

# Hamas vs. Israel: The Limits of Analogy

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Articles & Testimony

**What Hamas unleashed on October 7 was so jarring that it is only natural to seek the comfort of historical examples to put Israel's response in some digestible context.**

**W**ar, as Clausewitz famously said, is often shrouded in fog. For journalists, diplomats, experts and analysts, one tool to cut through the fog of war is analogy. These references to things known can be helpful in explaining what is unknown, obscure, distant or difficult to comprehend. But analogies are tricky—circumstances are never identical, so analogies, especially without detailed caveats, can deceive more than they explain.

So it is with the Hamas-Israel war. Here are three analogies about this conflict and why they blur more than they illuminate.

## Surprise, from Yom Kippur to Simchat Torah

**“T**he Arabs did it again,” so this analogy goes—“a surprise attack, on a major Jewish holiday, that confounded preconceptions about the enemy and delivered a mighty blow that, when it occurred, constituted the darkest day in the history of the state of Israel.” That sentence accurately characterizes what connects the events of October 6, 1973, and October 7, 2023—the Egypt-Syria joint attack on Israeli forces in Sinai and Golan and the stealthy Hamas attack on Israeli communities just across the Gaza frontier. But there the similarity ends—trying to read more into the Hamas attack by drawing on the lessons of 1973 is a mistake.

That is because 1973 was, for its architect Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat, a textbook example of “war as an extension of politics.” His goal was to cross the Suez Canal and thereby shake up a static situation in pursuit of peace—to give the Egyptian people enough pride in its military’s achievement that it would countenance a pivot to diplomacy; to give the Israeli government reason to take Egypt seriously, both as a military threat and a potential peace partner; and to give the U.S. government the raw material to fashion a strategic shift that would not only

transform the region but put the Arab world's most powerful actor firmly in America's orbit. The result was, within five years of war, the Egypt-Israel peace treaty and the beginning of what is now 45 years of bilateral peace and a strong (if often strained) U.S.-Egypt relationship.

The Hamas attack was the exact opposite. Despite the existential divide that separated them—on paper, Hamas and Israel opposed the very being of the other—the two parties maintained a certain political relationship right until October 7, both directly and via their Qatari middlemen. As it turned out, that was a Hamas ruse. Both the fact of its attack against civilian communities within pre-1967 Israel and the barbarous manner in which Hamas fighters reveled in the brutality against innocents was a clear message: this war is not about politics, this is a fight to the finish. The idea that Hamas and Israel will, like Egypt and Israel did after the 1973 war, celebrate a peace treaty five years from now is preposterous and even obscene. Other than their superficial commonalities, the 1973–2023 analogy dies there.

## Gaza as Fallujah

Cable news is full of retired U.S. generals offering insight from their experience fighting ISIS and, before that, al-Qaeda in Iraq in the urban areas of eastern Syria, Mosul and Anbar province. Much of this is useful, especially warnings about the threat of booby traps, the importance of limiting civilian casualties and the sheer psychological demands of intense, block-by-block fighting in areas with high population density. But few analyses highlight the important differences between what the Israel Defense Forces face in Gaza and what the U.S. faced in Syria and Iraq that give the former advantages that the U.S. did not enjoy. (One exception is an excellent [essay](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/gazas-urban-warfare-challenge-lessons-mosul-and-raqqah) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/gazas-urban-warfare-challenge-lessons-mosul-and-raqqah>) by my Washington Institute colleague Michael Knights.)

Such advantages include:

- Direct Israeli experience in Gaza that goes back decades;
- Israeli signals and other intelligence systems that have focused on Gaza for many years;
- The fact that Israeli troops are themselves doing the fighting, not just serving as forward advisors for another force (such as the Syrian Democratic Forces) in a “by, with, and through” strategy;
- The geographic disparity between compact Gaza and the vast area in which U.S.-led forces had to operate. To give a sense of proportion, Anbar province alone (53,476 square miles) is more than 375 times the size of the Gaza Strip (141 square miles).

In addition, Israelis are driven by a sense of urgency that the U.S.-led forces did not have. One reason the latter devoted so many months to clearing extremists/terrorists from dense, urban areas of Syria and Iraq was because they *could* devote many months to complete the job—they did not have the political clock ticking overhead, as the Israelis do. That time constraint will compel the Israelis to operate differently—perhaps effectively, perhaps not, but certainly differently.

This has important ramifications. The disbelief prevalent in U.S. policy circles that Israel can achieve its war aims—the dismantling of Hamas military infrastructure and the end of Hamas political control of Gaza—emerges largely from the American experience in Iraq and Syria and the sense that Israel will not have the time it took the U.S.-led forces to do the job there. While it is certainly true that the battlefield experience may compel Israel to scale back its objectives, the differences between the Gaza situation and what U.S.-led forces face in Syria/Iraq are substantial—the latter may inform the former but it doesn't determine it.

## Hamas/Gaza = PLO/Beirut

Today's news is not the first time we read of Israeli tanks entering Arab territory to annihilate a terrorist group bent on Israel's destruction. That goal animated Israeli operations in the war against the PLO in 1982, even if the trigger was a slow-burning fuse of gradually escalating conflict between the two sides, in contrast to the October 7 Hamas attack, which caused a sudden and dramatic shift in Israeli strategy. "I see a resemblance between this war and the Beirut War of 1982 when Ariel Sharon invaded Lebanon," opined Abdulrahman [al-Rashed \(https://english.aawsat.com/opinion/4613421-gaza-and-reminiscences-leaving-beirut\)](https://english.aawsat.com/opinion/4613421-gaza-and-reminiscences-leaving-beirut) in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*; "There are echoes of the summer of 1982," wrote Kim [Ghattas \(https://www.ft.com/content/20dd2d27-71c7-4b7b-b558-d01c65172c09\)](https://www.ft.com/content/20dd2d27-71c7-4b7b-b558-d01c65172c09) in the *Financial Times*. The similarity between Beirut 1982 and Gaza 2023 will likely lead to prognostication that the Hamas war may end like the former—not with a definitive outcome but an inconclusive, "live to fight another day" non-ending, akin to the U.S.-negotiated sea-borne evacuation of Yasir Arafat and his battered band of PLO fighters from Beirut to Tunis.

Perhaps that is how this chapter ends, with Hamas' leaders in the tunnels of Gaza cashing in their bargaining chips of hostages in exchange for safe passage to some Arab city. But on close inspection, the analogy breaks down.

By 1982, the PLO had already mastered its itinerant version of Palestinian revolutionary nationalism. It may have convened its first Palestine National Council meeting in Jerusalem in 1964, but after the Arab defeat in 1967, it was forced to move progressively further away from Palestine—first to Jordan and then to Lebanon. The escape to Tunis completed this process, which only ended when—irony of ironies!—Israel invited the PLO back to Palestine via the Oslo Accords. By contrast, Hamas is not only currently the ruler of a key chunk of Palestine but it just attacked and held, if only briefly, land in southern Israel, the first ever Arab territorial reacquisition within Israel's internationally recognized borders. In this environment, evacuation by Hamas to some faraway capital—Doha, Algiers, or with delicious irony, to Qais Saied's Tunis or Beirut itself—would be a dramatic step backward.

And the chance of Hamas being invited back in some future peace deal is next to nil. This is not only because of the barbarity of its October 7 attack, which rendered it politically radioactive for even the most ardent Israeli peacenik. But Israel will not be pressured to save a would-be peace partner because there is today an obvious alternative—the flawed but still alive Palestinian Authority. In 1982, the PLO was saved because it was viewed as an odious necessity; today, Hamas is just odious. If Muhammad Deif, Yahya Sinwar and their comrades board a boat to escape Israel's tightening noose, they won't be returning to Gaza like a triumphant Arafat did in 1994; they are far more likely to share the fate of Khalil al-Wazir (a/k/a Abu Jihad), Arafat's top deputy who was killed by an Israeli commando team in his Tunis home in 1988.

## Toward a Fearful New World

What Hamas unleashed on October 7—a gleeful massacre of women, children, elderly and mentally ill, filmed by the perpetrators themselves so as to celebrate their perverse achievement with their people and the wider world—was so jarring that it is only natural to seek the comfort of historical examples to make sense of its apparent irrationality and to put Israel's response in some digestible context. However, in the modern history of the Middle East, especially in the century-old Arab-Israeli arena, none exists. For Arabs, Israelis and the broader region, October 7 truly is a historical dividing point between what came before and what lies ahead.

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