

The War Hamas Always Wanted

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by Matthew Levitt

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Hamas's attack on October 7 took nearly everyone by surprise—most devastatingly, Israel, which struggled to respond as hundreds of fighters streamed across the border from the Gaza Strip to unleash a campaign of terror. But in the months before the attack, Hamas had in fact warned that a conflict could be coming. In late August, Saleh al-Arouri—the group's number-two leader, based in Beirut—told a Lebanese news channel that the Israeli government's policies, particularly what he described as its land grabs in the West Bank and its desire to control the al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, could spark a regional war. “We are preparing for an all-out war,” he said, “and we are closely discussing the prospects of this war with all relevant parties.” Indeed, in April, a delegation from Hamas met in Beirut with Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah, to discuss cooperation between the two organizations as an “axis of resistance” against Israel. The meeting was not the first. Officials from Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran's Quds Force have been meeting regularly in Iran and Lebanon for years. Following the May 2021 rocket war between Hamas and Israel, the editor of a Lebanese newspaper affiliated with Hezbollah reported that Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran coordinated the fighting from a “joint war room” in Beirut.

In the weeks and months before the October 7 assault, Hamas was not broadcasting that it would attack Israel, but for anyone looking, its intentions were on full display. After Hamas took over Gaza in 2007, some argued that the group would become more moderate while in power. But the notion that Hamas would change its ways was always wishful thinking. On October 7, Hamas made clear exactly what it really stands for and what it wants. Although the massacre likely took months to plan, the decision to execute it now appears to be tied to Hamas's fears over Israel and Saudi Arabia normalizing relations and the opportunity presented by the political and social disarray plaguing Israel.

MOMENT OF OPPORTUNITY

When Arouri raised the prospect of a regional war, violence in the West Bank was reaching an all-time high. Palestinian shooting attacks against Israelis were on the rise, and Israeli forces were conducting some of the most extensive counterterrorism operations there in years. In Jerusalem, Palestinian worshippers and Israeli security forces had been clashing at the al Aqsa mosque, one of the holiest sites in Islam and the location of the Temple Mount, one of the holiest sites in Judaism. Israel's far right had been pushing to undo the long-standing agreement that banned non-Muslim prayer at the compound. After Israeli forces stormed the mosque in April, arresting and beating Palestinian men, Hamas quickly took advantage of the situation and called for Palestinians “to take action to defend al Aqsa mosque.” In September, Israeli forces ejected Palestinian worshippers from the site to allow

Israeli settlers to visit. After October 7, Mohammed Deif, the commander of Hamas's military wing, the al-Qassam Brigades, justified the attacks on Israeli civilians as a defense of al Aqsa, even calling the attack "Operation al Aqsa Flood." The call to defend al Aqsa makes for good propaganda, and it may even mobilize others to act. (On October 8, for example, an Egyptian police officer killed two Israelis and their Egyptian tour guide in Alexandria.) But this appeal is a pretext, not a precipitant, for the war Hamas has launched.

In reality, it was the prospect of Israel's normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia, more than anything else, that drove Hamas to launch its attack. Such an escalation, the group's leaders calculated, would obstruct this new diplomatic effort that in their eyes would permanently undermine the standing of the Palestinian cause among Arab and Muslim countries. Moreover, normalization would solidify an alliance against Iran and its proxies, including Hamas and Hezbollah. Iran and Hezbollah, therefore, not only upped their incendiary rhetoric but also appear to have been involved in the strategic planning for the Hamas attack. Deputy National Security Adviser Jonathan Finer said in an [October 9 interview](#) with CBS News that Iran was "broadly complicit" in the attack given its many years of funding, training, and arming Hamas. State sponsors of terrorism and their proxies are always most dangerous when their interests align perfectly, and here Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran all had strong incentives to derail the deal.

Planning for the Hamas massacre began at least a year ago, Western and Middle Eastern intelligence officials told *The Washington Post*, "with key support from Iranian allies" (read: Hezbollah). Such operational planning gets to the underlying nature of Hamas, which has always been committed to the destruction of Israel and opposed to a two-state solution. Regional normalization with Israel provided Hamas with a reason to attack now.

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Leaders from Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran all gave speeches over the past few weeks denouncing normalization with "the Zionist enemy." They saw Israel and Saudi Arabia establishing diplomatic relations as a transformative event. It would create a de facto defense alliance against Iran and effectively terminate the Palestinian veto over Arab and Muslim peacemaking with Israel. On October 2, Nasrallah railed against the nascent deal in a televised [speech](#): "Any country that signs a normalization agreement must be condemned and its actions denounced. It is a very dangerous step and a stab [in the back] of the Palestinian people, the al Aqsa Mosque, and an abandonment of Palestine." Hamas leaders issued similar [statements](#) of their own.

Hamas and its backers in Beirut and Tehran also saw an opportunity. Recent political and social upheaval in Israel convinced Nasrallah that Israel really is—as he described the country years earlier—"weaker than a spider's web." In February, he [explained](#) that Israel's political crisis was causing internal weakness and security challenges for the country. Hamas

also understood that the Gaza border was vulnerable to attack since Israeli military officials had reduced the number of Israeli troops there, relying more on surveillance systems, sensors, and remotely automated machine guns. (Hamas used drones to disable parts of the Israeli military's cellular communications systems, rendering many of these automated systems useless.)

Just days after the attacks, it is too soon to tell what direct role, if any, Iran and Hezbollah may have played in planning or preparing for the attacks. For now, Hamas appears to have carried out the coordinated assault on Israeli communities on its own. But the Hamas operation comes straight out of the Hezbollah playbook, one that the Israeli military has been training to counter on the northern border for years. Part of the shock was seeing a familiar tactical operation—overrunning Israeli communities, killing and kidnapping civilians, and capturing video of fighters holding Israeli territory to punch a giant hole in Israel's sense of security and deterrence—but on a different border.

SPARKING A WAR

In a statement released on October 7, Ismail Haniyeh, a senior political leader of Hamas, lauded his group's "great victory" and "dazzling triumph." He hailed its "pious and courageous fighters" and railed against the "defeatists"—Arab leaders who are pursuing normalization with Israel. Then, showing Hamas's true colors, Haniyeh pledged to extend the fighting to the West Bank and farther into Israel and called on the "entire Arab-Muslim community" to join the battle however they can. The objective? To free Hamas prisoners from Israeli jails and then "liberate" the al Aqsa mosque and all of historic Palestine; in other words, destroy Israel.

By penetrating Israel's defenses so spectacularly, Hamas not only sought to encourage others to step up and do the same (saying, in essence, "We attacked Israel, and you can, too"); it also sought to convince Saudi Arabia and other Arab and Muslim states to abandon plans to normalize relations with Israel. As Haniyeh himself put it, "We say to all countries, including our beloved Arab countries: you must know that this entity which is incapable of protecting itself from our fighters is incapable of providing you with security or protection."

Some Arab countries may heed Haniyeh's warning, but when the dust settles, their more likely takeaway from this war will be the opposite. Regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, are likely to conclude that they should come together to counter the growing network of terrorists and militants of Iran and its allies, a club that includes not only Hamas and Hezbollah but also the Houthis in Yemen and the Shiite militias in Iraq. For the Gulf states, the lessons from this war will be about Iran and its proxy network more broadly, not just Hamas. There is no denying, however, that at least in the short term the Hamas massacre has thrown a wrench in prospects for normalization. Israeli officials have made it clear there can be no return to the prewar status of Hamas retaining power in Gaza, and Israel cannot tolerate a situation in which Hamas continues to hold some 150

hostages, including children and foreigners, including an unknown number of Americans. Normalization is off the table for now, as Israel takes the fight to Hamas in Gaza, and Palestinian citizens suffer the tragic consequences of war.

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The rest of the world may also finally come to realize that all of Hamas is a terrorist group and should be treated as such. Civilians from at least 25 countries besides Israel were killed or captured or have gone missing in the Hamas attack. The White House announced on October 10 that at least 14 Americans were killed and at least 20 more are missing. Haniyeh's statement, coming not from the head of the Hamas terrorist wing but its purportedly political bureau, fundamentally undermines the myth that Hamas has separate and distinct military and political wings.

Hamas had to know that Israel would respond to its attack severely, especially given the number of hostages it took into Gaza. And it may well have been part of the group's plan to draw Israel into a house-to-house battle in the Gaza Strip, where Hamas has built tunnels and extensive urban defenses for the specific purpose of inflicting heavy losses on any Israeli troops that enter the territory. But the group likely felt emboldened to execute such a massive operation because it had the support of Hezbollah and perhaps other Iranian proxies. Hezbollah has already fired missiles into Israel, attempted to infiltrate Jewish communities on the Israeli side of the border, and launched drone attacks across the border. Should Israeli ground forces enter Gaza, Hezbollah could open a second or even third front by attacking Israeli soldiers from Lebanon and from the Syrian-controlled portion of the Golan Heights. Remember Arouri's August statement that Hamas was discussing prospects for a regional war "with all relevant parties." The potential for horizontal escalation to other fronts is something Hamas is banking on. Even Yemen's Houthis and Iraq's Shiite militias have chimed in with threats of their own.

There are some who believed that the responsibility of governance would moderate Hamas and that the group's foundational commitment to destroying Israel would be muted by the mundane day-to-day responsibilities of collecting garbage and paying teachers in Gaza. The scholar Sara Roy, for example, claimed that Hamas's Islamic social institutions in Gaza and the West Bank "advocated a moderate approach to change that valued order and stability, not disorder and instability." Using Gaza as a safe haven, Hamas recruited and trained a large fighting force and built the capability to produce its own rockets and mortars and dig sophisticated tunnels. Rather than adhere to a long-term cease-fire that allowed Gazans to work in Israel and develop their economy, Hamas opted to start a war that, in the words of its political leadership, has only one ending. "This is the ultimate jihad," Haniyeh crowed as the October 7 attack played out, "the outcome of which can only be victory or martyrdom."