

## The Israel-Hamas Armed Conflict in the Middle East: A Sociological Lens

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### Abstract

*The State of Israel and the Palestinian Islamist militant group Hamas have been in conflict for decades. Amid the conflict, Israel is determined to maintain control of Gaza and strive to eliminate Hamas as a terrorist organisation at all costs. Hamas's objection to Israel's attempt to occupy Gaza and its refusal to recognise the State of Israel led to violence that resulted in many losses of life and property. This article examined the Israel-Hamas armed conflict in the Middle East, using a sociological lens. Henri Tajfel and John Turner's Social Identity Theory was adopted as a framework to guide the paper. Using evidence from textbooks, journals, media reports, government publications, and online sources, the results showed that the conflict between Israel and Hamas stems from many factors, including territorial settlement, political and ideological differences, and the role of the international community. The consequences of the armed conflict between Israel and Hamas include loss of life and property, destruction of critical infrastructure, economic disruption, and diplomatic relations. The study recommended the urgent need for a comprehensive and sustainable solution that prioritises the protection of human life, dignity, well-being, and critical infrastructure in the Gaza Strip. The international community should stop supporting an escalation of the conflict and instead engage in a peaceful effort to reconcile Israel and Palestine. Further research is needed to determine the coping strategies of the displaced Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and nearby cities.*

**Keywords:** Israel, Hamas, armed conflict, Middle East, sociological lens

## Introduction

Sociologically, conflict is inevitable in every human society. It arises from people's fundamental desires for resources, independence, and ideological differences. Conflict is a social process in which individuals or groups seek to achieve their goals by actively resisting their opponents through violence or threats (Wilson et al., 2021). Although conflict is often seen in the negative, it was thought by a German Sociologist, Karl Marx (1818-1883) to be necessary for an egalitarian society (Ronquillo et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2021). The sociological lens refers to the perspective of sociologists to examine and understand social phenomena, including conflict among nations. It is also a way of perceiving the world that helps distinguish when a personal problem is a public issue, one that may require concerted rather than individual action to bring about change.

Israel and Hamas have been in dispute over territory and power control for decades. Following the first Intifada against Israel's control of some Palestinian acclaimed territories, Palestinian imam and activist, Ahmed Yassin founded Hamas in 1987. This Islamic group emerged from the Mujama al-Islamiya, an Islamic charity organisation associated with the Muslim Brotherhood formed in 1973 (Reuters Editorial, 2021).

In June 2007, after ousting Fatah (Hamas's rival party), the Hamas government led by Ismail Haniyeh took over the control of the Gaza Strip. Its armed wing, Hamas had about 30,000 fighters before the war began. The group wants to establish an Islamic State instead of Israel. The Hamas government has rejected the Israeli's right of occupancy in the Gaza Strip and is determined to resist further invasion of Palestinian territories at all costs. Hamas attack was a response to Israel's attacks against the Palestinian residents. The report shows that many Palestinians were held in captivity by Israeli authorities and they needed their immediate release. The Hamas government also accused the State of Israel of conspiracy with Egypt due to blockage of the Gaza Strip. The effect of Hamas attacks against Israel was felt when the Al-Aqsa Mosque in East Jerusalem was bombed and several Israelis lost their lives. Hamas has fought wars with Israel, several rockets have been fired and other frequent deadly attacks and they are being supported with finance and weapons by the Iranian government (BBC Online News, 2024). (BBC Online News, 2024; United Nations, 2023).

Israel also fought Hamas to ensure the immediate release of its citizens who were held hostage. The Israeli government barricaded the Gaza Strip from the sea and targeted the Hamas military base in Gaza City. Israel also ordered over 1.1 million people to leave Gaza City for their safety and destroyed homes and infrastructure in the area. The Gaza Strip is geographically located between Israel, Egypt, and the Mediterranean. The city was conquered by Israel during a six-day war with Egypt. Gaza is a popular city with a population of more than 2 million people (United Nations, 2023).

Before the mid-20th century, Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Israel were provinces of Palestine. In 1948, part of Palestine was occupied by Israel without any sanction from the United Nations. Currently, the West Bank and Gaza are controlled by the rival Palestinian Authority (PA). The West Bank is governed by Mahmoud Abbas and is largely controlled by Israel (Congressional Research Service, 2024; United Nations, 2023). According to Bach (2023) and the United Nations (2023), many people have been killed and property destroyed in Israel and the Gaza Strip. Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023, killing over 1,200 Israelis and 35 Americans. Additionally, more than 250 people (including Americans) were taken hostage. In retaliation, Israel killed over 36,000 Palestinians, injured thousands of people, and displaced more than 1 million residents from their homes in Gaza.

Consequently, the Israel-Hamas conflict has deprived residents of security, free movement, employment, healthcare, food, water, fuel, and other basic needs and services. In Gaza, the healthcare system is collapsing due to a shortage of medical personnel and supplies and the Israeli military has invaded many hospitals in Gaza in search of Hamas gunmen, putting patients and medical personnel in fear (Neriem & Bashir, 2024).

In recent times, scholars like Govindharaj & Kareem (2023), Bach (2023) and Haushofer et al. (2010) have examined the Israel and Hamas conflict. However, there is little or no sociological analysis, regarding the causes and consequences of the conflict. This is the gap that this paper aims to address.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Armed Conflict**

According to O'Connell (2008), in all armed conflicts, groups are willing to engage in intense armed fighting. O'Connell (2008) also argued that the United States has been involved in armed conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq since 9/11. In this study, an armed conflict is said to exist when there is armed violence between states or prolonged violence between governments.

### **The Ethnography of Israel and Hamas**

The State of Israel is a country in the West Asia. It shares boundaries with the Red Sea to the south, the West Bank and Jordan to its east; Egypt, Gaza, and Mediterranean seas to their west, while Lebanon and Syria are to this region's north. Israelis are predominantly Jewish, but there are also various ethnicities like Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Mizrahi. The population of Israel is dominated by Muslims while a few persons are Arabs and Christians. Judaism is the main religion that guides the lives of many people. Major festivals in Israel include Passover, Hanukkah and Yom Kippur. Arabic and Hebrew are the two official languages. It also serves as a tourist centre for Christian pilgrims all over the world.

According to Ebrahim (2023), Hamas was formed in 1987 after the First Intifada, as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, a radical Islamist organisation. Hamas has a political and military wing. Hamas has controlled the Gaza Strip since 2007. Hamas is an abbreviation for 'Harakat al-Muqawamah al Islamiyyah', which means Islamic movement against Muslims. This Islamic group, like most Palestinian groups, argued that Israel is occupying Palestinian lands, which they consider illegal and unacceptable (Ebrahim, 2023).

Ebrahim (2023) furthered that Hamas sought to create an Islamic State in Palestine. This Islamic fundamentalist is committed to resisting Israel's political power and military control over Palestinian territories. Hamas has been proscribed as a terrorist organisation by the United States and the European Union, the State of Israel, and other countries of the world (Heywood, 2023). Despite its proscription, Hamas has improved the healthcare system, schools, pipe-borne water, electricity, food, and many other social services which make them popular among Gazans. Currently, Gaza is facing a severe security breakdown and economic hardship and Hamas's constant clash with Israel has resulted in severe damage to critical infrastructure and loss of lives (World Bank Group, 2024).

### **The Trajectory of the Israel-Hamas Armed Conflict**

The State of Israel was established in 1948 and this led to the first Arab-Israeli war, which resulted in the mass displacement of Palestinians. Other conflicts that occurred between Israel and Arab states include the 1956 Suez Crisis, the 1967 Six-Day War, and the 1973 Yom Kippur War (Ebrahim, 2023; Mock et al., 2014).

In 1987, Hamas was founded after the first Palestinian Intifada, uprising against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Two years later, Hamas carried out its first attack on the Israeli army, including the kidnapping and killing of two Israeli soldiers (Mock et al., 2014; Reuters

Editorial, 2021). In 1993, the Oslo Accords aimed to reach a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Hamas opposed the deal and carried violent and suicide attacks against Israelis.

In 1987, Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement) was founded after the first Palestinian Intifada, an uprising against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Two years later, Hamas carried out its first attack on the Israeli army, including the kidnapping and killing of two Israeli soldiers (Mock et al., 2014; Reuters Editorial, 2021). In 1993, the Oslo Accords aimed to reach a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Hamas opposed the deal and carried violent and suicide attacks against Israelis.

In 2000, Israel and the Palestinians failed to accept peace at the summit held in the United States in July 2000. After two months, Palestinians protested against Israeli opposition leader, Ariel Sharon's visit to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in East Jerusalem, otherwise called Temple Mount by the Jews (Sternberg and Bruer, 2023; Mock et al., 2014). In June 2001, Hamas carried out violent attacks in Israel, involving the killing of 21 Israelis. In 2004, Israeli airstrikes killed Hamas spiritual leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, and political leader Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi in Gaza; both of them were co-founders of Hamas. The Hamas leadership and the identity of Rantissi's successor became secret.

In 2005, Israeli forces began the withdrawal of troops from Gaza, which was captured from Egypt in the 1967 Middle East war and handed over the Gaza Strip under the control of the Palestinian Authority, while playing a supervisory role. In 2006, the majority of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Election were won by Hamas. Israel and the United States suspended aid to the Palestinians because Hamas refused to renounce violence and recognise Israel. On June 25, 2006, Hamas militants captured Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit in a cross-border attack, which prompted Israel's retaliation. Shalit was finally released after five (5) years in captivity. On June 14, 2007, Hamas captured Gaza in a civil war and ousted Fatah soldiers loyal to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, based in the West Bank. On December 27, 2008, Israel launched a 22-day military offensive on Gaza after Palestinians fired rockets at the southern Israeli town of Sderot and approximately 1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis were killed (Reuters Editorial, 2021).

After being under attack by Palestinian militants and rocket fire from Palestinian fighters for eight days, Ahmed Jabari, the Chief of Staff of Hamas, was killed on November 14, 2012. The kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers by Hamas in 2014 sparked a seven-week war in Gaza in which more than 2,100 Palestinians were killed and 73 Israelis, including 67 soldiers lost their lives. In 2018, Palestinians protested due to Israel's blockade of the Gaza border, and Israeli soldiers opened fire at the protesters, leading to the killing of over 170 Palestinians within a few months (Reuters Editorial, 2021).

At Al-Aqsa Mosque, during the Ramadan fast on May 7, 2021, the Israel Police clashed with Palestinian protesters over a dispute involving eight Palestinian families who lost their homes in East Jerusalem to the Jews (Reuters Editorial, 2021). The aftermath of that encounter revealed that at least 20,000 Palestinians in Gaza were killed between October 7 and December 16, 2023. The 20,000 people who lost their lives represented 1 per cent of Gaza's 2.2 million residents (Thomas, 2023). As of July 2024, it was reported that 60 dead bodies were found in the Tal al-Hawa area of Gaza City, while dozens were rubble, and Israeli troops halted the rescue efforts. It was at this encounter that four (4) aid workers from the Al-Khair Foundation lost their lives at Khan Younis (Pietromarchi & Jamal, 2024).

In summary, the media reports revealed that tensions have escalated over the years between the Israeli government and the Palestinian militant group (Hamas), and between October 7, 2023 and July 12, 2024, at least 38,345 Palestinians have been killed and 88,295 injured, while 1,139 Israeli died in the ongoing war and many people are in captivity in Palestine (Pietromarchi & Jamal, 2024). The roots of the conflict lie in historical issues, territorial disputes, and differing national aspirations. While sporadic violence and humanitarian crises continue to plague the region, efforts toward lasting peace have so far proven elusive.

### **Literature Review**

Govindharaj & Kareem (2023) examined the impact of the war between Israel and Hamas on the global economy, including India. The study used a descriptive survey design and secondary sources for data collection and analysis, which affirmed the results and conclusions. The results showed that the armed conflict between Israel and Hamas over the Gaza Strip has caused economic problems worldwide, leading to increased food and energy prices. Israel's armed conflict with Hamas disrupted regional relations, caused Palestinian deaths, and hit the economy. However, Israel's GDP increased in the second quarter of 2023. Geopolitical dynamics include the European recession, regional forces seizing control, the war in Lebanon, and Iran's nuclear weapons. The Israel and Hamas armed conflict has caused mass displacement of Gaza's inhabitants into Egypt and Jordan and this could have a destabilizing effect on the region. This armed conflict had a significant impact on the Indian economy and foreign exchange earnings, inflation, and supply interruptions. The armed conflict has also affected agriculture and trade, which can lead to inflation.

Spitka (2023) examined the national protection principles and practices of Palestinian and Israeli children and teenagers. In the research, secondary sources were used for data collection and analysis. The results showed that young people have been trained in the use of weapons, and are used in dangerous activities, including vigilantism and terrorism. Palestinian children and teens, particularly those living in Gaza, East Jerusalem and West Bank are not only vulnerable during escalations but are subject to exploitation, detentions and severe security measures. Also, Haushofer et al. (2010) examined the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The study used econometric techniques to determine the extent of violence committed by each side in response to attacks. The study established that both Israelis and Palestinians used lethal weapons including airstrikes, to kill and injure their rivals, destroy properties, and displace many residents in the Gaza Strip and neighbouring cities.

In summary, the reviewed literature aligned with the aims of the paper. However, while the available literature anchored on the causes and immediate humanitarian impacts of the conflict, there is less comprehensive analysis of the long-term consequences on mental health, education and economic stability in the affected areas. This gap will be filled in the course of this paper.

### **Theoretical framework**

The paper examined the Israel-Hamas armed conflict in the Middle East. It adopt the Social Identity Theory (SIT) of Henri Tajfel and John Turner developed in 1979 (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The social identity theory is a useful framework for understanding this conflict (Felty, 2019).

### **Major Tenets of Henri Tajfel and John Turner's Social Identity Theory (SIT)**

This theory is based on several key assumptions including:

- i. People categorize themselves and others into different social groups (e.g. by race, gender, nationality) to make sense of the social environment. This helps simplify and systematize the social world.
- ii. Individuals derive a part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups. This social identity contributes to their self-esteem.
- iii. People compare their in-groups (the groups to which they belong) with out-groups (the groups to which they do not belong) to maintain positive distinctiveness. This means they strive to see their in-groups in a positive light compared to out-groups.
- iv. To boost self-esteem, individuals seek to enhance the status of their in-groups compared to out-groups. This can lead to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination.
- v. Tensions and conflicts between groups arise partly due to the need for positive distinctiveness, which can lead to prejudice and discrimination against out-groups.

### **Application of Henri Tajfel and John Turner's Social Identity Theory (SIT) to the Study**

Henri Tajfel and John Turner's Social Identity Theory (SIT) can provide a useful framework for understanding the dynamics of the Israel-Hamas armed conflict in the Middle East. Both Israelis and Palestinians, including Hamas members, categorize themselves into distinct social groups. Israelis identify strongly with their nation and Jewish identity, while Palestinians identify with their national and often Islamic identity. Both groups derive a significant part of their self-concept from their group memberships. For Israelis, their national identity is tied to the state of Israel. For Palestinians, their identity is tied to the notion of Palestinian statehood and resistance against what they see as occupation.

Both groups compare their situation with that of the other group. Palestinians might see Israelis as oppressors, leading to a negative view of the out-group. Israelis might see Palestinians, especially militant groups like Hamas, as threats to their security, leading to a negative view of that out-group. Each group seeks to enhance the status of their group relative to the other. This can be seen in the political, social, and sometimes violent actions taken to assert dominance or protect the group's interests. For example, Hamas's acts of resistance and Israel's military responses can be viewed through this lens.

The need for positive distinctiveness and the negative views held about the out-group lead to ongoing intergroup conflict. Each group's actions are often seen as justified within their narratives but are viewed as aggressive or illegitimate by the other side. In-group favouritism is evident in the support each group provides to its members while discriminating against the out-group. For example, policies and actions taken by Israel to secure its citizens can be seen as favouritism, whereas restrictions and military actions in Palestinian territories are viewed as discriminatory.

### **Materials and Methods**

Using a sociological perspective, the study examined the Israel-Hamas armed conflict in the Middle East. The paper utilised information obtained from secondary sources, such as textbooks, journals, media reports, government publications, documentaries and online materials. The information derived was analysed using a content analysis approach.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Causes of Israel-Hamas Armed Conflict**

The result showed that the Israel and Hamas armed conflict is tied to territorial settlement, political and ideological differences, and the role of the international community. Below is a discourse of each of these causes of the Israel and Hamas armed conflict:

#### **Territorial Settlement**

The roots of the conflict can be traced to the early 20th century, with the rise of both Jewish and Arab nationalism in Palestine, which was then under Ottoman and later British control. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent Arab-Israeli War led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, creating longstanding grievances and refugee issues. In 1967, following the Six-Day War, Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. Therefore, Israel occupies territories that Hamas considers Palestinian land, including Gaza, West Bank and East Jerusalem. This result is supported by Govindharaj & Kareem (2023). This result is supported by Govindharaj & Kareem (2023).

#### **Political and Ideological Differences**

Israel is known as an independent state with a large Jewish population, while Hamas is a fundamentalist Islamic organisation in Palestine. Israel wants to continue its existence as a Jewish state, and Hamas aims to establish an Islamic state in Palestine without Israeli occupation and control. Hamas's rights over Gaza are controversial; some countries like the United States of America, consider it as a terrorist organisation. This result is supported by Ebrahim (2023).

#### **International Community's Role**

The role of the international community has contributed to the perpetration and escalation of the conflict between Israel and Hamas, various countries, and organisations supporting different parties, escalating the conflict and preventing a comprehensive solution. Israel's armed conflict with Hamas led to the intervention of regional and global powers; while the United States of America has historically supported the State of Israel, Iran and other Arab countries have strongly supported Hamas, creating a complex web of alliances and rivalries that perpetuate the cycle of violence. Inconsistent policies, partisan interventions, and failure to hold both sides accountable for their actions have exacerbated the conflict, making a permanent solution difficult. This result is supported by Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel (2024).

### **Consequences of Israel-Hamas Armed Conflict**

The results showed that the Israel-Hamas armed conflict has a wide range of consequences, including loss of lives and property, destruction of critical infrastructure, economic disruption and diplomatic relations. These consequences of the Israel-Hamas armed conflict are discussed hereunder:

#### **Loss of Lives and Property**

Israel's war with Hamas has resulted in the massive destruction of lives and property, unprecedented suffering, displacement, and economic devastation. The ongoing violence has claimed countless lives, injured scores of people, and left thousands of civilians, including children, youth, women, men, and the elderly, homeless and without access to basic needs like water, electricity, and medical care. The massive destruction of lives and property had a lasting impact on the psychological well-being of affected communities, perpetuating a cycle of trauma, fear, and hatred that would take generations to

overcome. This result is supported by Omullah (2023), The Times of Israel Editorial (2023), Sternberg & Breuer (2023), Teitel (2023), United Nations (2023), and Haushofer et al. (2010).

### **Destruction of Critical Infrastructure**

The destruction of critical infrastructure is a hallmark of Israel's war with Hamas. This conflict has resulted in the deliberate and indiscriminate destruction of critical infrastructure, including electricity, water treatment plants, hospitals, schools, and transportation systems, causing widespread destruction and paralyzing the fabric of Palestinian society. This destruction has created a humanitarian crisis that has left millions without basic needs such as electricity, clean water, healthcare, and education, perpetuating poverty, dependency, and despair. The targeting of critical infrastructure has also had a significant impact on the economy, leading to high unemployment, business closures, and a sharp decline in living standards, further entrenching violence and instability. Schools in areas near Gaza often close during periods of intense conflict, disrupting education. As a result of the missile threat, students and teachers face psychological problems and trauma. This result is supported by Jamal (2024), Kabalan (2023), Omullah (2023), Rees & Moussa (2024) and Ghoneim (2024).

### **Economic Disruption**

Israel's war with Hamas conflict is having a devastating impact on the regional economy, causing disruption, and destruction of industries and businesses. It perpetuates poverty, unemployment, and economic instability, causing huge losses to the Palestinian economy, estimated at billions of dollars. Gaza's border closures and restrictions on movement have worsened the economic crises, restricting access to markets, resources, and opportunities. The economic crisis has also had a disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups, including women, children, and the elderly, who rely on international aid to survive. This result is supported by Omullah (2023), Govindharaj & Kareem (2023), Sternberg & Breuer (2023), Buss et al. (2023), Bach (2023) Ghoneim (2024), and Haushofer et al. (2010).

### **Diplomatic Relations**

The armed conflict between Israel and Hamas had serious consequences on diplomatic relations; regional and international relations have been seriously deteriorated and efforts to achieve peace and stability in the Middle East have been undermined. The conflict strained relations between Israel and neighbouring countries, exacerbated tensions between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and created division in the international community. The conflict has weakened diplomatic efforts, including the collapse of peace in the Middle East, and slowed cooperation on key regional issues, such as security, trade, and counterterrorism. Moreover, the conflict has intensified anti-Israel sentiment and boycott movements globally, leading to increased polarisation and division in the international community. The impact of the armed conflict between Israel and Hamas on international relations has created a complex web of conflict, distrust, and hostility, making a resolution to the conflict challenging and underscoring the need for sustained and constructive diplomatic efforts to restore trust, dialogue, and cooperation. This result is supported by Haushofer et al. (2010) and Ghoneim (2024).





Figure 1: Israel and Gaza Strip in map



Figure 2: Israeli bombing Gaza, destroying lives and property

Source: Rasheed et al. (2023)



**Figure 3:** Debris of houses destroyed in Israeli strikes, in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip October 11, 2023.

Source: Burnett et al. (2023)



**Figure 4:** Smoke and debris ascend over the northern Gaza Strip following Israeli bombardment on October 23, 2023

Source: Kabalan (2023)



**Figure 5:** Wounded Palestinian children are carried on stretchers after an Israeli strike at Al-Aqsa Hospital in Deir el-Balah on Sunday, June 9, 2024

Source: Jamal (2024)



Figure 6: Mourners reacts to the bodies of Palestinians killed in Israeli strikes, at Abu Yossef Al-Najar Hospital, in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, December 12, 2023. **Source:** Klabin (2024)



Figure 7: Palestinians wave their national flag and celebrate by a destroyed Israeli tank at the Gaza Strip fence East of Khan Younis on October 7, 2023.

**Source:** Macaron (2023)



Figure 8: Hamas attack on Israel

**Source: Champion (2023)**

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study examined the armed conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Middle East from a sociological perspective. The results showed that the armed conflict between Israel and Hamas is driven by issues such as territorial settlement, political and ideological differences; and the role of the international community. The consequences of this conflict include loss of lives and property, destruction of critical infrastructure, economic disruption, and diplomatic relations.

Sociological analysis of the Israel-Hamas armed conflict in the Middle East provides a deeper understanding of the social, political, and cultural factors shaping this conflict. This study has important scientific implications for understanding the armed conflict between Israel and Hamas. Examining the sociological dimensions of the armed conflict between Israel and Hamas, this study provides valuable information to academics, policymakers, and anyone seeking a deeper understanding of this ongoing conflict in the Middle East. Research is needed to determine the coping strategies of the displaced Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and nearby cities.

The study recommended the urgent need for a comprehensive and sustainable solution that prioritises the protection of human life, dignity, well-being, and critical infrastructure in the Gaza Strip. The international community should stop supporting an escalation of the conflict and instead engage in a peaceful effort to reconcile Israel and Palestine.

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