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SPECIAL REPORT

Hamas: Threat on the International Arena After the End of the War in Gaza

Dr. Ely Karmon

Abstract

This report delves into the unprecedented scale and brutality of the October 7, 2023, attacks by Hamas in Israel, marking a new phase in violent Islamic extremism. The assault, characterized by mass killings, hostage-taking, and extreme violence, represents the worst pogrom against Jews since World War II. It provoked a formal war declaration from Israel against Hamas and highlighted the group's growing influence and credibility in the Arab and Muslim world, as observed by US intelligence. The FBI chief noted an increased terror threat against the West post-attack. Al-Qaeda and ISIS also responded, framing the attack within a global jihad narrative and proposing strategies to eradicate Israel. The article also reports arrests in Europe linked to Hamas, suggesting a shift in the group's operations beyond the Middle East, a pattern reminiscent of historic Palestinian terrorism strategies. The article examines potential platforms for Hamas's expanded terror activities, including Lebanon, Syria, Algeria, Turkey, and Iran, each offering unique operational advantages. This marks a significant transformation in Hamas's strategy, indicating a potential evolution into a global terror threat.

Keywords: Hamas; October 7 Hamas Attack; Islamic Extremism; al-Qaeda; ISIS; Europe

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The October 7, 2023 assault's scope and lethality against Israel have no precedent in the 16 years Hamas has controlled Gaza, and the nature of the violence stunned Israelis. It was the worst pogrom against Jews since World War II, terrorists gunning down the young at a music festival, slaughtering the old at a string of kibbutzim, killing children wherever they could be found, raping women, torturing victims while alive and mutilated once dead. More than 1,400 people, including 28 children, were killed and some 240 others, including 33 children, were taken hostage. In response to the October 7 attacks, Israel's cabinet formally declared war on Hamas.¹

The reports of what Hamas terrorists did in southern Israel recalled the cruelty and savagery of the Islamic State's rampage in Syria and Iraq.

1 "Israel and Hamas: Major Conflict After Surprise Attacks," Congressional Research Service, October 10, 2023, URL: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN12262>

New analysis by US intelligence agencies has warned that Hamas' credibility and influence has grown dramatically in the two months since the October 7 terror attack. The group has successfully positioned itself across some parts of the Arab and Muslim world as a defender of the Palestinian cause and an effective fighter against Israel. It's possible the conflict will do more to boost Hamas' influence outside of Gaza than within it, where years of poor governance have bred mistrust.²

Christopher Wray, FBI chief, said at a congressional hearing, that since the start of the conflict in Gaza, multiple foreign terrorist organizations have called for attacks against Americans and the West and predicted that Hamas attack will inspire greatest US terror threat since ISIS.³

Al-Qaeda and its branches in India, North Africa, the Sahel, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen applauded the October 7 attack and cast it in the framework of a global jihad against the "Zionist-Crusader" alliance. ISIS addressed the attack on October 19 in an editorial in al-Naba. It condemned Hamas by noting the folly of fighting "under the banner of the Iranian axis" and offered what it called a "practical plan" for putting an end to the "petty state of the Jews." Such an effort would include not only fighting in the Palestinian territories but also targeting "the Jewish presence" throughout the world, in particular the Jewish communities of the United States and Europe. Eradicating the Jewish state would also require attacking the West and "the apostate Arab armies and governments" that support Israel's existence.⁴

It is not clear if Hamas leaders took seriously al-Qaeda's and ISIS's recommendations or it had planned to go international parallel to the October 7 attack on Israel, but on October 14, several suspected Hamas members, who planned attacks against Jewish institutions in Europe, were arrested in Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark.

German police arrested four suspected Hamas members, three in Berlin and another in the Netherlands, who were planning a terror attack against Jewish institutions in Berlin. Bild, the German tabloid, reported that "the three men have close ties to senior leaders of Hamas's military wing." According to German prosecutors, Hamas leaders in Lebanon had tasked the operatives with moving a cache of weapons from a depot in an undisclosed European location to Berlin to carry out an attack. The weapons were due to be "kept in a state of readiness in view of potential terrorist attacks."⁵

2 Katie Bo Lillis, "US intelligence analysis warns Hamas' influence has grown since its attack on Israel," CNN, December 21, 2023, URL: https://www.applevalleynewsnow.com/news/politics/national-politics/us-intelligence-analysis-warns-hamas-influence-has-grown-since-its-attack-on-israel/article_11902c63-03d5-51e7-8183-7eb8e2e0c61d.html

3 "Hamas attack will inspire greatest US terror threat since Isis, FBI chief says," Reuters, November 1, 2023, URL: https://www.scmp.com/news/world/middle-east/article/3239886/hamas-attack-will-inspire-greatest-us-terror-threat-isis-fbi-chief-says?module=hard_link&pgtype=article

4 Cole Bunzel, "Gaza and Global Jihad. Why the Hamas-Israel War Is Unlikely to Revive ISIS and al Qaeda," Foreign Affairs, November 2, 2023, URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/gaza-and-global-jihad>

5 Jane Prinsley, "Hamas terror plot to attack Jews in Europe foiled by police," The Jewish Chronicle, December 15, 2023, URL: <https://www.thejc.com/news/world/hamas-terror-plot-to-attack-jews-in-europe-foiled-by-police-iy0zp-4mt>

Danish officials announced arrests related to separate terror offences. Police have not given any details about the target of the alleged plot but said that there was no direct link to the arrest the same day of four suspected Hamas members in Germany accused of preparing an attack against Jewish targets in Europe. The Danish Prime Minister described the plot as being "as serious as it gets" and authorities in Denmark said they would up security at Jewish sites.

Danish media say the arrests were linked to the organised crime gang Loyal to Familia, which is banned in Denmark. Loyal to Familia is a Danish street gang, founded in late 2012 by members of other Copenhagen street gangs, but it quickly expanded beyond the capital. Following the gang's involvement in public shootings, violence and other crimes, the Copenhagen police outlawed it in 2018. The Copenhagen City Court and the High Court upheld the decision two years later.⁶

"It was a group that was planning an act of terror," Flemming Drejer, head of operations at the PET intelligence service, told a news conference. Drejer would only say that other suspects currently abroad were also thought to be implicated in the plot.⁷ Israel had said that the suspects in Denmark were acting "on behalf of Hamas," which has not been confirmed by Danish authorities.⁸

Danish prosecutors have charged a 26-year-old man for 'publicly expressing approval of a terror crime', in a case related to Hamas' October attack on Israel, while announcing that they are dropping three other cases. "The statements were made via a profile on Snapchat, and thus they were able to be disseminated to a larger circle of followers," the prosecutor in the case, Lise-Lotte Nilas, said in a press release. In three other cases, which also relate to statements about the attack, prosecutors have decided not to press charges.⁹

The arrests come as concern mounts globally over possible terror attacks from Hamas outside Israel. A joint statement from Mossad and the Shin Bet security service said that the arrests "thwarted a terror attack plot that aimed to kill innocent civilians in Europe".

It is the first time since its inception that Hamas has decided to stage terrorist attacks outside the Middle East, where it has been active mainly in southern Lebanon. It seems therefore, that on the backdrop of its defeat in the war in Gaza, Hamas returns to the old pattern of Palestinian global terrorism strategy, which the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) initiated in 1968.

6 Zdravko Ljubas, "Danish Court Bans a Street Gang," Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), 6 September 6, 2021, <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/15112-danish-court-bans-a-street-gang>.

7 "Denmark and Germany arrest Hamas suspects planning terror attacks," Agence France-Presse, December 5, 2023, URL: <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/europe/article/3245121/denmark-and-germany-arrest-hamas-suspects-planning-terror-attacks>

8 <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2426251/world>

9 "Danish prosecutors charge man for 'public approval' of Hamas terror attack," The Local, December 18, 2023. <https://www.thelocal.dk/20231218/danish-prosecutors-charge-man-for-publically-approving-hamas-terror-attack>

Colin P. Clarke, director of research at The Soufan Group, claims that the scale and sophistication of the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks have led many counterterrorism analysts to revisit their assumptions about the group's intent and capabilities and it could transform the organization into a global threat. Speaking in early December on Al-Aqsa television, senior Hamas official Sami Abu Zuhri called for attacks against Israel's allies, specifically the United States and the United Kingdom. "We need violent acts against American and British interests everywhere, as well as the interests of all the countries that support the occupation," Zuhri said.¹⁰

Hamas seems to be hoping that its ideology, its cause, and its brand will go global in much the same way the Islamic State's did. Its propaganda is resonating in Western publics, especially younger generations and many university students who have turned out in large numbers at anti-Israel demonstrations and protests. Hamas is a different organization after the October 7 attacks and has openly declared its desire to ensure that the war does not remain contained to Gaza but also threatens Israel and its supporters worldwide.¹¹

It seems for now that the Hamas military infrastructure will be destroyed by Israel, even if it will need more time; its leaders in Gaza will either be killed in the fighting or exiled in the framework of some agreement; Gaza will be possibly run by a revamped Palestinian Authority and some international military force; the West Bank will remain under control by the Palestinian Authority with IDF and the Israeli intelligence agencies intervening in case of need.

So, from what platform will Hamas be able to act as an international terrorist actor, on the model of Fatah, the PFLP and other smaller organizations active between the end of the 1960s and 1980s?

Lebanon

The most obvious is Lebanon, which already serves as a basis of missiles fired by Hamas from the Southern Lebanon to Northern Israel, under the strategic umbrella of Hezbollah and active support of Iran.

Following the 2017 blockade of Qatar by its Gulf rivals and their regional allies, and after Turkey's recent rapprochement with Israel, Lebanon became the destination of choice for Hamas leaders who could no longer find refuge in those two countries. Saleh al-Arouri, deputy head of the Hamas Political Bureau, positioned himself in Beirut where he could freely pursue his operational activities. Khalil al-Hayya, leader of Hamas's Arab and Islamic relations, and Zaher Jabarin, in charge of issues concerning Palestinian

10 Colin P. Clarke, "Could Hamas Become a Global Threat?" Foreign Policy, December 19, 2023, URL.: <https://foreign-policy.com/2023/12/19/hamas-terrorism-threat-global-europe-germany-arrests/>

11 Ibid.

prisoners in Israeli jails, followed suit.¹²

According to the Israeli ALMA Research and Education Center, Hamas's Lebanese headquarters are in the city of Sidon. Hamas's "Construction Bureau," based in Lebanon contains specialized departments, each responsible for different sets of activities, such as weapons manufacturing, military intelligence, combat training, communications, funding, planning, logistics, security, and foreign relations. Hamas's activities in Lebanon occur with the assistance and supervision of the Iranian Quds Force, specifically, its Palestine Branch. Hezbollah is involved in Hamas activity in Lebanon and assists it.¹³

Hamass's activity in Lebanon is concentrated in the 12 refugee camps scattered around Lebanon, where some 250,000 Palestinians live. Some of the major camps, like Ein el-Hilweh in the south of Lebanon, are controlled by Fatah, PA's backbone. In September 2023 there have been fierce battles for control of Ein el-Hilweh between the two organizations.¹⁴ Hamas's expansion of its security and military presence in Lebanon aims to create what the axis of resistance calls a "unified front" that can effectively target Israel.

It is of note, that according to German prosecutors, Hamas leaders in Lebanon had tasked the operatives arrested in Germany in December this year, with moving a cache of weapons from a depot in an undisclosed European location to Berlin, to carry out an attack. Which means that Hamas has already prepared weapons depots on European soil or that it received them from Hezbollah or Iranian arsenals.¹⁵

Lebanon could be indeed the main Hamas platform for external operations, mainly in Europe: existing military and political infrastructure, important Palestinian population, direct support and defense umbrella from Hezbollah, influential Iranian presence.

Syria

When the civil war broke out there were about 650,000 Palestinian refugees living in Syria in 14 refugee camps. During the years of fighting the number fell to 438,000. Many Palestinians have sided with the Syrian regime and served as reservoirs for recruiting by the Syrian army. The al-Quds Brigade, is the Palestinian force with the highest level of military capabilities, established in October 2013 and has about 3,500 fighters. The Galilee Forces (Kuwat al-Jalil) are a militia-like military force established in 2012. Their

12 Souhayb Jawhar, "Lebanon: New Strategic Base for Hamas," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 17, 2022, URL.: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/88184>

13 Tal Beerli, "Exposing Hamas's Growing Front in Lebanon – Infrastructure and Activity," ALMA Research and Education Center, Special Report, October 2021, URL.: <https://israel-alma.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Hamas-Growing-Front-in-Lebanon-%E2%80%93-Infrastructure-and-Activity.pdf>

14 "Palestinian fighters in Lebanon camp agree new truce after another week of violence," AFP, September 14, 2023, URL.: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/palestinian-fighters-in-lebanon-camp-agree-new-truce-after-another-week-of-violence/>

15 Jane Prinsley, Hamas terror plot to attack Jews in Europe foiled by police.

several thousand fighters come from the Palestinian refugee camps. During the war they were operated in the Qalamoun Mountains along the Syrian-Lebanese border, where Hezbollah played a central role. Fatah, for decades an enemy of the Syrian regime, does not have a real presence in Syria.¹⁶

Hamas was not only highly critical of Assad during the Syrian civil war, but actively supported his opponents, especially rebel organizations affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Over the years there has been a slow but steady rapprochement between the Syria regime and Hamas, in part as a result of pressure exerted by Iran and Hezbollah, which sought to unify the “axis” forces in their resistance to Israel. It was only in October of last year that Hamas formally re-established ties with the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.¹⁷

According to Israeli INSS researchers, although the mood in Syria is generally supportive of the Palestinians, Assad is not interested in supporting Hamas, as the price is a possible threat to his survival. Iran may also prefer to keep Syria out of the conflict, to safeguard its “Syrian asset” and activate it when Tehran decides.¹⁸

Taking in consideration the long period of distrust between the Syrian regime and the Hamas leadership, and the present strategic considerations of Damascus, it is hard to see Syria becoming a platform and safe haven for an international terrorist campaign of Hamas.

Algeria

A Hamas representative office was opened in Algeria in August 2016, during the official six-day visit of some of its leaders to Algeria, including Abu Marzouk, and Hamas’ foreign relations chief Osama Hamdan. Ahmed Yousef, the former political adviser to Ismail Haniyeh, said this is a huge political achievement for Hamas despite its shaky regional relations. The Palestinian Authority’s pressure on Algeria to close Hamas’ office were fruitless. Algeria also backed Hamas during Israel’s war on Gaza in 2008-2009, when it refused to consider the movement a terrorist group. Syria’s contribution to Hamas’s material strength is small and unlikely to have played any role in facilitating the October 7 assault.¹⁹

16 “Armed Palestinian forces, militias and organizations handled by the Syrian regime in the Syrian civil war,” The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, March 19, 2018, URL.: <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/armed-palestinian-forces-militias-organizations-handled-syrian-regime-syrian-civil-war/>

17 Andrew Waller, “Is Syria’s al-Assad supporting Hamas for political gain or optics?” Al-Jazeera, December 10, 2023, URL.: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/10/syrias-al-assad-and-supporting-hamas-all-for-political-gain-or-optics>

18 Carmit Valensi and Tal Avraham, “Syria and the Israel-Hamas War: Symbolic Support, Short of Escalation,” INSS Insight, December 24, 2023, URL.: <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/assad-war/>

19 Adnan Abu Amer, “Hamas looks to Algeria,” Al-Monitor, September 6, 2016, URL.: <https://adnanabuamer.com/post/2489/hamas-looks-to-algeria>

The Algerian government mediated in October 2022 a reconciliation deal between Fatah and Hamas that aims to resolve 15 years of discord through new elections in the occupied Palestinian territories. The agreement was signed after the leaders of 14 factions, including Fatah movement and Hamas, held two days of talks in the run-up to an Arab summit in Algiers.²⁰ Like other agreements in the past it didn't materialize.

Algerians are known for their unconditional support of the Palestinian cause. Two years ago, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, in his first UNGA international speech from his office in El-Mouradia, strongly criticized the Abraham Accords with Israel, emphasizing that Algeria will never trot fast to join the "normalization" process. For Algeria, in the ongoing geopolitical turmoil that is shaping the entire MENA region and the Maghreb in particular, it is impossible for Algeria to turn its back on Palestine. Firstly, this is a result of the bold positions aforementioned. Secondly, the high diplomatic tensions between Algiers and Rabat, which has worsened due to Rabat's strategic rapprochement with the Jewish state, is also crucial.²¹

Recently, Abdulaziz Al Sager, the chairman of the Saudi Gulf Research Center, following a meeting with the French Foreign Ministry's North Africa and Middle East director, Anne Grillo, in Riyadh, suggested "evacuating" Hamas military leaders, Mohammed Deif and Yahya Sinwar, to Algeria. Algeria is reportedly mentioned as a possible haven for Hamas leaders for its good relations with Qatar and Iran, the movement's main sponsors.

Taking in consideration the historical support of Algeria to the Fatah movement and other Palestinian terrorist groups active in the 1960s – 80s, Hamas could be well positioned to convince the Algerian leaders to support a campaign of terrorism against the Jewish state outside the borders of the country.²²

Turkey

Since Hamas's victory in the Palestinian Authority parliamentary elections in 2006, Turkey has had very robust relations with Hamas, in the larger context of Erdogan and his party's, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), ideological and strategic goals.

Turkey's operative support to Hamas materialized when the Mavi Marmara, a Turkish ship carrying a sizeable Turkish militant group from the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri İnsani Yardım Vakfı - IHH) leading an international flotilla, tried to break the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip in May 2010. The Turkish leaders supported the provocative aid flotilla which terminated in an Israeli military operation and the death of nine violent Turkish militants of the IHH.²³

20 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/13/palestinian-factions-sign-reconciliation-agreement-in-algeria>

21 <https://menaaffairs.com/what-makes-the-algeria-palestine-relationship-unique/>

22 "Saudi Arabia Develops, Sends to France Settlement Plan for Gaza Strip – Reports," Sputnik, December 21, 2023, URL: <https://en.sputniknews.africa/20231221/gaza-death-toll-from-israeli-strikes-exceeds-20000-including-8000-children--authorities-1064228820.html>

23 Ely Karmon & Michael Barak, "Erdogan's Turkey and the Palestinian Issue," Perspectives on Terrorism Research

Since the Mavi Marmara diplomatic and political crisis between Turkey and Israel in 2010, and more so since the 2011 agreement between Israel and Hamas to release Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in exchange for 1,027 Palestinian prisoners and the expulsion of 10 operatives to Turkey, Turkey has become a “second home” for Hamas militants and terrorists. There they invest efforts to recruit members, build financial resources and cooperate with other actors against Israel. Since 2014, Turkey was host to Salah al-Arouri, a senior Hamas political bureau member and the major operative commander responsible for establishing, funding and strengthening the Hamas military-terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank, operating out of his headquarters in Istanbul. The Islamist ideology of the AKP and Hamas contributed to a deepening of their relationship, as they share common values and vision.²⁴

Israel signing of the Abraham Accords have helped the Jewish state establish substantive relationships with the Arab states in its neighborhood and marginalized Ankara. Israel and Turkey have succeeded spring 2023 in reestablishing diplomatic ties at the ambassadorial level. However, a relationship built on trust is unlikely to materialize unless Turkey satisfies some key Israeli demands such as the expulsion of Hamas leaders from its territory, as well as shutting down its offices.²⁵ Israel has moved ahead with the recent rapprochement without Ankara conceding to the request.

Turkey condemned the civilian deaths caused by Hamas’s October 7 rampage in Israel, but also urged Israeli forces to act with restraint in their response. Then, Turkish President Erdogan, in his strongest comments on the Gaza conflict, declared that Hamas was not a terrorist organisation but a liberation group fighting to protect Palestinian lands. Indicating that the normalization efforts between the two countries were suspended, Erdogan accused Israel of taking advantage of Turkey’s “good intentions” and said he had cancelled a previously planned visit to Israel.²⁶

As Hamas has maintained at least part of its operative infrastructure in Turkey and the Erdogan regime seems eager to stand behind the Islamist movement at all costs, Turkey could be a preferred platform for the future terrorist activity, in Europe and possibly Central Asia.

Iran

Iran has supported Hamas, after it took control of Gaza in June 2007, in developing its military and security apparatuses. Hamas benefits considerably from Iran’s provision

Notes, Vol.12, Issue 2, April 2018 URL.:

24 Ibid.

25 Sinan Ciddi, “Erdogan’s Charm Offensive Will Not Satisfy Egypt, Syria, or Israel,” *The National Interest*, March 27, 2023, URL.: <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/03/27/erdogans-charm-offensive-will-not-satisfy-egypt-syria-israel/>

26 Tuvan Gumrukcu and Huseyin Hayatsever, “Turkey’s Erdogan says Hamas is not terrorist organisation, cancels trip to Israel,” *Reuters*, October 25, 2023, URL.: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-says-hamas-is-not-terrorist-organisation-2023-10-25/>

of weapons, technology, know-how, and training. This support allowed it to carry out the October 7 attacks against Israel. The Islamic Republic has viewed Hamas as an important Sunni ally in the Palestinian arena and it used this relationship to advance its regional goals, particularly vis-à-vis Israel.

The probable fall of the Hamas regime will compel all Hamas leaders to find a safe haven from Israel's wrath. No doubt, Tehran could be one of the safest places for them to take refuge.

This could be also the opportunity, for both Hamas and Iran, to cooperate and advance their anti-Israeli and anti-Western strategy through a field in which Tehran has become a master: international terrorism.

On the backdrop of the targeted killing in Beirut of Hamas's Saleh al-Arouri, considered number two in Hamas, chairman of Hamas' political bureau responsible for Hamas' terrorist activity in Judea and Samaria, and the unfounded and farfetched accusation by President Ebrahim Raisi's political deputy, Mohammad Jamshidi, that Israel and the US were behind the bombing in Kerman, Iran, one should expect a campaign of terrorist acts against Israel and Jews around the world by a combined force of Hamas, Hezbollah and IRGC cells or individuals.