

Frequently Asked Questions About the Gaza War (revised 12-7-2023)

What is Hamas and how is it related to Palestine?

The occupied Palestinian Territories comprise of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza. There are two primary political factions in Palestine: Fatah and Hamas. Fatah, the political group most active in West Bank and known as the Palestinian Authority (PA), has renounced the use of violence. Hamas, the political group most active in Gaza has not renounced violence as a means to political ends. In January 2006, in monitored democratic elections, Hamas defeated the ruling Fatah party and gained the majority of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council. The Bush Administration would not deal with Hamas. Both the US and the EU cut off funds to the Palestinian Authority. Attempts at a Palestinian unity government were ultimately not successful. In 2007 Hamas took political control of the Gaza strip, and Mahmoud Abbas, president of Palestine and a member of the Fatah party dismissed the Hamas-led PA government and outlawed the Hamas militia from West Bank. From 2007 on, Israel imposed an economic blockade on Gaza which has created 16 years of inhumane conditions.

What did Hamas do?

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched an offensive against Israel. Hamas militants broke through the security surrounding Gaza and took control of numerous small cities around the Gaza border, murdering many civilians. Hamas also attacked a group of Israeli and foreign national civilians at an outdoor music concert near the Gaza border. About 12-1400 Israelis and foreign nationals were killed, over 5000 wounded, and (reported numbers vary) around 240 civilians of all ages were taken hostage into Gaza.

What is Hamas's motive for this attack?

The 2 million Palestinians in Gaza have lived under blockade for 16 years in dire conditions. Since 2020, the UN has been referring to Gaza as uninhabitable. Before the war, most Gazans were living in poverty, with little hope for the future. In addition, Israeli settlers are perpetrating widespread state-sanctioned violence against Palestinians in the West Bank, forcing whole villages of Palestinians to abandon their homes. Israeli military have raided Palestinian cities as well as the Al Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem. The Al Aqsa Mosque is the second most sacred place on earth to Islam, so this raid has caused deep offense. All these actions of Israel have bred desperation in the Palestinian people, and hopelessness feeds terrorism. Hamas is resisting occupation using violent means and has named this offensive the "Al Aqsa Flood."

What has Israel's response to the attack been and what is their goal?

Israel is attempting defeat Hamas so totally that the organization can no longer exist. Israel immediately responded with continuous aerial bombardment of the Gaza strip for 48 days and nights. After warning Gazans that those living in the northern half of the strip should move to the southern half of the strip, Israel bombed the routes people needed to use to move from north to south, also bombing the southern city of Khan Unis, one of the locations to which civilians had been told to flee. Israel initially closed off all humanitarian assistance and cut off electricity and communication (phone, internet) in the Gaza Strip. Multiple hospitals, churches, mosques, clinics, refugee camps, and UN facilities have been bombed. On October 27 Israel commenced a ground invasion of northern Gaza. Humanitarian pauses of 4 hours were allowed for civilian evacuation beginning Nov. 9th. A complete pause in hostilities began November 24th to allow for

hostage release/prisoner exchange. Shelling resumed December 1, after Israel stated Hamas had violated the pause by firing a rocket. There have been no further fatalities in Israel from Hamas. Gazan workers who were working in Israel by permit at the time that the war broke out were hunted down, arrested, and often beaten, and evicted back to Gaza. 138 people remain hostages in Gaza.

What is happening to regular Palestinian citizens?

In Gaza: As of 12-7-23, over 16,000 Palestinians in Gaza (more than one out of every 150 people) had been killed (70% women and children). At least 70 journalists and 198 Palestinian medics have died. 85% of the population, or 1.9 million people, are internally displaced. 1.2 million are in UN shelters housing four times their capacity. Some shelters have been forced to evacuate due to warnings from Israeli military. Due to overcrowding, communicable diseases are increasing. The number of injured is believed to be at least 35,000. Over 60% of the housing in Gaza has been destroyed. Electric and communications blackouts continues across the whole Gaza strip. In the north there is no potable water. Food insecurity is deepening; hunger is rampant. Around 50 UN facilities have been bombed, and 112 UN staff have died in bombing. The number of missing is not being reported. Authorities are seeing separated families and unaccompanied children; hence, there is a need for child protective services. Some food, water, and fuel supplies are now being allowed into Gaza since the pause, but routes to distribute aid are nonexistent except in the very south. Fuel is being distributed by the UN for cooking and to assist hospitals. 56 health care facilities have been bombed including 24 hospitals. 14 out of 36 hospitals are currently able to admit patients.

In the West Bank: 253 Palestinians (66 children) have been killed since October 7 and almost 3,341 civilians including over 500 children injured. Four Israelis (including three soldiers) have been killed in clashes. In the small herding communities in rural areas, right-wing Israeli settlers have taken advantage of the situation by resorting to violence against shepherds and their families. In 318 settler attacks verified by the UN, over 1000 people have been internally displaced due to forced removals from their villages by Israeli settlers being aided by the Israeli Army. Fifteen entire villages have been forced to leave their lands. These actions are in line with the Israel's recent actions against Palestinians in rural areas of the West Bank.

In the larger cities, Israeli security presence is much increased since October 7. Freedom of movement and freedom of speech are greatly reduced, with soldiers arresting people off the streets and searching their social media platforms on their phones for any reference to the war. Israel has taken approximately 5000 civilian West Bank Palestinians as political prisoners in raids, roughly doubling the number of administrative detainees being held in Israeli prisons prior to the war. Among Palestinians, there is acute fear. There is an increase of Palestinian resistance in the north part of the West Bank.

What is happening in Israel?

The potential for dialog between Israelis and Palestinians is much reduced. Many in Israel speak of Gazans, and even all Palestinians, as human animals and of completely eliminating the enemy. The war is creating an economic crisis for Israel, and widespread anxiety. 88 Israeli soldiers have died in fighting in Gaza.

What can we do as followers of Jesus, called to be peacemakers?

1. Pray for all involved, for a way forward to peace that will last, based on justice for all.
2. Advocate with The White House and Congress for a ceasefire, for the sake of human life and dignity, and for access to humanitarian aid in Gaza without delay.
3. Financial assistance can be given through the ELCA website: <https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Relief-and-Development/Lutheran-Disaster-Response/Our-Impact/Middle-East-Crisis>