Opinion **Global Insight**

# Audacious Hamas attack is a pivotal moment for Israel

Jewish state has long prided itself on the ability to pre-empt and crush threats to its borders and people

**ANDREW ENGLAND**

Israeli soldiers during combat operations against Palestinian militants on Saturday © Bloomberg

**Andrew England**, Middle East editor 19 MINUTES AGO

Hamas's brazen dawn assault began with rocket fire from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel. Simultaneously, the Palestinian militant group dispatched armed drones, fighters on motorbikes and paragliders across the strip's border, targeting civilian towns and military checkpoints.

Images on social media showed Israeli civilians — who would have been sleeping or resting during the Shabat, Israel's day of rest — fleeing for their lives across fields.

Hamas's deadly, carefully planned and multi-faceted operation has unleashed Israel's most terrifying nightmare: civilians finding themselves on the front lines of the protracted conflict as their homes became war zones.

Israeli analysts describe the attack as the worst inside the Jewish state's territory since 1948 — the year it was founded. At least 300 people have been killed in Israel, and Hamas has taken 100 hostages.

Over 300 Palestinians have been killed in Israeli air strikes on Gaza, according to health officials in the strip.

It is a pivotal moment for Israel, a nation acutely aware of its vulnerability to hostile forces, but which has long prided itself on the ability of its security and intelligence

establishment to pre-empt and crush threats to its borders.

Hamas's ability to launch such a well planned attack from within the confines of the impoverished, hemmed-in Gaza Strip, which is surrounded by Israeli military fences and checkpoints, suggests a massive intelligence failure that will send shockwaves — and fear — through Israeli society.

It has echoes of the 1973 war when Egypt and Syria caught Israel unawares by leading an Arab offensive in the Sinai and the Golan Heights on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in Judaism. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that Hamas launched its assault close to the 50th anniversary of that war.

But Saturday's attack took place inside Israel and civilians were targeted, whereas in 1973 the Sinai and the Golan Heights were under Israeli occupation.

Despite fighting at least four wars with Hamas since the group seized control of Gaza in 2007, Israel clearly underestimated the militants' capacity.

The most recent conflict was in 2021 when Hamas fired barrage after barrage of rockets into Israel, surprising Israeli security officials with their scope and scale.

Israel responded by pounding Gaza with air strikes and artillery and ended up fighting on multiple fronts. Communal violence erupted between Palestinians with Israeli citizenship and their Jewish neighbours, protesters in the occupied West Bank clashed with Israeli security forces and Palestinian factions in Lebanon fired rockets into northern Israel.

More than 250 Palestinians, including women and children, died in that 11-day conflict, while 13 people were killed in Israel.

This eruption of violence is already on course to be far worse; Hamas fired thousands of rockets into Israel in a matter of hours.

Israeli prime minister <u>Benjamin Netanyahu</u> presides over the most far-right government in the nation's history, which took office promising to take a tougher line on security. Extremists within his coalition are likely to push for the most hardline response.

The militants' capture of Israeli hostages will pour more fuel on the flames as the authorities become desperate to secure their release.

Israeli security analysts warn that the Jewish state could choose to mount a full-scale invasion of Gaza in an attempt to crush Hamas, which has repeatedly managed to

invasion of Gaza in an attempt to crush Hamas, which has repeatedly managed to replenish its ranks and weapons stockpiles after being bombarded from the air, ground and sea.

That would be the first land offensive in the densely populated strip of 2mn people since the 2014 war and would lead to even greater casualties on all sides — and further devastation for Gaza's long-suffering population.

There is also the risk that an escalation triggers a broader conflagration, if Lebanese militant movement Hizbollah co-ordinates with Hamas and opens a front on Israel's northern border. That would spell disaster for the region.

Iran-backed Hizbollah has a far larger and more sophisticated rocket and missile arsenal than Hamas, which tends to rely on homemade rockets.

Its involvement in the conflict would threaten to overwhelm Israel's Iron Dome defence system, which protects its towns and cities.

Hizbollah delivered a bloody nose to Israel during a month-long conflict in 2006 and it has gained battleground experience after intervening in Syria's civil war to back President Bashar al-Assad.

Israel has long warned that it would respond to any serious Hizbollah attacks with massive force against Lebanon, a country already on its knees after years of economic crisis and political malaise.

Saturday's events also raise Israeli fears that Iran, which supports Hizbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, another militant Palestinian group in Gaza, may decide to stoke the flames.

The West Bank, meanwhile, has been simmering with tension as it endures the worst cycle of violence since the second intifada, or Palestinian uprising, ended in 2005. Israel has been conducting almost daily raids in the occupied territory.

Rarely in recent years has the situation appeared so combustible.

"This is definitely a pivotal moment and in any scenario Israel is coming out of it very badly," said Avi Melamed, an Israeli intelligence analyst.

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