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THE STRATEGIC IMPACT OF THE ISRAELI-HAMAS WAR ON U.S. COUNTERTERRORISM POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A POST 2015 ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The Israeli-Hamas conflict, particularly its escalation on October 7, 2023, has reshaped U.S. counterterrorism strategies in the Middle East. This study examines the implications of the Israeli-Hamas war on American counterterrorism objectives, alliances, and operational frameworks from 2015 to 2025. Anchored on the securitization theory, the study interprets how threats are constructed and framed by political actors to justify extraordinary responses. Employing a qualitative historical approach, the research draws on secondary sources, including government documents, academic journals, and policy briefs, to analyze shifts in U.S. foreign policy. Findings reveal that the war amplified regional instability, challenged normalization efforts under the Abraham Accords, and intensified U.S. military and diplomatic alignment with Israel. The study further found that the entrenchment of Hamas within a broader regional network of Iran-backed militant groups has transformed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into a larger geopolitical and multi-front confrontation, complicating U.S. security calculations. It is recommended that the United States adopt a more balanced diplomatic strategy that includes addressing the humanitarian and political dimensions of the Palestinian question to prevent radicalization and reduce long-term threats to regional security.

KEYWORDS: *Israeli-Hamas War, U.S. Counterterrorism Policy, Middle East, Securitization Theory, Regional Security, Hybrid Warfare.*

INTRODUCTION

Counter-terrorism remains a central pillar of the United States' foreign policy objectives in the Middle East, alongside other strategic interests such as securing access to oil and gas resources, despite its proclaimed energy independence, promoting democratization, ensuring the uninterrupted flow of trade through vital maritime routes like the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf, and the Strait of Hormuz via the Red Sea, and protecting Israel while sustaining a fragile, recently brokered regional peace (Bolan, 2021; Byman & Moller, 2016). The core of U.S. counter-terrorism efforts has historically focused on safeguarding American citizens and interests both at home and abroad, reinforcing its self-appointed role as the global guarantor of peace and security—often described as the "World Policeman" (Ilan & Yoel, 2023; Immerwahr, 2020).

Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, which were attributed to al-Qaeda, the U.S. counter-terrorism strategy has undergone significant transformations, characterized by a series of cyclical policy shifts. These attacks led to the articulation of the "first strike doctrine," a principle that justified pre-emptive action against perceived terrorist threats, whether posed by state or non-state actors. This approach was embedded in what came to be known as the Bush Counter-Terrorism Doctrine (Byman & Moller, 2016; Khan, 2003). Over time, U.S. counter-terrorism in the Middle East has been shaped by a dynamic interplay of strategies and ideological posturing, involving the persistent classification of Islamic fundamentalist and extremist groups as terrorist entities, the reaffirmation of military and diplomatic ties with Israel, and the alternation of counter-terrorism tactics, from pre-emptive to defensive, from coercive to cooperative, and from reactionary to preventative initiatives (Mansour-Ille, 2021).

The United States' military invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, as well as targeted airstrikes in Somalia and Yemen against al-Qaeda affiliates between 2002 and 2012, and its subsequent offensives against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014–2015, were all conducted under the legal framework of the U.S. Congress's "2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF)" (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). Although these interventions were justified as counter-terrorism measures, critics have often labeled them as violations of national sovereignty, describing them as acts of impunity under the guise of global security. These operations laid the groundwork for the permanent stationing of U.S. military personnel and the establishment of military bases across various Middle Eastern

countries, including Lebanon, Afghanistan, Syria, Jordan, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (Zenko, 2018; Masters & Merrow, 2019). While these deployments enhanced deterrence and reassured U.S. allies particularly Israel, they also contributed to the radicalization and resilience of certain Islamic and Arab fundamentalist groups, who viewed American military presence as evidence of unwavering support for Israel at the expense of Palestinian sovereignty (Yakubu, 2014).

The human and material costs of U.S. military operations in the Middle East sparked considerable debate within American policy and academic circles. Public opinion remained divided: on one hand, the John Deutch school of thought advocated for a reduced American military footprint in favor of diplomacy and a pivot toward economic interests in East Asia. On the other hand, a counter position argued for the maintenance of a robust, target-scale military presence in the Middle East as essential for the protection of U.S. strategic interests (Zenko, 2018). These debates were reflected in the policy fluctuations of President Barack Obama, whose administration oscillated between military drawdowns and renewed engagements between 2009 and 2014, notably in support of counter-ISIS operations (Zenko, 2018). Despite rhetorical commitments to recalibrate U.S. military presence in the region, successive administrations, those of Donald Trump and Joe Biden, continued to sustain key military operations and counter-terrorism efforts across the Middle East.

However, a notable shift during this period was the growing emphasis on collaborative and partnership-based counter-terrorism initiatives. The United States sought to integrate regional actors into a broader security framework, leading to the revitalization of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and the inclusion of additional Arab nations in counter-terrorism coordination. This trend toward regional integration also revived diplomatic frameworks such as the Camp David Accords of 1978 and the Abraham Accords of 2020, aimed at normalizing relations between Israel and several Arab states (Hazbun, 2024; Ilan & Yoel, 2023). Nonetheless, these normalization efforts have yet to yield the anticipated outcomes, largely due to the unresolved issue of Palestinian statehood, which remains a critical barrier to comprehensive regional peace (Youssef, 2023).

The Palestinian people constitute a nation in pursuit of statehood—an aspiration that remains one of the most contentious and unresolved issues in Israeli–Arab relations. Central to this tension is the status of the Palestinian territories and the longstanding conflict over the land, particularly in and around Jerusalem, which is regarded by Palestinians as the heart of a

future sovereign state. Israel's continued occupation and territorial expansion have fueled resentment and resistance, particularly from Palestinian factions such as Hamas, a Gaza Strip-based Islamist group whose founding charter calls for the destruction of the Israeli state. This ideological position, coupled with territorial disputes, has contributed to the recurring cycles of violence between Israel and Hamas, notably in December 2008, July 2009, May 2021, and most recently, the ongoing conflict that erupted on October 7, 2023. The present war was triggered by a large-scale, coordinated attack by Hamas on Israeli territory, resulting in the deaths of over 1,200 individuals and the abduction of approximately 243 hostages. This marked a significant escalation in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and reignited global attention to the enduring struggle over land, national identity, and sovereignty. At the heart of the conflict is the question of Jerusalem's ownership and the broader Palestinian claim to statehood—an issue that has historically attracted the attention and involvement of regional and international actors.

This study is therefore positioned to examine the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas through the lens of U.S. counter-terrorism policy in the Middle East. It aims to explore how the conflict aligns with or challenges American strategic interests, particularly in the context of countering terrorism, maintaining regional stability, and managing its alliance with Israel amidst broader geopolitical shifts in the region.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions, which aim to explore the complex dynamics of the Israeli–Hamas conflict within the broader context of Middle Eastern geopolitics and international counter-terrorism strategy

- What are the underlying nature and root causes of the ongoing Israeli–Hamas war?
- In what ways is the Israeli–Hamas conflict central to the United States' counter-terrorism policy in the Middle East?
- How has the involvement of affiliated terrorist groups intensified the conflict, transforming it into a multi-front war for Israel?.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the Israeli-Hamas war since October 7, 2023, as it relates to the U.S counter- terrorism policy in the Middle East. The specific objectives are to

1. Examine the nature and underlying causes of the Israeli–Hamas war within the context of historical, political, and ideological tensions.

2. Analyze the relevance of the Israeli–Hamas conflict to the United States' counter-terrorism policy in the Middle East.

3. Investigate how the involvement of affiliated terrorist groups has escalated the conflict and contributed to the emergence of a multi-front war for Israel.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Concept of Terrorism

Terrorism is broadly defined as the deliberate use of violence, intimidation, or threats by non-state actors or insurgent groups to instill fear and achieve political, religious, or ideological objectives. According to Hoffman (2017), terrorism is distinguished by its symbolic nature and its psychological impact, rather than the scale of destruction it causes, targeting civilians to influence a wider audience beyond the immediate victims. Cronin (2019) emphasizes that terrorism is not just random violence but a strategic communication tool intended to provoke a reaction or manipulate state behaviour. Schmid (2020) highlights that terrorism involves the calculated use of violence by a weaker group against a stronger opponent to draw attention to grievances and compel political change. Neumann (2021) adds that terrorism is deeply rooted in perceived injustice and marginalization, often emerging where governance fails or state repression is intense. As such, terrorism is both a form of irregular warfare and a message designed to resonate far beyond its immediate acts.

Concept of Counterterrorism

Counterterrorism, in contrast, refers to the wide range of policies, strategies, and operational efforts undertaken by state and international actors to prevent, disrupt, and respond to acts of terrorism. According to Wilkinson (2018), counterterrorism involves both reactive and preventive measures, including intelligence gathering, law enforcement, military operations, and diplomatic engagement. Byman (2020) explains that counterterrorism strategies often include denying terrorists safe havens, disrupting financing, enhancing border security, and engaging in ideological counter-narratives. Efebeh (2016) notes that U.S. counterterrorism policy in the Middle East has increasingly relied on partnerships with regional allies, drone warfare, and pre-emptive strikes, reflecting a securitized response to perceived threats. Furthermore, Jackson (2021) stresses that effective counterterrorism also requires understanding the root causes of radicalization, incorporating human rights, and promoting

political solutions. Thus, counterterrorism is not merely a military or law enforcement initiative but a comprehensive framework aimed at dismantling terrorist networks while addressing the political and social environments that enable their growth.

Theoretical framework

This study is based on the securitization theoretical framework, which has become prominent in understanding how security issues are constructed and framed, especially in the post-9/11 era marked by increased counter-terrorism policies at national, regional, and international levels (Mansour-Ille, 2021, p. 662). The theory is mainly associated with scholars like Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies. This school challenged traditional, state-focused, and militaristic views of security by introducing alternative perspectives, particularly the idea of human security (Otukoya, 2024; Mansour-Ille, 2021). Central to securitization theory is the idea that security is not an objective condition but a subjective and inter-subjective process. It argues that an issue becomes a security concern not inherently, but through its presentation and framing as an existential threat by actors, often political elites, who seek to justify extraordinary measures outside normal politics. The theory thus goes beyond mere perceptions or fears; it requires that an issue be publicly constructed as a threat to survival, undergoing a process of securitization (Otukoya, 2024).

Securitization theory combines aspects of realism, constructivism, and post-structuralism. It originated as a critique of traditional security models by highlighting how threats are socially created through discourse and political processes (Mansour-Ille, 2018). Although one version of the theory, as developed by Buzan, keeps the state as the main focus of security, it also recognizes that for securitization to succeed, the issue must shift from normal political discussion to emergency action—where acceptance by a relevant audience or community is the final step in the process.

This process includes two key dimensions: the "speech act" and the "audience reception." The speech act refers to the linguistic articulation, whether written or spoken, of an issue as a threat by political elites or decision-makers. The audience, in turn, consists not only of a single homogenous group but a network of social actors and communities who validate or reject the securitizing move (Maulidia, 2018; Otukoya, 2024). Securitization theory provides a useful lens through which to analyze U.S. counter-terrorism policy in the Middle East. According to Mansour-Ille (2021), the progressive securitization of Islam and Islamist

movements, particularly those associated with political Islam and jihadist ideologies, transformed both bilateral and multilateral relations between the United States, the European Union, and several Arab-Muslim states. The securitization process placed democracy promotion, human rights, and strategic military alliances at the center of the U.S. and EU policy agendas in the region (Mansour-Ille, 2021, p. 665).

Despite its analytical usefulness, securitisation theory shows clear weaknesses. One key critique is the tendency toward over securitisation, which involves exaggerating or magnifying threats in security debates. Eroukhmanoff (2018) argues that the theory has often helped create inflated threat perceptions, especially regarding terrorism, leading to disproportionate and violent responses with serious consequences, including civilian casualties. Additionally, as Otukoya (2024) notes, securitisation often justifies the use of extraordinary measures, which can infringe on civil liberties and democratic principles by prioritising security over basic freedoms (p. 1752). Another limitation of the theory is its fluidity in categorising issues—moving them between the realms of politics and security. While securitisation shifts issues from political debate to emergency security measures, *de-securitisation* involves reversing this process by offering alternative framings and solutions. This dynamic can lead to inconsistent or contested understandings of what constitutes a security threat. Nevertheless, as Otukoya (2024) further affirms, securitisation theory remains a powerful analytical framework for interpreting the political processes through which security threats are constructed and legitimised (p. 1753).

In this study, securitisation theory is adopted to explore how threat perceptions are framed, constructed, and operationalized, particularly concerning the United States' counterterrorism policies in the Middle East. The terrorist threat representations of Islamist groups such as Hamas and Al-Qaeda, especially following the September 11 attacks, significantly influenced U.S. regional security strategies. The securitisation of these groups prompted robust diplomatic and military alliances across the region. Israel, as one of the United States' closest regional allies, perceives Hamas as a direct existential threat, a framing that aligns with broader U.S. counterterrorism objectives. Consequently, Israel's war with Hamas, and the associated actions against allied Islamist factions, must be interpreted within the securitisation paradigm that informs the West's counterterrorism policy.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts the historical research design due to its suitability in explaining past events and their implications on present realities (Greenwood, 2012). Historical research enables an in-depth understanding of the U.S. counterterrorism policy and the Israel-Hamas conflict (Morris, 2020). Data collection relies mainly on secondary sources such as scholarly articles, journals, textbooks, official documents, and credible internet materials (Sanubi, 2011). These materials were sourced from institutions like DELSU, UI, OAU, and UIBEN. According to Kotheria (2019), the research design guides evidence collection with minimal effort and cost. Sanubi (2011) cautions that unverified sources may be biased and misleading. Online libraries and academic repositories were also utilized. The historical method aids in analyzing past trends to understand current developments (Richard, 2023). Data analysis was qualitative and descriptive, comparing cases and presenting issues sequentially. This approach enables a fair evaluation of past and ongoing events (Sanubi, 2011).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: What are the underlying nature and root causes of the ongoing Israeli–Hamas war?

The ongoing Israeli–Hamas war is one of the most persistent and devastating conflicts in the contemporary Middle East, marked by its complexity, longevity, and cyclical resurgence of violence. At the heart of this conflict lies a deeply rooted historical and geopolitical contest, driven by ideological, territorial, religious, and socio-political factors. Understanding its nature and root causes requires an interdisciplinary approach that blends history, political science, religious studies, and international relations. The genesis of the Israeli–Hamas conflict can be traced back to the broader Arab–Israeli conflict that followed the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent British Mandate over Palestine after World War I. The 1947 United Nations Partition Plan, which proposed the creation of separate Jewish and Arab states, was accepted by the Jews but rejected by the Arab leadership, setting the stage for the 1948 Arab–Israeli War.

With the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians (known as the Nakba), the roots of the conflict were firmly planted. According to Khalidi (2020), the Palestinian loss of land and identity in 1948 remains one of the most potent sources of collective grievance and resistance among Palestinians.

The emergence of Hamas in 1987 during the First Intifada further intensified the conflict's ideological and militant dimensions. Hamas, an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, was formed as both a political and militant resistance organization committed to the liberation of Palestine and the establishment of an Islamic state in historic Palestine (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2018). Its founding charter explicitly calls for the destruction of the State of Israel, positioning it at odds with the more secular and negotiation-inclined Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The ideological divide between Zionism and Islamism has thus created a binary of existential opposition that complicates any peace process or diplomatic engagement.

Territorial disputes, especially concerning the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, also fuel the conflict. Gaza, governed by Hamas since 2007, has been under a crippling Israeli-Egyptian blockade aimed at curbing Hamas's military capacity. This blockade has caused severe humanitarian crises, including lack of electricity, clean water, and medical supplies, further radicalizing sections of the population (UN OCHA, 2023). The West Bank, while nominally under Palestinian Authority control, remains heavily fragmented by Israeli settlements and military checkpoints. East Jerusalem, revered by both Jews and Muslims, remains a flashpoint, particularly due to Israeli policies viewed by Palestinians as attempts to "Judaize" the city (B'Tselem, 2022).

Religious symbolism also permeates the conflict, particularly with regard to Jerusalem, home to sacred sites such as the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Western Wall. Clashes around these sites frequently serve as triggers for broader escalations. For Hamas and many Palestinians, defending Al-Aqsa is not just a political duty but a religious obligation, which intensifies their resistance (Tamari, 2021). Conversely, for many Israelis, sovereignty over Jerusalem is central to Jewish identity and historical continuity.

The asymmetry of power between Israel and Hamas contributes to the conflict's persistence. Israel, with its advanced military, intelligence, and economic capabilities, has often employed overwhelming force in its operations in Gaza, resulting in high civilian casualties and infrastructural damage. Hamas, despite being significantly weaker, employs asymmetric warfare tactics such as rocket attacks, tunnels, and guerrilla strategies. Each cycle of violence typically ends without resolution, merely setting the stage for future confrontations. According to Lustick (2021), this dynamic of managed conflict benefits hardliners on both sides, who draw political capital from the continuation of hostilities.

External actors have also played significant roles in perpetuating or mitigating the conflict. The United States has traditionally been a staunch ally of Israel, providing military aid and political support, which critics argue emboldens Israeli hardline policies. On the other hand, Iran has provided financial and military backing to Hamas and other militant groups, framing the conflict as part of a broader anti-Israel and anti-Western resistance (Levitt, 2020). Regional Arab states have shown fluctuating levels of engagement, with some, such as Egypt and Qatar, occasionally mediating ceasefires, while others have normalized relations with Israel, effectively sidelining the Palestinian cause.

Socioeconomic deprivation in Gaza and parts of the West Bank, coupled with youth disenfranchisement, widespread unemployment, and lack of educational and professional opportunities, further exacerbate the conditions that fuel recruitment into militant groups. As Gunning (2018) notes, the absence of hope and the daily indignities of occupation are among the most powerful motivators for continued resistance.

Failed peace processes have undermined trust and contributed to the perception that violence is the only remaining option. The Oslo Accords of the 1990s, initially seen as a breakthrough, have unraveled due to mutual violations, lack of good faith negotiations, and the expansion of Israeli settlements. Hamas, which opposes Oslo, gained traction partly because of the perceived ineffectiveness and compromises of the Palestinian Authority. The lack of a viable political horizon continues to radicalize both sides and close the space for dialogue.

Research Question 2: In what ways is the Israeli–Hamas conflict central to the United States' counter-terrorism policy in the Middle East?

The Israeli–Hamas conflict holds a central place in the formulation and implementation of the United States' counter-terrorism policy in the Middle East due to the strategic, ideological, and security implications it poses for both regional and international stability. The Middle East has long been a geopolitical hotspot, and the enduring hostilities between Israel and Hamas are emblematic of the broader conflicts that plague the region, involving issues of religious extremism, territorial disputes, and the proliferation of armed non-state actors. The United States, in its efforts to curb terrorism and ensure the security of its allies and interests in the Middle East, has embedded the Israeli–Hamas conflict into the core of its counter-terrorism agenda. U.S. counter-terrorism policies have increasingly focused on combating Islamist militancy, particularly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which redefined America's security priorities globally. Hamas, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization since

1997, represents a significant case study in the U.S.'s efforts to combat terrorism in the Middle East (Byman, 2011). The ideological underpinnings of Hamas, rooted in political Islam and resistance to Israeli statehood, challenge American interests that are tied to the security of Israel, a major U.S. ally in the region. The United States sees Hamas not only as a local threat to Israel but also as part of a larger network of radical Islamist groups that share tactical and sometimes operational links with global jihadist organizations like Hezbollah, Al-Qaeda, and Iran-backed militias (Levitt, 2006). The conflict also serves as a prism through which U.S. foreign policy measures the effectiveness of its support for democratic institutions, state-building, and peace processes in the Middle East. According to Efebeh (2016)**,** U.S. foreign policy in the region has often centered on countering Iranian-backed groups and maintaining regional security by supporting allies such as Israel, a strategy that inherently involves confronting Hamas and similar organizations.

The instability generated by recurring escalations between Israel and Hamas often undermines peacebuilding efforts, complicates U.S.-led negotiations, and diminishes the credibility of the two-state solution, which has long been advocated as a pathway to lasting peace. According to Quandt (2021), the persistence of the conflict exacerbates anti-American sentiments across the Arab world, as the U.S. is often viewed as being overly aligned with Israel, thereby reducing its effectiveness as a neutral mediator in regional peace processes. Moreover, the U.S.'s extensive military and financial assistance to Israel is partially justified by the need to maintain a secure buffer against terrorism, with the Israeli defense system— including the Iron Dome- being a crucial element of the broader counter-terrorism infrastructure in the region. This assistance is not merely symbolic but serves to reinforce American deterrence strategies against Iran and its proxies, who support Hamas ideologically, financially, and logistically (Cordesman, 2023). Consequently, U.S. engagement with the Israeli–Hamas conflict is intrinsically linked to its broader confrontation with Iranian influence in the region.

The conflict also influences U.S. domestic politics, where bipartisan support for Israel shapes legislative and foreign policy decisions. The classification of Hamas as a terrorist organization allows the U.S. to justify surveillance, sanctions, and even cyber warfare against suspected networks linked to Hamas or its financiers. According to Cronin (2020), these counter-terrorism tools, developed in the context of broader global anti-terror efforts, have increasingly been tailored to address the challenges posed by groups like Hamas, which

engage in both governance and militancy. This duality complicates U.S. policy, as efforts to engage diplomatically with Palestinian factions must navigate the internal division between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, with the latter's militancy undermining any peace prospects and feeding into the U.S.'s security-first approach in the region. The visibility of the Israeli–Hamas conflict in international media and its frequent eruptions into large-scale violence make it a constant point of concern for U.S. policymakers. Each flare-up necessitates diplomatic engagement, military readiness, and strategic recalibration, especially as it relates to preventing the conflict from spilling over into broader regional war. As Fischer and Kugel (2022) note, the strategic importance of Israel as a U.S. ally and the symbolic weight of Jerusalem in Islamic and Western narratives alike render the conflict uniquely impactful in shaping the ideological undercurrents of global terrorism. As such, the Israeli–Hamas conflict is not merely a bilateral issue, but a pivotal node in the complex matrix of U.S. counter-terrorism policies aimed at ensuring both regional and international security.

Research Question 3: How has the involvement of affiliated terrorist groups intensified the conflict, transforming it into a multi-front war for Israel?

The involvement of affiliated terrorist groups in the Israeli–Hamas conflict has played a crucial role in transforming a traditionally localized confrontation into a multifaceted, regionalized conflict (Ikenga & Agah), evolving into a multi-front war for Israel. This development reflects the broader geopolitical entanglements and ideological networks that link militant Islamist organizations across the Middle East and beyond. The intensification of hostilities and the widening scope of the conflict cannot be understood without an appreciation of the interconnectedness of Hamas with other non-state actors, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and various Iran-backed militias operating in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.Hamas, founded in 1987 during the First Intifada, has been ideologically and operationally aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood and has received substantial support from Iran, both financially and militarily. This support has extended to the provisioning of advanced weaponry, military training, and strategic guidance. In recent years, Hamas has also formed operational links with Hezbollah and the PIJ, organizations that share anti-Israeli ideologies and similar resistance narratives. Hezbollah, in particular, has become a significant northern threat to Israel, opening up a second front through rocket attacks from Lebanon and provocations along the Blue Line. These coordinated assaults, often synchronized with Hamas's military actions from Gaza, reveal a deliberate strategy of encircling Israel with hostile militant entities (Levitt, 2021).

The transformation into a multi-front conflict was especially evident during the escalation in October 2023. While Hamas launched unprecedented rocket barrages from Gaza and carried out cross-border infiltrations, Hezbollah simultaneously increased its rocket fire and drone operations from southern Lebanon. Meanwhile, pro-Iranian militias in Syria and Iraq threatened Israeli and U.S. interests, signalling a regional alignment of resistance movements against perceived Western and Zionist occupation (Al-Tamimi, 2023). This alignment suggests a broader geopolitical strategy facilitated by Iran, aimed at using proxy groups to destabilize Israel without direct engagement, allowing Tehran plausible deniability while furthering its strategic goals in the Levant. The presence of these terrorist-affiliated groups complicates Israel's security calculus significantly. Rather than focusing solely on Gaza, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) now face the daunting challenge of preparing for simultaneous engagements on multiple borders. Each affiliated group, although operating under different command structures and regional objectives, shares the broader ideological goal of eradicating the Israeli state. Their coordination in timing and strategy has forced Israel to mobilize resources more widely, diluting its military focus and intensifying the conflict both in scope and severity. This has also strained Israeli civil defense and emergency response mechanisms, with cities from the south to the north regularly experiencing rocket alerts and infrastructural damage (Ben-David, 2024).

Moreover, the entry of groups like the Houthis in Yemen, who have declared solidarity with Hamas and threatened missile attacks against Israel, underscores the widening geographical reach of the conflict. Though their capacity to effectively strike Israeli territory is limited compared to Hezbollah or Hamas, their involvement adds to the psychological and strategic pressure on Israel, further confirming that the conflict has transcended its traditional Gaza-Israel axis (Zelin, 2024). The strategic use of media by these groups also amplifies their impact, spreading disinformation and propaganda, which fuels further radicalization and recruitment among sympathizers across the Muslim world.

In addition to direct military involvement, affiliated groups enhance Hamas's ability to sustain conflict by facilitating smuggling networks, arms transfers, and intelligence sharing. The Sinai Peninsula, for instance, has historically been a conduit for weapons from Libya and Sudan into Gaza, often with the assistance of transnational jihadist networks. These logistical lifelines allow Hamas to recover and rearm quickly, making the conflict more enduring and less susceptible to resolution through ceasefires or peace initiatives (Clarke & Gartenstein-

Ross, 2022). The regionalization of the Israeli–Hamas conflict has also had profound implications for international diplomacy. It has compelled global powers to re-evaluate their positions and alliances, especially as Iran's hand becomes increasingly visible. The United States, for example, has reaffirmed its support for Israel while also attempting to deter further escalations from Hezbollah and Iranian proxies. However, the multi-front nature of the war complicates diplomatic interventions and peacebuilding efforts, as it involves not just resolving the Israeli–Palestinian issue, but also addressing the broader web of militancy and regional rivalries that sustain it.

Findings and Observations

Based on the analysis, the following findings are observed:

1. The study found that the underlying nature and root causes of the Israeli–Hamas war are entrenched in historical, political, and religious grievances, particularly the long-standing Israeli occupation, the blockade of Gaza, and the denial of Palestinian statehood. These factors, coupled with recurring cycles of violence and failed peace efforts, have contributed to a deeply entrenched conflict marked by mutual distrust and existential insecurity.

2. The study found that the Israeli–Hamas conflict is central to the United States' counter-terrorism policy in the Middle East, as the U.S. perceives Hamas not only as a threat to its ally, Israel, but also as part of a broader regional network of militant Islamist groups. This perception has shaped U.S. foreign policy to support Israel militarily and diplomatically while framing counter-terrorism strategies to include containment and isolation of Hamas and its sponsors, particularly Iran.

3. The study found that the involvement of affiliated terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Iran-backed militias has significantly intensified the conflict, transforming it into a multi-front war for Israel. These groups have expanded the geographical scope of the hostilities beyond Gaza, engaging Israel on its northern borders and complicating its security landscape, thereby escalating regional instability and increasing the risk of a wider war.

CONCLUSION

The Israel-Hamas war significantly threatens global peace and international relations, with effects reverberating across trade, security, and diplomacy. Its persistent recurrence hinders efforts toward good governance and lasting peace, as global divisions and intelligence gaps enable terrorist activity (Ikenga & Chima, 2021). The misuse of humanitarian aid for

extremist funding complicates peace efforts further. Iran's involvement, notably its backing of Hamas and the broader "axis of resistance" groups, deepens the conflict and fuels instability in the region. Tehran's strategic support to Hamas includes weapons, training, and military guidance via the IRGC Quds Force. These efforts aim to overburden Israel militarily, forcing it to split focus between Gaza and Lebanon. Iran's commitment to protecting its nuclear program, seen as a deterrent and political tool, raises the stakes of the conflict. The war also presents significant challenges for international humanitarian law, with both Israel and Hamas facing war crime allegations. The conflict underscores the necessity of impartial investigations into potential violations. It also impacts U.S. counterterrorism policies, as the rise in extremism and regional instability may force Washington to recalibrate its strategies. Domestically, the U.S. must guard against politically motivated violence inspired by foreign events. Ultimately, a broader approach, combining security, diplomacy, and humanitarian initiatives, is vital to addressing the roots of radicalization and ensuring long-term regional stability.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion drawn, the following recommendations were made:

1. There should be revival of a credible peace process that addresses the root causes of the conflict, including ending the Israeli occupation, lifting the Gaza blockade, and recognizing Palestinian statehood.

2. The United States should re-evaluate its counter-terrorism strategy in the Middle East by adopting a more balanced approach that prioritizes diplomacy, human rights, and regional stability alongside security concerns.

3. There should be establishment of a regional security framework to contain the activities of affiliated terrorist groups, prevent a wider regional war, and manage cross-border threats through cooperation among key Middle Eastern states.

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