



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

An Invasion of Gaza Would Be a Disaster for Israel

America Must Prevail on Its Ally to Step Back From the Brink

BY MARC LYNCH October 14, 2023

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In the early morning of October 13, the Israeli military issued a warning to the 1.2 million Palestinians of northern Gaza: they must evacuate within 24 hours, in advance of a probable ground invasion. Such an Israeli assault would have the avowed goal of ending Hamas as an organization in retaliation for its shocking October 7 surprise attack into southern Israel, where it massacred over 1,000 Israeli citizens and seized over a hundred hostages.

An Israeli ground campaign has seemed inevitable from the moment Hamas breached the security perimeter surrounding the Gaza Strip. Washington has fully backed Israeli plans, notably refraining from urging restraint. In an overheated political environment, the loudest voices in the United States have been those urging extreme measures against Hamas. In some cases,

commentators have even called for military action against Iran for its alleged sponsorship of Hamas's operation.

But this is precisely the time that Washington must be the cooler head and save Israel from itself. The impending invasion of Gaza will be a humanitarian, moral, and strategic catastrophe. It will not only badly harm Israel's long-term security and inflict unfathomable human costs on Palestinians but also threaten core U.S. interests in the Middle East, in Ukraine, and in Washington's competition with China over the Indo-Pacific order. Only the Biden administration—channeling the United States' unique leverage and the White House's demonstrated close support for Israeli security—can now stop Israel from making a disastrous mistake. Now that it has shown its sympathy with Israel, Washington must pivot toward demanding that its ally fully comply with the laws of war. It must insist that Israel find ways to take the fight to Hamas that do not entail the displacement and mass killing of innocent Palestinian civilians.

UNSTEADY STATE

The Hamas attack upended the set of assumptions that have defined the status quo between Israel and Gaza of nearly two decades. In 2005, Israel unilaterally withdrew from the Gaza Strip but did not end its de facto occupation. It retained full control over Gaza's borders and airspace, and it continued exercising tight control (in close cooperation with Egypt) from outside the security perimeter over the movement of Gaza's people, goods, electricity, and money. Hamas assumed power in 2006 following its victory in legislative elections, and it consolidated its grip in 2007 after a failed U.S.-backed effort to replace the group with the Palestinian Authority.

Since 2007, Israel and Hamas have maintained an uneasy arrangement. Israel keeps up a stifling blockade over Gaza, which severely restricts the

territory's economy and imposes great human costs while also empowering Hamas by diverting all economic activity to the tunnels and black markets it controls. During the episodic outbreaks of conflict—in 2008, 2014, and again in 2021—Israel massively bombarded the densely populated Gazan urban centers, destroying infrastructure and killing thousands of civilians while degrading Hamas's military capabilities and establishing the price to be paid for provocations. All of this did little to loosen Hamas's grip on power.

Israeli leaders had come to think that this equilibrium could last indefinitely. They believed that Hamas had learned the lessons of past adventurism through Israel's massively disproportionate military responses and that Hamas was now content to maintain its rule in Gaza even if that meant controlling the provocations of smaller militant factions, such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The difficulties the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) experienced in a brief ground offensive in 2014 tempered its ambitions to attempt more. Israeli officials waved off perennial complaints about the humanitarian effects of the blockade. Instead, the country was content to keep Gaza on the back burner while accelerating its increasingly provocative moves to expand its settlements and control over the West Bank.

Hamas had other ideas. Although many analysts have attributed its shifting strategy to Iranian influence, Hamas had its own reasons to change its behavior and attack Israel. Its 2018 gambit to challenge the blockade through mass nonviolent mobilization—popularly known as the “Great March of Return”—ended with massive bloodshed as Israeli soldiers opened fire on the protesters. In 2021, by contrast, Hamas leaders believed that they scored significant political gains with the broader Palestinian public by firing missiles at Israel during intense clashes in Jerusalem over Israeli confiscation of Palestinian homes and over Israeli leaders' provocations in the al Aqsa

mosque complex: one of Islam's holiest sites, which some Israeli extremists want to tear down to build a Jewish temple.

More recently, the steady escalation of Israeli land grabs and military-backed settler attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank created an angry, mobilized public, one that the United States—and the Israel-backed Palestinian Authority—seemed unable and unwilling to address. Highly public U.S. moves to broker an Israeli-Saudi normalization deal may also have appeared like a closing window of opportunity for Hamas to act decisively, before regional conditions turned inexorably against it. And, perhaps, the Israeli uprising against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's judicial reforms led Hamas to anticipate a divided and distracted adversary.

It is still unclear the extent to which Iran motivated the timing or nature of the surprise attack. Certainly, Iran has increased its support to Hamas in recent years and sought to coordinate activities across its “axis of resistance” of Shiite militias and other actors opposed to the U.S.- and Israeli-backed regional order. But it would be an enormous mistake to ignore the broader, local political context within which Hamas made its move.

TIPPING POINT

Israel initially responded to the Hamas attack with an even more intense bombing campaign than normal, along with an even more intense blockade, where it cut off food, water, and energy. Israel mobilized its military reserves, bringing some 300,000 troops to the border and preparing for an imminent ground campaign. And Israel has called on Gaza's civilians to leave the north within 24 hours. This is an impossible demand. Gazans have nowhere to go. Highways are destroyed, infrastructure is in rubble, there is little remaining electricity or power, and the few hospitals and relief facilities are all in the northern target zone. Even if Gazans wanted to leave the strip, the

Rafah crossing to Egypt has been bombed—and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has shown few signs of offering a friendly refuge.

Gazans are aware of these facts. They do not see the call to evacuate as a humanitarian gesture. They believe that Israel's intention is to carry out another *nakba*, or “catastrophe”: the forced displacement of Palestinians from Israel during the 1948 war. They do not believe—nor should they believe—that they will be allowed to return to Gaza after the fighting. This is why the Biden administration's push for a humanitarian corridor to allow Gazan civilians to flee the fighting is such a uniquely bad idea. To the extent that a humanitarian corridor accomplishes anything, it would be to accelerate the depopulation of Gaza and the creation of a new wave of permanent refugees. It would also, fairly clearly, offer the right-wing extremists in Netanyahu's government a clear road map for doing the same in Jerusalem and the West Bank.

This Israeli response to the Hamas attack comes from public outrage and has thus far generated political plaudits from leaders at home and around the world. But there is little evidence that any of these politicians have given serious thought to the potential implications of a war in Gaza, in the West Bank, or in the broader region. Neither is there any sign of serious grappling with an endgame in Gaza once the fighting begins. Least of all is there any sign of thinking about the moral and legal implications of the collective punishment of Gazan civilians and the inevitable human devastation to come.

The invasion of Gaza itself will be laced with uncertainties. Hamas surely anticipated such an Israeli response and is well prepared to fight a long-term urban insurgency against advancing Israeli forces. It likely hopes to inflict significant casualties against a military that has not engaged in such combat

in many years. (Israel's recent military experiences are limited to profoundly one-sided operations, such as this July's attack on the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank.) Hamas has already signaled gruesome plans to use its hostages as a deterrent against Israeli actions. Israel could win a quick victory, but it seems unlikely; moves that might accelerate the country's campaign, such as bombing cities to the ground and depopulating the north, would come with major reputational costs. And the longer the war grinds on, the more the world will be bombarded with images of dead and injured Israelis and Palestinians, and the more opportunities there will be for unexpected disruptive events.

Even if Israel does succeed in toppling Hamas, it will then be faced with the challenge of governing the territory it abandoned in 2005 and then mercilessly blockaded and bombed in the intervening years. Gaza's young population will not welcome the IDF as liberators. There will be no flowers and candy on offer. Israel's best-case scenario is a protracted counterinsurgency in a uniquely hostile environment where it has a history of failure and in which people have nothing left to lose.

In a worst-case scenario, the conflict will not remain confined to Gaza. And unfortunately, such an expansion is likely. A protracted invasion of Gaza will generate tremendous pressures in the West Bank, which President Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority may be unable—or, perhaps, unwilling—to contain. Over the last year, Israel's relentless encroachment on West Bank land, and the violent provocations of the settlers, has already brought Palestinian anger and frustration to a boil. The Gaza invasion could push West Bank Palestinians over the edge.

Despite overwhelming Israeli anger at Netanyahu for his government's nearly unprecedented strategic failure, opposition leader Benny Gantz has

helped solve Netanyahu major political problems at no evident cost by joining a national unity war cabinet without the removal of the right-wing extremists Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich. This decision is significant because it suggests that the provocations in the West Bank and Jerusalem, which Ben-Gvir and Smotrich spearheaded last year, will only continue in this unsettled environment. In fact, it could accelerate, as the settler movement seeks to take advantage of the moment to attempt to annex some or all of the West Bank and displace its Palestinian residents. Nothing could be more dangerous.

Serious conflict in the West Bank—whether in the form of a new intifada or an Israeli settler land grab—alongside the devastation of Gaza, would have massive repercussions. It would lay bare the grim truth of Israel's one-state reality to a point where even the last diehards could not deny it. The conflict could trigger another Palestinian forced exodus, a new wave of refugees cast into already dangerously overburdened Jordan and Lebanon or forcibly contained by Egypt in enclaves in the Sinai Peninsula

BEYOND THE PALE

Arab leaders are realists by nature, preoccupied with their own survival and their own national interests. Nobody expects them to sacrifice for Palestine, an assumption that has driven American and Israeli policy under both former U.S. President Donald Trump and U.S. President Joe Biden. But there are limits to their ability to stand up to a furiously mobilized mass public, particularly when it comes to Palestine. Saudi Arabia might very well normalize relations with Israel, that curious obsession of the Biden administration, when there are few political costs to doing so. It is less likely to do so when the Arab public is bombarded with gruesome images from Palestine.

In years past, Arab leaders routinely allowed anti-Israel protests as a way to let off steam, diverting popular anger toward an external enemy to avoid criticism of their own dismal records. They will likely do so again, leading cynics to wave off mass marches and angry op-eds. But the Arab uprisings of 2011 proved conclusively how easily and quickly protests can spiral from something local and contained into a regional wave capable of toppling long-ruling autocratic regimes. Arab leaders will not need to be reminded that letting citizens take to the streets in massive numbers threatens their power. They will not want to be seen taking Israel's side.

Their reluctance, in this climate, to cozy up to Israel is not simply a question of regime survival. Arab regimes pursue their interests across multiple playing fields, regionally and globally, as well as at home. Ambitious leaders seeking to expand their influence and claim leadership of the Arab world can read the prevailing winds. The last few years have already revealed the extent to which regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey have been willing to defy the United States on its most critical issues: hedging on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, keeping oil prices high, building stronger relations with China. These decisions suggest that Washington should not take their continued loyalties for granted, particularly if U.S. officials are seen as unequivocally backing extreme Israeli actions in Palestine.

Arab distancing is far from the only regional shift the United States risks if it continues down this path. And it is far from the most frightening: Hezbollah could also easily be drawn into the war. Thus far, the organization has carefully calibrated its response to avoid provocation. But the invasion of Gaza may well be a redline that would force Hezbollah to act. Escalation in the West Bank and Jerusalem almost certainly would be. The United States and Israel have sought to deter Hezbollah from entering the fight, but such threats will only go so far if the IDF continuously escalates. And should

Hezbollah enter the fray with its formidable arsenal of missiles, Israel would face its first two-front war in half a century. Such a situation would be bad not just for Israel. It is not clear that a Lebanon, already laid low by last year's port explosion and economic meltdown, could survive another Israeli retaliatory bombing campaign.

Some U.S. and Israeli politicians and pundits seem to welcome a wider war. They have, in particular, been advocating for an attack on Iran. Although most of those advocating for bombing Iran have taken that position for years, allegations of an Iranian role in the Hamas attack could widen the coalition of those willing to start a conflict with Tehran.

But expanding the war to Iran would pose enormous risks, not only in the form of Iranian retaliation against Israel but also in attacks against oil shipping in the Gulf and potential escalation across Iraq, Yemen, and other fronts where Iranian allies hold sway. Recognition of those risks has thus far restrained even the most enthusiastic Iran hawks, as when Trump opted against retaliation for the attack on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq refineries in 2019. Even today, a steady stream of leaks from U.S. and Israeli officials downplaying Iran's role suggests an interest in avoiding escalation. But despite those efforts, the dynamics of protracted war are deeply unpredictable. The world has rarely been closer to disaster.

CRIMES ARE CRIMES

Those urging Israel to invade Gaza with maximalist goals are pushing their ally into a strategic and political catastrophe. The potential costs are extraordinarily high, whether counted in Israeli and Palestinian deaths, the likelihood of a protracted quagmire, or mass displacement of Palestinians. The risk of the conflict spreading is also alarmingly large, particularly in the West Bank and Lebanon but potentially far wider. And the potential gains

—beyond satisfying demands for revenge—are remarkably low. Not since the American invasion of Iraq has there been such clarity in advance about the fiasco to come.

Nor have the moral issues been so clear. There is no question that Hamas committed grave war crimes in its brutal attacks on Israeli citizens, and it should be held accountable. But there is also no question that the collective punishment of Gaza, through blockades and bombing and the forced displacement of its population, represents grave war crimes. Here, too, there should be accountability—or, better yet, respect for international law.

Although these rules may not trouble Israeli leaders, they pose a significant strategic challenge to the United States in terms of its other highest priorities. It is difficult to reconcile the United States' promotion of international norms and the laws of war in defense of Ukraine from Russia's brutal invasion with its cavalier disregard for the same norms in Gaza. The states and peoples of the global South far beyond the Middle East will notice.

The Biden administration has made very clear that it supports Israel in its response to the Hamas attack. But now is the time for it to use the strength of that relationship to stop Israel from creating a remarkable disaster.

Washington's current approach is encouraging Israel to launch a profoundly misbegotten war, promising protection from its consequences by deterring others from entering the battle and by blocking any efforts at imposing accountability through international law. But the United States does this at the cost of its own global standing and its own regional interests. Should Israel's invasion of Gaza take its most likely course, with all its carnage and escalation, the Biden administration will come to regret its choices.

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