



2024-02(S)

Israel-Hamas War: Analysis and Prospects

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2024.1.2

Background of the Hamas surprise attack: Fatah-Hamas competition and Saudi Arabia-Israel-Iran conflict

On October 7, 2023, Hamas, a militant Islamist group that controls the Gaza Strip, launched an unprecedented, large-scale surprise attack on Israel, killing over 1,400 Israelis and taking over 240 hostages. Israel immediately announced their goal of the destruction of Hamas, launched retaliatory airstrikes on the Gaza Strip, and implemented a complete blockade that cut off food and fuel supplies until Hamas released the hostages. Furthermore, on the 27th, a 'second war of independence' was declared and ground troops were deployed to the Gaza Strip. A month after the armed conflict between Israel and Hamas began, the death toll of Palestinian residents has exceeded 10,000, and the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip has escalated.

The cause of Hamas' provocations is found in the competition for leadership between Fatah, the largest political faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and Hamas, a radical armed faction, and in the triangular conflict between Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran. Hamas, which denies the very existence of Israel and insists on establishing an Islamic state, feared the basis for their existence would be shaken when Saudi Arabia, the leading Sunni power and guardian of Islam's holy sites, attempted to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. Mediated by the United States, this deal would have offered Saudi Arabia enhanced security from the threat of Iran, the biggest Shia country. Thus, Hamas launched a life-or-death armed attack against Israel in order to destroy the current détente. From Hamas' perspective, if regional détente is achieved, its biggest rival, Fatah, will monopolize the legitimacy of Palestinian rule and profit economically. The organization representing the Palestinian people to Saudi Arabia and Israel is the Palestinian Authority led by Fatah, not Hamas, which is designated as a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union. Hamas had a strong incentive to shake up the status quo. Hamas also included in its calculations the divided public opinion and security vacuum in Israel, resulting from the Israeli far-right coalition government's attempt to neutralize the judiciary, which was launched in November 2022, and the anger of Muslims across the Middle East over Israel's coercive policy against Palestine.

Causes of Israel's intelligence failure: Division of public opinion caused by the far-right populist government and its coercive policy against Palestine

Israel, which has so far had the upper hand in the conflict with Hamas, was arrogant and missed subtle warnings leading up to the October 7 attack. Israel's signal interception unit 8200 reportedly stopped monitoring Hamas over the past year. This was a clear leadership failure, and the decisive cause was domestic political chaos. Between 2019 and 2022, Israel held five general elections, an unprecedented event in constitutional history, as conservatives, centrists, and progressives failed to form a coalition government. Voters are sharply divided between right wing Jewish nationalism and the rule of law as

it concerns the future of Prime Minister Netanyahu, a conservative icon who has been tried on corruption charges, including bribery, breach of trust, and fraud.

In January 2023, after the announcement of the coalition government's judicial reform plan to weaken the judiciary and strengthen the authority of the executive branch, the largest anti-government protest in Israeli history was organized, and members of almost all classes of society participated. In particular, about 10,000 reservists from the Air Force, special forces, and intelligence agencies signed a refusal to serve in protest of the government's attempt to take over the judiciary, and incumbents also supported collective action by reservists, raising concerns about a security vacuum resulting from the absence of core military personnel. Opposition lawmakers boycotted the vote and walked out, as Netanyahu showed no signs of conceding. Due to this worsening division of public opinion, Israel has fallen into a crisis of national paralysis.

The Biden administration also expressed deep concern about the Israeli far-right government's regression towards authoritarianism. The majority of Democrats criticized the Netanyahu administration's policies against domestic democracy and the 'two-state solution', and anti-Netanyahu public opinion surged, even in the American Jewish community. In the end, Israel's long-standing national policy of self-reliance has collapsed due to the selfishness of a politician who incited populism and divided the people and society.

Post-War Scenarios and Prospects

It is unlikely that the Israel-Hamas war will escalate into another Middle East war involving other countries. This is because neighboring authoritarian regimes in Iran and Egypt are anxious about possible internal instability and are busy protecting their interests. Particularly for Iran, intervention in the war is burdensome, due to the economic difficulties caused by United States sanctions and worsening domestic public opinion over forced hijab wearing.

Nevertheless, this Israel-Hamas war can, in fact, be seen as the first Israel-Iran war, as the two countries have been waging a shadow war for a long time. Lebanon's ally Hezbollah has already engaged in combat on Israel's northern front, and Yemen's Houthi rebels, who declared a struggle against Israel, recently launched drones and cruise missiles toward Israel. Some of Iraq's pro-Iran People's Mobilization Forces also gathered in Syria. That is, the pro-Iranian proxy organization, Iran's vaunted Axis of Resistance, is joining in the armed struggle against Israel. However, they will limit their provocations in order not to get their sponsor state Iran in trouble. Iran is not easily able to decide whether to participate in the war, as it has been supporting Hezbollah to suppress Israel and the United States' airstrikes on its nuclear facilities, but at the same time, it cannot just sit by and watch the destruction of Hamas.

After Israel eliminates Hamas forces to some extent in the ground war, Israel and the United States are discussing a plan for the Palestinian Authority, led by Fatah, to transfer control of the Gaza Strip and for peacekeepers to help with security. Hardliners, including Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have suggested Israel's control of the Gaza Strip, but those who failed to prevent the Hamas attack face being kicked out, as they have completely lost their political base at home and abroad. The Biden administration has been emphasizing that the future of the Gaza Strip depends entirely on the Palestinian people. The key is whether the Palestinian Authority can successfully govern the Gaza Strip, which has been under Hamas rule for 16 years. In the end, the general and presidential elections, which were postponed indefinitely due to the bloody conflict between Fatah and Hamas that broke out in 2006, should be held as soon as possible and serve as a turning point in the conflict between Israel and Palestine on the one hand, and Fatah and Hamas on the other.

Following this, détente negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, mediated by the United States, are expected to be held again. Saudi Arabia and other major Middle Eastern countries have expressed support for the Palestinian people, not Hamas. In particular, Prince Turki al-Faisal, a respected senior figure in Saudi Arabian politics, strongly criticized Hamas's killing of Israeli civilians, saying it violates Islamic doctrine. This is seen as an indicator of the Saudi Arabian leadership's position on the Israel-Hamas conflict. It is also difficult for the United States and Israel to accept the fact that détente is broken due to this armed conflict, which is tantamount to having surrendered to terrorists. Therefore, when military tensions subside, the United States mediation and the movement of major Middle Eastern countries toward détente will reemerge.

The ROK policy toward the Middle East supports the 'two-state solution' and the Middle East détente process that pursues coexistence between Israel and Palestine, condemns Hamas' terrorist acts, and emphasizes humanitarian support for Palestine. Korea, which will serve as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for two years starting in 2024, will actively participate in the Security Council's response to the Middle East conflict while presenting a vision of a responsible 'Global Pivotal State.' We must continue to develop independent ways to resolve tensions and humanitarian crises in the region by promoting Middle East policies based on international norms and values, such as human rights, democracy, the liberal international order, and the rule of law. In addition, as revealed in the Israel-Hamas armed conflict, Israel's intelligence agency failed to identify Hamas's intention to launch a surprise attack, so there is a need to further strengthen our surveillance system against North Korea.

This article is an English Summary of Asan Issue Brief (2023-25).

(‘이스라엘-하마스 전쟁: 분석과 전망’, <https://www.asaninst.org/?p=91518>)



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