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## Recent developments in the Middle East: Hamas' terrorist attack on Israel and Israel's response

### Addendum to the report<sup>1</sup>

Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy

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### 1. Introduction

1. At its meeting on 12 and 13 December 2023, the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy approved a report and adopted a draft resolution on "Recent developments in the Middle East: Hamas' terrorist attack on Israel and Israel's response", with a view to a debate to be held at the January 2024 part-session. On this occasion, I stated my intention to present an addendum to the report in order to take account of developments.

2. The conflict has been underway for over 100 days and the situation remains fraught in the region. Many hostages remain in captivity, the humanitarian situation in Gaza has further deteriorated, and the risk of a regional conflagration has increased.

### 2. Israel-Hamas conflict and humanitarian consequences

3. The high intensity war waged by Israel against Hamas has continued through December and into January. Palestinian armed group rocket attacks into Israel have continued, as have ground operations and fighting between Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups across much of Gaza.<sup>2</sup>

4. The Israeli military report that 186 Israeli soldiers have been killed and 1 113 injured since the start of the ground operations.

5. No further hostages have been released since the weeklong pause in late November 2023. The bodies of eight hostages have been recovered by Israeli forces, and Israel said that 25 hostages have died in captivity. Grave concerns remain for the fate of the other hostages.

6. Thousands of Israelis have rallied in Israel to call for the release of the hostages being held in Gaza, with the demonstrators and families of hostages calling on the Israeli Government for further initiatives to secure their release, and to approve any deal that would lead to their release. Speaking on 14 January 2024, leader of the opposition Yair Lapid stated that the return of the hostages was the most urgent goal of Israel's war aims.

7. On 16 January 2024, a deal, mediated by France and Qatar, was announced to deliver medicine to hostages being held in Gaza, as well as additional medication and humanitarian aid to Palestinians.

8. According to statistics from the Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza, as of 14 January 2024, at least 23 968 Palestinians have died due to the conflict, and a further 60 582 have been injured.<sup>3</sup> 1.9 million people, representing 85% of the total population of Gaza, have been internally displaced.<sup>4</sup>

1. Addendum to report [Doc. 15890](#), approved by the committee on 22 January 2024.

2. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), [Situation report](#), 14 January 2024.



9. Due to the severe risk of collapse of the humanitarian situation in Gaza, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres invoked Article 99 of the United Nations Charter on 6 December 2023 for the first time under his tenure to call on the Security Council to avert a humanitarian catastrophe.<sup>5</sup> The invocation of Article 99 allows the UN Secretary-General to bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which, in his opinion, may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security. In his letter of 6 December 2023, the UN Secretary-General reiterated his appeal for a humanitarian ceasefire to be declared and for the international community to use all its influence to prevent further escalation and end the crisis.

10. To address the humanitarian consequences of the conflict, after several rounds of negotiations, the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution on 22 December 2023 that demanded the facilitation and enabling of immediate, safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance at scale directly to the Palestinian civilian population of Gaza, and allow and facilitate the use of all available routes to and throughout the entire Gaza Strip.

11. The humanitarian needs related to the large-scale displacement have been exacerbated by the lack of shelter, food, water, medicine and healthcare. On 15 December 2023, the Government of Israel announced that it would open its crossing at Kerem Shalom for the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Gaza. The first deliveries of humanitarian aid using this crossing took place on 17 December 2023. Despite this, the flow of humanitarian assistance has been assessed by the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Martin Griffiths, on 12 January 2024, as insufficient to meet the current needs in Gaza.<sup>6</sup> Speaking on 15 January 2024, UN Secretary-General said the humanitarian access issues were raising the risk of starvation, disease and other health threats.<sup>7</sup>

12. Diplomatic efforts to forge a path toward lasting peace and security have included further visits to Israel by the National Security Advisor of the United States Jake Sullivan and United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken in December 2023 and January 2024. Their visits focused on liberating the remaining hostages, addressing the humanitarian crisis and protection of civilians in Gaza, and preventing the conflict from spreading.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Proceedings before the International Court of Justice

13. On 29 December 2023, South Africa requested the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to urgently issue provisional measures ordering Israel to immediately suspend its military operations in and against Gaza and to protect residents from acts of genocide, alleging breaches by Israel of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.<sup>9</sup>

14. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel responded to the request of South Africa to the ICJ on 29 December 2023, noting that Israel was committed to international law and acted in accordance with it, and that it directed its military efforts only against Hamas and other terrorist organisations co-operating with Hamas. The Ministry rejected the factual and legal basis of South Africa's request for provisional measures.<sup>10</sup> Hearings concerning this request were held on 11 and 12 January 2024.

### 4. Settler violence

15. The human rights situation in the occupied West Bank including East Jerusalem has continued to deteriorate. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has verified the deaths of 330 Palestinians from 7 October 2023 to 10 January 2024. In parallel, according to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, entire herding communities have been forcibly displaced due to settler violence.<sup>11</sup>

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3. OCHA, [Flash Update #92](#), 14 January 2024.

4. UN Security Council, [Meetings Coverage](#), 9521st Meeting, SC/15564, 12 January 2024.

5. UN, [Letter](#) by the Secretary-General to the President of Security Council invoking Article 99 of the United Nations Charter, 6 December 2023.

6. [Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Martin Griffiths: briefing to the UN Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory](#), 12 January 2024.

7. UN Secretary-General, [Press Conference](#), 15 January 2024.

8. US Department of State, [Remarks](#), Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State, 9 January 2024.

9. International Court of Justice, [Press Release](#), 29 December 2023.

10. Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Press Release](#), 29 December 2023.

11. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Press Briefing Notes](#), 12 January 2024.

16. In light of the increased settler violence, United States Secretary of State Anthony Blinken announced on 6 December 2023 that the Department of State would impose a ban on visas for Israeli settlers in the West Bank. The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, said after the meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council on 11 December 2023 that the European Commission would work on a proposal for imposing sanctions against settlers in the West Bank.<sup>12</sup>

17. Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the European Union released a joint statement on 15 December 2023 that called on Israel to take immediate and concrete steps to tackle record high settler violence in the occupied West Bank. The statement said that the unprecedented levels of settler violence undermined security in the West Bank and the region and threatened prospects for a lasting peace.

## 5. Regional risks

18. There have been further alarming developments in the Red Sea which risk exacerbating regional tensions. The Houthis first launched missile and drone attacks at Israel from Yemen after the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war on 7 October 2023, which they said would continue until Israel ended its military campaign in Gaza. Their attacks expanded to target Israeli-affiliated ships in November 2023, and since December 2023, the attacks on commercial vessels have appeared to become indiscriminate after the Houthis warned all carriers to avoid Israeli ports.

19. Continued Houthi threats to maritime navigation have included at least two dozen Houthi attacks on merchant and commercial vessels since 19 November 2023. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) Secretary-General, Arsenio Dominguez strongly condemned these attacks against international shipping and re-iterated a call for de-escalation to ensure the safety of seafarers, freedom of navigation and stability of supply chains.<sup>13</sup> Research by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy has estimated that the diversion of maritime shipping from the Red Sea had reduced freight container volumes through the Red Sea region by around 65%.<sup>14</sup>

20. In response to Houthi-led attacks in the Red Sea, a United States-led coalition called Operation Prosperity Guardian was launched on 18 December 2023 to counter threats to international maritime commerce in the region. On 4 January 2024, the Governments of the United States, Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, and the United Kingdom released a statement that said ongoing Houthi attacks in the Red Sea were illegal, unacceptable, profoundly destabilising and a direct threat to the freedom of navigation.

21. On 10 January 2024, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution that demanded that the Houthis immediately cease all attacks, and urged caution and restraint to avoid further escalation in the Red Sea and the broader region.

22. On 11 January 2024, airstrikes were carried out by forces from the United States and the United Kingdom on a range of Houthi military facilities.<sup>15</sup> Further strikes have been announced by the United States and United Kingdom since. The Houthis have responded with the launching of anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles against a United States naval vessel and container ship. The UN Secretary-General stressed the need to avoid acts that could further worsen the situation in Yemen itself, and further warnings have been made by UN officials that further incidents may reverse recent humanitarian improvements in Yemen.<sup>16</sup>

23. The frequency of the exchange of fire between Israeli forces and Hezbollah actors in Lebanon has also increased. This escalation of cross-border fighting has included a strike on an Israeli air traffic control base on 8 January 2024. This attack came after a strike killed Hamas deputy political leader Saleh Arouri in Beirut on 2 January 2024. The United Nations Secretary-General spoke on 15 January 2024, to raise concerns about the daily exchanges of fire, and the risks of triggering a broader escalation between Israel and Lebanon. He called for de-escalation and to bring hostilities to an end.<sup>17</sup>

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12. EU Foreign Affairs Council: [Press remarks](#), High Representative Josep Borrell, 11 December 2023.

13. IMO, [Press release](#), 4 January 2024.

14. IfW Kiel Institute for the World Economy, [News](#), 11 January 2024.

15. UK Government, [Press release](#), 12 January 2024.

16. [Remarks](#), Assistant Secretary-General Khaled Khiari to the Security Council on maintenance of international peace and security, 12 January 2024.

17. UN Secretary-General, [Press release](#), 15 January 2024.

## **6. Conclusions**

24. The developments in the region have only reinforced the need for the international community to call for an immediate and extended ceasefire to allow full, rapid, safe and unhindered access to the population of Gaza.

25. The real and accelerating risk of a regional conflagration requires intensive engagement with regional and international partners to prevent further escalation.

26. The importance of a sustainable peace and the active pursuit of a long-term vision for the region is clear. The Parliamentary Assembly has continually called for a two-State solution, and should continue to use its well-founded engagement with both the observer delegation of Israel and the partner for democracy delegation of Palestine to enhance parliamentary dialogue for reaching a stable and secure peace.

27. Finally, after more than 100 days since the barbaric attacks conducted by Hamas and other militia groups against Israel on 7 October 2023, hostages remain in captivity. Their immediate and unconditional release must be secured.