

# [***The Israel-Hamas War—Seven Months On | Opinion***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C0C-CMM1-JBR6-9005-00000-00&context=1516831)

Newsweek.com

May 9, 2024 Thursday 11:54 AM EST

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**Length:** 932 words

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**Highlight:** Diplomatic prospects look bleak.

**Body**

Seven months ago this week, [*Hamas*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/hamas?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) broke through what was thought to be an impenetrable barrier separating Gaza from Southern Israel. The result was an earthly-version of Dante's Inferno. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) were caught totally by surprise, and Israeli troops needed more than a day to flush out the [*more than 3,000 Hamas terrorists*](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-estimates-3000-hamas-terrorists-invaded-israel-in-oct-7-onslaught/) who conducted the attack. By the time it was over, about 1,200 people were killed and 250 were brought back to Gaza as bargaining chips.

Israel's ensuing war against Hamas began while Hamas' Oct. 7 attack was still happening. In the seven months since, Gaza—which [*was already a terrible place to live*](https://www.un.org/unispal/document/gaza-unliveable-un-special-rapporteur-for-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-the-opt-tells-third-committee-press-release-excerpts/)—has turned into hell-on-earth. On May 7, Israeli forces started [*moving into Rafah*](https://www.newsweek.com/hamas-agrees-ceasefire-deal-after-israel-signals-new-offensive-1897634?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), capturing the Rafah border crossing on the Palestinian side of the Egypt-Gaza border.

For those in Gaza braving the bombs, bullets, and shells, the top priority is survival. Esoteric questions and lessons-learned exercises will need to be kicked for another day. Even so, the war doesn't have to stop for the soul-searching to begin. We have learned quite a lot since Oct. 7.

First, we've learned that the United States [*isn't the beacon of universal values*](https://www.newsweek.com/values-us-says-one-thing-does-another-opinion-1896201?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) it so often claims to be. Before and during the war in Gaza, President [*Joe Biden*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/joe-biden?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) all the way down to the State Department spokesperson have consistently stated that America is the defender of the "rules-based order." Those who flout or break the rules will get called to the carpet and penalized for their actions.

In reality, however, the U.S. [*says one thing and does another*](https://www.newsweek.com/values-us-says-one-thing-does-another-opinion-1896201?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) and is [*oftentimes hypocritical*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/10/opinion/us-un-ceasefire-gaza.html) in enforcing the rules it claims to love. Allies and partners, like Israel, get the benefit of the doubt whereas adversaries and competitors (like Russia) are ripped apart for engaging in some of the same behavior. The U.S., for instance, didn't wait very long to (rightly) criticize Russia for bombing Ukraine to smithereens. With Israel, in contrast, the Biden administration has walked on eggshells. It took [*more than 34,000 Palestinian deaths*](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/5/8/israels-war-on-gaza-live-calls-for-israel-to-open-border-crossings-grow#:~:text=At%20least%2034,844%20people%20have,of%20people%20still%20held%20captive) in Gaza before the White House [*paused a single package of munitions to Israel*](https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/u-s-paused-weapons-shipment-to-israel-over-a-possible-rafah-offensive-1074521b?mod=mhp) in an attempt to influence Israeli policy.

Second, we've learned that even mortal adversaries can negotiate with each other successfully. Hamas and Israel are sworn to one another's destruction, yet both have been using intermediaries to send plans, proposals, and papers back and forth. Granted, such an observation will no doubt come across as starry-eyed at the present moment. Israel and Hamas have spent the last five months trying to strike a mutually-beneficial hostage release and ceasefire deal—thus far to no avail. The two sides have totally different bottom-line positions and opinions about a pause should be crafted [*and whether it should be permanent*](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68971818). Hamas is only willing to release the remaining hostages if Israel commits to ending the war; Israeli Prime Minister [*Benjamin Netanyahu*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/benjamin-netanyahu?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) has vowed that Hamas must be destroyed regardless.

Diplomatic prospects look bleak. Even so, diplomacy has worked at times. Last November, Israel and Hamas [*agreed*](https://www.newsweek.com/israel-hamas-ceasefire-hostages-prisoners-white-house-biden-extension-war-qatar-1847202?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) to a one-week ceasefire and the exchange of 100 hostages for 240 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. The deal, of course, didn't hold for long. Negotiations back then were also far easier than ones occurring today. In November, Israel and Hamas were negotiating specific items like the number of hostages and prisoners to be swapped and which individuals would be given priority. Now, the talks have far more ambitious objectives, which explains why they have broken down multiple times. Still, when circumstances warrant, Israel and Hamas have at least explored the idea of a settlement to defend their interests.

The third observation concerns the Palestinian issue writ-large. Before Oct. 7, foreign policy commentators were speculating that the Palestinian cause was losing its potency in the eyes of Arab leaders. The 2020 [*Abraham Accords*](https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/), in which Israel normalized diplomatic relations with the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Bahrain, and Sudan seemed to support that argument. Israel was able to ingratiate itself further into the region without doing much on the Palestinian file. Even Saudi Arabia, the Middle East's biggest power, appeared ready to sign a normalization agreement with Israel in exchange for a few tacit Israeli concessions to the Palestinian Authority—less as a way of making a future Palestinian state more probable but rather to make normalizing with Israel easier to sell.

But the war in Gaza has shown that the Palestinian question is still a major factor in Middle Eastern ***politics***. Rulers like Saudi Crown Prince [*Mohammed bin Salman*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/mohammed-bin-salman?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) (MBS), who long ago [*got sick and tired*](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/2018-05-01/ty-article/palestinians-should-shut-up-or-make-peace-said-saudi-crown-prince/0000017f-df31-db22-a17f-ffb1510b0000) of lobbying on behalf of the Palestinians, are now in forced into a 180-degree turn. Arab publics are now outright opposed to normalizing relations with Israel and the Abraham Accords no longer has the shine it once did. The Saudis are now holding up normalization with Israel to push for an irreversible path toward a Palestinian state—something they likely know is possible due to the ultranationalist composition of Israel's government. To the extent anybody is talking about the Middle East these days, the Palestinians are again at the front and center of the conversation.

The world is still coming to grips with the lessons of the last seven months. One can only hope we don't have a similar seven months ahead of us.

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*The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.*

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2390636/smoke-billows-israeli-strikes-rafah.jpg)

**Graphic**

Smoke billows from Israeli strikes in Rafah

AFP via Getty Images

Smoke billows from Israeli strikes in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on May 9, 2024, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas.

**Load-Date:** May 9, 2024

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