



Israel-Hamas War 2023

A COMPREHENSIVE REPORT ON THE RECENT CONFLICT,
PROVIDING INSIGHTS FOR DECISION-MAKERS AND
STAKEHOLDERS.

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Israel-Hamas War 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“It seems increasingly likely that the region is now on course to see the outbreak of a broader conflict.”

This was the assessment that Solace Global Intelligence made in May 2023 when the security situation between Israel and Palestine continued to rapidly deteriorate. With the incursion into southern Israel by the Gaza-based militant group

Hamas over the weekend of 7 and 8 October, this eventuality became a reality, and the region is now on the precipice of a protracted and deadly conflict. Such a conflict will undoubtedly have significant ramifications for those operating in the region. Consequently, this report will analyse the ongoing events, furnish practical recommendations for navigating the situation, and offer future assessments to equip decision-makers with an enhanced comprehension of the circumstances, facilitating more informed choices regarding their operations.

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SOLACE GLOBAL INTELLIGENCE, MAY 2023

BACKGROUND

The events of the weekend 7 and 8 October did not occur in isolation or without precedent. Both 2021 and 2022 were consecutively recorded as being the deadliest years in the West Bank for over 15 years, and 2023 was already on the way to supersede these. Recent political developments in both the West Bank and Israel have only fueled existing tensions and have contributed to the rising rates of violence. Many of the tensions and issues underpinning the current volatility are long-standing and well-known, however recent months have seen domestic developments occur in Israel which have almost certainly been exploited by Hamas to carry out their actions.

In recent years both Israel and the Palestinian territories have seen a decline in security. As a result, the United Nations declared 2022 the deadliest year since the end of the Second Intifada in 2005. The Second Intifada is estimated to have left at least 4,300 people dead over a five-year period. Intifadas, or uprisings, are sustained periods of deadly unrest and violence across Israel and the Palestinian territories characterised by high civilian and military casualties. The Second Intifada was particularly marked by gun battles, assassinations, and tank and aerial attacks by Israeli forces. Palestinian forces meanwhile engaged in targeted bombings, gun battles, and rocket attacks. The use of suicide attacks also increased considerably during this period.

The current decline in security has been driven by the emergence of new Palestinian militia groups inside the West Bank. Such groups include the Lion's Den, Balata Brigades, Mujahideen Movement, Popular Resistance Movement and the Yabad Brigades. It should be noted that whilst some of these groups have only recently formed in the West Bank, they have been present in Gaza for some time. Violence in the West Bank was driven and promoted by the far-right and ethno-nationalist members of Israel's current governing coalition. Ministers such as Itamar Ben-Gvir, who is the country's National Security Minister, have promoted settler violence, and further annexation of Palestinian territory. To try and stabilize the West Bank, Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) were diverted to the West Bank to contain the resulting violence, thus weakening the country's defences on the border with Gaza.

Simultaneously, as the West Bank witnessed an increase in violence, following the conclusion of the 2021 war between Hamas and Israel, the Israeli establishment believed that the Hamas threat had been contained and that the war-weary Hamas was shifting its focus towards rebuilding the territory's economy. Consequently, Israel made efforts to promote economic stability in Gaza, which included granting thousands of work permits to Gazans for employment in the West Bank or Israel. In the meantime, Hamas declined participation in military operations against Israel initiated by other groups like Palestinian Islamic Jihad, further reinforcing the notion that Hamas was no longer prioritising attacks on Israel. During this period, Hamas dedicated its efforts to preparations for the operation, including the training of militants and the accumulation of weapons and equipment.

Internal Israeli politics is almost certain to have also played a role in undermining the country's security preparedness. Since 2019, Israel has experienced a period of political instability which has seen the country hold five general elections. This volatile period was a direct result of inherent instability in the country's coalition governments, due to liberal parties refusing to cooperate with Benjamin Netanyahu, whilst the country's conservative and right-wing parties refused to form a coalition without him or his party, Likud. Netanyahu became controversial due to his indictment on bribery, fraud, and breach of trust charges. His reluctance to resign, therefore, exacerbated significant divisions within the Israeli political landscape, cutting across more conventional divisions such as left-wing and right-wing affiliations. Amidst this period of instability, there was a noticeable escalation in policies and rhetoric regarding both Palestine and Israeli Arabs. This escalation was particularly pronounced from the Israeli right and far-right in 2021 when, for the first time, Israeli Arab parties became part of a government

142 Palestinians killed
in West Bank

37 Palestinians killed in
Gaza

25 Israelis killed across
Israel and the West Bank

20 Palestinians killed in
Jerusalem

5 Palestinians killed in
Israel

**2022 fatality numbers from
Euro-Med Monitor**

coalition. This coalition ultimately disintegrated, partly due to the pressure exerted by right-wing and far-right factions in Israel.

The country's fifth election was held in November 2022 and saw Netanyahu and his party, Likud, emerge as the largest party in parliament. By December 2022, Likud had managed to form a governing coalition which had 64 seats in the Knesset, thus giving them a working majority of three. The new government has been Israel's most right-wing and ultra-orthodox since its founding. Alongside Likud, parties in the new government include the ultra-conservative Noam, Otzma Yehudit, and Religious Zionist parties. Noam seeks to roll back LGBT and Palestinian rights, Religious Zionism opposes the ceding of any territory to a future Palestine State and formally supports the annexation of the West Bank, whilst Otzma Yehudit seeks annexation, a one-state solution and a "deeper Jewish identity". Extremist elements in the government also increased the Jewish presence on Temple Mount, by al-Aqsa Mosque, which only further inflamed Israeli-Palestinian tensions.

In tandem with this, the proposed reforms to the country's judiciary have deeply split Israeli society. These reforms will grant the Knesset the power to override any Israeli Supreme Court ruling with a simple majority vote, see the country's judiciary selection committee appointed by the government, and remove the judiciary's oversight of Israel's Basic Laws, a series of quasi-constitutional laws. Due to the design of Israel's political system, the Supreme Court is currently the only check on Israeli government activity, and removing these reforms would effectively give carte blanche to the government from a legislative perspective. Since the proposed reforms were announced in January 2023, most weekends have seen large-scale protests across Israel. The protests in Tel Aviv commonly attracted more than 100,000 attendees. The political volatility and polarisation within Israel are such that President Isaac Herzog stated that the country is "on the brink of constitutional and social collapse".

In March 2023, it was reported that IDF reservists in the intelligence and air force units across the country refused to report for duty in protest of these reforms. By July 2023, the IDF estimated that more than 10,000 reservists were no longer fulfilling their duty. The controversy surrounding the Israeli government and its proposed judicial reforms led to limited domestic

attention being paid to emerging volatility and threats from the Palestinian territories. When Israeli security forces attempted to draw attention to the detrimental effects of the judicial reforms on Israeli security and the incitement of violence by settlers and right-wing Israelis, the government accused them of being influenced by "woke" thinking or acting as an "arm of the left-wing." Such rhetoric has exacerbated the military-political divide in Israel, potentially contributing to a decline in the IDF's preparations and combat effectiveness.

10,000

**The number of reservists
who were not fulfilling their
IDF duties in July 2023**

The final background issues which will have played a role in the events leading up to this attack is the collapse in the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority (PA). This first commenced in 2006 as a result of the Hamas – Fatah split which left Fatah and the PA in charge of the West Bank, whereas Hamas achieved control of the Gaza Strip. Across both Gaza and the West Bank, years of economic mismanagement and a recent decline in international financial support mean the PA is facing an acute economic crisis, placing it on the verge of financial collapse and has likely led to an overall decline in its support.

71% Of Palestinians support the formation of new armed groups

86% Of Palestinians oppose the arrest of those involved with such groups by the PA

24% Of Palestinians believe the existence of armed groups is the best development since 1948.

56% Of Palestinians would vote for Hamas in PA elections if held.

As of 2021, the PA's budget deficit was estimated to be USD 1.26 billion by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This is likely to have grown substantially since that estimation, as Israel has further reduced the amount of money that it grants the PA. According to the Oslo Accords, Israel is responsible for collecting customs duties on behalf of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and transferring these funds to the PA on a monthly basis. However, Israel has increasingly withheld these payments as a form of punitive action against PA activities, especially in response to the PA's practice of providing financial support to the families of incarcerated militants. The deteriorating economic situation has further intensified Palestinian dissatisfaction with the existing arrangement.

Meanwhile, the PA has not held national elections for at least sixteen years. National elections have been repeatedly postponed due to disputes on whether Palestinians living in Israeli-controlled East Jerusalem will be allowed to vote. Due to the years-long stand-off on this issue, the lack of national elections is increasingly viewed by Palestinians as a ploy by Fatah to remain in power. This is because holding elections could lead to an almost certain defeat for Fatah. Data from past local and municipal elections shows that candidates supported by Fatah have consistently faced defeat, with independent candidates or those backed by Hamas emerging as winners.

The lack of political legitimacy on the part of the Palestinian Authority, growing support for armed resistance among Palestinians, along with the described shifts in Israeli politics and the worsening security situation, all underscore the unsurprising nature of a significant and potentially transformative attack having taken place. However, the specific nature of such an attack may be unique in its manifestation.

HOW EVENTS UNFOLDED

Around 06:30 local time on Saturday 7 October, air raid sirens began to ring out in several cities across central and southern Israel, including in Tel Aviv, Sderot, Rehovot, Gedera and Ashkelon. In the following 30

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minutes it is estimated that between 2,500-5,000 rockets were launched from Gaza, with direct hits reported on buildings in several population centres. Within one hour of the initial sirens, the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) reported that Hamas fighters had infiltrated southern Israel through multiple means, including breaching the border fence, using small watercraft for maritime entry, and flying paragliders over the border. As a result, the local population was advised to seek shelter and stay in place.

The extent of the attacks quickly became apparent, with hundreds of Hamas fighters entering and operating in southern Israel within the first 90 minutes of the offensive. The militants rampaged through population centres, killing many citizens they found, taking hundreds of others hostage. At this time, at least 260 bodies have been recovered from the Supernova music festival alone. The festival was being held in the Negev desert near Re'im, approximately 3km away from the Gaza border. Militants approached the festival from multiple directions and engaged party goers with gun and rocket fire. Gunmen chased fleeing festival goers across the desert both on foot and within vehicles, shooting and snatching people. It is reported that dozens of attendees have been taken back to Gaza where they currently remain in captivity. Videos obtained from social media have reportedly shown captives being paraded on the streets of Gaza.



Figure 1: A map of Solace Secure showing the alerts recorded on the app between 6-9 October.

At 08:23, Israel declared a state of alert for war, which allowed them to call up as many reservists as possible, before at 10:34, Tel Aviv announced that they were officially at war with Hamas. This was later confirmed at around 11:30 when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made his first statement to the population. Concurrently, Israeli Air Force fighter jets were already striking targets in Gaza and by 13:46 they claimed to have struck all locations where rockets had been launched from that morning, as well as struck 21 buildings that house Hamas military operations. By Sunday 8 October it was reported that IDF forces were engaging Hamas militants in 22 different locations across southern Israel.

According to reports, elements of Hamas fighters who entered Israel remained engaged in clashes with the IDF across multiple locations until the early hours of 10 October. Heavy casualties were reported on both sides, with the IDF stating that they had neutralised as many as 1500 Hamas militants. At the time of writing, an estimated 120,000 people have been displaced in Gaza and the death toll within Gaza is close to reaching 1000 with the IDF showing no signs of abating their strikes on Hamas related targets. Hamas have responded

with sustained rocket attacks into Israel and have warned that any IDF strikes on civilian housing without prior warning will lead to the public execution of Israeli hostages. A meeting of the United Nation Security Council (UNSC) on the evening of 8 October failed to achieve anything substantial, and by 9 October, the Israeli government announced a complete siege of Gaza, including the prevention of food, water, and power from getting in, as well as the closing of the land border between Israel and the West Bank. After deploying IDF, troops and armoured vehicles to southern Israel, the IDF released a statement on the 10 October declaring that Hamas threat within southern Israel is now contained and that the Gaza border has been fully secured, with reports indicating that over 300,000 IDF reservists have now been mobilised.

ANALYSIS OF EVENTS SO FAR

Hamas' assault on southern Israel marks the worst breach in Israel's defences since multiple Arab armies waged war on Israel in 1973. Hamas achieved a complete tactical surprise which allowed it to penetrate Israel with hundreds of fighters, and it is almost certain that Israel's inability to anticipate

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this attack will be viewed as a major intelligence failure. Israeli intelligence is reported to have a major network of human operatives embedded within militant organisations and maintains an advanced electronic intercept capability. It is therefore highly likely that Hamas relied on in person meetings to plan the attack and avoided the use of electronic communication to prevent intercept. There is also a realistic possibility that Hamas orchestrated this attack entirely from within Gaza and refrained from any international communication to further mitigate against intercept. Moreover, the attack follows a two-year period where Hamas has limited its attacks on Israel, likely deceiving Israel into thinking it was receptive to engaging diplomatically by giving the public impression it no longer wanted to fight. It is likely that Israel also thought that the economic benefits it had recently offered to Gazans, such as work permits, had played a role in pacifying many regular citizens and had drained Hamas' ability to mobilise support. Similarly, it is also likely that the Hamas training activity near the border was misinterpreted as posturing. Gaza-based militants have also received less attention than militants operating in the West Bank during the last few months. It is almost certain that the cumulative effect of these factors contributed to Israel being caught off guard and that Israeli intelligence will be forced to reevaluate its procedures and assessments to preclude a future repeat of the attack.

With there being a number of wider drivers for a Hamas attack, the timing of this incursion should not come as a surprise, which will likely serve as greater embarrassment for Israel. Since the start of 2023, Israel has experienced huge protests and much civil unrest as a result of the Netanyahu government's decision to overhaul Israel's judicial system and curtail the power of the Supreme Court. This has led to Israel's security services largely being dedicated to internal problems, a situation that has undoubtedly been compounded by the fact that thousands of IDF reservists refused to

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report to duty, resulting imposing limitations on the IDF's capabilities. Furthermore, Israel has been holding talks with Saudi Arabia in a bid to normalise relations. This would likely be interpreted as a strategic loss by Hamas, other Palestinian groups, and most importantly, Iran. It is likely that the timing of the attack was aimed at disrupting the talks between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and that the talks might come to a complete end should Israel act in a manner that Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies deem too disproportionate.

It is highly likely that Hamas was able to increase its rocket inventory by limiting strikes on Israel and increasing its domestic manufacturing capability, as evidenced by the use of its new "Rajun" missile system. It is highly probable that Hamas maintains a network of facilitation routes leading into Gaza over the Egyptian border. Despite Israel's attempts to disrupt these routes, it is almost certain that many passages remain operational, enabling the smuggling of components into Gaza that are subsequently built into rocket systems. This likely enabled Hamas to achieve a rocket inventory large enough to overwhelm Israel's advanced Iron Dome air defence system, when hundreds of rockets were launched near-simultaneously against multiple targets across southern Israel. Reports indicate that as many as 5000 rockets were launched from Gaza in under 20 minutes which likely enabled Hamas to overwhelm the Iron Dome, accounting for the extent of damage. It is also likely that the Iron Dome was hampered with reloading times and that the smaller Rajun rockets and UAVs operated by Hamas were harder for its sensors to detect and engage. It is almost certain that Hamas has been attempting to exploit weaknesses with the Iron Dome system, and the success of such a tactic will highly likely be replicated in the future to maximise the chances of rockets hitting their intended targets.

Hamas' decision to launch multiple air, sea and land incursions into Israeli territory was likely a tactic used to maximise the breadth and extent of militant penetration into Israel. With multiple engagement areas achieved, it is almost certain that Hamas was able to disperse IDF forces across southern Israel and increase IDF response times, who were likely already struggling to mobilise effectively during the Sukkot holidays. This likely afforded Hamas more time and space to achieve its operational objectives of causing mass civilian casualties and capturing over 130 Israeli soldiers and civilians to hold in Gaza to strengthen the group's negotiation position. In 2011, Israel was forced to swap 1,027 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for one IDF soldier, who had been held captive for five years, a precedent that has almost certainly encourage Hamas to kidnap as many Israelis as possible.

WHAT NEXT?

Israel's traditional tactic has been to retaliate with overwhelming and often disproportionate violence to serve as a future deterrent. The IDF has already conducted multiple airstrikes on targets in Gaza resulting in hundreds of deaths of both militants and Gazan civilians and will almost certainly continue to strike Hamas linked targets for days to come. However, as Hamas currently holds perhaps as many as 130 Israeli soldiers and civilians, including children, in its detention, it is likely that Israel will be forced to evaluate this tactic should it wish to free its citizens, allowing Hamas to challenge the fundamental concept of Israeli deterrence. It is likely that Hamas will refrain from the mass execution of hostages due to the bargaining power it grants the militant organisation, as evidenced by the 2011 prisoner exchange. Hamas has already

released a statement demanding the release of Palestinian prisoners held in Israel and will likely refuse to exchange Israeli prisoners on a one-to-one basis to maximise the number of Palestinians released and to undermine Israel on the international stage by suggesting that Palestinian lives are worth more. It is almost certain that Hamas will be holding Israeli prisoners in multiple, dispersed locations and routinely move hostages in order to mitigate against IDF hostage rescue attempts. However, despite the value placed on Israeli hostages, it is likely that Hamas will execute some prisoners in response to sustained IDF strikes, attempted hostage rescue operations or in response to a major IDF ground offensive.

Israel has ordered a complete siege of Gaza, which has included cutting off food, fuel, electricity and water supplies to the territory. It is likely that Israel has done this to prevent more materiel from being smuggled into the strip and to break the morale of people within Gaza. However, this tactic runs the risk of provoking further attacks and will likely be deemed as a form of collective punishment by many international observers. There are developing fears concerning an Israeli invasion of Gaza itself, although Netanyahu has refrained from committing to this in the past given the cost involved and the unknown consequences. Firstly, there's the weight of international pressure and diplomatic ramifications. A large-scale invasion could invite condemnation from the global community, straining relations with key allies and potentially leading to sanctions against Israel. With Israel already left relatively isolated as a result of its domestic affairs, and with marches occurring across the West in favour of Palestine, Israel may be unwilling to commit to an operation that will compound its isolation. Secondly, Gaza is a densely populated and largely urban environment. It is almost certain that any ground offensive will entail mass casualties on both sides and could even undermine the IDF's capabilities if drawn into a war centring around urban warfare. The IDF is Israel's greatest deterrent against state actors such as Iran or competent non-state actors like Hezbollah. If the IDF is undermined it could have long lasting implications for its effectiveness as a deterrent. Moreover, if considerable elements of the IDF are fixed in Gaza and southern Israel, there is a realistic opportunity that this situation will be exploited by groups like Hezbollah to conduct operations against Israel's northern border, undoubtedly with extensive backing from Tehran. Furthermore, the practical complexities of occupying and governing Gaza cannot be underestimated. It would be a resource-intensive operation with long-term implications, both politically and logistically. As such, Israel has instead traditionally opted for targeted military operations and maintaining a security buffer along the Gaza border to mitigate security threats. Ceasefire agreements and diplomatic efforts, while often precarious, have also served as alternatives to full-scale invasion in managing the volatile situation in the past. However, the magnitude and severity of Hamas' attack, along with the considerable number of Israeli hostages now in their possession, may compel Netanyahu to consider, at the very least, a limited ground offensive as a response.

Whether Israel commits to a ground offensive or not, it is almost certain that Israel will continue to mobilise its military forces in southern Israel to contain any potential threats posed from Gaza. Alongside enhancing its defensive posture in the south with the deployment of heavy armour and advanced military technology, Israel will likely reinforce its borders with greater security checks, more security presence and will maintain the closure of selected border crossings. The IDF will highly likely intensify its campaign to strike high-value

targets and known Hamas units or locations within Gaza, aiming to disrupt the operational capabilities of the militant group and degrade its capacity to mount further attacks into Israel.

OPPORTUNITY FOR A WIDER CONFLICT?

Since the initial offensive from Hamas militants on 7 October, there have been growing concerns regarding the possibility of a wider, regional conflict, which could bring in Iran and its other proxies into the fray. There is a realistic possibility that Israel is preparing for some form of ground offensive into Gaza to target Hamas fighters and reclaim kidnapped Israelis, and this would almost certainly result in hundreds, if not thousands of Palestinian civilian deaths. Such an occurrence would doubtlessly aggravate groups aligned with the Palestinian cause.

For their part, whilst stating their support for the Hamas incursion, Iran has denied any involvement in the attack. The United States has also stated that they have yet to see any evidence that implicates the involvement of Tehran. However, there are emerging reports that members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) helped plan Hamas' offensive and ultimately gave the green light for the assault at a meeting in Beirut on 2 October. If IRGC involvement in this attack is confirmed, it is highly likely that their broader plan is to create a multi-front threat with Hezbollah attacking from Lebanon, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank, and Iranian-backed armed militias attacking from Syria. This has already been demonstrated already in the last 72 hours by dozens of rockets and shells being launched into northern Israel from Lebanon, and reports of incursions on the northern Israel-Lebanon border.

Regardless of whether the attack was driven by Iran or Hamas, it is highly likely that one of the purposes of the offensive was to derail the accelerating negotiations between Israel and Saudi Arabia to normalise diplomatic relations between the two nations, a process which is backed by the United States. Such a realignment of the status quo in the region would have threatened Palestinian hopes of self-determination and threatened Iran's position in the region. It is therefore likely that if this deal continues to progress, other Iranian proxies will conduct similar offensives in order to provoke Israel into further attacks to jeopardise its rapprochement with Saudi Arabia. This is supported by the military commander of Hamas appealing for the "Islamic resistance in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen" to support the latest attack.

The rhetoric coming from Tel Aviv however suggests that conflict is highly likely to occur whatever other proxies or nations do in the coming days. In a sign of Israel's rapid shift onto a war footing, a cabinet member said it could set up a national unity government joined by opposition leaders. Netanyahu has said the Israeli response to the attack by Hamas will "change the Middle East." This suggests that their response will be large and deadly, a scenario that is likely to bring retaliatory attacks from those sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. Such a situation will increase the chances of escalation and could easily see multiple fronts develop as part of a wider conflict.

Whilst Egypt and Qatar are both attempting to act as mediators during this crisis, calling for restraint if ceasefires are not possible, in the short term these attempts are highly likely to fall short. Both Hamas, its

allies, and the Israeli government look set on carrying this conflict on. With Israel almost certain to enter Gaza in a heavy-handed military operation, the chances of a wider, regional conflict increase. These chances only increase the more involved Iran becomes in the situation. As it stands there is a realistic possibility that a wider conflict emerges, but there are many factors that increase this possibility in the coming days and weeks.



ADVICE

- Heightened tensions and armed conflict are highly likely to persist in the short-term. All protest action should be avoided as clashes are almost certain.
- Travellers should defer all but essential travel to Israel.
- Avoid all travel to the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and southern Israel.
- While the risk of casualties or damage to buildings in Israel is mitigated by the Iron Dome air defence system, the Hamas tactic of mass barrages can result in rockets occasionally striking targets. Settlements close to the border with Gaza are most likely to be impacted.
- If rocket warning sirens are activated, seek shelter immediately, ideally in a purpose-built structure. If in a building when sirens sound, head to a secure, inner room or stairwell, closing all windows and doors. Stay in the shelter for ten minutes after the siren ends.
- If within Israel or the Palestinian territories, be aware of any travel restrictions, curfews, or road closures that may be imposed during the conflict.
- Ensure you have reliable means of communication, such as a charged mobile phone, and consider purchasing a local SIM card for better connectivity.
- Individuals in the country or with interests in the wider region should monitor the latest developments. It is advised to keep abreast of all IDF public announcements and regularly check travel advisories from your respective government.
- Prepare to reconfirm itineraries and expect possible travel disruption as a result of the unrest, rocket attacks and Israeli airstrikes.
- If currently in Israel or the Palestinian territories and unable to depart by commercial means, shelter in place and adhere to all instructions issued by the authorities.
- Travellers in Israel, Palestine or the wider region should avoid discussing the current conflict and other sensitive topics or developments in public given the politically charged and emotive nature of the situation.
- It is likely that events in Israel and Gaza will drive anti-Semitic unrest globally, this includes protest action, attacks on synagogues and direct violence.
- Israeli and Palestinian embassies and consulates are likely to see associated unrest in the short term. This should be avoided due to the risk of violence and localised disruptions.

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risk@solaceglobal.com

+44(0)1202 308810



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T +1 (345) 949-0004
F +1 (345) 945-6591

info@security.ky
www.security.ky

Cayman Technology Centre
115 Printer Way

PO Box 10055, Grand Cayman
KY1-1001, Cayman Islands