

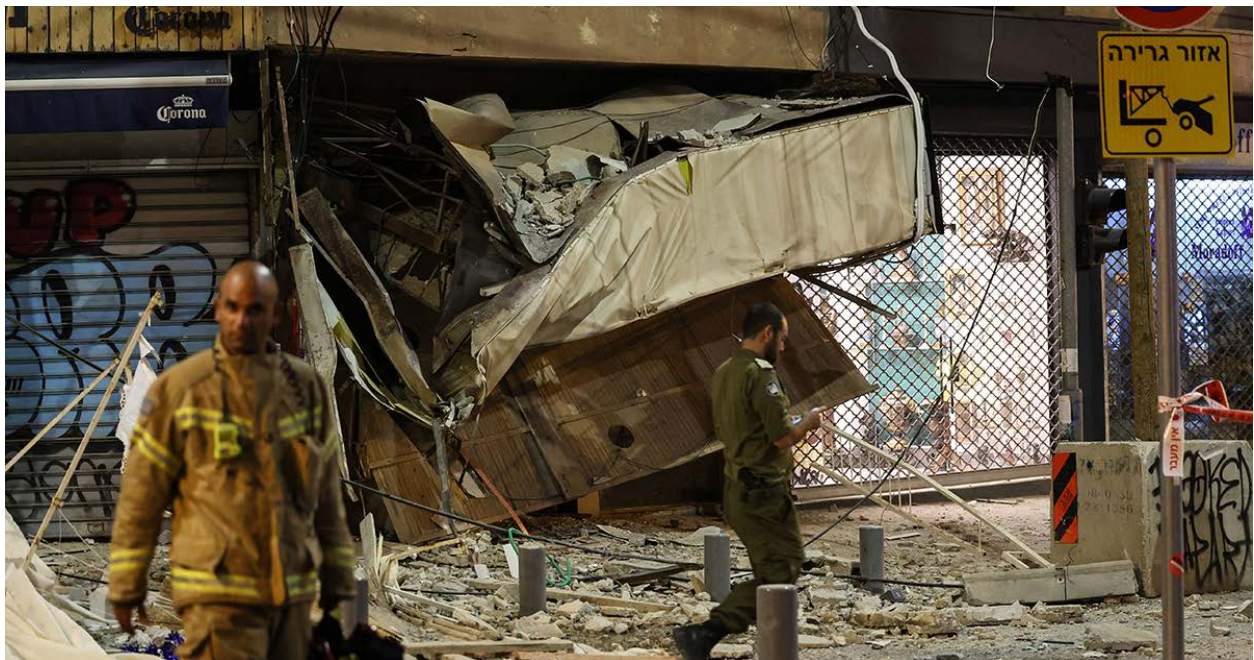


MEI
Middle
East
Institute

Defense Rapid Reaction: Hamas attack on Israel

Bilal Y. Saab, Mick Mulroy, Joseph L. Votel, Michael K. Nagata

October 7, 2023



INTRODUCTION

In the early morning of Oct. 7, 2023, members of Hamas launched a surprise attack of unprecedented scale and scope on southern Israel from the Gaza Strip. The military incursion by land, sea, and air and associated barrage of missiles and rockets resulted in hundreds of deaths, prompting Israeli retaliatory airstrikes on Gaza that killed hundreds more and setting off a potential escalatory spiral. In the latest installment of the Defense Rapid Reaction series, experts from MEI's Defense & Security Program provide their views on the attack and what it might mean for Israelis and Palestinians, the wider region, and U.S. policy.



MEI
Middle
East
Institute

REACTIONS

Bilal Y. Saab

Doom and gloom in the Middle East all over again

From this moment on, it matters little what happens on the Israeli-Palestinian battlefield. Hamas can be declared the victor already, just like al-Qaeda on 9/11 when it pulled off the most spectacular terrorist attack in history.



Hamas has won because it caused a dramatic and unprecedented shock to the Israeli national security system. It dealt a vicious blow to Israeli deterrence, and it exposed the massive holes in Israeli intelligence, which nobody saw coming. These two monumental failures — not just in personnel, equipment, and analysis, but also in imagination and preparedness — will be debated for decades by Israeli professionals and analysts alike.

This is worse than the strategic surprise of the 1973 Yom Kippur or October War. This, aside from Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon, is Israel's worst nightmare: Palestinian terrorists roaming Israeli towns and villages, killing both soldiers and civilians, and taking many back to Gaza as hostages.

The diversionary tactics Hamas used — a barrage of rockets and missiles followed by incursion from the air, land, and sea — were impressive, but largely because Israel was caught sleeping. Although looking, operating, and armed like a conventional army unit, Hamas did not seek military aims. Rather, they wanted to overturn the status quo. So, they resorted to the powerful tool of terrorism, pursued a blitzkrieg of their own, and utilized modern tools of war. Then they filmed it all so the entire world could see.

For the first time since 1948, Israel has lost control of parts of its own territory (which will be temporary). The unprecedented ground incursion and intense rocket and missile barrage of Tel Aviv and other urban centers have made it the deadliest attack on Israel in decades.



MEI
Middle
East
Institute

Israel has responded with force, killing hundreds of Palestinians. A large-scale ground incursion into Gaza is likely, although it will be incredibly challenging this time around given that Hamas holds dozens of hostages in Gaza and there is still fighting inside Israel proper. Ultimately, the result will not be that different from past episodes: Innocent civilians will die, so will the idea of peace. Saudi-Israeli normalization seemed close for a moment, but after this, thanks to Iran and its Palestinian ally, who never miss an opportunity to spoil, it's doom and gloom in the region all over again.

Bilal Y. Saab is a senior fellow and director of the Defense and Security Program at MEI.



MEI
Middle
East
Institute

Mick Mulroy

The Hamas attack on Israel and what might follow

There were indicators that intelligence should have picked up that an attack would happen in Israel. It was right around the anniversary of a similar attack in 1973 that started the Yom Kippur or October War. There were activities including the buildup of munitions and the preparation of the assault force, and there were reportedly cyberattacks in Israel before the assault as well.



Gaza has always been a difficult area to penetrate from an intelligence perspective. It is apparent that was the case here too, or else there would have been some advance warning. That said, even the best intelligence organizations in the world make mistakes, just like the United States did on 9/11. There will be a time later on to determine exactly what went wrong.

The attack itself was very complex. It was preceded by a barrage of thousands of rockets and missiles, which likely buttoned up the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and a lot of the police force in Israel. This was followed by denial-of-service attacks in Israel, disrupting communications, and then an air, sea, and land assault, with Hamas fighters on tractors breaching the security fence, technical pickup trucks loaded with soldiers traveling through tunnels, and small boats and paragliders proceeding by sea and air. These multiple means of attack likely created a significant tactical dilemma for the IDF.

This operation's complexity indicates a nation-state like Iran was behind it, supporting the attackers with weapons and munitions, intelligence, and possibly operational planning. If Iran is indeed orchestrating this in any sense, it could escalate things by using its regional proxy forces to initiate attacks from multiple directions, including Syria or Lebanon. These proxies are estimated to have as many as 150,000 missiles and rockets that could be fired at Israel — something that no air or missile defense systems could defeat.

The next move will likely be a major ground invasion of Gaza by the IDF aimed at capturing or killing militants and destroying their weapons and munitions supply. This will likely be preceded by airstrikes and special forces operations to decapitate Hamas leadership and recover



MEI
Middle
East
Institute

hostages, who will probably be used as human shields or as part of negotiations to return Hamas fighters imprisoned by Israel.

One of the reasons this attack may have been carried out is to scuttle the current U.S.-brokered negotiations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. That effort may be successful. The Palestinian people will likely be the ones to lose the most from this, both from the inevitable ground invasion and the end of any real discussions on their future and any possible two-state solution. Every country that has the ability to mitigate the consequences of this war should do so now.

Mick Mulroy is a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Middle East, retired U.S. Marine and CIA paramilitary officer, a senior fellow at MEI, and an ABC News national security and defense analyst.



MEI
Middle
East
Institute

Joseph L. Votel

A game-changer with significant implications for the region and the US

The Oct. 7 attack by Hamas on Israel is a game-changer for the region. The fact that this is taking place over the Yom Kippur holiday with invasive on-the-ground attacks, including hostage-taking, directed at the Israeli civilian population marks this as a distinct change from what we have seen in other flare-ups between these two warring parties. This situation will have significant military and strategic implications not only for the region but for the United States as well.



The United States will be compelled to respond in the military, diplomatic, and information domains. The full nature of this response is not yet clear but will likely include increased intelligence sharing, some weapons, supporting efforts to prevent Iran and other actors from widening the conflict, and strong and broad diplomatic messaging on the situation.

U.S. military commanders will review necessary resources that must be positioned in the region to add stability to a rapidly escalating situation. Efforts to increase the force protection of our service members, diplomatic posts, and other American interests will be necessary as many of Hamas' supporters will see this bold move as a signal to take action. And as they always do, our military leaders will be key conduits for information to our partners in and out of the region.

This could not have come at a worse time. With a long and difficult fight underway in Ukraine and a strategic imperative for the United States and its allies to address the expanding influence of China, we will not have the luxury of remaining on the sidelines.

It is also a clear reminder that the deep and underlying tensions that run through the Middle East will always act as a siren call, drawing us back into this troubled but extraordinarily important region where we have key national security interests.

Gen. (ret.) Joseph L. Votel is a distinguished senior fellow on national security at MEI. He retired as a four-star general in the U.S. Army after a nearly 40-year career, during which he held a variety of commands in positions of leadership, including most recently as commander of CENTCOM from March 2016 to March 2019.



MEI
Middle
East
Institute

Michael K. Nagata

The predictable consequences of “doing less” in the Middle East

The explosion of violence now occurring between Hamas and the state of Israel is horrific, yet it should surprise no one. The unresolved issues and resentments between Israel and Gaza, and the role of external actors who delight in fomenting armed conflict between them, have ebbed and flowed for decades.



The situation also lays bare the predictable consequences of the United States deciding, for several years now, that America can afford to "do less" in the Middle East.

This not to suggest that the problems of the Middle East are for America to solve. We have neither the skill nor the political appetite for either restoring or ensuring stability in the Middle East. America certainly cannot dispel the deep antagonism between the two sides.

Yet, in recent years these realities, and others like them, have too often been used by U.S. policymakers as an excuse for washing our hands of the region. The sheer number of U.S. ambassador nominations for the Middle East that have languished unconfirmed, and the enormous reduction in the U.S. military presence in the region, are seen globally as signs of an American retreat from this arena.

Until now, most of the strategic impact of this choice on America has been in the form of higher oil prices and generally greater difficulty in securing various types of cooperation for U.S. priorities from Middle Eastern leaders. Sadly, this renewal of fighting in southern Israel may foreshadow even greater strategic difficulties for the U.S. going forward.

While the U.S. cannot and should not be deemed responsible for the awful conflict now raging there, it would be equally wrong to hold U.S. policy choices for this region as blameless. Nature abhors a vacuum, and whether we realize it or not, America created one. It is now being filled by things that, in too many cases, we will deeply dislike and will be compelled to belatedly respond to.

Lt. Gen. (ret.) Michael K. Nagata is a distinguished senior fellow on national security at MEI. He retired from the U.S. Army in 2019 after 38 years of active duty, with 34 years in U.S. Special



MEI
Middle
East
Institute

Operations. His final position was director of strategy for the National Counterterrorism Center from 2016 to 2019.

Photo by JACK GUEZ/AFP via Getty Images