with Arab and international allies to pressure Israel to shift from a conflict management approach to a more sustainable conflict resolution approach. This has included conditioning any post-war role of Arab countries in Gaza to the creation of a political horizon with irreversible steps toward a two-state solution.

In the immediate term, Jordan has taken a number of measures to stabilize an increasingly fragile West Bank. In November, Jordan sent a [field hospital](#) to Nablus and delivered significant humanitarian aid. In June, Jordan held an [emergency international conference](#) to mobilize global support and resources for Gaza. A key focus of the conference was to support the Palestinian Authority (PA) in strengthening governance and stability in the Palestinian Territories in the face of Israeli government efforts to weaken the PA.

Geography requires Jordan and Israel to continue to have a relationship. But the nature of that relationship will very much be shaped by the Palestinian issue. Failure to seriously address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will hamper the security and stability of both nations. Jordan will continue to advocate for a viable two-state solution and work with international allies toward this aim, including through pressure on Israel. For Jordan, more than ever there is an urgency for a comprehensive political strategy that prioritizes humanitarian aid, economic development, and the protection of Palestinian rights. Pursuing this path while securing its strategic interest in an ongoing relationship with Israel is a balancing act the country navigates every day.

PHOTO: A protest surrounding the Jordanian Prime Ministry in Amman, Jordan on Feb. 4, 2011. Many Jordanians have protested the Gaza war, but the country still maintains important security ties with Israel. (Andrea Bruce The New York Times)

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s).

MENASource | February 22, 2024

The future of Saudi-Israeli relations is a balancing act between Palestinian and regional interests

By **R. Clarke Cooper**

Before Arab normalization with the state of Israel or the Abraham Accords ever became a reality, any sincere consideration of **Saudi-Israel normalization** was tied to the prospect of Palestinian statehood. This condition still applies today.

In early 2021, it was clear that the Joe Biden administration sought a normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia by the end of 2023 as a capstone to the Donald Trump administration’s **2020 Abraham Accords** normalization agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. The historic breakthrough of the Abraham Accords, which bolstered Israel’s sovereign right to exist, brought fresh hope for regional stability and economic growth. The heinous attacks by Hamas on October 7, 2023, sought to bury such hope of stability and were launched by those who refuse to accept any terms short of Israel’s destruction. It is the fault of Hamas and its Iranian sponsors that peaceful coexistence is now seemingly further off than ever.

Among the now **heightened** normalization stakes in 2024, constants remain in the discourse as leaders in Riyadh, Jerusalem, and Washington continue to signal normalization remains on the table. As stakeholders continue to address the war in Gaza, negotiate the release of hostages, advocate for the movement of humanitarian assistance into the Gaza Strip, and seek to mitigate a regional conflagration, there is ongoing strategic consideration of normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Primary constants revolve around the pernicious **threats** from Iran and its proxies, and persistent interest in Palestinian statehood. Though not a new Saudi position, Palestinian statehood has become amplified during talks of Israeli ceasefires with Hamas and the post-conflict development of Gaza.

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To varying degrees, Saudi officials—**including royals**—condemned the Hamas attacks on Israel, which required a deliberate Israeli kinetic response. Still, they also recognize that for any reconciliation to take root and normalization to occur, there must be a path toward Palestinian statehood. Before a panel of reporters at the 2024 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Princess Reema bint Bandar Al Saud, Saudi ambassador to the United States, noted, “While Saudi Arabia recognizes the need for Israel to feel safe, it cannot be at the expense of the Palestinian people.”

Additionally, during the February 5 **visit** of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, as part of his broader Middle East tour to seek de-escalation of regional tensions, his stop in Riyadh included talks with Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). The consideration of normalization was among the critical issues discussed regarding the Gaza war and Yemen’s Houthis **attacking** shipping routes in the Red Sea. Parallel to Blinken’s tour, the release of an annual **Arab public opinion survey** likely read in Riyadh reported that a current majority of Arabs do not support official recognition of Israel, with 89 percent of respondents from sixteen Arab countries either outright hostile or deeply skeptical of the idea.

Following Secretary Blinken’s fifth regional visit since the war began, the Saudi foreign ministry clarified overtly what had been stated all along in **bilateral communications** with US officials in the Biden and Trump administrations: “The Kingdom has communicated its firm position to the US administration that there will be no diplomatic relations with Israel unless an independent Palestinian state is recognized on the 1967 border, with east Jerusalem as its capital.”

Secretary Blinken then confirmed Saudi Arabia had conveyed that advancing a two-state solution to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a prerequisite for normalization. Still, as his colleagues at the State Department are well aware, the Abraham Accords—which the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan signed in 2020—did not require the condition of regional progress on creating a Palestinian state.

The door for normalization discourse has been wide open since the 2020 Abraham Accords, and the desire remains. However, any credible movement to formalize bilateral relations between Riyadh and Jerusalem cannot ignore what the Saudis have consistently stated about the two-state solution. Looking back at the autumn of 2020, then **US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo** urged his counterpart, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, toward recognition of Israel, stating, “We hope Saudi Arabia will consider normalizing its relationships as well, and we want to thank them for the assistance they’ve had in the success of the Abraham Accords so far.” Pompeo added that he hoped Riyadh would encourage Palestinian leaders, including the Palestinian Authority led by Mahmoud Abbas, to return to negotiations with Israel.

During the 2020 pinnacle of normalization, any US diplomat or official spending time in the Gulf, myself included, was met with sincere expressions of anticipation along with measured pragmatism over the Palestinian file. Fast forward to summer 2023, and the Saudi ambassador to the United States publicly shared the Saudi **perspective** on Israel-Palestine relations when she noted that Saudi Arabia aims for integration, rather than mere normalization, with Israel. Her remarks highlighted that Israeli-Palestinian peace aligns with Saudi Arabia’s ambitious social reform project, Vision 2030, and that Saudi Arabia envisions “a thriving Israel” alongside “a thriving Palestine.”

The Saudi stance Princess Reema further articulated at Davos, inclusive of **Vision 2030**, is intended as a comprehensive approach in which prosperity and collaboration transcend the mere coexistence of neighboring states. This declaration, like MBS’s most recent engagement with Secretary Blinken, is an acknowledgment that there is a place in the normalization discourse for Saudi Arabia to use its regional political and economic influence to enable reform of the Palestinian Authority and deradicalize the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

There is also the candid **recognition** of “statehood” in international affairs that is more consequential than simply recognizing the idea of a state. In treaties and international law, statehood has important sovereign characteristics, including having a defined territory and population and a capital city, and being able to implement government functions. To date, there is not an existent “Palestine” that is both de jure and de facto, in that it exists according to law and practice. If there is to be such a state, it will be incumbent upon existent states, particularly Saudi Arabia, to ensure such a state exists according to both law and practice. Any sort of two-state solution cannot allow for the development of a proto-state permissive to radicalization and terrorist facilitation to exist next to thriving neighboring countries.

R. Clarke Cooper is a nonresident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council’s Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative and is the founder and president of Guard Hill House, LLC. He previously served as assistant secretary for political-military affairs at the US Department of State.

Further reading



Mon, Dec 11, 2023

Threats from Yemen are increasing. It’s time to redesignate the Houthis.

MENASource By R. Clarke Cooper

Ever since the 2021 lifting of FTO status, the world has witnessed the increased threats emanating from Yemen, which include recent repeated attacks on commercial ships with drones and missiles

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IN BRIEF

Iran's Support of the Houthis: What to Know

By Kali Robinson | March 1, 2024 4:36 pm (EST)

Iranian support has boosted the military prowess of Yemen's Houthis, helping them project force into the Red Sea. In return, the group has extended the reach of Iran's anti-West axis of resistance.

Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthi movement is emerging as one of the Middle East's most potent nonstate actors as Israel's war against Hamas rages on in the Gaza Strip. The group's ability to maintain disruptive strikes in the Red Sea raises fresh questions about the extent of its ties with Iran.

Who are the Houthis?

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The Houthis are a local rebel movement that currently rules a third of Yemen's territory and two-thirds of its population. They revolted against the internationally recognized government in 2011 and overthrew it in 2014. Yemen's civil war continues today, with its front lines largely frozen. The Houthis' government, based in the capital, Sanaa, is recognized only by Iran. Influenced by strict readings of Islamic law and local caste-based traditions, Houthi governance is considered repressive by human rights watchdogs. The Houthis' infamous, Iranian-inspired rallying cry points to their ambitions beyond Yemen: "God is great, death to America, death to Israel, a curse upon the Jews, victory to Islam." The United States designates them as a terrorist group.

The Houthis are formally known as Ansar Allah (Supporters of God in Arabic), but their popular name refers to the movement's leaders, who come from northern Yemen's Houthi tribe. Originally a political movement, the Houthis militarized in the late 2000s, fighting wars against Yemen's government. They command some twenty thousand fighters, a mix of tribal forces and troops formerly loyal to the government. The Houthi movement is rooted in Zaidism, also known as "Fiver" Shiite Islam, meaning it recognizes only the first five of the Prophet Mohammed's successors. It is practiced mainly in northern Yemen, where it has also taken on elements of Sunni Islam. Zaidis compose around a third of Yemen's population of thirty-four million.

How did the Houthis become aligned with Iran?

By some experts' estimations, Iranian military support to the Houthis began as early as 2009, amid the Houthis' first war against Yemen's government. Most experts agree that the Houthis were receiving weapons from Iran by 2014, the year they captured Sanaa. In both cases, military intervention against the Houthis by Iran's regional rival, Saudi Arabia, likely catalyzed Tehran's increased interest in the group.

Elliott Abrams

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The Israel-Hezbollah Conflict: Where It Stands

Militant groups allied with Iran are frequently called Tehran's proxies, but many experts say the Houthis are better characterized as Iran's willing partner [PDF]. Iran's model of "exporting" its 1979 Islamic Revolution by cultivating armed groups in the region allows these groups a degree of flexibility, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Michael Knights tells CFR. "It doesn't tend to force groups like the Houthis to choose between what they want to do locally and the Iranian model," he says. However, the Houthis and the Islamic Republic share an ideological affinity [PDF] and geopolitical interests that motivate the Houthis to assist Iran. "They don't have to be told, they don't have to be coerced, they don't even really have to be bribed. They're a very loyal fellow traveler to the Islamic Revolution in Iran."

While the Houthis hold Iran's supreme leader and the Islamic Revolution in high esteem, notable differences separate them from Iran and its closest partners. The Houthis don't practice the "Twelver" Shiism prevalent in Iran, though they have reportedly incorporated Twelver beliefs into their interpretation of Zaidism. They also weren't founded with Iran's help, as groups including Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iraq's Badr Organization were. And unlike with some Iran-backed groups, Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi reportedly doesn't see himself as subordinate to Iran's supreme leader.

How extensive is the military relationship?

Houthi fighters display ballistic missiles during a military parade commemorating their takeover in Sanaa. Khaled Abdullah/Reuters

Iran is the Houthis' primary benefactor, providing them mostly with security assistance, such as weapons transfers, training, and intelligence support. In late January 2024, for example, U.S. forces intercepted a shipment carrying military aid from Iran to the Houthis, including drone parts, missile warheads, and anti-tank missile units. Such aid mainly reaches the Houthis via Iran's paramilitary Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

In return for Iran's aid, the Houthis serve as an increasingly important part of Iran's "axis of resistance," a network of state and nonstate actors seeking to undermine Western influence in the Middle East. That mission involves pushing the United States out of the region, destroying Israel, and intimidating those countries' regional partners. The Houthis regularly engage with leaders from across the alliance, especially Hezbollah, Knights says, and that group provides the Houthis with support at Iran's behest. In addition, IRGC and

Hezbollah representatives advise the Houthis' military command authority, the Jihad Council, though their influence on Houthi decision-making is unclear, Knights wrote [PDF] in 2022.

For the Houthis, the Iran connection provides more sophisticated weaponry than they could acquire on their own, especially missiles and drones. Iranian support has bolstered the group's fighting abilities, helping the Houthis gain and maintain military superiority within Yemen, but experts say it has had greater impact elsewhere. "The role of Iran has been decisive in providing the Houthis with smuggled weapons and expertise to project power into the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait," Gulf analyst Eleonora Ardemagni writes for the Yemen-based Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies.

The Houthis assist Iran by menacing Saudi Arabia's border and protecting Iranian ships in the Red Sea, giving Iran room to evade sanctions on oil shipping, Iran expert Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar writes in *Foreign Affairs*. At the same time, the Houthis help field test Iranian-made weapons on Yemen's front lines and in the Red Sea. Like all axis members, the Houthis offer Iran plausible deniability; members routinely claim responsibility for attacks likely ordered or perpetrated by Iran. For instance, many experts blame Iran for attacks on Saudi Arabia's oil facilities that the Houthis claimed in September 2019.

How have ties been affected by the Israel-Hamas war?

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In what the Houthis are calling a show of support for Hamas and Palestinians, the group has attacked supposed U.S.- and Israel-linked targets in the Red Sea and even fired missiles at Israel, with ruinous effects for international shipping. Experts say it is unclear whether Iran or Houthi leaders ordered the initial strikes, but Tehran has voiced its unequivocal support for the operations and reportedly assists the Houthis in targeting vessels. The Houthi threat in the Red Sea concerns Washington especially, as freedom of navigation is a core U.S. interest. In response, the United States is working with the United Kingdom to bomb Houthi targets in Yemen, and U.S. and European Union naval missions are protecting ships in the Red Sea.

But efforts to halt the attacks have been unsuccessful so far and have instead highlighted the strength of Iran's axis of resistance. At the same time, experts say, the war is boosting the Houthis' status among Iran's partners and raising their reputation in Yemen and beyond. In a December report, the Sana'a Center's editorial board wrote, "For the Houthis, this is a golden opportunity to capitalize on widespread support for the Palestinian cause to raise their flagging popularity inside territories under their control, while pressing their case to the outside world that they are the only effective authority in Yemen."



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