

# **Conflict Over Gaza: From Operation Cast Lead (2008) to Operation Iron Swords (2023)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Israel-Hamas conflict is a long-standing and complex struggle rooted in historical, political, and ideological differences. Hamas, an Islamic Resistance Movement that emerged in Palestinian politics, posed a significant challenge not only to the secular, Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) but also to the State of Israel. Hamas's refusal to recognize Israel's right to exist and its goal of establishing an Islamic state in place of Israel directly threatens Israeli security and sovereignty. After Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007, there were several conflicts between Israel and Hamas. therefore, this paper offers a critical analysis of five major Israeli military operations conducted between 2008 and 2023: Operation Cast Lead (2008–2009), Operation Pillar of Defence (2012), Operation Protective Edge (2014), Operation Guardian of the Walls (2021), and Operation Iron Swords (2023). These operations represent key flashpoints in the protracted Israel-Hamas conflict and reflect the cyclical nature of violence in the region. Each military campaign was initiated in response to rocket fire or escalating tensions, but they often resulted in disproportionate civilian casualties on both sides, mass displacement, and widespread infrastructural damage in Gaza. Therefore, this research paper adopts a descriptive and analytical research approach to investigate the following central questions: What political, social, and regional conditions influenced the emergence and popular support for Hamas during and after the First Intifada? Additionally, how have Israel's control, blockade, and repeated military interventions in Gaza since 2007 impacted the humanitarian crisis and political dynamics between Israel, Hamas, and the international community?

**Keywords:** Fatah, Hamas, Israel, Palestine, Peace, Conflict, Security, War and West Asia etc.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since the State of Israel was established on 14 May 1948, the conflict between Jews and Muslims, known as the Arab-Israel conflict or Israel-Palestine Conflict, has been a major issue in world politics. The situation became highly tense following the outbreak of conflict between Israel and Hamas on 7 October 2023. This event caused significant chaos in global politics as the Palestinian militant group Hamas initiated a major terrorist attack from the Gaza Strip towards Israel's southern border<sup>1</sup>. They took control of Israeli cities and caused casualties among both Israeli soldiers and civilians. According to Josef Federman and Issam Adwan, "Israel is experiencing

its most severe assault since the Holocaust, with thousands of rockets fired into its territory, leading to the highest civilian death toll in a single day in the nation's history, as stated by a senior Knesset official. The conflict in southern Israel persists, with reports indicating that Hamas has taken Israeli hostages back to Gaza<sup>2</sup>.

In response, "Israel has launched 'Operation Iron Swords' to counter Hamas's attacks on its territory. The airstrikes launched by Israel in retaliation have resulted in the deaths of several Palestinians<sup>3</sup>. On 31 July 2024, "Hamas political chief Ismail Haniyeh was assassinated in Tehran while attending the inauguration of Iran's newly elected President, Masoud Pezeshkian. According to Hamas, both Haniyeh and one of his bodyguards were

killed by a 'Zionist' airstrike<sup>4</sup>. As of 26 August 2024, more than 41,000 individuals have lost their lives in the Israel-Hamas conflict. "This comprises 40,435 Palestinians and 1,478 Israelis. The casualties also include 116 journalists (111 Palestinian, 2 Israeli, and 3 Lebanese) and more than 224 humanitarian aid workers, with 179 being employees of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)<sup>5</sup>. Since Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007 during the Palestinian civil war, frequent clashes have occurred between Israel and Palestinian militant groups, resulting in substantial casualties on both sides. Therefore, it's crucial to understand Hamas's background, objectives, and the reasons behind its opposition to Israel and the ongoing conflict with the Jewish state<sup>6</sup>.

### Historical Background of Israel- Palestine Conflict

The Israel-Palestine conflict, since its inception in 1948, has been marked by deep-seated territorial, political, and humanitarian disputes. "On 29 November 1947, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 'Future Government of Palestine' was adopted by the General Assembly. It noted Britain's planned termination of the British Mandate for Palestine and recommended the partition of Palestine into two states, one Jewish state and other Arab state with Jerusalem as an international city<sup>7</sup>. While the Jewish community accepted the plan, the Arab leadership rejected it, seeing it as unjust and favouring the Jewish population<sup>8</sup>. Upon Israel's declaration of independence on 14 May 1948, neighbouring Arab states, including Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Syria, launched a military intervention, marking the start of the First Arab-Israeli War of 1948-1949<sup>9</sup>. This war was also known as the War of Independence from the Israeli perspective and the Nakba (*catastrophe*) from the Palestinian viewpoint, resulted in further displacement of Palestinians and solidified deep-seated animosity between the two communities. This conflict not only reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the West Asia but also laid the foundation for ongoing territorial disputes and refugee issues that persist to this day.

From 1949 onwards, a series of wars and conflicts ensued, including the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the Six-Day War of 1967. These conflicts further exacerbated tensions and reshaped territorial boundaries. During the Six Days War of 1967, "Israel occupied all of Palestine and the Israeli army had won a decisive land war. Israeli forces had taken control of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai

Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan and the Golan Heights from Syria<sup>10</sup>.

This period saw the consolidation of Israeli control over territories claimed by Palestinians, leading to increased resistance and nationalist movements among Palestinians, notably the emergence of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) under the leadership of Yasser Arafat. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the conflict evolved into a complex struggle involving not only Israel and Palestinian nationalist movements but also neighbouring Arab states and international players<sup>11</sup>. The PLO, through armed resistance and political advocacy, sought to establish an independent Palestinian state and challenge Israeli occupation. Meanwhile, Israel pursued policies aimed at maintaining security and asserting sovereignty over disputed territories, leading to cycles of violence, military operations, and international diplomatic efforts to broker peace<sup>12</sup>.

Throughout this period, the Israel-Palestine conflict remained a focal point of global attention, with numerous peace initiatives and diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving the entrenched disputes. However, by 1987, the situation reached a critical juncture with the outbreak of the First *Intifada*, a sustained Palestinian uprising against Israeli rule in the occupied territories<sup>13</sup>. This marked a significant shift in Palestinian resistance tactics, highlighting the enduring nature of grievances and the complexity of achieving a lasting peace in the region.

### Rise of Hamas

Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, was founded in 1987 during the First *Intifada* under Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Its goal was to resist Israeli occupation through military and social means<sup>14</sup>. While rooted in the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist organization founded in 1928 in Egypt, Hamas focused on the armed struggle for the liberation of Palestine and opposed the secular nationalist forces led by Fatah and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)<sup>15</sup>.

Throughout the *Intifada*, Hamas gained prominence, especially in Gaza, by positioning itself as a rival to Fatah. The movement became an important force, using both social outreach and violent resistance to attract supporters beyond the traditional base of the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>16</sup>. Hamas's refusal to accept any compromise with Israel, including its opposition to peace agreements such as the Oslo Accords (1993-1995),

further distinguished it from the PLO. Hamas rejected the Accords as a betrayal of Palestinian aspirations and reinforced its stance on the full liberation of Palestine, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea<sup>17</sup>.

Hamas boycotted the 1996 Palestinian elections because they were based on the Oslo Accords, which Hamas rejected for not securing fundamental Palestinian rights. Participating would have legitimized the Palestinian Authority (PA), which Hamas opposed. Fatah won the election, and Yasser Arafat became the first PA president<sup>18</sup>. After Arafat's death, Mahmoud Abbas won the 2005 presidential election as Hamas again boycotted<sup>19</sup>. After the 2005 presidential elections, Fatah's support declined due to political deadlock, the collapse of Camp David II, and dissatisfaction with the Fatah-led PA, seen as corrupt and incompetent. Meanwhile, Hamas gained support by addressing Palestinian hardships under Israeli occupation<sup>20</sup>. At the same time, in 2005, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon decided to withdraw from Gaza, partly due to the costs of maintaining settlements and the security of Israeli citizens amid ongoing violence during the second *Intifada*. Capitalizing on these factors, Hamas participated in the 2006 parliamentary elections and secured a landslide victory, winning 76 out of 132 seats (57.5%), while Fatah came in second with 43 seats (32.5%)<sup>21</sup>.

Hamas' 2006 electoral victory was a major shock to Fatah, Israel, and the U.S., leading to the first Palestinian government without Fatah's dominance. Fatah, with support from Israel, the U.S., and the EU, tried to block Hamas from integrating into the Palestinian Authority (PA). Israel and major donors imposed sanctions on the PA, cutting off aid due to Hamas's refusal to renounce violence, recognize Israel, and honour past agreements. In June 2007, tensions between Hamas and Fatah escalated into a civil war, splitting Palestinian territories into two separate entities, "*Fatahland*" and "*Hamastan*", called the 'Second Partition of Palestine.' While Fatah continues to govern the West Bank, Hamas has solidified its control over the Gaza Strip. This internal conflict resulted in the deaths of thousands of Palestinians<sup>22</sup>.

### Conflict Over Gaza

Following Hamas's takeover of Gaza in 2007, Israel imposed a strict blockade to prevent weapon smuggling. Enforced by Israel and Egypt, the blockade has severely restricted goods and movement, causing economic and

humanitarian issues. In addition, Israel has launched several major military operations in response to rocket attacks and other aggression from Gaza<sup>23</sup>. These include *Operation Cast Lead* (2008-2009), *Operation Pillar of Defence* (2012), *Operation Protective Edge* (2014), *Operation Guardian of the Walls* (2021) and *Operation Iron Swords* (2023). Each of these operations involved significant airstrikes and ground invasions, designed to weaken Hamas's military capabilities and discourage future attacks.

### *Operation Cast Lead (2008-2009)*

*Operation Cast Lead*, conducted from 27 December 2008, to 18 January 2009, was a major military campaign initiated by Israel in response to ongoing rocket attacks from Hamas and other militant groups in the Gaza Strip. The operation began with intense airstrikes targeting Hamas infrastructure, including rocket launch sites, weapons storage facilities, and government buildings. Israel justified the operation as a defensive measure in response to years of rocket attacks from Gaza, which had escalated after the breakdown of a six-month ceasefire. The initial airstrike was followed by a ground invasion involving thousands of Israeli troops. This aimed to significantly weaken Hamas's military capabilities and protect Israeli civilians. The operation caused extensive destruction in Gaza, with entire neighbourhoods demolished and critical infrastructure severely damaged<sup>24</sup>.

The operation resulted in heavy casualties and widespread destruction in Gaza, with over 1,400 Palestinians killed, many of them civilians, and thousands more wounded. 13 Israelis also lost their lives<sup>25</sup>. International criticism grew as concerns over the humanitarian impact and allegations of disproportionate force were raised, leading to calls for investigations into potential war crimes<sup>26</sup>. Despite weakening Hamas's capabilities and temporarily halting rocket fire, Israel's operation failed to resolve underlying issues. The Gaza blockade remained, and periodic escalations continued, reflecting the deep-rooted complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

### *Operation Pillar of Defence (2012)*

*Operation Pillar of Defence*, also known as '*Operation Pillar of Cloud*', launched by Israel in November 2012, was a military campaign aimed at curbing rocket fire from Hamas and other militant groups in Gaza<sup>27</sup>. The operation began with the targeted killing of

Ahmed Jabari, the commander of Hamas's military wing, followed by airstrikes on Gaza. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) focused on destroying rocket-launching sites and Hamas's infrastructure to reduce the threat to Israeli civilians<sup>28</sup>.

In response to Israeli airstrikes, Hamas and other militant groups launched rockets at Israeli cities, including Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, marking the first attacks on these cities since 1991<sup>29</sup>. The Iron Dome defence system intercepted many rockets, reducing casualties, though fear and disruption persisted across Israeli communities<sup>30</sup>. In Gaza, airstrikes caused significant casualties, with over 160 Palestinians killed, many of them civilians. Despite the Iron Dome's effectiveness, the conflict caused widespread fear and disruption in Israel, with millions under the threat of rocket attacks. In Gaza, airstrikes resulted in significant casualties and destruction, with over 160 Palestinians killed, many of them civilians<sup>31</sup>. The operation ended with a ceasefire brokered by Egypt, though the conflict highlighted the deep-seated tensions between Israel and Gaza. While Israel claimed success in reducing Hamas's military capabilities, the operation did not resolve the underlying issues of the blockade on Gaza or the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Civilian casualties and extensive damage in Gaza sparked international criticism, while the situation remained tense, setting the stage for future confrontations<sup>32</sup>.

#### ***Operation Protective Edge (2014)***

'Operation Protective Edge, which began on 8 July 2014, was a major military campaign launched by Israel to halt rocket fire from Gaza and dismantle the extensive tunnel networks used by Hamas for smuggling and infiltration into Israeli territory. The operation was triggered by a significant surge in rocket attacks on Israeli cities and the abduction and murder of three Israeli teenagers by Hamas's operatives<sup>33</sup>. The conflict commenced with a series of intense airstrikes targeting Hamas's military infrastructure, including rocket launchers, weapons storage sites, and command centres. As the operation progressed, Israel launched a ground invasion on 17 July focusing on destroying the tunnel networks that posed a direct threat to Israeli security<sup>34</sup>.

The 50-day conflict resulted in over 2,200 Palestinian deaths, many of whom were civilians, and tens of thousands of injuries. Israel reported 66 soldier deaths and six civilian fatalities, along with several injuries. The fighting displaced hundreds of thousands in Gaza and

heavily damaged critical infrastructure<sup>35</sup>. Despite international calls for a ceasefire, hostilities continued until an open-ended ceasefire was brokered by Egypt on 26 August 2014. The ceasefire addressed some key issues, but the underlying causes of the conflict remained unresolved, resulting in continued tensions. *Operation Protective Edge* highlighted the ongoing volatility of the conflict and the difficulties in achieving lasting peace<sup>36</sup>.

#### ***Operation Guardian of the Walls (2021):***

*Operation Guardian of the Walls*, launched by Israel on 10 May 2021, responded to escalating hostilities between Israeli forces and Hamas. The conflict was triggered by heightened tensions and violent clashes in East Jerusalem, especially around the *Al-Aqsa Mosque* and the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood, where Palestinian families faced eviction. In retaliation, Hamas launched rockets targeting major Israeli cities, including Tel Aviv and Jerusalem<sup>37</sup>. Israel responded with extensive airstrikes aimed at crippling Hamas's military infrastructure, targeting rocket launch sites, weapons depots, and tunnel networks<sup>38</sup>. The Iron Dome missile defence system intercepted many rockets from Gaza, significantly reducing potential Israeli casualties and damage<sup>39</sup>.

The conflict resulted in significant casualties and widespread destruction. Over 250 Palestinians were killed, including women and children, with many more wounded, while in Israel, 13 people lost their lives due to rocket attacks. Hamas launched over 4,000 rockets into Israeli territory, leading to significant fear and disruption in Israeli communities. The Iron Dome missile defence system intercepted most of the rockets, but several still hit civilian areas. The airstrikes in Gaza caused extensive damage to homes, hospitals, and infrastructure, sparking international concern over the humanitarian crisis in the region<sup>40</sup>. International reactions to *Operation Guardian of the Walls* were mixed, with widespread condemnation of the civilian casualties and destruction in Gaza. While Israel defended the operation as a necessary response to rocket attacks and the need to protect its citizens, critics highlighted the disproportionate impact on Gaza's civilian population. The hostilities ended with a ceasefire mediated by Egypt on 21 May 2021<sup>41</sup>. Although the fighting stopped, the ceasefire failed to address the underlying political and territorial conflicts, keeping the region tense and vulnerable to future outbreaks of violence.

### ***Operation Iron Swords (2023)***

*Operation Iron Swords*, launched by Israel in response to a major Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, represents a significant escalation in the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas<sup>42</sup>. This event is part of the long-standing conflict between Palestine and Israel, with a particular emphasis on tensions between Gaza and Israel. Although Israel and Hamas had engaged in several conflicts before, there was a relative calm throughout 2022 and much of 2023. During this period, Hamas appeared to be preparing for a large-scale offensive, later known as “*Operation Al-Aqsa Flood*”<sup>43</sup>.

The attack began in the early morning with more than 3,000 rockets launched at Israel, followed by incursions into Israeli territory using vehicles. Palestinian militants broke through the Gaza-Israel barrier, attacking military bases and inflicting civilian casualties in nearby Israeli towns<sup>44</sup>. Tragically, the attack claimed the lives of 1,139 people, including 695 Israeli civilians, 36 of whom were children, along with 373 security personnel and 71 foreigners. In addition, unarmed civilians were taken hostage, and Israeli soldiers were captured and taken to the Gaza Strip<sup>45</sup>.

In response, Israel initiated a military campaign aimed at Hamas infrastructure in Gaza, carrying out airstrikes on rocket launchers, command centres, and tunnels. The operation resulted in extensive destruction, civilian casualties, and mass displacement across Gaza. The international community urged de-escalation and called for humanitarian assistance<sup>46</sup>. According to a UN report, on October 13, Israel ordered the evacuation of northern Gaza, displacing 1.1 million people—nearly half of the region’s population<sup>47</sup>. Concerns over a humanitarian crisis intensified as Israel cut off food, water, electricity, and fuel supplies to Gaza, which was already under blockade<sup>48</sup>.

The global reactions to the Israel-Hamas war have been mixed. Western nations like the U.S. and several European countries strongly supported Israel’s right to defend itself, condemning Hamas’s attacks while urging Israel to minimize civilian casualties. Russia remained restrained, while China called for “restraint” from both sides, without condemning the Hamas attacks<sup>49</sup>. In contrast, many countries in West Asia and the Global South opposed Israel’s actions, highlighting the Palestinian civilian casualties. Iran supported Hamas and denounced Israel, while Saudi Arabia and Gulf states called for an end to the violence and stressed the need for a two-state

solution<sup>50</sup>. Despite their recent normalization of relations with Israel through the Abraham Accords, the UAE and Bahrain expressed deep concern about the humanitarian impact in Gaza and called for a peaceful solution to the conflict<sup>51</sup>. Protests in solidarity with Palestinians occurred globally, and international organizations like the UN called for ceasefires and humanitarian aid. India’s response balanced its strategic interests, supporting Israel’s right to self-defence while expressing concern over Gaza’s humanitarian crisis and advocating for a two-state solution<sup>52</sup>. The United States, Egypt, and Qatar are making a final diplomatic push to secure a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas to end the war<sup>53</sup>. In January 2025, a U.S.- and Egypt-brokered ceasefire came into effect, initiating a three-phase plan: hostage-prisoner exchanges, Israeli troop withdrawal from populated Gaza areas, and large-scale humanitarian aid delivery<sup>54</sup>. The first phase saw dozens of hostages traded for Palestinian prisoners, the Netzarim Corridor opened, and thousands of aid trucks entered Gaza. Despite reduced violence, isolated Israeli strikes continued, and talks stalled over troop withdrawal and Gaza governance. The ceasefire remains fragile without addressing underlying issues—blockade, reconstruction, and political authority in Gaza<sup>55</sup>. Hence, Ceasefire proposal provide temporary relief from violence but are not long-term solutions. Sustainable peace requires addressing the root causes—blockade, occupation, political exclusion, and mutual insecurity—through serious negotiations and international engagement.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the conflict between Israel and Hamas remains a serious threat to both regional stability and global security. Since Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007, the two sides have engaged in multiple military confrontations, resulting in widespread destruction, civilian casualties, and deepening animosity. Israel considers the conflict a matter of existence, viewing Hamas as a terrorist organisation that endangers its citizens through rocket attacks and infiltration attempts. On the other hand, Hamas claims to resist Israeli occupation and aims to establish an Islamic state in Palestine, rejecting the legitimacy of the Israeli state. The international community is sharply divided in this regard. Some countries support Israel’s right to self-defence, while others express solidarity with the Palestinian cause and condemn Israeli military actions and the blockade of

Gaza. This polarisation risks escalating the conflict beyond the region and complicates efforts toward peace. Both sides justify their actions based on security, identity, and political interests, but repeated cycles of violence have only led to greater human suffering and instability.

The conflict over Gaza remains a deeply tragic part of the broader Israel-Palestine issue. Repeated military operations—*Operation Cast Lead* (2008), *Operation Pillar of Defence* (2012), *Operation Protective Edge* (2014), *Operation Guardian of the Walls* (2021), and *Operation Iron Swords* (2023)—have intensified violence, suffering, and mistrust. These operations were often triggered by rocket attacks from Gaza and Israeli strikes on Hamas leaders. However, beyond these immediate causes lie unresolved political grievances, the long-standing Israeli blockade, and severe socio-economic hardships in Gaza. *Operation Cast Lead* revealed the devastating human cost of modern warfare in a densely populated area, killing over a thousand Palestinians and damaging essential infrastructure. *Operation Protective Edge* in 2014 was the deadliest, exposing the failure of military means to bring lasting peace. In 2021, tensions in East Jerusalem sparked *Operation Guardian of the Walls*, again leading to widespread casualties and destruction. Most recently, *Operation Iron Swords* in 2023 responded to a Hamas attack but highlighted the continued failure to resolve root issues. These repeated offensives have neither secured peace for Israel nor improved life for Palestinians. A lasting solution requires ending the blockade, addressing Palestinian political rights, and promoting meaningful diplomatic dialogue, without which the cycle of violence will persist.

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