

# **The Goals of Hamas' Terrorist Attack on Israel from Gaza**

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# **SPECIAL REPORT**

## **The Goals of Hamas' Terrorist Attack on Israel from Gaza**

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### **Summary**

The strategic surprise attack on Israel from Gaza, on 07 October 2023, needs a thorough analysis to understand all its intelligence and operational failures aspects and their impact on Israel, on the regional arena, and beyond.

This paper will evaluate the strategic goals of Hamas in its barbarian terrorist attack on Israel:

- (1) The weakening and possible crumbling of the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, with the hope to take control of it. This is the long-term objective.
- (2) The disruption of the normalization process between Saudi Arabia and Israel, this being the more urgent, immediate, objective, intertwined with Iran's regional interests.

Keywords: Hamas; Palestinian Islamic Jihad; Swords of Iron

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### **The narrative of Hamas as Defender of the Al Aqsa Mosque**

During the first months of 2021, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), the head of the Palestinian Authority, promised to organize elections in May 2021. There have been none since 2006, neither in the West Bank nor in Gaza.

At the end of April, Abbas decided to cancel the elections under the pretext that Israel is preventing him from holding the elections in East Jerusalem. Hamas refused to delay the elections and accused Abbas of intending to cancel the elections not because of Jerusalem but rather because of the internal situation of Fatah that is entering the elections with three lists, and because of Israeli warnings that Hamas will win in the West Bank.

The Hamas leadership was deeply disappointed by Abbas' decision, as it was sure that victory in the elections in the West Bank was at hand.

Therefore, Hamas decided to do everything possible to destabilize the Palestinian

Authority while attacking Israel. After riots on the Temple Mount on May 10, 2021, and an Israeli Police raid chasing rioters into the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Hamas leadership decided to present themselves as defenders of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy city of Jerusalem.

Hamas launched hundreds of rockets into Israel, targeting dense civilian populations in cities, towns, and villages. Jerusalem, Israel's capital, and the Tel Aviv metropolitan area were also targeted.

Israel responded with the military Operation "Guardian of the Walls". During the 11 days of the operations more than 4,360 rockets were fired at Israel.

Throughout the hostilities, rioting increased in Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem between the Palestinians and the Israeli security forces. Ten terrorist attacks were carried out, most of them shooting attacks.

More significantly, during Operation Guardian of the Walls violent riots erupted in several Israeli cities with mixed Jewish and Arab populations. Three Israeli citizens were killed, hundreds were wounded, and extensive damage was caused to civilian property at 520 sites. From the point of view of Hamas, this was an important success, which boosted its support among the Palestinians.

Since May 2021 we are witnessing an annual increase in violence and terrorist attacks in the West Bank, a spiral which extended into 2022 and then 2023, which registered 35 victims of Palestinian terrorism, the greatest number of attacks since the end of the Second Intifada in 2005. Numerous knife and vehicular attacks against Israeli soldiers and civilians have occurred, but then more attacks with automatic firearms and from individual attacks the Palestinians in the cities of Jenin and Nablus, passed to small cells or even larger groups, like the Lions' Den in Nablus. We are witnessing a sort of new intifada.

The trigger of the present operation is Hamas' attempt to upgrade the terrorist spiral and possibly to provoke a larger uprising in the West Bank.

Significantly, Mohammed Deif, the military leader of Hamas, announced the October 7 operation "Al-Aqsa Flood," in an audio tape broadcast by the organization's TV station, as it fired thousands of rockets, signaling the attack as payback for Israeli "raids" at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Just a week after the beginning of the operation, Hamas published on its Telegram page a call to all residents of the West Bank "to establish popular defense committees in all the focal points of the region to repel attacks by Israelis who threaten to escalate the situation and attack homes and property." The movement emphasized that "it is the duty of all Palestinians to stand up and defend their homes and take an active part in the battle of the Al-Aqsa Flood."

For the moment there is no massive response to this call by the Palestinian population in the West Bank, as hoped by Hamas.

### **The Disruption of the Israeli - Saudi Normalization Process**

Since the formation of the new Israeli government in December 2022, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a process of normalization in the relationship of the Hebrew State with Saudi Arabia has begun, first in secrecy and then in a rapid success of events.

It became clear that the Biden Administration was powerfully behind this process, for internal political reasons in a year of American elections, but also in the context of President Biden's grandiose plan presented on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in September 2022: the India – Middle East – Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).

The IMEC will be comprised of two separate corridors, the east corridor connecting India to the Arabian Gulf and the northern corridor connecting the Arabian Gulf to Europe. It will include a railway that, upon completion, will provide a reliable and cost-effective cross-border ship-to-rail transit network to supplement existing maritime and road transport routes – enabling goods and services to transit to, from, and between India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, and Europe. The project serves primarily as a US diplomatic tool to counter China's influence in the Middle East. In fact, IMEC should be considered in the same light as Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): an ambitious foreign policy project.

It should be mentioned that in March 2022, China brokered a reconciliation deal that resumed diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran after seven years.

Despite the recently improved diplomatic relations with Tehran, Riyadh is asking the US for a full mutual defense treaty or possibly the non-NATO ally status. Moreover, on the nuclear file, Saudi Arabia wants to build 17 civilian nuclear reactors as part of its energy diversification and Vision 2030 and beyond. The sticking point is Saudi Arabia's insistence on domestic uranium enrichment, an option in such an uncertain future vis-à-vis Iran.

On the Saudi Israeli track, while normalization is sought by both, there seems to be little clarity on what the Israeli extreme right-wing government could offer on the Palestinian issue to Saudi Arabia — the central player in both the Arab and Islamic worlds, and the site of the two holy mosques.

If the normalization process materializes, the Palestinians are not assured to gain recognition for their right to an independent state. Hamas, which is outlawed in Saudi Arabia as a Muslim Brotherhood organization, would suffer dire consequences just when recent improvement in the relations with the Kingdom could have led to liberation of its senior members condemned in Saudi Arabia to lengthy prison terms on charges of money laundering and support for the Hamas military wing.

Iran would be the great loser if Saudi Arabia would receive a strategic defensive umbrella from the United States, a nuclear project of itself on its territory, and allied with Israel, a strong commercial, technological and possibly military partner.

Not surprisingly, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, on October 3, days before the October 7 attack on Israel, has slammed countries seeking to normalize relations with Israel: "The position of the Islamic Republic is that countries that make the gamble of normalization with Israel will lose. They are betting on a losing horse."

It is interesting to note that this is the second time Hamas has sabotaged a Saudi Initiative, the so-called Arab Peace Initiative, a 10-sentence proposal for an end to the Arab Israeli conflict, that was endorsed by the Arab League on March 29, 2002 at the Beirut Summit. The same night, on Jewish Easter eve, at the height of the Second Intifada, a Hamas suicide bomber killed 30 Israelis in the attack at the Park Hotel in Netanya. Hamas claimed responsibility for the attack and its leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin said that the attack sent "a message to the Arab summit to confirm that the Palestinian people continue to struggle for the land and to defend themselves no matter what measures the enemy takes."

Indeed, Syria and Lebanon helped change the original version of the Saudi proposal while insisting on letting the Palestinians pursue armed resistance, objected to the use of the term "normalization," and insisted that any such offer was too generous to Israel.

The Park Hotel attack was the trigger of Israel's Defensive Shield Operation, in which IDF reoccupied the West Bank and for the next years dismantled the networks of suicide bombers and led to the end of the Second Intifada in 2005. A *deja-vu* of the present situation in the Israel-Hamas crucial conflict.

For the moment it seems the Hamas - Iranian axis has succeeded on its bet, as on the backdrop of the Israeli declared war on Hamas in Gaza, Saudi Arabia announced that it has suspended talks on potentially normalizing ties with Israel. Hopefully, this is only a temporary delay in the efforts to bring an important expansion in the Abraham Accords by bringing Saudi Arabia and possibly the Palestinian Authority to the process to advance peace in the region, even if slowly and painfully.