



**Cover Image Attribute:** The Israeli military is conducting operations against Hamas fighters in the country's southern region, and they are currently advancing on a road in that area. / **Date:** October 10, 2023, / **Source:** REUTERS

[Home](#) > [United States](#) > [Opinion](#)

# Implications of the Hamas Terror Attacks and the Israeli Response on Latin America and the Global Strategic Environment

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[Table of Content](#)



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1. [Troubling Scenarios of Escalation and Polarization](#)
2. [Implications for Latin America](#)

## Introduction

My heart goes out to the [almost 1,000 Israelis](#) brutally slaughtered by Hamas on October 7, 2023, terrorist attacks this week. Few not actually living this moment in Israel, and certainly not me, can truly understand the grief and outrage that Hamas' acts of depravity have sparked among Israelis. A nation forged from history's most nefarious effort to exterminate a people cannot coexist within miles (sometimes even meters) of a terrorist organization whose principal objective is its destruction. Yet, I fear even more what is likely to come next.

Following the 9-11 terror attacks that killed [more than 2,977](#) in the United States, I watched my own country, in moral outrage and a quest for security framed by "never again..." effectively bankrupt itself over the next two decades while creating enemies around the world, and squandering a generation of military and technological advantage as its geopolitical rival the People's Republic of China (PRC) rose in the shadows of its distraction. Israel's response to the Hamas attacks can not be anything less than total, but it must be smart.

The dilemma for both the US response to 9-11 and the Israeli response to Hamas is the same: Appeasement nurtures enemies and invites aggression. Yet military responses risks proliferating enemies. Terrorists have long used violence, not to directly overthrow the government, but to escalate the conflict, radicalize the environment, and provoke the State into actions that exhaust its treasure while turning its own society against it. In that sense, the terrorist group al-Qaeda was arguably highly successful in provoking the US into a military campaign that provoked anti-American perceptions among collateral victims and those watching *Al-Jazeera* coverage faster than any drone strike could take out individual enemies. In the process, those prolonged wars polarized the Middle East to the ultimate advantage of the extremists.

With Hamas, as with al-Qaeda, the extensive planning, resource group's large-scale coordinated air, land, and sea attacks against its purpose was principally to *provoke*; Through the scale and savagery of those behind it, sought to goad an Israeli response so severe as



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the middle ground of those who [tolerate and work with Israel](#), while dragging the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) into a protracted, and ultimately unwinnable campaign against proliferating enemies among the governments and populations of the Muslim world.

As I watched reports of [Israel's bombardment of the Gaza Strip](#) and declarations that it would completely cut-off [electricity, food, water and fuel](#) to the territory, I recalled the sentiment in the U.S. at the beginning of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, perhaps best captured by the Toby Keith song "[Courtesy of the Red White and Blue.](#)" I fear that, as with the U.S. after 9-11, in its grief and justified rage, Israel will be blind or indifferent to how the response it is being provoked into, if not managed with extreme care, strategical plays out against it, and against its ally the United States, to the benefit of radical groups such as Hezbollah, as well as Iran, Russia, and the PRC.

## **Troubling Scenarios of Escalation and Polarization**

As with the U.S. after 9-11, in the wake of Hamas' horrific actions, Israel has the sympathy of most of the world. In the coming weeks, however, beginning with news outlets such as *al Jazeera*, *Russia Today*, and *TeleSur*, images of Israeli victimization will give way to those of "victims" of Israeli strikes against Gaza, the humanitarian crisis as food, water, and hospital supplies run out, and possibly, an [Israeli occupation](#), which will generate more media images of armed Israeli soldiers seemingly engaged in acts of hostility against imperiled Palestinians.

With the public's traditional short memory span, the world's fixation over almost 1,000 Israelis murdered in brutal, coordinated Hamas attacks by air, land, and sea [will abate](#), giving way to references to "complex causes," "violence on all sides," and increasingly, negative reactions to the images and reports of damage caused by "the latest" Israeli actions.

In the Islamic world, in particular, sentiment will turn most rapidly and strongly against Israel with every passing day of its campaign. Israelis, in their determination and accustomed to feeling surrounded by hostile neighbors, may dismiss such reactions as inevitable. Yet just as occurred with U.S. engagement in the region after 9-11, Israeli actions will indirectly fuel recruitment and financing for Hezbollah and other radical groups, ultimately increase risk.



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Such expanded anti-Israel sentiment in the region will also indirectly empower Iran, which has led the charge against Israel and [praised the Hamas attack](#), the [Erdogan government in Turkey](#), and help the cause of radical governments such as the Taliban, as well as groups in more “neutral” states. In the process, public sentiment may oblige Saudi Arabia, as the defender of the Islamic Holy Sites, Egypt, and others to take public positions against Israel and work against it or collaborate with groups doing so, to varying degrees.

U.S. [air defense munitions and other support](#) to Israel, even if the US does not directly participate in military operations in the Gaza strip, will further isolate it from its “under pressure” partners in a polarizing Middle East. [Russia](#), North Korea, Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and other “illiberal” states will predictably condemn Israeli aggression. The European Union will become increasingly paralyzed [over the humanitarian effect on Palestinians](#).

The PRC, for its part, will lament all violence, even while [profiting handsomely](#) from commercial engagements with those illiberal regimes, while using the morass to support its self-promotion to developing countries, suggesting that Western abuses show the value of its [alternative concept of world order](#).

In this struggle, Hezbollah or other radical groups, benefitting from an inflow of recruits and funding, could escalate attacks against Israel or other Western targets, drawing the US further into the escalating fight as the nation’s defender and financier. Such US support, in areas such as dwindling stocks of precision munitions, will inherently compete with support for Ukraine. Every mile that Ukraine is unable to take in its current offensive before Winter sets in, in turn, will require far more lives, ammunition, and time to take in 2024 after Russia has reinforced its lines.

From the PRC perspective, in such a scenario, its rival, the US, would find itself simultaneously expending significant resources supporting allies in two wars: Ukraine and Israel, distanced from other traditional partners in the Middle East and politically distracted by the 2024 U.S. Presidential elections.



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In the context of expanding hostilities and the strategic interest of malevolent actors in further polarizing the situation, there is a non-zero possibility that a terror group could acquire or be given and use a nuclear weapon. Such nuclear use would not only cause unthinkable casualties in Israel, but the act and possible responses would have a transformative impact on the region's strategic environment and, likely, the globe.

## Implications for Latin America

For Latin America, the escalation of conflict in the Middle East could stimulate the activities of Hezbollah and other radical groups in the region, given that they have historically conducted a portion of their [money-raising and other work there](#). The enmity toward Israel by Middle Eastern-based radical groups could lead to new attacks against Israeli targets in the region, as famously occurred with the deadly March 1992 attack against the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, [killing 29 and injuring over 200](#), and the July 1994 Attack against the AMIA Jewish Community Center [which killed 85 and injured more than 300](#).

The further empowerment of Iran as a US rival in the unfolding drama could encourage expanded Iranian initiatives to threaten the US in its own near abroad, building on the [current re-engagement](#) with the region by the [Ebrahim Raisi regime](#), focusing on anti-US regimes such as those of [Cuba](#), [Venezuela](#), and [Nicaragua](#).

For Israel, as it pursues its fundamental security interests, it is vital that it proceed with extreme caution to avoid falling into the strategic trap that Hamas, and [perhaps its patron Iran](#), hopes to bait it into. For its part, the US must refrain from being drawn into a confrontation with its traditional partners in the polarizing Middle East, even as it stands against Iran. The US must take particular care to avoid that the conflagration does not spread to Iran, Russia, and the PRC.



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For Latin America and the Caribbean, the region should be alert to the risks of expanding terrorist finance activities, attacks on Jewish targets, and openings for Iranian engagement. In the coming months, as Israel seeks to create conditions for the security of its people against mass murder, its actions may raise concerns. In this context, some Latin American leaders will likely adopt the cynical rhetoric of moral neutrality, as some have [over Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#). That is not acceptable.

## About the Author

**Dr. R. Evan Ellis** is a research professor of Latin American studies at the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, with a focus on the region's relationships with China and other non-Western Hemisphere actors as well as transnational organized crime and populism in the region. Dr. Ellis previously served as the secretary of state's policy planning staff with responsibility for Latin America and the Caribbean as well as international narcotics and law enforcement issues. In his academic capacity, Dr. Ellis presented his work in a broad range of business and government forums in 27 countries on four continents. He has given testimony on Latin American security issues to the U.S. Congress on various occasions, has discussed his work regarding China and other external actors in Latin America on a broad range of radio and television programs, and is cited regularly in the print media in both the United States and Latin America for his work in this area. Dr. Ellis has also been awarded the Order of Military Merit José María Córdova by the Colombian government for his scholarship on regional security issues.

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