

## The Extremist Domino Effect of October 7

### Description

Half a century after the Yom Kippur War, Hamas's surprise attacks on Oct. 7 [echo](#) the infamous 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict. This day has also been likened to Israel's own Sept. 11 by [diplomats](#) and [commentators](#), intensifying its contemporary resonance. Moreover, in the annals of the War on Terror, Oct. 7 holds powerful symbolic value for additional reasons: it marks the [onset](#) of the US war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in 2001.

As President Biden [warns](#) Israel not to repeat these mistakes twenty-two years after the United States initiated its War on Terror, al-Qaeda remains [resilient](#) and reactive. Its response to Oct. 7 is worth unpacking for its implications to the broader extremist landscape. Despite ongoing debates among analysts regarding the organization's [strength](#), al-Qaeda and its affiliates continue to operate, govern territory, and launch attacks across various regions. And the Oct. 7 attacks may have just catalyzed a shift in extremist alliances, unfolding a new chapter in the global jihadist narrative.

While the Islamic State (ISIS) labels Hamas as [apostates](#) for their Iranian links and perceived failure to enforce Islamic law, al-Qaeda's transnational network [welcomed](#) the Oct. 7 attacks with endorsements of solidarity. Al-Qaeda's [General Command](#) lauded the operations as a [turning point in history](#) and a [once in a lifetime opportunity](#) for Muslims to [liberate Palestine](#). By Oct. 13, various al-Qaeda factions from East Africa to the Sahel echoed this sentiment, hinting at a possible convergence of extremist narratives that could resonate within the global militancy landscape.

### Al-Qaeda and Hamas Relations

The relationship between al-Qaeda and Hamas has gradually evolved, ebbing and flowing through cooperative and conflictual phases. At its core, this relationship is shaped by a delicate balance of strategic [pragmatism](#) and an uncompromising [commitment](#) to ideological principles, interconnected with the goals pursued and the methods employed to achieve them.

Indeed, al-Qaeda and Hamas diverge on affiliations, tactics, and goals, inciting tensions and confrontations between the two entities. Al-Qaeda, with its global jihadist agenda, [criticized](#) Hamas for its Muslim Brotherhood affiliation, ties to Iran and Hezbollah, and election participation, which al-Qaeda deemed un-Islamic. Osama bin Laden even went as far as to [claim](#) that Hamas had [lost its](#)

religionâ• when Hamas clashed with jihadist militants in Gaza in the late 2000s. Moreover, differences over [nationalism](#) and views towards the international system further separate these organizationsâ• tactics and territorial ambitions. It is worth remembering that at the height of the War on Terror, Hamas was even considered a potential [counter-weight](#) to al-Qaeda.

Despite these differences, both groups have consistently highlighted the Palestinian cause. Their convergence on this issue was evident as early as 1991, during the â• Popular Arab and Islamic Conferenceâ• in Sudan, where Osama bin Laden [met](#) with representatives from several extremist militant organizations, including Hamas. Following this, adjacent training camps were [established](#) by bin Laden and Hamas in Sudan, marking an era of cooperation. Bin Laden even went as far as to [reference](#) Hamasâ•s founder Ahmad Yassin in his 1996 Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Sanctuaries. This recognition hinted at a shared objective despite differing operational tactics and affiliations. The operational overlap became more apparent in 2006, when members of Hamasâ• military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, [joined](#) forces with al-Qaeda-inspired groups in Gaza. Around the same time, al-Qaeda figures like al-Zawahiri [reached](#) out to the rank-and-file members of the Qassam Brigades.

Al-Qaedaâ•s commitment to the Palestinian cause, at least rhetorically, has been unwavering. Bin Laden, in an oft-quoted statement, [pledged](#) that â• America shall never dream of peace as long as Muslims in Palestine donâ•t live in peace.â• Bin Laden reiterated this theme in various statements, most notably linking the 9/11 attacks to US backing of Israel. Al-Qaeda militants further echoed this [sentiment](#) by stating, â• We wanted to take revenge for our brothers and sisters in Palestine by striking at the nation that is the reason behind the existence of Israel.â•

[Emphasizing](#) the significance of Palestine, al-Qaeda factions, such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), frequently [incorporate](#) the al-Aqsa Mosque into their propaganda. This site, deeply embedded in the Palestinian cause, serves as a rallying cry and is reflected in the designation of the Oct. 7 attacks as â• al-Aqsa Flood.â• AQAPâ•s slogan â• O Aqsa, We Are Comingâ• and al-Shabaabâ•s integration of Palestinians into their martyrdom narratives, such as â• [Jerusalem Will Never Be Judaized](#),â• underscore the centrality of the Palestinian issue in al-Qaedaâ•s ideological framework.

## Contemporary Dynamics and Future Trajectories

The post-Oct. 7 statements from al-Qaedaâ•s transnational network illuminate several key insights into the groupâ•s position and the wider trends in regional militancy. First, in recent statements, al-Qaedaâ•s transnational network has primarily directed its praise toward the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades and general Palestinian resistance rather than Hamasâ• political faction. This nuanced

commendation is exemplified by al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which [heralded](#) the “marvelous series of combative encounters” by the Qassam Brigades against Israel. Similarly, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM), al-Qaeda’s affiliates in the Sahel, [conveyed](#) messages of encouragement to the Mujahideen in Palestine, explicitly mentioning the Qassam Brigades. Such statements showcase al-Qaeda’s ongoing strategy to support Palestinian militant actions without endorsing the political decisions of Hamas, maintaining a clear distinction in their approach to the organization’s different branches.

Second, the glorification of Palestinian militants in the Oct. 7 attacks serves to reassert al-Qaeda and its affiliates’ dedication to the Palestinian cause. This is typified by AQAP’s [reference](#) to the “Blessed al-Aqsa Flood Operation,” which intertwines religious motifs with militant rhetoric to venerate Palestinian fighters and vilify Israel. AQIS and al-Shabaab also [joined](#) in expressing joy and admiration for the Palestinian “heroes,” framing their actions as part of a larger battle against “Crusaders.”

Third, these statements from al-Qaeda’s network serve a dual purpose: rallying global support for their cause and unifying disparate extremist factions. AQAP’s [call](#) for solidarity among Palestinian Islamic groups, for example, seeks to advance a collective militant response against common adversaries, echoing al-Qaeda’s wider ambitions. Al-Shabaab’s denunciation of Israel as a “bastard entity” reflects an extremist worldview that aims to resonate with jihadists worldwide by depicting the Palestinian struggle as a universal Muslim issue.

The global response to the Oct. 7 attacks underscores the need for a nuanced grasp of the fluid dynamics within extremist alliances and rivalries. It stresses the importance of a comprehensive and multilateral counterterrorism strategy that addresses the global scope of jihadist narratives.

### **Implications of Endorsements: A Look at Al-Qaeda, Hamas, and Beyond**

The endorsement from al-Qaeda’s global network towards the actions of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades signals a nuanced shift that may point to a new tactical alignment, one that may have the potential to bridge the longstanding [ideological rift](#) between al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated-Hamas. This raises a crucial question: In confronting a shared foe, could these groups momentarily set aside their ideological differences?

The reactions to the Oct. 7 operations from al-Qaeda affiliates highlight the intricate relationship between regional conflicts and the overarching extremist discourse. The rise of Palestinian Sunni Islamist groups, such as the “[Lion’s Den](#),” with its explicit nod to bin Laden’s legacy, expands the influence of jihadism within Palestinian territories and signals possible future alliances

among extremist factions, amplified by al-Qaeda's endorsements.

Expressions of support, which might initially [appear](#) as mere rhetorical solidarity, could foreshadow deeper coordination among militant factions. This ideological convergence, though potentially transient, could spawn transactional [alliances](#) against mutual adversaries. Research has demonstrated that external pressures can [alter](#) the behavior of armed groups in significant ways. As the ground invasion of Gaza unfolds, it could change Hamas's standing in the region, potentially catalyzing a united front among various factions against external military aggression and a common enemy – Israel.

These expressions of unity across jihadist factions could embolden extremist groups, promoting a narrative of a broader religious or ideological conflict. Should this ideological camaraderie translate into actionable alliances, the threat level may escalate, possibly leading to an uptick in terrorist activity both within the Middle East and beyond.

Historically, anti-Israel sentiment among extremist groups is not new. Following the 9/11 attacks, Bin Laden explicitly mentioned Tel Aviv would be the [next target](#). This longstanding enmity towards Israel, along with the events in Gaza, hints at the opportunistic nature of extremist factions to capitalize on regional hostilities. These endorsements and shared affinities might serve as a rallying point, rekindling global jihadist interest in the Palestinian cause and potentially fostering new alliances against Israel.

While al-Qaeda's endorsement suggests possible alliances, it also paves the way for rivalries, with the hostilities in Gaza serving as a platform for extremist groups to reassert their global relevance within a competitive jihadist landscape. For instance, the quest for influence might propel al-Qaeda and its affiliates to execute high-profile attacks. These dynamics could further ignite rivalries, especially with groups like ISIS, potentially triggering inter-group violence and further fragmentation as the differing ideologies and control over territories come to the forefront.

## Conclusion

The significance of Oct. 7 in the context of global extremism cannot be understated. As alliances shift and Israel's operations on the ground progress, the extremist landscape is set to evolve.

[Understanding](#) these dynamics is crucial for developing effective counterterrorism policies.

Recognizing the historical enmities and pragmatic alliances that define Hamas and al-Qaeda's relationship is essential in anticipating the possible outcomes of their cooperation. Moving forward, as we witness the domino effect of Oct. 7 spread, it becomes imperative for the international community to adapt its strategies to meet the sophisticated and ever-changing tactics of global jihadist factions.

*Mark Berlin is a Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science at George Washington University and a fellow at the University of York's Centre for the Comparative Study of Civil War. His research on armed group cooperation, patterns of violence, and Middle East politics has been published in outlets such as International Interactions, International Studies Review, Terrorism and Political Violence, and Texas National Security Review.*

*Sara Harmouch, a Lebanese national and Doctoral Candidate at American University, specializes in counterterrorism. She has firsthand experience with the impacts of conflict and terrorism through her upbringing and extensive fieldwork conducted across the MENA region. Harmouch consults for the US government and the private sector, and has recently briefed NATO on religious terrorist groups. Her research focuses on asymmetric warfare, political violence, and threats to democracies. She holds graduate degrees in International Relations and contributes to Lawfare, War on The Rocks, Voice of America, Dagbladet Information, the Globe Post, and Orion Policy Institute.*

*Vladimir Rauta is an Associate Professor in International Security at the University of Reading. He researches conflict delegation to proxies and has published in International Security, International Studies Review, International Relations, Contemporary Security Policy, and Civil Wars. He recently edited the Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars, together with Assaf Moghadam and Michel Wyss.*

*Main image: Hamas flags. Credit: [Rainwiz via Flickr](#).*

**Date Created**

2023/11/14