

Some Context for Israeli-Hamas War

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I was visiting Israel on October 7, and had to shelter in safe place in Tel Aviv following the Hamas attacks. I offer no judgments on the subsequent war, because it's clear that both Palestinians and Israelis are suffering, but I will provide some context from the Israeli perspective.

First, Israel is a very small country. Because of its powerful impact in areas such as high tech, it is easy to forget how very small Israel is. It is 8 thousand square miles, approximately the size of New Hampshire. It is 25 times smaller than France. Israel's population of 9 million people is similar to North Carolina. As comparison, California has nearly 40 million residents. This very small country is surrounded by countries that either have uneasy peace agreements with Israel, or are openly hostile.

Israel is a very complex society. Nearly 20% of residents are Arab, who have voting rights and tend to live peacefully with their Jewish neighbors. Many actually enter the military, although some are excused. Approximately 13% of the Jewish population is Ultra-Orthodox, and they have, for the first time, gained a substantial say in the current government, headed by Netanyahu. They have been passing legislation, including substantially weakening the judicial system, that most moderate Israelis oppose. They are unhappy with this government that has made openly hostile statements towards Arabs and has been moving settlements into the West Bank, against international rules. Thousands of Israelis have been protesting this government weekly.

Here is a very simplified history of the Arab-Jewish conflict in Israel: After World War I, Britain ruled the Arab majority area that is now known as Israel. Although the Jewish population was substantially smaller than the Arab population in the beginning, the Jewish population grew exponentially during the European pogroms and after World War II. The British split the land and drew up an agreement. The Jewish leaders signed this agreement, but the Arab leaders refused to do so. In 1948 Britain withdrew and the Zionists established Israel. For periods of time, Gaza was occupied by Jordan or Egypt. After the 1967 War, Israel controlled Gaza and set up settlements. However, in 2005, Israel forcibly removed the Jewish settlements and completely withdrew from Gaza. Israel did control the border and airspace, and instituted a blockade to prohibit weapons from entering Gaza. Egypt maintains the same blockade on their side of the border with Gaza. Recently, Israel began allowing a total of 18,500 citizens of Gaza to enter Israel to work.

I feel as most of the Israelis I spoke with felt - extreme sadness about the war and the catastrophic losses, feeling that no side will win. They fear a much broader escalation of the conflict. They appreciate Israel's investment in the Iron Dome because it keeps most Israelis safe from the ongoing shelling by Hamas. There is much appreciation for the role of the US in standing by Israel. President Biden is seen as an extremely strong and wise leader.

