

How the Islamic State Propaganda Machine is Exploiting the Israel-Hamas Conflict

Description

Since the Hamas raid on Israel on Oct. 7, the Islamic State (IS) has been attempting to exploit the resulting conflict to inspire its followers to commit acts of terrorism. Working through its central command apparatus, branches, and affiliates, as well as its legions of online supporters, IS seeks to capitalize on hostile sentiments stirred up throughout the Muslim world by Israel's assault on Hamas in Gaza, launched in response to an attack that killed over 1,400 in Israel.

The Israeli counterattack has led to thousands of civilian casualties, including many children, with devastating images being shared throughout the world daily. In response, IS has called for its followers to join the fight and commit militant violence against Jewish, Israeli, and Western targets across the globe. There is likewise a real threat of IS Central and its branches carrying out coordinated external attacks and continuing to incite supporters to act. Current events are emboldening the Islamic State to continue inciting its followers while also looking to recruit new members. IS sees a real opportunity to mobilize radicalized Hamas supporters, taking advantage of the opportunity to capitalize upon the frenzy of rage that has accompanied large-scale mass protests, including many in the West.

It did not take long for IS followers to capitalize on the rage resulting from what many in the Muslim world considered to be the collective punishment of the Palestinian population living in Gaza. On Oct. 13, a 20-year-old man from Russia's northern Caucasus region stabbed a teacher to death at a school in Arras, France. The [perpetrator referenced the Hamas attack](#) on video prior to the attack while identifying with the Islamic State cause. Then, on Oct. 16, a 45-year-old man of Tunisian descent [shot and killed](#) two Swedish soccer fans in Brussels. The gunman [posted a video online](#) stating he was acting on behalf of IS.

A number of pro-IS propaganda networks, publishing in a range of languages, sought to exploit the momentum, link the Brussels attack to Israel's military operations in Gaza, and exalt the perpetrator as an example for other supporters to emulate. When looking at these unofficial but IS-aligned media outlets for instance, Al-Adiyat described the act as "blood for blood" and revenge for the suffering of Palestinians, while Al-Zuhd threatened that the "storm" would spread to the other capital cities of the West and beyond. Within hours of the attack, a [pro-IS group chat](#) with the express purpose of updating supporters on developments in Gaza was created.

Several days after the attack in Brussels, the Islamic State's Central Command issued its [most overt and aggressive call](#) since the incident for attacks on Israeli, Jewish, and Western targets. IS celebrated the Brussels terrorist, boasted about European countries releasing statements about the elevated risk of IS attacks, and promised all nations that form part of the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh that they will continue to bleed at the hands of IS jihadists. In the editorial, IS labeled Hamas and Hezbollah apostates, denigrating the former as a stooge of Iran and the latter as a Shia group. IS further suggested that all its supporters and all Muslims should strike inside Israel and "target the Jewish presence throughout the world, whatever the form of this presence, especially the Jewish neighborhoods in America and Europe," as well as Israeli embassies. They should also, IS said, "arm themselves with whatever military equipment is available to them, especially the explosive belts that were absent from the arena of confrontation with the Jews." The communique likewise demanded that IS supporters conduct attacks inside the West "in retaliation for their war on IS and for US-led Western support for Israel."

The Islamic State's Af-Pak branch, which has emerged as the [organization's most internationally-minded network](#), has also been vocal since early in the conflict alongside [aligned pro-IS Khorasan Province propagandists](#). ISKP's Al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production released a video on the war, and its partnered South Asian outlet Al-Zuhd published statements encouraging followers to make hijrah to Palestine as was done in Iraq and took the opportunity to criticize the Taliban's lack of action to protect Gaza. The [latest issue](#) of its flagship Voice of Khurasan magazine, published on Nov. 19, places great emphasis on the conflict by taking aim at Hamas for being "traitors of Islam", allying with Iran, and "playing with the innocent blood and souls of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip on behalf of the Rafidah," while threatening Israel with destruction via a future IS-led war that will bring down the "Zionist army".

Interestingly, while IS pushes its supporters to carry out violence on the heels of Oct. 7, the group has refrained from praising Hamas, [unlike al-Qaeda](#) and some affiliates. Numerous al-Qaeda-linked groups praised Hamas while also celebrating the death of Israelis. Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, al-Qaeda's South Asian franchise, labeled the Hamas attack the deadliest blow to Israel in the long history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, [noting that](#) "the attack exposed the cowardice of Israeli soldiers." Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen [lauded](#) the Hamas attack and spoke about the "myth" of Israeli military might, prodding its supporters in the Muslim world to harness the momentum of the "Al-Aqsa Flood," the name Hamas gave to its operation. Al-Shabaab's [statement](#) declared: "we salute all the brave heroes, the brave commandos, and all those stationed in the Holy Land, and we say to all of them: May God reward you with good on behalf of the Islamic Ummah [worldwide Islamic community], and may God reward you for your jihad and your noble deeds." Numerous other jihadist groups seemed to take pride in the Hamas attack, including Tehrik-

i-Taliban Pakistan, Hurras al-Din, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and Ansar al-Islam, to name just a few.

To most jihadism scholars, it was unsurprising that IS eschewed joining al-Qaeda in praising Hamas. For years, IS has [denigrated Hamas](#) and labeled it un-Islamic because the Gaza-based group recognized the law of man, sitting for and winning elections in 2006. Moreover, IS [criticizes](#) Hamas for its interpretation of *sharia* and regularly castigates the group for receiving support from Iran, a Shia country that is often on the receiving end of IS's takfirist sectarian attacks. Still, even as IS maintains its disdain for Hamas, it will not refrain from acting in an opportunistic manner to take advantage of a heightened threat environment. There is also an element of outbidding at play, with IS seeking not just to capitalize on the moment but also to position itself as the true defender of the Palestinian cause.

As mentioned in recent congressional testimony from FBI Director Christopher Wray, the Hamas-Israel conflict could inspire violent extremists and lone actors to attempt attacks on US soil. [According to Wray](#), "Here in the United States, our most immediate concern is that violent extremists—individuals or small groups—will draw inspiration from the events in the Middle East to carry out attacks against Americans going about their daily lives." In the past, IS has leveraged its ability to inspire individuals online, urging supporters in the West to launch lone-actor attacks against a range of targets. While inspired attacks are typically less lethal than coordinated plots, they can still be deadly, and consume counterterrorism bandwidth.

In its weekly newsletter al-Naba, IS urged its followers to participate in its propaganda campaign against Israel and to conduct attacks against priority targets, which included targeting Jewish neighborhoods in America, Europe and the rest of the world; attacking the Jewish and "Crusader" embassies with burning and vandalism; targeting Jewish temples (synagogues) spread everywhere; attacking Jewish nightclubs and targeting their visitors with death; and targeting Jewish economic interests spread throughout the world. A [subsequent al-Naba issue](#), released in mid-November, criticized the rulers of Arab states and other Muslim countries for fake posturing, enabling, and even being complicit in the Israeli assault on Gaza.

IS propaganda may be having the intended effect. On Oct. 22, French intelligence thwarted a [plot by a three-man terrorist cell](#) planning multiple attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets in Europe—including a car bombing at an Israeli embassy in Paris. Other [anti-IS operations](#) resulting in [arrests](#) have also taken place across Europe, and independent or unofficial propagandists and supporters of the group have become heavily involved in spreading pro-IS narratives to build support and incite violence. On Oct. 21, four Syrians were arrested in possession of knives and a hammer after [detonating a pipe bomb](#) at an Israeli embassy in Cyprus, and on Oct. 19, a Jordanian was [detained in Texas](#) on firearms charges and suspicion of preparing an attack; however, it is unclear if these

incidents were inspired by IS.

There is also some threat within Israel itself, which IS has been [criticizing since its foundation](#) in 2014 and has been [targeted domestically](#) on occasion in past years. In fact, on Oct. 29, Israeli police and Shin Bet [arrested three men](#) in Sakhnin and Arraba on suspicion of plotting to commit violence on behalf of the Islamic State. On Nov. 16, Israeli police [arrested](#) three more suspects in Jerusalem who allegedly possessed pro-IS propaganda materials and had links to militants abroad. Given the intensity of the conflict between Hamas and Israel, few expect the situation to improve any time soon. And even as IS continues to have a particular disdain for Hamas, it does not mean that the jihadists will forgo taking advantage of the fighting for their own purpose—pushing supporters to strike in the West, nudging fence-sitters toward action, and aiming to radicalize a growing pool of angry individuals. These actions will push them closer toward extremist violence that will very likely have deadly results in the West.

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Main image: Members from the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service present Marine Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with a flag from Bartilah, a town recaptured just outside of Mosul from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. This flag symbolizes the efforts of Combined Joint Task Force — Operation Inherent Resolve composed of U.S. Army Soldiers, U.S. Marine Corps Marines, U.S. Navy Sailors, United States Air Force Airmen and coalition military forces. (Dominique A. Pineiro/U.S. Navy)

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