

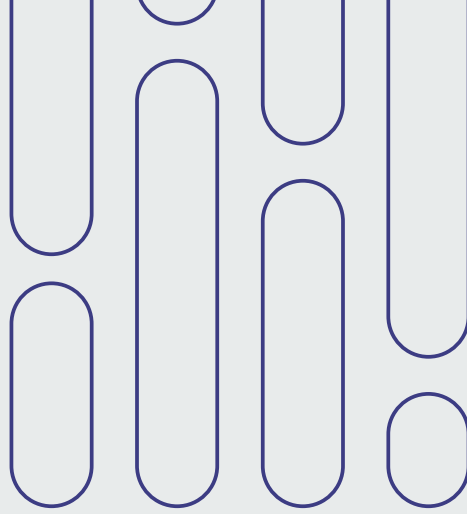
Position Paper

Operation Al-Aqsa Storm (Flood): Reasons, Consequences and Expected Scenarios

15 October 2023



RASANA
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies



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On October 7, 2023, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, launched Operation Al-Aqsa Storm against Israel in an unprecedented offensive. A huge number of militants from the al-Qassam Brigades infiltrated the Gaza Envelope settlements, killing scores of soldiers and settlers and kidnapping dozens more. Operation Al-Aqsa Storm began with firing thousands of missiles at Israeli settlements and cities. Hamas militants also infiltrated by sea and air into the occupied Palestinian territories.

Conversely, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has declared a state of war, launching Operation Iron Swords, which has so far killed 950 Palestinians, displaced thousands and destroyed entire neighborhoods in the Gaza Strip.

The following position paper compares the characteristics of the current conflict with the prior wars launched by Hamas against Israel. The paper will also address the reasons for the war and the context as well as the results of Operation Al-Aqsa Storm and its implications, and, lastly, different scenarios for how this war may conclude.

Features and Characteristics of the Current Round of Fighting Compared to Previous Episodes

Features of the ongoing round of confrontation between the Palestinian resistance, represented by the al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas's armed wing, on the one hand and the Israeli army on the other, can be distilled down to three points:

Changing the Rules of the Game and Engagement

Compared to the previous rounds of confrontation involving the Palestinian resistance and the Israeli occupation, Operation Al-Aqsa Storm, launched by the al-Qassam Brigades, will entirely change the rules of the game and engagement be-

tween the two sides in terms of the battleground on which the two sides would encounter as well as the party that controls determining the time and place of confrontations.

With regard to the scene of the confrontations, the al-Qassam Brigades managed during the ongoing round of confrontation, to take the battle into the territories controlled by the Israeli occupation. This started with the fighters storming — by air and sea — the wall separating the Gaza Strip from the so-called Gaza Envelope toward the Israeli territories. All the previous rounds of confrontation took place inside the Gaza Strip.

The Gaza Strip is strategically important for Tel Aviv because it serves as a buffer zone between Gaza and Israel, neutralizing any possible threats from Gaza. As a result, Israel provides significant incentives for Israelis to dwell in the Gaza Envelope settlements. Yet it is Israel's primary defense line from the Gaza flank. Thus, the Palestinian operation represents a significant breach in this defense line. For the first time, gun-toting al-Qassam Brigades militants were observed patrolling the settlement. This provides Israel with the challenge of settlers fleeing the Gaza Envelope settlements and the difficulties of returning to them.

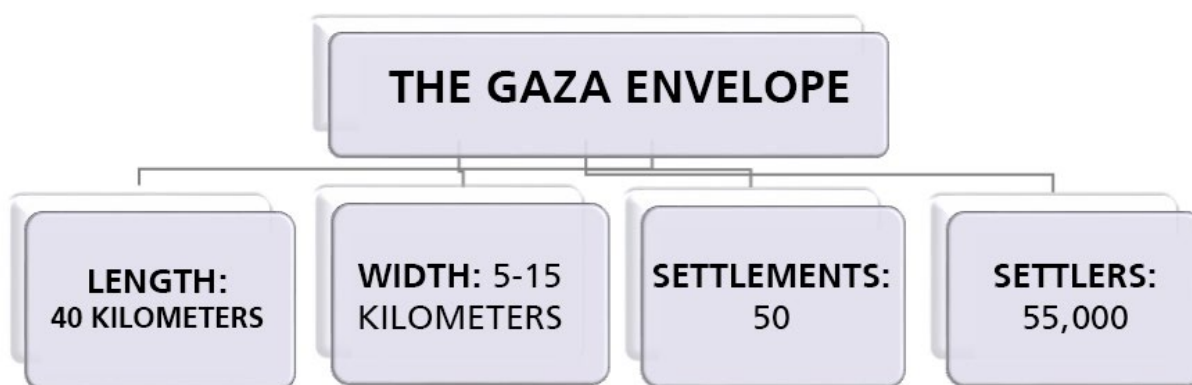
Map 1: The Gaza Envelope's Geographical Location



Source: Alearaab, <https://cutt.us/8FDBS>

It is worth noting that Israel created the Gaza Envelope following its withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. It extends about 40 kilometers from the separating wall surround Gaza up to Israel's borderline with the envelope area. It is also 15 kilometers wide and houses Israeli bases such as Re'im military base. The envelope also includes 40 settlements housing 55,000 settlers, including Sderot, Zikim, Kissufim, Eshkol, Nahal Oz, Magen and Kfar Azza (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Gaza Envelope by Numbers



Regarding the party that determines the time and place of the confrontations, Israel has been the party that has determined the time and site of the confrontations throughout the last few decades. But this time, the resistance seemed to have sole control over the time and place of the clashes, launching Operation Al-Aqsa Storm, which involved infiltrating fighters into the envelope's settlements while simultaneously firing thousands of missiles into southern and central Israel. Israel has been deeply, unprecedentedly shocked by the attacks not seen since the 1973 Yom Kippur War. In return, Israel launched Operation Iron Swords.

Outcomes and Gains

Compared to the previous rounds of confrontation, Israel has gained sympathy and solidarity from some countries on the international stage. It has employed this solidarity, coupled with the large number of captives and hostages, in order to wage a more violent attack with the aim of reclaiming part of its stature which has been shaken both internally and externally.

The Palestinian factions, on the other hand, have made unprecedented gains and quantum leaps during the current round of confrontation. Not only did the al-Qassam Brigades' fighters succeed in breaching Israel's first line of defense, taking the battle deep into Israeli territory and even calling into question the principle of invincible Israeli power. This has reached the point where [Israeli writers have described](#) Operation Al-Aqsa Storm as both a "shock and a nightmare that terrorized an entire country," insisting that it is a repetition of the Yom Kippur War of 1973 in which Egypt liberated on October 7, 1973 the Sinai Peninsula.

They also maintained that the infiltration into the Gaza Envelope exposes a major failure of the Netanyahu government and the Israeli intelligence, both of whom failed to gather information before the attack took place. They also failed to protect the settlers, making it urgent to form an emergency government and hold Netanyahu accountable after the war ends. With regard to the casualties inflicted on Israel, including those killed, the hostages and military equipment, it is a long list that sparked a state of unprecedented terror, particularly within Israel. From the first to the seventh day of the conflict, official Israeli statistics show that 1,400 people were killed,

including 258 soldiers of various military ranks. The number of Israelis wounded reached 4,000, with 120 Israelis held hostage by the resistance. Despite Israel's continued declaration of losses, the number of those killed could be exaggerated for political motives or raising the security and political cost that Hamas should pay, in addition to eliciting more Western sympathy and support for Israel.

On the other side, the number of Palestinian deaths until the seventh day reached 1,800 with 6,400 wounded, a significantly higher toll compared to the previous rounds of confrontation. The Israeli response to the current episode has been described as the harshest, with no sign of an advanced trajectory involving the two sides, which could lead in the near future to a settlement. Therefore, it is expected that the number of Palestinians dead and wounded will be in the tens of thousands.

Assessing the Scope of the Devastation

The magnitude of the aftermath of this round of conflict differs from that of prior episodes. The current round of conflict has dealt a blow to the Israeli government's and the state's standing — both domestically and globally. In comparison to earlier episodes, it has revealed a slew of Israeli flaws in its security visions and strategies, as well as its evaluations of its adversaries' levers of power. It also puts Israel in the face of a new stage in the Arab-Israeli dispute and peoples' certainty that the hype propagated about Israeli power has proved to be nothing more than a big lie, which makes Israel change the way it thinks as well as its calculus with regard to the final resolution issues: the Palestinian state, settlements, refugees,

Jerusalem (al-Quds). This is in addition to exacerbating challenges at home and impacting the prospects of the Israeli normalization with the outside world.

It seems that the magnitude of the Hamas operation's impact has prompted unprecedented Israeli retaliation. This has evidently appeared in the number of Palestinian deaths in the Gaza Strip, civilian facilities, places of worship, schools, hospitals and thousands of Hamas-affiliated targets. This will prolong this round of confrontation to durations not seen in the previous rounds of confrontation in case other regional and international parties — capable of exerting pressure on Israel to stop the war — intervene.

Overall, this operation is considered a quantum leap in terms of timing, scale, rules, outcomes and implications. This is the first time since the creation of Israel 75 years ago in which Palestinian fighters have infiltrated into the Israeli territories occupied after 1948.

Reasons and Contexts

The reasons behind Operation al-Aqsa Storm launched by Hamas against the Israeli occupation is different from past operations, which used to be reactions to continued Israeli violations against the Palestinians and their sacred places. Mohammed Deif, supreme military commander of Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigade, announced the launch of Operation Al-Aqsa Storm in response to Israel's reckless desecration of Al-Aqsa Mosque and assaulting women protesters in its courtyard. Additionally, the Israeli government has refused to conclude a humanitarian prisoner swap deal. The operation is not relat-

ed to a specific incident, since its enormity and complexities require huge preparations that take a relatively long time. But the timing of the operation comes in a Palestinian, Israeli and regional setting, the most important features of which are the following:

- The relative calm of the front of resistance organizations in the Gaza Strip, particularly the Hamas Movement, which has shown some sort of restraint in terms of firing missiles from the Gaza Strip toward Israel. Among the steps that Hamas took was avoiding participation in the last confrontation between Israel and the Islamic Jihad movement when the former launched Operation Shield and Arrow which consisted of attacks that targeted al-Quds Brigades commanders, the movement's military wing. According to media reports, this was done on purpose as part of Hamas's strategic deception plan to confuse the Israeli army with its onslaught. At that time, the Israeli army was ruling out an operation, and it was reasonable to believe that the Hamas movement had moved closer to political management than to resistance acts.
- The continued deterioration of the economic situation in the Gaza Strip as a result of the siege in place over the past two decades, which has further exacerbated the desperate living conditions of the Gaza Strip's residents.
- The continued undermining and marginalization of the Palestinian Authority by the Israeli government, which has limited its impact on the Palestinian security and political landscape. This is in addition to the incessant Israeli attacks on Islamic sacred places, enabling extremist settlers to desecrate

them, which has been a source of huge provocation of the resistance factions, which needed to win back Palestinian confidence in them and their ability to respond to Israeli violations.

- The continued incursions by the Israeli army into the Palestinian cities, villages and towns in the West Bank, launching a wave of arrests, demolishing homes, confiscating lands, building settlements and carrying out provocative acts with huge significance. Haaretz newspaper revealed that two female Israeli soldiers forced five Palestinian women in Hebron to undress, an act that has received condemnation and threats on the part of the resistance factions that it will not go unpunished.
- The rising pace of the initiatives aimed at ending disputes in the region following the China-sponsored Saudi-Iran rapprochement deal. A new initiative aimed to revive peace via Saudi Arabia has recently come to the fore. The initiative spoke of negotiations — via the United States — to establish relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Saudi Foreign Ministry showed openness to the matter — but with conditions, foremost among these is granting the Palestinians their rights.
- The time of Operation al-Aqsa Storm coincides with the October War anniversary, with its varied historical significations, evoking the victory over Israeli occupation. This is especially noteworthy given the similarities between the two battles, the first of which being the Arabs launching the sudden attack, ambushing and engaging in strategic deception, all of which shocked the Israelis on both occasions, as well as huge fatalities on Israel's side.

Al-Aqsa Storm's Consequences and Implications

Operation Al-Aqsa Storm will not finish without ramifications for the Palestinian cause, the whole Middle East, and possibly the world. The prolonged war has forced the Palestinian cause to the forefront, revealing a worrisome weakening of Israel's deterrence force and possibly a miscalculation that it would eternally squeeze a whole people into a corner. Some of the expected implications and consequences of the war waged by the Palestinians on Israel can be explained in the following lines.

The Erosion of Israeli Deterrence and Changing the Domestic Landscape

The operation carried out by the Palestinian factions, led by Hamas, has succeeded in dealing a deadly blow to the Israeli army. The operation has asserted the grave intelligence and military failure. The Israeli security services, which always boast of cutting-edge superiority, failed to predict the offensive, which changed the rules of engagement between Israel and the Palestinian factions, with the resistance shifting from the war based on calculated missile barrages to attacks on the battlefield by land, sea and air. In addition, the operation has also revealed that the Israeli deterrence force is questionable. This force has been glaringly exposed, and Israel was in need of US military might for it to restore its psychological stability and to collect itself. Perhaps this operation, after the October War in 1973, will remain one of the major defeats to be endured by Israel. Therefore, the Israeli concern for the time being will be restoring the ability to initiate attacks, make the dispute costlier for Hamas, and take advantage of the *carte blanche*

granted to it by the United States under the guise of Israel's right to self-defense for waging a military operation against the Gaza Strip in which it does not take into account any humanitarian considerations in an attempt to drive out the resistance factions. The measures will include cutting off food and fuel, according to the Israeli army. However, any escalation or excessive use of force against the Gaza Strip and the rest of the Palestinian territories will not wash away the stain left by this defeat.

Perhaps the operation has put an end to Netanyahu's political role as he has been facing difficulties in leading the current government since its formation. His policy, affected by forming the most extremist government in Israel's history, alleging that this government in particular is capable of providing Israelis with security and repressing the Palestinian factions and adopting an ultra-radical approach, has proved to be a dangerous and failed course. This is why Netanyahu has called on all factions of the Israeli opposition to partake in a national unity government. But this does not mean a change in reality, and there would be a post-war accountability, as was the case after the October War when Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan and many other political leaders were held accountable. And given the magnitude of the psychological, let alone the political and military losses of the battle, Netanyahu's future could be at stake. He will bear the consequences of the military defeat, even after honing his reputation through the military operation he is launching against Gaza. Regardless of the consequences of the war Netanyahu has waged against Gaza, he will not escape accountability and

exclusion along with many political, security, military and intelligence leaders. This could open the door for more moderate political factions in Israel to make a comeback.

The Palestinian Issue Regaining Momentum, Enhancing Hamas's Position and Prioritizing the Prisoners' File

After years of stagnation, lack of attention and limiting the entire issue to solely safety matters, the operation has caused Palestine to make headlines. According to regional and international analysis, the issue will be at the heart of the region's geopolitical dispute, and the cause may gain more traction as a result of the ongoing international competition. The United States has worked to establish a global public opinion that opposes Hamas and stands in solidarity with Israel at the UN Security Council. However, China and Russia took a neutral stance, equating both parties to the dispute.

Just as Hamas is facing a challenge in light of the Israeli desire to irrevocably change the situation in Gaza, the military operation has had important outcomes for Hamas, whether in the Palestinian arena or in the Arab and Islamic world. This is because the operation comes at a time when Palestinian public opinion is shifting in favor of armed resistance, which has recently appeared in the clashes that took place in the West Bank and Jerusalem. While the Palestinian Authority appears isolated and suffers from a crisis of credibility in light of Israeli intransigence and the total collapse of the peace trajectory, the rise of Hamas in the medium term will be the likelier scenario. It was clear that the Palestinian factions were focusing on capturing the largest possible number of Israeli captives within the ranks of Israeli soldiers and civilians and transferring them

to the Gaza Strip; and they have already succeeded in capturing dozens of Israelis. Meanwhile, this file will be an important lever to be used against Israel in order to ease the Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip. It will also be an important lever in the negotiations that follow the ceasefire. Although Israel has refused to yield to the pressures exerted by this lever in recent times, the large number of prisoners and the pressures exerted by their relatives will prompt Israel to cut a new prisoner swap deal. Perhaps the deal will be a large-scale one, encompassing thousands of Palestinian prisoners in Israel.

The Salience of the Ideological Dimension and Its Impact on Religious Discourse

The ideological dimension of the military operation emerged from the very beginning. Operation Al-Aqsa Storm was launched in response to the continued attacks on the sacred Al-Aqsa Mosque which was recently stormed. On July 27, 2023, Israeli Security Minister Tiamat Ben-Gvir stormed Al-Aqsa Mosque under protection from the Israeli police, saying, “This place is the most important for the people of Israel, and to which we should return and [on which](#) we should impose our sovereignty.” At the time, the spokesman for Hamas considered the move to be a dangerous escalation of the [religious](#) war. Earlier in October 2023, hundreds of Israeli settlers stormed the courtyard of Al-Aqsa Mosque under protection from the Israeli police. Hamas also reiterated that such steps are an escalation of the [religious](#) war.

The religious tone is evident in the speeches of Hamas leaders during the operations. The speech of Mohammed Deif, which paved the way for the operation is a case in point. After he at-

tributed the operation to the Israeli violation of international charters, the crimes of the occupation, Israel's unrestrained hegemony, touching on the issues of the captives, prisoners and refugees, not to mention the continued incursions into the Palestinian villages and towns, he said, "Our pious fighters, kill them wherever you find them. Don't kill the elderly and children. Fight, and the angels will be fighting [on your side](#)."

This religious discourse has attracted sympathizers, and the inspiration appears manifestly in the incident that took place in Egypt's Alexandria. It appears that the Palestinian operation has inspired some zealots. So, an Egyptian police officer opened fire on Israeli tourists in the city located north of Egypt, killing two and wounding others. In his speech, Deif stated, "Our brothers in the Islamic resistance in Lebanon, Iran, Yemen, Iraq and Syria, this is the time in which your resistance factions coalesce with your people in [Palestine](#)." Several Shi'ite factions and militias subsequently declared their support for the [operation](#), which points to new "ideologized fighters" backing Hamas.

Iran Embracing More "Pro-resistance" Policies:

Perhaps the military operation Israel is launching against the Gaza Strip will invite intervention by other factions in Lebanon, the Lebanese Hezbollah or other factions in the region like those affiliated with Iran in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. This act runs a huge risk for Lebanon as well as these countries, and the threats of these militias use the lever of intervention in order to put pressure on the Israeli side to stop the ongoing operation. However, expanding the operation could prompt

these parties to intervene in the dispute to ease the pressure on the Palestinian factions at home, moving all parties toward easing tensions and improving Hamas's position in the negotiations with Israel. Iran could move in this direction, perhaps to prove its credibility and enhance its presence in the Arab and Islamic world, not to mention its prime objective: stopping the normalization drive with the Gulf states, which it views as a threat to its security and interests, particularly the (Israeli) normalization with Saudi Arabia. In addition, this operation raises doubts about the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), in which Israel is an essential partner. The military operation has revealed a security challenge that could hinder the success of this project — unlike the other safer routes, including the traditional trade route between Asia and Europe via the Suez Canal.

More of the Saudi Realistic Approach

Saudi Arabia's realistic foreign policy approach has attracted regional and international attention with some Arab elites adopting the viewpoint that the old proposals for settling the Palestinian issue no longer fit the current realities. Therefore, it is expected that new settlement initiatives will be laid out. The Arab Peace Initiative could be modified in a way to reflect the developments and shifts, ensuring that the Palestinians are granted their rights. Saudi Arabia could play a role in this context, given its current role in the Arab and regional arenas. The battle, on the other hand, proved correct the Saudi viewpoint of insisting on concluding a bilateral defense agreement with Saudi Arabia. The deal would be better than indirect participation in security structures which are not suitable alter-

natives according to the Saudi perspective. Saudi Arabia does not want its strategic alliances to be subject to any consequences of the dispute in the occupied territories and Israel's policy of intransigence. Saudi Arabia could also fear for its standing, that could be significantly hurt in the Arab and Islamic world in case of normalizing relations with Israel, a move that Iran will exploit in order to undermine Saudi Arabia's role — particularly if the boundaries set by Israel in the normalization deal — pertaining to the Palestinian issue — are limited and exceed the Palestinian red lines. Saudi Arabia's religious standing and the holy bond between the Holy Mosque and Al-Aqsa Mosque bringing together all Muslims and the impossibility of treating the two mosques separately should be taken into account. This bond encompasses the entire Palestinian cause, given that it is a general cause that concerns all Muslims, rather than being a cause specific to Palestine and the Palestinians.

Potential Scenarios

In light of the military escalation between Hamas and Israel, as well as the latter's prime minister declaring that Israel is at war, and the massive support Tel Aviv is receiving from the West, there are a number of scenarios that could play out as current events unfold into the future:

The first scenario sees Israel opting for a full ground invasion and occupation of Gaza. Probably, Israel has planned for this end by allowing Hamas to implement its operation, so it can justify its potential ground invasion and full control of Gaza. This will be used by Israel as a bargaining chip for a future resolution of the Palestinian Cause. If this scenario comes to pass,

it could be then said that there will be a prolonged war. But this scenario remains risky since the cost of such a step will be staggeringly high versus low chances of success given past historical experiences. Hamas also possesses massive levers that it could deploy against Israel to prevent it from opting for this scenario, the foremost of which is the large number of Israeli captives who could be killed in case Israel runs the risk of invading the Gaza Strip, a move that will cause Israel to face immense pressure from the captives' families as well as Israeli society.

The second scenario sees the war expanding, with Iran, Hezbollah and the other pro-Iran paramilitaries in Syria and Iraq getting involved. However, if this scenario occurs, the area will be dragged into a large-scale war, while none of the regional actors appear to be interested in fighting an open war with Israel owing to a variety of factors. These include the West's staunch support for Israel in its conflict with Hamas. Yet, Israel does not appear to want to inflame multiple fronts because doing so will cost it a lot of blood and treasure. Hezbollah and other proxy actors allied with Iran have yet to declare their involvement in the conflict. Hezbollah has also unequivocally stated that the strikes against Israeli bases were carried out in response to the deaths of some of its affiliates as a result of Israeli shelling. Moreover, Hezbollah has been struck on countless occasions in Syria and it did not take any action to defend itself by inflaming the Lebanese front.

The third scenario sees the Israeli army rearranging its ranks and launching a counteroffensive against the Gaza Strip, occupying parts of it. At the time, Israel will attempt to reach out

to targets which it has already surveilled and which it deems to be military targets belonging to Hamas. The aim is to paralyze Hamas and destroy its military capabilities, thus entirely evacuating Hamas fighters from the Gaza Envelope before accepting any mediation for a ceasefire or prisoner swap deal. Israel will also carry out intermittent attacks against leaders of Hamas and other Palestinian factions, which will face difficulties in undertaking operations similar to Al-Aqsa Storm due to the absence of the element of surprise and ambush. They will only launch counterattacks by rockets, thus restoring the status quo ante.

The fourth scenario sees a truce reached, with the regional and international intermediaries succeeding in containing the escalation by convincing both sides to stop escalation and enter into negotiations for swapping prisoners. Hamas announced that it had achieved the operation's objectives, implying its readiness for a prolonged war. At the same time, it has expressed openness to the proposals of de-escalation, conditioning the start of the prisoner swap negotiations on stopping the Israeli onslaught. But this scenario may not be achieved — at least for the time being — given the huge fatalities and moral losses on the part of Israel due to Operation Al-Aqsa Storm, which has dealt a blow to the image of its army and intelligence among the Israeli public. Israel could accept this formula after several weeks when it feels it has achieved some victories to restore its credibility at home.

