

## Israel, Hamas, and Iran in a perfect storm.

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Israeli police officers in Lod, Israel in May 2021 (Photo: Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

*By Raphael Benaroya*

The time was ripe for Hamas and its benefactor, Iran, to initiate this month's unprovoked and unusually aggressive attacks on Israel. They exploited a convergence of conditions in Israel and geopolitical influences in the Middle East.

Hamas and Iran saw Israel's government as divided, even unstable. Four elections in two years had failed to form a viable coalition government. The Prime Minister and Minister of Defense belonged to opposing

parties, which could be perceived as disunity and weakness.

And Israel was in the grips of internal strife—Palestinian unrest in East Jerusalem and violent confrontations between Israeli Arabs and Jews across the country. Many of these clashes occurred in mixed cities that have enjoyed harmonious Arab-Jewish coexistence for 70 years.

Hamas and Iran also perceived the new US administration's weaker resolve and less "Israel-centric" policies in the Middle East compared to its predecessor. The US had openly expressed its intention to reduce its footprint in the region. The US has also adopted a posture of appeasement with Iran in the hope of renewing their nuclear agreement (for example, accepting Iran's demand to exclude the US from direct negotiations with other world powers in Vienna). And the US had sent hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, stoking resentment among Hamas-led Palestinians in Gaza.

Even more troubling, an anti-Israel faction inside the US Democratic Party had asserted itself as never before. Even before the current conflict began, these "progressives" have been pushing a view in Congress that aligns with the narrative of the Palestinians and Hamas as innocent victims, and they have spoken openly and loudly against Israel.

In addition to exploiting political conditions in Israel and the US, Hamas also saw an opportunity to take advantage of the weakness of Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority's aging, ineffective leader, who had (again) postponed Palestinian elections. Hamas had hoped to build its Jihadist presence in the West Bank, taking advantage of the vacuum of governing leadership there.

And Iran saw an opportunity to avenge the recent attacks on its nuclear program, which it attributed to Israel. So it expanded its support of the Hamas war machine with new weapons: attack drones, anti-tank rockets, and more-accurate, longer-range missile technology.

All of this created a perfect storm—an ideal moment for Hamas and Iran to throw gasoline on the fire.

Hamas started with familiar tactics, echoing its previous aggressions against Israel. It launched a rocket barrage at Israeli cities, targeting civilians and vital facilities. But this time, new elements made Hamas's attacks even graver than past hostilities:

- The Palestinian-Israeli clashes inside Israel exacerbated the emotionally charged atmosphere surrounding Hamas's attacks. Violence escalated across Israel, with Arab youths burning synagogues and extreme Jewish groups attacking Arabs.
- Hamas's attacks were on an unprecedented scale, with over 4,000 missiles launched in 10 days. Hamas sought to inflict more damage and sow more chaos than it ever had before.
- The geographic reach of Hamas's rocket barrage was also more extensive than in past attacks, with the new weaponry supplied by Iran. Hamas targeted dozens of Israeli cities, as far north as Tel Aviv, in the center of the country.
- The attacks were also sustained, without abatement, as never before, forcing half of Israel's population to shelter and paralyzing everyday life.

As Hamas expected, Israel had no option but to defend itself. It responded with retaliatory airstrikes on Gaza, targeting Hamas installations, tunnels, and supply lines.

But Hamas intentionally places its assets in close proximity to civilians. So despite efforts to avoid hurting ordinary people, Israel's counterattacks killed many civilians, as well as Hamas militants, and disrupted

Gaza's supply of electricity, water, and food.

Predictably, Hamas exploited this humanitarian crisis, soliciting world sympathy with the narrative that Israel responded "disproportionately." Never mind Hamas's own, unprovoked, unprecedented attacks that triggered the calamity.

What long-term strategic gains did Hamas and Iran foresee with their exploitation of political conditions and escalation of conflict?

For Hamas:

- This was a chance to assert itself in the fractured Palestinian political environment—to gain power and influence with Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Lebanon, and of course Gaza. Hamas wants to be seen as the only viable alternative for leadership of the Palestinian Authority, replacing the ineffectual 16-year era of Mahmoud Abbas. Ultimately, Hamas, which is committed to eliminating Israel, seeks to become the leader of a Palestinian state spanning from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean.
- Hamas used the clashes in East Jerusalem as propaganda to position itself at the forefront of the Palestinian cause, to win world sympathy and financial support. It has thus portrayed the casualties in Gaza as martyrs. Hamas wants to portray itself as a righteous victim, demonstrate its endurance and resolve to fight, and provoke further Palestinian revolt.
- Hamas hoped its actions would pressure the US into changing its position on the Israel-Palestine status quo, and more assertively support a two-state solution.
- Hamas wanted to disrupt the progress of the Abraham Accords, through which, so far, Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the UAE have normalized relations with Israel. While most of the world sees these diplomatic accomplishments as positive steps towards peace in the Middle East, Hamas views them as undermining the Palestinians' aspiration for a greater Palestine.
- Hamas desired the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to remain front and center in Middle East dynamics—the top priority in the foreign policies of Arab nations, Europe, and the US.
- Based on past experience, Hamas cynically calculated that the severe conditions in a war-torn Gaza would prompt Arab countries and the West to send a flood of financial aid (with which it is certain to rebuild its military capabilities as well as the economy).

For Iran:

- This was, likewise, a chance to foment division among the US's Arab allies, complicating their *détentes* with Israel.
- Iran thought these divisions would increase pressure on the US to renew its nuclear deal with Iran, and thus help the Islamic nation win concessions.
- Iran also hoped to inspire its other proxies in the Middle East, beyond Hamas: Jihadists in Syria, Houthis in Yemen (who have recently stepped up hostilities against Saudi Arabia), and Hezbollah militants in Lebanon (who have also fired rockets toward Israel in the current conflict).
- And as a practical military matter, Iran wanted to judge the effectiveness of Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system in intercepting Hamas's rockets. Iran has supplied 100,000 missiles to Hezbollah in Lebanon, which could be used in a future attack.

But did this adventurous strategy deliver the intended results?

Hamas and Iran miscalculated that Israel's political dysfunction would hinder the country's resolute response. Israel quickly united under attack, set political rivalries aside, and stood behind its military

defense. Squabbles over domestic policies did not stand in the way of a firm response to an external threat.

Israel also did not bow to the international pressure that Hamas tried to manufacture. It did not let the opinions of factions among its allies soften its defensive posture.

Hamas and Iran were also surely disappointed in the results of their test of the Iron Dome. It intercepted more than 90% of incoming projectiles, proving resilient in the face of 4,000 missiles over 10 days. In addition, Israel's "Operation Aggressive Deterrent" delivered a crippling blow to Hamas's leadership, war machine, and infrastructure.

With a cease-fire now in place, Hamas, though severely wounded, has claimed "victory." It has garnered world attention and sympathy, particularly in the US, and created a wave of anti-Israel sentiment and anti-Semitism in the West. President Biden has already committed to fund the rebuilding of Gaza. The left wing of the Democratic Party has stood firmly with the Palestinian cause. And the Israel-Palestinian conflict may be brought to the forefront of US Middle East policy.

Iran was also able to demonstrate that its influence and might are to be reckoned with at the negotiating table with the US and Europe.

The tragic cost of lives in conflict has never been a concern to Hamas or Iran. Their sole intent is to improve their political and economic position in the region, reduce US influence, expand their Islamic Jihadist presence, and ultimately eliminate Israel from the map.

The US is a key player in this storm. Will it stand firm by Israel, along with other allies in the region, in the face of Iranian aggression? Will it deliver a stern enough message to Iran to stop its export of terror? Will it decisively ensure that Iran never lays its hand on nuclear weapons?

Unless the US takes clear and decisive steps to stop Iran and its proxies in the Middle East, we are bound to be entangled in more conflicts in the region and see our alliances there weaken.

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