

Operation al-Aqsa Flood: A Rupture in the History of the Palestinian Resistance and Its Implications

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ABSTRACT *This paper argues that the al-Aqsa Flood operation launched by the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades –the military wing of Hamas– on the morning of October 7 has led to a psychological and epistemological rupture in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Middle East politics as the operation marked a paradigm shift in the philosophy of the resistance. The infiltration of al-Qassam into the occupied territories by land, sea, and air was a clear sign of a change in the strategy of the resistance to continue the active struggle against the aggressive expansionism and aggression of the Zionist Israeli government. In this context, the study tries to frame Operation al-Aqsa Flood and analyze the dimensions of the rupture. Besides this, it will also outline the possible impact of the operation on global and regional politics, considering that the ongoing process will change the political balance in the Middle East.*

Keywords: Al-Aqsa Flood, Gaza, Hamas, Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

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Introduction

Fawaz Gerges, a prominent scholar in the field of Middle Eastern studies, offered a new perspective on the Arab Uprisings in the introduction of his 2014 edited volume *The Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*. In reference to the uprisings, Gerges states, “A psychological and epistemological rupture has occurred in the Arab Middle East that has shaken the authoritarian order to its very foundation and introduced a new language and a new era of contentious politics and revolutions.”¹ 2014 coincided with the end of the popular revolutions in the Arab world, except Tunisia, and the establishment of the authoritarian status quo in Egypt, while Libya and Yemen plunged into major crises. Despite these negative indicators, the depiction of the process as a “psychological and epistemological rupture” was directly related to the legacy of the liberation motivation of the revolution for the upcoming years.

It would not be an exaggeration to say Operation al-Aqsa Flood has had a similar impact on the Arab world in relation to regional and global politics. The land, sea, and air infiltration of the resistance elements into the Israeli-occupied territories, which had been under blockade in a limited area for years, is a milestone in the Palestinian struggle against the Zionist occupation. In this respect, the operation launched by the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, on the morning

of October 7 marks a paradigm shift in the Palestinian resistance and a new era. At the same time, the recent rupture in the history of the modern Middle East caused by Operation al-Aqsa Flood clearly shows that this process will alter the region’s political balance. In this context, the present study attempts to frame the operation and analyze the dimensions of the rupture. It also outlines the possible effects of the operation on regional and global politics.

Framing Operation al-Aqsa Flood: A Psychological and Epistemological Rupture

Operation al-Aqsa Flood was a significant turning point in the Palestinian struggle, marking the most fundamental change in the philosophy of resistance since the First Intifada (1987). The Palestinians, who for many decades thought that they would end the occupation and establish an independent state thanks to the support of the Arab world, realized by the mid-1970s that the Arabs would not take the necessary steps in this regard. The leadership of the Palestinian resistance realized that the only path to progress depended on their own will and initiative, and launched a massive uprising against Israel with the power of its people. The First Intifada, therefore, led to a significant paradigm shift in the Palestinian resistance. Rather than waiting for a move from the international community or the Arab world, the local struggle against the occupying Zionist regime, albeit

with limited means, could enable Palestine to make gains toward independence. This new strategy also allowed the Palestinian resistance to institutionalize and build a strong identity. Moreover, the establishment of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) at the beginning of the First Intifada² signaled that not only a methodological but also an ideological transformation would take place in the Palestinian resistance. As a matter of fact, in the following years, Hamas' conception of the political order, the methods it used, the discourse it produced, and its clear stance against the Israeli occupation resulted in this movement finding a response throughout Palestine and becoming one of the most powerful actors in Palestinian political life.³

Hamas' determined strategy over the years and the combat experience of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades allowed for the launch of an operation against Israel from Gaza. The operation, which began on the morning of October 7, marked a paradigm shift in the aftermath of the First Intifada. The Gazan resistance elements, led by the Qassam Brigades, shifted from a defensive model of resistance against Israeli attacks to an offensive strategy of multi-pronged infiltration. In addition, establishing a "joint operation center" of 12 different resistance groups to fight against the occupation forces in a coordinated manner was also noteworthy in uniting all Palestinian groups against the common enemy.⁴ While both developments added a new dimension to the Palestinian resistance, they also

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led to psychological and epistemological rupture in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

As the first hours of Operation al-Aqsa Flood sent shockwaves through the Israeli side, the first signs of psychological damage also surfaced. For years, the Israeli state has created a convincing myth about the effectiveness and competence of its intelligence units. The undermining of the general belief that any action posing a threat to Israel inside or outside Palestine would be detected in advance and necessary measures would be taken constituted the first leg of psychological damage that started on October 7. The fact that such a well-planned operation carried out by the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades in coordination with other resistance groups was not detected by the Israeli intelligence services indicated a significant problem. Statements made by official authorities and analyses on different platforms indicate that Hamas manipulated Is-

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raeli intelligence.⁵ It was understood from later statements that Hamas implemented various strategies to mislead the Israeli side by implying that the operation was planned for a later date. The fact that Hamas has seriously improved itself in the field of cyber-intelligence in recent years and accessed many secret documents belonging to Israel are essential signs in terms of understanding the pressure⁶ Hamas and its forces put on the occupation state.

In addition to the failure of the potent intelligence myth after the operation, another myth that collapsed was related to the Iron Dome air defense system. The Iron Dome, widely regarded as one of the most potent air defense systems in the world, failed to fully defend Israel from thousands of Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades missiles. This meant that even points far from Gaza could now threatened

by the resistance. The failure of the system it had built has caused more damage than ever to Israel's state machinery and society. In addition, the neutralization of a large number of army officers and the capture of hundreds of prisoners in the first hours of the operation shows how Operation al-Aqsa Flood dismantled the Israeli security apparatus.

Having suffered many casualties for the first time against Palestinian resistance, Israel, due to the psychological devastation it has suffered, has begun to exhibit a level of aggression incomparable to its past. The unprecedented policy of aggression against Gaza pursued by Israel's decision-makers, who felt the fear of defeat so profoundly for the first time, stems from the irrationality caused by this fear. The psychological devastation that Israel faced with the Hamas operation also meant a psychological gain for the Palestinian resistance. The change in strategy on October 7 by Hamas and other groups, which have so far remained on the defensive or pursued a semi-active resistance strategy, can be considered the central element of the psychological rupture. In this regard, Operation al-Aqsa Flood is a complete break in the history of the Palestinian resistance, both in terms of representing the most critical transformation in the essential character of the resistance after the First Intifada and in terms of showing what the Palestinian resistance can do despite limited means. This operation, carried out by the Palestinian resistance with its own will, is also essential in changing percep-

Hamas initiates “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood” against Israel

Armed Palestinian groups from Gaza Strip infiltrate Israeli settlements along the border



 Areas infiltrated by armed Palestinian groups



October 7, 2023



tions about Palestinian subjectivity. The expression of a new and unique subjectivity through the operation is a solid challenge to the asymmetrical relationship between Palestine and Israel that was constructed in the past years.

Israel's dominant character in the international arena led to an asymmetrical relationship in all processes. Although the Oslo Accords and the Oslo Agreement between the Israeli and Palestinian sides were portrayed

by many as an essential step toward peace, they also deepened the unbalanced relationship between the two sides. In these negotiations, during which the Israeli side was subjective and the Palestinian side objective, a situation emerged that ignored the Palestinians' right to full sovereignty.⁷ In this process, which ignored vital Palestinian issues such as East Jerusalem's status as the capital of the State of Palestine and the return of refugees, Israel envisioned a vague autonomous structure for

An infographic showing the Operation al-Aqsa Flood against Israel, which Hamas initiated on October 7, 2023.
YASIN DEMIRCI / AA

October 7 is the primary source of motivation that opened the door to a new era in the Palestinian resistance and a historical breaking moment whose reflections will be seen in regional and global politics

the Palestinian side rather than an independent state.⁸ In the years that followed, Israel's ability to dispose of the occupied territories at will, and its devastating attacks on Gaza in particular, made the desperation of the Palestinians somewhat commonplace. For this reason, Operation al-Aqsa Flood is the starting point of a psychological break that will leave a new legacy of resistance for years to come in terms of reaching a new level of resistance and proving that people who have been living under a blockade for years can still undertake a multi-dimensional and multi-front operation.

The October 7 operation marked the second major rupture in the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and resistance to the occupation in the epistemological context. Israel, with its expansionist occupation strategy carried out through its military power, not only had physical superiority on the ground but also discursive superiority in the international arena. The support given to Israel by Western states, especially the U.S.,

both enabled the production of this discourse and provided legitimacy. In this framework, the official authorities from Western countries tried to legitimize all of Israel's unlawful actions in some way. Trying to conduct effective public diplomacy in the international arena, Israel was, in a sense, pulling the wool over the eyes of the whole world through *Hasbara*⁹ to cover up its crimes.¹⁰ However, the irrational attitude triggered by the fear that Israel faced after October 7 resulted in Israel's loss of discursive superiority and a significant collapse of its public diplomacy during Operation al-Aqsa Flood.

Hamas and the Palestinian resistance as a whole have regained the upper hand in the discourse, as the tone of the language used against the resistance has hardened in parallel with the intensity of the attacks on Gaza. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant tried to demonize the resistance in Gaza, saying, "We are fighting against human animals."¹¹ The Defense Minister's statement can be interpreted as an attempt to secure the support of the "Western superior race" by referring to a traditional colonial language in which Israel has difficulty producing discourse. Rudyard Kipling, a prominent figure in English literature, wrote a poem for the U.S. Army invading the Philippines in 1899, in which he referred to the white man's sacred mission while at the same time describing non-Western societies as "half-devil and half-child." The similarity between Kipling and Gallant's description of the marginalized group, despite a gap of more than 130

years, reveals that the Israeli Zionist leaders have completely forgotten their understanding of humanity after they lost supremacy on October 7.

Israel's successful international strategy in its occupation policy to date can be characterized as desensitization. With its aggressive expansionism, radical steps, and harsh attacks, Israel has committed all kinds of violations against international law and humanitarian law. It has primarily desensitized the world by inuring its massacres. This situation, which the international community has taken for granted, has given Israel considerable room for maneuver. At the same time, Israel lost the upper hand in the discourse and faced larger protests than ever all over the world. In addition to the military, political, and economic damage caused by October 7, the message sent by the masses standing with Gaza against the inhumane practices of the Zionist regime is turning into a nightmare for Israel. The massive protests, the developments in the diplomatic field and the rising anti-Zionism in the international arena indicate that the process in Gaza will result in even higher costs for Israel.

In this process, the Gaza resistance continues to inflict heavy casualties on the occupation forces with its determined and coordinated structure. On the other hand, all Gazans are giving great lessons to the world with their stance of determination, patience, and absolute belief in victory. The images that emerged during the hostage exchange and the mes-

sages given by the Israeli hostages opened a great space for legitimacy for Hamas and the Gaza resistance while destroying Israel's manipulative arguments. All these indicators prove once again that Operation al-Aqsa Flood was a significant turning point in the Palestinian struggle against the occupation. In addition, October 7 is the primary source of motivation that opened the door to a new era in the Palestinian resistance and a historical breaking moment whose reflections will be seen in regional and global politics.

Is Operation al-Aqsa Flood the Herald of a Systemic Transformation in the Middle East?

In the last few decades, extensive literature has emerged on the increasing role of religion in international relations. The shift from the secular sphere to a situation where politics and strategies are determined on the axis of the "sacred" is visible in the discourse and actions of some states. In this respect, the situation that emerged in the aftermath of Operation al-Aqsa Flood indicates that the influence of theo-politics in Middle East politics will be felt more in the coming years.

In his speech on the evening of October 25, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu not only demonized Hamas but also used religious rhetoric to legitimize himself to minimize the reaction of Israeli citizens against the government. The most important

part of the speech was where Netanyahu emphasized that through the collective strength and deep faith of Israeli society, they would destroy Hamas and fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah. Quoting from the Book of Isaiah, Netanyahu said: “Violence shall no more be heard in your land, desolation nor destruction within your borders; but you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise.”¹²

The religious rhetoric used by Israeli statesmen after October 7 is the most crucial evidence that Zionism aims to realize its political goals. However, what is dangerous for the balance of regional and global politics is the endorsement of the religious references of Israeli leaders by the mainstream Western powers, especially the U.S. During his visit to Tel Aviv on October 12, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken explicitly sought to legitimize the Zionist polity, saying, “I come before you not only as the U.S. Secretary of State but also as a Jew.”¹³ In fact, in this way, Western states are encouraging Israeli leaders by supporting the “extreme, Zionist, and apocalyptic rhetoric” of the Netanyahu government.¹⁴

It is clear from current developments that Operation al-Aqsa Flood will accelerate the rise of religious discourses in global politics. In addition, the post-October 7 dynamics prove that international actors are seriously trying to change or maintain the balance of power in the Middle East. The warships sent by the U.S. and the United Kingdom to the Mediterranean to support Israel’s “right

to self-defense” are related to the preservation of the status quo in the region. Similarly, Russia and China’s support for Palestine signals that the post-Operation al-Aqsa Flood political atmosphere will open the door to a systemic transformation in the region. In particular, Russia’s position in Syria and Libya, China’s increasing influence in the Gulf region in recent years, and its role as a mediator in the normalization between Saudi Arabia and Iran are harbingers of new developments in the region. In this respect, Operation al-Aqsa Flood should be considered a turning point that will not only affect Palestinian and Israeli politics but also force global powers to determine new strategies for the Middle East.

In addition to global actors, it is also seen that the politics to be followed by the countries in the region will evolve into a new dimension after October 7. The normalization process with Israel, which has been ongoing under the Abraham Accords since 2020, suffered a significant blow after Operation al-Aqsa Flood. Despite the lack of sufficient social consent, normalization with Israel was imposed on society in many Arab countries on the initiative of the administration due to the dominant character of the regimes. However, Israel’s genocide in Gaza and its more ambitious outlook on the “Promised Land” through religious arguments have reignited anger against Israel in Arab societies. In this context, states in the Middle East need to consider more parameters in their relations with Israel than before October 7.

Since the beginning of the operation, Qatar and Egypt have managed to strengthen their position in the Arab world with their mission toward a solution. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has returned more to Egypt's traditional foreign policy codes on the Palestinian issue, pursuing an active strategy that does not frighten the Western world or his people. Qatar, on the other hand, has once again signaled to the world that it will always be an actor at the table on the Palestinian issue, especially with its initiatives on the hostage swap and the establishment of a permanent ceasefire. This situation indicates that Qatar will want to take an active role in the process in all possible future scenarios related to Palestine.

Türkiye's political, diplomatic, and discursive support, which has always closely followed the developments in Palestine and defended the rights of Palestinians at the highest level after Operation al-Aqsa Flood, corresponds to a significant place in regional and global politics. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, who have been conducting very active diplomatic traffic against Israeli aggression from the very beginning, have been making great efforts to end the massacres and to put Israel on trial internationally. In his speech at the group meeting in the Turkish Grand National Assembly on October 25, President Erdoğan gave a clear answer to those who associate Hamas with terrorism by saying, "Hamas is not a terrorist organization, but a group

Beyond Arab societies and the Muslim world, Operation al-Aqsa Flood is a severe test for the Shiite world, which is carrying out the "Axis of Resistance" discourse

of liberation, a group of mujahideen who struggle to protect their lands and citizens."¹⁵ Türkiye's policy in the wake of Operation al-Aqsa Flood will provide Ankara with a significant advantage in reshaping the balance of power in the Middle East. It will allow it to influence the emerging dynamics of the region, particularly the Palestinian struggle.

Another critical issue that needs to be addressed in the context of the October 7 operation is the approach of Iran and Hezbollah to the Hamas move. It is well known that Iran and Hezbollah have supported the operation from the beginning. However, reading between the lines, it is evident that this decision made by Hamas of its own volition has caused relative discomfort for Iran and especially Hezbollah. For example, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah said in a speech on November 3 that Hamas carried out this operation without informing them but that they were not angry with Hamas for this.¹⁶ The content of the speech, which the world listened to with the expectation that Nasrallah would make harsh and clear statements that he would take

Operation al-Aqsa Flood was a significant event that broke many rules in Middle Eastern politics and signaled a systemic change in the region

sides in the war, was nothing more than Hezbollah's attempt to preserve its status quo in the region. Although low-profile clashes between Hezbollah and Israel have been ongoing since the start of Operation al-Aqsa Flood, this is taking place within the framework of the rules of engagement established after the July 2006 war between the two sides. However, Hezbollah's potential to play a more active role in the process is one of the main factors that will accelerate the change of the political equation in the region.

For many years, Iran has been trying to gain a foothold in the Muslim world and the anti-Western bloc with its anti-Israel and "axis of resistance" rhetoric. Following the outbreak of popular uprisings in Syria, Tehran's support for Bashar al-Assad and his regime has seriously damaged Iran's reputation in the Sunni world. Moreover, Hamas' preference not to stand with the regime during the uprisings in Syria had reached a point where Iran accused Hamas of betraying the resistance.¹⁷ Following these developments, Iran, seeking to strengthen its position in the region, sought to re-establish close relations with Hamas after 2014, and both sides decided

to leave the Syrian issue out of bilateral ties. It should not be overlooked that Iran played a significant role in increasing Hamas' military capacity. Although Iran has taken a clear stance against Israel in this process, it is also observed that Iran fears the outbreak of a major crisis in the region. Hezbollah, on the other hand, has been reluctant to take a more active stand against Israel. Time will tell whether this strategy aligns with Iran's directives or against them. Beyond Arab societies and the Muslim world, Operation al-Aqsa Flood is a severe test for the Shiite world, which is carrying out the "Axis of Resistance" discourse. Especially considering the recent attacks of the Houthis in Yemen against Israeli ships in the Red Sea, it is seen that Iran and its proxies have entered a new process in regional politics.

Conclusion

Operation al-Aqsa Flood, led by the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades with other resistance elements in Gaza, has already taken its place in history as a paradigm-shifting turning point in the Palestinian struggle against occupation, like the First Intifada. The destruction of Israel's security myth and the shift of discursive supremacy to Palestine can be considered direct consequences of the psychological and epistemological rupture brought about by the October 7 operation. Similarly, the fact that such decisive and massive protests were organized all over the world indicates that Israel has seriously lost its legitimacy

in the international arena. Although Western states try to normalize the aggressive policies and massacres of the Zionist Netanyahu government, it is evident that their societies do not reciprocate this situation.

With Operation al-Aqsa Flood, a process that has the potential to transform Middle Eastern politics radically has de facto begun. The Palestinian and Israeli policies of both global and regional actors will seriously affect the political balance in the region. Moreover, this process, in which religious references are used more than in the past, means that the eschatological approaches of the Abrahamic religions will have a more significant place in the future political equation of the Middle East. In the Middle East, where signs of a transition from a geopolitical to a theo-political phase have been seen for a long time, the post-October 7 process is expected to accelerate this transition. In conclusion, Operation al-Aqsa Flood was a significant event that broke many rules in Middle Eastern politics and signaled a systemic change in the region. It would be appropriate to argue that the results of the operation in the coming period will largely shape the region's politics. ■

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