

The Middle East

Wrath and sorrow rule in Israel on the anniversary of October 7th

A divided country is at war with multiple enemies, and fighting itself



Photograph: Getty Images

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AS ISRAEL faces the first anniversary of the October 7th atrocities by Hamas, two huge challenges loom. One is Israel's internal divisions, which will be highlighted by two separate commemoration services that are due to be held. The other is how Israel prosecutes and eventually ends the multiple connected wars that it is now fighting, and not least how it retaliates to Iran's recent ballistic-missile barrage. On October 5th General Michael Kurilla, head of America's Central Command, arrived in Israel in an attempt to reach an agreement on that high-stakes question.

The first anniversary of the October 7th attacks comes as Israel is at [war on multiple fronts](#). The fighting in Lebanon is intense, with ground operations and airstrikes continuing, which Israel says are targeted at Hizbullah infrastructure. In Gaza the violence seems never-ending, alongside a humanitarian disaster and over 40,000 dead Gazans. October 5th the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) launched another operation in Jabalia, a refugee camp next to Gaza city, in order to dislodge [Hamas fighters](#) who re-established control there. It is possible that another terrorist attack or military operation against Israel by its many adversaries could further darken the day of October 7th.



Map: The Economist

Alongside the fighting, there will be mourning by Israelis, Lebanese and [Palestinians](#). In Israel this may illuminate divisions rather than heal them. One national commemoration ceremony will be produced by the

government, with an address by Binyamin Netanyahu, the prime minister, that has been pre-recorded, perhaps to avoid protesters disrupting a live event in his presence. Many of the families of hostages and of Israelis killed since October 7th are angry at his reluctance to take responsibility for the tragedy, and have refused to take part. Likewise, some of the kibbutzim attacked have declined to allow the ceremony's producers to film their communities.

A separate "families' memorial ceremony" will take place in a Tel Aviv park. Some 40,000 people have registered online to attend, although owing to civil-defence orders restricting the size of public events only relatives of hostages and victims are to participate. While the fight against Hizbullah has galvanised the national mood, any solidarity is fragile. Tens of thousands of reservists have been called up once again, some for a third stint of duty this year, to allow the IDF to broaden its ground campaign in Lebanon, while maintaining the campaign in Gaza and reinforcing troops in the restive West Bank. Anger is mounting at Mr Netanyahu's ultra-religious coalition allies. They insist that ultra-religious Torah scholars, potentially 60,000 recruits, should continue to be exempt from service. (Though their legal right to avoid it has ended, the government and IDF remain reluctant to draft them.) All this could feed into political instability in the coming year. In a poll by the Israel Democracy Institute, a think-tank, 63% of Israelis want early elections and 53% favour ending the war in Gaza.

Even as Israel's internal challenges are on display, so are the external constraints on its war-fighting. Mr Netanyahu is determined to land a significant blow on Iran. Israeli officials mention two types of targets at the top of their hit-list, those related to Iran's burgeoning nuclear programme and high-level economic targets, specifically port facilities and oil terminals. The White House appears to want a more modest target list, but Mr Netanyahu may reckon that with a month left until the presidential election, he can refuse Joe Biden's entreaties and sort matters out with the next president. Donald Trump has called for Israel to attack Iran's nuclear facilities. Kamala Harris has been far more circumspect, although she has called out Iranian "aggressive behaviour". In Europe, meanwhile, there is more evidence of Israel leaching support. Following Britain's decision to suspend some arms-export licences to Israel, on October 5th Emmanuel Macron, France's president, called for an embargo on weapons used in Gaza. The practical impact is tiny since neither country sells much to Israel, but the symbolism is significant.

Israel's overarching goal on all three fronts—in Gaza, against Hizbullah and other Iranian proxies, and against Iran itself—is to re-establish deterrence after the October 7th attacks. Israel has partially succeeded at that, particularly with its surprise strikes on Hizbullah. But judged by the narrower official aims of each war it is hard for Israel's generals and citizens to know when to stop.

In Gaza the official aims are to destroy Hamas's military and governing capabilities and rescue the hostages. Israel has battered Hamas, at the cost of huge civilian casualties, but 101 hostages are still held there (around half are presumed dead) and there is no alternative governing body anywhere in sight. In Lebanon, the goal is to allow over 60,000 civilians subject to Hizbullah rocket attacks to return to their homes near the border. But Israeli generals admit that despite having decapitated Hizbullah's leadership, including killing its leader Hassan Nasrallah, and destroying at least half of its missile arsenal, Hizbullah will remain a force in Lebanon. An attack on Iran might trigger further escalation by it.

A year on Israel has succeeded at hammering its enemies, but has not yet worked out how to end its wars. And the [country is still in trauma](#). It is living in what Lilach Volach, a novelist, has called "October 367th" and unable to fully process its tragedy, even as a second year of fighting begins. ■