

Escalating Hamas Activity in the West Bank

by [Camille Jablonski \(/experts/camille-jablonski\)](/experts/camille-jablonski)

Nov 7, 2023

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/tsad-nshat-hmas-fy-aldft-alghrbyt\)](/ar/policy-analysis/tsad-nshat-hmas-fy-aldft-alghrbyt)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Camille Jablonski \(/experts/camille-jablonski\)](/experts/camille-jablonski)

Camille Jablonski is a research assistant in The Washington Institute's Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence.



Brief Analysis

Hamas began laying the groundwork for a West Bank uprising before October 7 and has steadily increased its activities there, demonstrating the risk it poses beyond Gaza.

When Hamas forces in Gaza launched their all-out assault on Israel last month, the group's leaders quickly called on Palestinians in the West Bank to follow suit. On October 7, senior political leader Ismail Haniyeh [warned \(https://muqawamalogy.com/2023/10/07/new-release-from-hamas-ismail-haniyah-speech-on-the-developments-of-the-al-aqsa-flood-battle/\)](https://muqawamalogy.com/2023/10/07/new-release-from-hamas-ismail-haniyah-speech-on-the-developments-of-the-al-aqsa-flood-battle/) that the violence in Gaza “will extend into the West Bank,” while Muhammad Deif, head of the group's Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, [called \(https://www.memri.org/tv/hamas-military-commander-deif-operation-aqsa-deluge-calls-palestinian-carry-out-attacks\)](https://www.memri.org/tv/hamas-military-commander-deif-operation-aqsa-deluge-calls-palestinian-carry-out-attacks) for all Palestinians to carry out attacks against Israelis. Since then, Hamas has released several statements calling for [protests \(https://muqawamalogy.com/2023/10/17/new-statement-from-hamas-an-urgent-call-to-mobilize-and-take-to-the-streets-and-squares-around-the-world-in-rejection-of-the-al-ahly-hospital-massacre-and-the-genocide-to-which-our-people-are-expos/\)](https://muqawamalogy.com/2023/10/17/new-statement-from-hamas-an-urgent-call-to-mobilize-and-take-to-the-streets-and-squares-around-the-world-in-rejection-of-the-al-ahly-hospital-massacre-and-the-genocide-to-which-our-people-are-expos/), [clashes \(https://muqawamalogy.com/2023/10/18/new-release-from-hamas-press-conference-in-beirut-about-the-al-aqsa-flood-battle-and-the-ongoing-zionist-aggression-against-the-gaza-strip/\)](https://muqawamalogy.com/2023/10/18/new-release-from-hamas-press-conference-in-beirut-about-the-al-aqsa-flood-battle-and-the-ongoing-zionist-aggression-against-the-gaza-strip/), and [escalatory violence \(https://muqawamalogy.com/2023/10/12/new-statement-from-hamas-we-salute-our-people-who-are-rebelling-against-the-occupation-and-its-settlers-in-the-west-bank/\)](https://muqawamalogy.com/2023/10/12/new-statement-from-hamas-we-salute-our-people-who-are-rebelling-against-the-occupation-and-its-settlers-in-the-west-bank/) against Israeli interests in the West Bank. [More than ninety \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/second-palestinian-front-relative-quiet-restlessness-and-waiting\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/second-palestinian-front-relative-quiet-restlessness-and-waiting) significant terrorist attacks occurred there in just the first two weeks following October 7, and local tensions have risen accordingly. In response, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and other authorities have conducted large-scale arrest raids and even taken the rare step of using airstrikes to target members of Hamas and other groups. Together, these events have created an environment ripe for further escalation.

Hamas Setting the Stage Before October 7

Hamas was seemingly emboldened in the months leading up to the Gaza war, claiming six terrorist attacks in Israel and the West Bank from June to August, compared to just one (<https://twitter.com/JoeTruzman/status/1634252921813753856?s=20>) from January to May. This high volume of claims departed from the group's pattern of praising terrorist attacks against Israelis without taking credit for them.

On July 6, Hamas military spokesman Abu Obaida issued a rare statement claiming three attacks: a June 20 shooting that killed four Israelis (<https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/20/middleeast/israel-eli-shootings-west-bank-intl/index.html>) near the West Bank settlement of Eli, a July 4 car-ramming and stabbing attack (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-66095623>) in Tel Aviv that injured seven, and a July 6 shooting attack near the settlement of Kedumim (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/shooting-reported-near-israeli-settlement-west-bank-military-2023-07-06/>) that killed one Israeli soldier. He claimed that the July 4-6 attacks were a response to Israel's July 3 raid on the Jenin refugee camp that killed at least eight (<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/02/world/middleeast/israel-west-bank-jenin.html>) Palestinians. The uptick in incidents continued throughout the summer: on July 25, the IDF killed (https://unsco.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/security_council_briefing_-_21_august_2023.pdf) three Hamas operatives after they opened fire in the direction of an Israeli checkpoint in the northern West Bank, and Hamas claimed (<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/palestinian-territories/1693052445-our-jihad-won-t-stop-hamas-claims-2-deadly-huwara-attacks-vows-escalation>) responsibility for two more attacks (<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iran-update-august-23-2023>) in August.

Indeed, even before the current Hamas-Israel conflict erupted, 2023 was the deadliest year for West Bank Palestinians in decades. Israeli forces conducted multiple counterterrorism operations in areas under limited Palestinian Authority control, including raids on the Nablus (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/22/israel-nablus-attack-palestine/>) and Jenin (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/why-is-israel-attacking-jenin-west-bank-operation-explained-2023-07-04/>) camps that resulted in both Israeli and Palestinian casualties.

Such operations also revealed Hamas's aspirations to conduct more complex attacks against Israel from the West Bank. In April, the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet) foiled (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/shin-bet-says-it-foiled-hadera-bus-bombing-by-umm-al-fahm-man-recruited-by-hamas/>) a Hamas attempt to conduct a bus bombing in Hadera. In August, the IDF arrested a nine-man (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/shin-bet-foils-9-man-hamas-cell-planning-kidnapping-of-soldier-in-west-bank/>) Hamas cell planning to kidnap an Israeli soldier in the West Bank. And on September 24, Israeli forces arrested (<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/palestinian-territories/1695549591-8-students-arrested-as-israeli-security-forces-bust-hamas-terror-cell-at-west-bank-university>) eight student members of the Hamas-affiliated al-Kutla al-Islamiyah (Islamic Bloc) at Birzeit University, whom the group had recruited to conduct a terrorist attack in the "immediate timeframe." Various plots and attacks by other Palestinian factions in the West Bank likewise surfaced in early 2023, including by Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/palestinian-dies-of-wounds-sustained-in-clash-during-demolition-of-attackers-homes/>) and Lion's Den (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/03/israel-palestinians-militants-raids-uprising/>).

West Bank Escalation Since October 7

The Gaza war has only heightened the wave of violence sweeping over the West Bank. UN monitors reported that the week of October 7 was the deadliest week for Palestinians in the West Bank in nearly twenty years; in all, more than 140 (<https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israel-steps-up-arrests-in-the-west-bank-in-wake-of-hamas-attacks-1d7f5c92>) have been killed there since the war began.

The bulk of these fatalities have resulted from direct confrontations between Israeli security forces and Palestinian operatives, including Hamas and other unidentified militants. On October 13, Israeli Border Police **shot and killed** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/police-kill-4-palestinians-trying-to-blow-a-hole-in-west-bank-security-barrier/>) four Palestinians who attempted to breach the West Bank security barrier with explosives. On November 6, Israeli forces killed four members of a terrorist cell in Tulkarem who, according to the Shin Bet and police officials, **operated** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-daytime-raid-police-take-out-west-bank-terror-cell-planning-attacks-on-israelis/>) “under the guidance and funding” of Hamas and had plans to launch rockets from the West Bank. Other operatives have been killed while conducting **dozens of shooting attacks** (<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/defense-news/article-770319>) against Israeli forces.

In addition, Israel has arrested more than 1,350 wanted terrorist suspects in the West Bank since October 7, including **850 believed to be associated with Hamas** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-daytime-raid-police-take-out-west-bank-terror-cell-planning-attacks-on-israelis/>). Some of the group’s senior members have been targeted in these raids. On October 19, the IDF **arrested** (<https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/israel-hamas-war-biden/card/israel-detains-hamas-spokesman-in-west-bank-fjEwRZHEcs5HMfptJOLI>) Hamas cofounder Hassan Yousef in Ramallah. On October 24, two more senior operatives **were arrested** (<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel-at-war/1698235019-security-services-930-arrested-in-west-bank-since-hamas-attack>) during a raid in Qalandiya refugee camp. And on October 31, Israeli forces **demolished** (https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-10-31-23/h_85a4093810f88ba783ab7f8946ba5e82) a house belonging to **Saleh al-Arouri** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hamass-not-so-secret-weapon>), the deputy head of Hamas’s political bureau who played a founding role in its West Bank military activities. Israel has also **dismantled** various explosive devices (<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel-at-war/1698664033-israeli-security-services-arrested-51-in-west-bank>) intended to harm its forces and confiscated **military equipment** (<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/palestinian-territories/1698058107-security-forces-confiscate-stolen-israeli-license-plates-and-uniforms-in-arrest-raid>), weapons, and **funds** (<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel-at-war/1698824757-israeli-security-forces-conduct-arrests-destroy-shaft-with-ammunition-in-jenin-west-bank>) from Hamas and other factions.

Notably, the IDF has used airpower in several West Bank operations both before and after October 7, deviating from its previous tactics there. Two such instances occurred **in June and July** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-forces-strike-west-bank-city-palestinians-say-one-killed-2023-07-02/>)—the first time air operations had been seen in the West Bank since 2006. Several more have been reported during the war:

- an October 19 **drone strike** (<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/defense/1697724260-idf-ramps-up-counterterrorism-operations-in-the-west-bank>) on the Nur Shams refugee camp near Tulkarem;
- an October 22 **airstrike** (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67186178>) on al-Ansar Mosque in Jenin, targeting Hamas and PIJ operatives whom the IDF accused of using areas underneath the site to organize an “imminent terror attack”;
- an October 25 **drone strike** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-drone-strikes-palestinians-during-west-bank-raid-military-says-2023-10-25/>) in the Jenin camp after Israeli forces came under fire during an arrest raid;
- an October 30 **drone strike** (<https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-770760>) targeting militants in the Jenin camp during an Israeli raid;
- a November 1 **airstrike** (<https://twitter.com/idfonline/status/1719611864085115383>) in the Jenin camp that killed at least two Palestinians after Israeli forces came under fire during an arrest operation.

In addition to heightened terrorist activity, the West Bank has felt the Gaza war's repercussions at the popular level as well. On October 18, hundreds of protesters gathered in Nablus, Ramallah, Tubas, and Jenin in response to the al-Ahli Hospital explosion in Gaza. Some of the protesters in Nablus [held Hamas banners \(https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel-at-war/1697611457-mass-protests-across-middle-east-following-gaza-hospital-tragedy\)](https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel-at-war/1697611457-mass-protests-across-middle-east-following-gaza-hospital-tragedy) and chanted slogans against Israel and the United States, while others called for the ouster of PA president Mahmoud Abbas; in Ramallah, some protesters chanted in support of Hamas and against security coordination with Israel. Large-scale demonstrations have [continued \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/prayers-protests-clashes-jerusalem-west-bank-gaza-war-rages-2023-10-27/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/prayers-protests-clashes-jerusalem-west-bank-gaza-war-rages-2023-10-27/) across the West Bank since then, spurred by a combination of [persistent Hamas calls \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/hamas-calls-for-mass-protests-to-demand-opening-of-rafah-border/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/hamas-calls-for-mass-protests-to-demand-opening-of-rafah-border/) for unity and protest, increased public frustration over the war, and Israeli crackdowns that have further limited local movement. On October 27, thousands of Palestinians held [additional mass protests \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/liberate-gaza-thousands-of-palestinians-demonstrate-across-west-bank/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liberate-gaza-thousands-of-palestinians-demonstrate-across-west-bank/) in Ramallah and Nablus, with pro-Hamas chants and flags visible once again.

Conclusion

Despite the increase in West Bank attacks and protests, violence has not risen to the level that Hamas desires, spurring some of its leaders to voice discontent about the territory's "inaction." On October 29, senior official Mousa Abu Marzouk stated that Hamas members [expect a lot \(https://twitter.com/ajmubasher/status/1718796037144379889\)](https://twitter.com/ajmubasher/status/1718796037144379889) from "their brothers" in the West Bank, calling the PA's position on the conflict "shameful." Hamas disappointment aside, the security situation in the territory remains volatile and should be watched carefully to deny all terrorist and militant factions the opportunity to open a new front in the war.

Camille Jablonski is a research assistant in The Washington Institute's Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Israeli Offshore Gas Platform Near Gaza Resumes Production](#)

Nov 15, 2023

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/israeli-offshore-gas-platform-near-gaza-resumes-production)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iranian Escalation in Iraq and Syria: Implications and U.S. Options](#)

Nov 15, 2023

◆
Michael Knights,
Devorah Margolin,
Andrew J. Tabler,
Wladimir van Wilgenburg

[\(/policy-analysis/iranian-escalation-iraq-and-syria-implications-and-us-options\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Potentially Expanding Its Air Defense Axis in Lebanon and Syria](#)

Nov 15, 2023

◆
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-potentially-expanding-its-air-defense-axis-lebanon-and-syria\)](#)

TOPICS

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)