

[Transcript] Global News Podcast / Gaza Special: Your Questions Answered

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This is a Global News podcast special edition from the BBC World Service.

I'm Jackie Leonard and in this edition, recorded at 17.30 GMT on Friday, the 13th of October, we'll be answering your questions about the Israeli Gaza crisis. A week on from the Hamas attack on Israel, we've teamed up with the new BBC podcast, The Conflict, and are joined from Israel by its host, our chief international correspondent, Lee's Doucet, who is in Ash Dodd, north of Gaza. Also with us is our international editor, Jeremy Bowen, who's in Jerusalem. We'll be hearing too from the BBC security correspondent, Frank Gardner.

We had planned to talk to our colleagues in Gaza, but our apologies for now is just too dangerous.

Let's cross to Israel. We have a great deal to discuss about the events in the Middle East, how we got here, how events are unfolding on the ground, how the international community is responding, and how any sort of peaceful outcome might be achieved. It's clear from your questions that you'd like us to start with a little bit of geography and a bit of history, so Lee's welcome, a relatively easy one to kick off with. Can you give us a sense of the size and location of Gaza, where it is in relation to Israel, who lives there, who's in charge, and who its neighbours are?

Well, the Gaza Strip is a coastal strip of land on the Mediterranean. The southern side, it's connecting to Egypt, and then its other neighbour is Israel. It is described as one of the most densely populated places on earth. Some 2.3 million Palestinians live there, and they live with great frustration because they feel they don't really have control over their lives. Even though Israel pulled out its troops in 2005, it controls the airspace, it controls the sea, it also controls all of the land crossings into Gaza, except the one which goes to Egypt, which is called the Rafa crossing. We've tried to use various measures to say how big it is for people who live in North America. It's about the size of Washington DC. Okay, so that was the geography part. To the more complicated part now, what is behind this conflict? Let's hear from a listener. Sydney from Albany, New York. I know very little about the history of the conflict between the two sides. I always grew up believing it had to do with religious differences. I'm 24 years old and was never led to believe anything different. I want to learn more about the history of the conflict because I don't remember learning about it in school, and I want to be correctly

And this one. Hi, this is Lili from Germany. I was wondering how was the state of Israel founded? How did that impact local people in what was formerly Palestine? Why did the following force break out? And what is life for people on their occupation in the West Bank like?

So Jeremy, the problem here is how far back do we go? Can you attempt a potted history for us?

So I'll try it in the next minute or so. At the first part of the question, when did the conflict start? Well, I suppose you have to go back to the Zionist movement in Europe, where in 1897

they had a Congress and they decided, among other things, that they would push to get a Jewish state

within 50 years. In fact, they got one in 51 years in 1948. And there was, even by 1897, there was settlement by Jews who were known as Zionists. It's a Jewish nationalism, if you like. It was a period of nationalism in Europe. The Czechs wanted a homeland. The Hungarians wanted independence.

And Jews were thinking, well, let's get a nation state as well. And they decided they wanted to have one here in Palestine. But there was a famous historian, Avis Schleinke, found this great quote, some rabbis who came out here after that first Zionist conference. They telegraphed back to Europe and said, the bride is beautiful, but she's already married. In other words, there were people here. One of the old sayings about Israel was it was a land without a people for a people without a land. But that wasn't true because they were Palestinian Arabs here. And when the Zionists were coming in to start with, there was a bit of cooperation. But increasingly, there was conflict. And I think asking where this conflict came from, I think it started off with two peoples having very strong claims to the land in their own minds and not being able to agree

how to split it and how to share it. Now, the British were in charge here between the World Wars effectively. They left in 1948. And they did have a plan to try to split the land into two states. But it was one which the Arabs particularly would not accept. They wanted everything. I think

that the Jews at that time were more of a subtle approach. And while they weren't getting what they wanted, they thought we'll take a bit and maybe we'll have something extra. So 1948, Israel's War of Independence, they won a massive victory. But since then, it has had a very troubled history. And one of the questions was about religious differences. Well, you know, in the time that I've been here as a journalist, reporting from here for more than 30 years, the conflict has got more religious. Now, there are people on both sides who believe they are doing the will of God. And those people were always existed. But now they're in really powerful positions.

Well, the latest stage in the crisis started with the unprecedented attacks on Israel by Hamas, which seemed to come as a complete surprise. We'll talk about the why now shortly. But first, let's have another one of your questions. This is Katie. I live in New York.

I want to know what life was or is like in Palestine. And is it those harsh conditions that led to this breaking point? Or did Hamas just do this because they want to eradicate Jewish people from the earth? And they're just using this claim of oppression as an excuse to kill Jewish people. So, Lees, would you like to take this one?

Well, I'll just pick up on what Jeremy said is that the longer this conflict goes on, it does acquire more and more of a religious dimension. But, you know, Muslims against the Jews and the Jewish people feel very profoundly threatened by the attacks that Hamas carried out on Saturday. It has gone right round the world for in Jewish communities. But I think predominantly this is an issue about, yes, the very difficult impoverished conditions in Gaza, the conditions in the occupied West Bank, the fact that Israel continues to exercise control over people's lives, the fact that the hopes of the Palestinians... Just sorry, just to interrupt you there, Lees. We were hearing some sirens there and it sounded like some explosions. Can you tell us what's going on? Well, that's the thud of artillery. We're very close to the Gaza border, so that's outgoing. In the night, there's a lot of intense aerial bombardment. It goes on

around the clock for Gazans. It is in the distance. I'm afraid it is a sound that we hear all day, even here in southern Israel. Artillery going out, drones in the sky, helicopter gunships. We hear the thud of some of that bombardment in Gaza. We only see, for the most part, hear the sound and right here we can't see what's happening on the ground. Frightening moment. It is frightening.

Are you okay to continue? Yes, of course. You are okay. Okay, that's great. Not for us, for the people under them, for the people under them. It is. So, I was saying one of the most controversial issues between the Israelis and Palestinians is the expansion of Jewish settlements. And in the past many months, with Benjamin Netanyahu remaining in power and now governing with the most right-wing

government in Israel's history, it is very pro-settler. And there's been, for most of this year, more and more clashes. The siren is going off, but I think we're fine. We can continue. And I think maybe it's good for our listeners to know that this is the reality of life. There's been a lot of clashes between the settlers and Palestinians in the West Bank, so much so that it was regarded as Israel's more focused on the West Bank than they were on Gaza. But there are many reasons for this. And they are very profound. They're very emotional. They're historical and very personal and political. Right. Let's have another clip from one of our listeners. Given the Israeli response to the Hamas attacks seemingly resulting in collective punishment towards the Palestinians, I'm curious as to what the average Palestinian civilian sentiment is towards Hamas. Is this an organization that is largely supported? And that one's for you, Jeremy. Well, there have been any polls in the last week, because I think that for a lot of Palestinians, and ones I've spoken to, horror and incredulity about what has been happening, about the numbers of people that will kill, I think people had no idea that this was coming. So there's that.

Now, before all this happened, Hamas took over in Gaza in 2007, quite violently. They kicked out the other faction, Fateh. They were a daggers drawn, literally in some cases. They had won an election the previous year, so they were popular then. And a lot of that was a protest vote against the ineptitude and the corruption of the other Palestinian main group, Fateh, and the fact that they hadn't delivered their objective of a Palestinian state. To start with, some people thought Palestinians were quite a breath of fresh air, but things have changed, became more authoritarian, and they haven't been so popular in Gaza and also here in the West Bank. Yes, of course, they have their followers, some very, very dedicated followers, often people who are religious. But you cannot say that the Palestinian national movement, those people who want to have their own state, which is virtually every Palestinian I've ever met, that they are co-extensive with Hamas, because that's not the case, far from it. And so Hamas were not ragingly popular group. And I don't think this is necessarily going to make them any more popular, but what will happen, because what is already happening, because of the number of deaths of Palestinian civilians, particularly, is there will be a feeling that Palestinians and others in the Arab world, we've seen a lot of demonstrations today, will be angry about what was happening,

and angry at Israel, because of the way that they are attacking Gaza. Well, turning to current Israeli politics now, let's get a bit more context. Chris Hochman from Texas, but originally from Australia. How much of a factor is the settlements in this situation? How has this changed Israeli policy, given that to get support from the right Netanyahu had shifted to a more anti-Palestinian policy? What's Iran's role in all of this? Please take that one. Well, I mentioned one of the

primary reasons for the increasing anger of Palestinians, including Hamas, against Israel, is the rise and rise expansion of Jewish settlements. Jewish settlements was one of the issues that was postponed in the Oslo Peace Accords of 30 years ago, and many now realize that was a

huge mistake. They thought they would be able to deal with it. Israel has given back some of the control of the occupied West Bank, but there are large swathes which are under Israeli control, and the settlements continue to expand. And also the Israeli settlers now feel emboldened by the right-wing government, which has many pro-settler politicians inside Prime Minister Netanyahu's cabinet, at least the cabinet he had before he formed the war cabinet. Well, yes, it is a major issue. On Iran, this has been asked many times. Iran is one of the main backers of Hamas and Islamic

jihadi. It both helps to arm and finance both groups. But in this particular crisis, the United States and Israel have both said that there is no intelligence to suggest that Iran was part of the planning and the execution of this assault by Hamas. Okay, so Frank Gardner, our security correspondent, is here. Let's take a question that we got from one of our listeners on intelligence. I'm Alan C. from the Philippines. With vast resources at its disposal, how could Israel have failed to foresee the attack by Hamas? Is this failure of intelligence really attributable to Israel's current political climate? Well, Alan, this is exactly the question that a lot of Israelis are asking of their government. And it is a failure of intelligence.

It's also a failure of imagination. So there was always known to be a threat coming from Hamas in Gaza. But Israel had spent about a billion dollars building what it called its iron wall. It relied a lot on technology. That meant it thinned out a lot of the forces it had on that border. It didn't think Hamas was going to attack from there. Plus, it happened on a holiday. And yes, your right to some extent, the Israeli government has been distracted by a lot of the political turmoil. That plus the fact that most of the violence in recent months has been in the West Bank, not in Gaza. Alan also wanted to know if it would be in Iran's interest to stoke conflict all over the Middle East. Well, Iran has denied any role in this attack, but has applauded it. Hamas is an ally of Iran. It's funded, trained, equipped, armed by Iran. And I think it's fair to say that there was some nervousness in Iran and in Hamas that Saudi Arabia was about to conclude a deal with Israel that would see the two countries normalizing their relations. That deal is now temporarily, at least for the time being, off the table. So Iran has definitely an interest in supporting Hamas. And it has been accused by Western governments and Israel of fermenting trouble in the Middle East,

fermenting violence and channeling weapons to not just Hamas, but also to Hezbollah, which is why Israel has been bombing airports in the last few days in Syria to try and interrupt that weapons flow from Iran. And quite a lot of people were also wondering about what they see as the apparent international bias in support of Israel. Hello, I'm Andrei. I'm from Poland. Why are most of the people, also world leaders, expressing support for Israel and accepting their military response? From what I understand, it is the Israel that is a longtime aggressor and an occupant of the Palestinian territory. Shouldn't more support and understanding be given to the Palestinian people? I don't support violence in any way and would prefer a peaceful solution, but it is not that Hamas is attacking Israel without reason. With all the news about Israeli violence and the settlers in recent months, I find it understandable that they see it as an only way to fight further freedom. Right, Andrei. So this attack was unprecedented in the ferocity

and barbarism and absolutely disgusting sadism of killing children in cold blood. Now, yes, it's horrific what's happening in Gaza. Of course, it is. And it's deeply unfair, the treatment of the Palestinians, that their land has been continually encroached upon by settlement after settlement. And that, of course, has led to this frustration. But nothing excuses the total barbarity, the ISIS level of savagery that was committed on the morning of Saturday, October the 7th, the chasing down and gunning down in cold blood of young people as they went to a music festival, the murdering of grandmothers in their beds. This has shocked not just Israelis, but the whole world. That's why for the time being, the kind of moral compass of outrage has tended to be on the side of Israel. That I think will probably change as more and more suffering is experienced by the people of Gaza as Israel pummeled that narrow coastal strip. Some are wondering about what the views are more specifically in the Middle East region. Hi, my name is Matthew and I'm from

New York. I'm curious how neighboring Muslim countries view Hamas and more specifically the Palestinian people. What is Egypt's, Jordan's, Lebanon's or Syria's official stance on Hamas? Are there unofficial perspectives you could discuss? As ever in the Middle East, there is a difference between the official stance of governments, which is nearly always in support of the Palestinian

cause and what the leaders of those governments actually think in practice. Most of them don't like Hamas. Qatar does. Qatar provides a base for Hamas's political leadership, but most certainly the Sunni conservative Arab governments of Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, the United Emirates and Bahrain, they don't particularly like Hamas because it is what's called political Islam. It believes that religion should have a role in government and they see that as a threat to their way of ruling. But the conflict that's raging now is so huge with such high casualties that they feel obliged those governments to all come out and support most cases the Palestinian cause. And there's been a rare joint statement by Saudi Arabia and Iran supporting the Palestinian cause. And are there countries in the region sympathetic enough and able to take in refugees from Gaza? Well, the big question here is, will Egypt do it? Because there's enormous pressure from the United States, from Israel, from other countries on Egypt to open its very tiny border at Rafa between Egypt, the north of the Egyptian Sinai, with the south end of the Gaza Strip. Now, Gazans don't particularly want to leave their country. I mean, you know, this is traumatic for them. Many of them, they are descendants of people who were kicked out of their homes back in 1948.

So they don't want to have another what's called Nakhbar in Arabic catastrophe. Egypt certainly doesn't want to host tens, if not hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees because they don't think it would be a temporary thing while Israel clears out Hamas. They think with some justification, it'll end up being a permanent refugee camp in the north of the Sinai. So no, there's no appetite in the Middle East for hosting more Palestinian refugees. What everyone would rather see is an equitable solution. And I'm going to end with this. This conflict is going to go on and on in a vicious cycle, regardless of Israel's military actions, until Palestinians are ruled governed by people who don't seek the destruction of the state of Israel. And Israel stops building settlements on Arab land, on Palestinian land that deprives them of a future contiguous homeland. That's the bottom line. Now, when we talk about what's going on, people are, of course, really sensitive to the language used by media organizations. Here in the BBC, we have specific guidelines related to our use of words like militant and terror. Jeremy, can you just very briefly talk us through

those? Well, the big controversial one is whether or not at the BBC we should refer to Hamas as terrorists. I've been listening closely to the way that newsreaders have been framing it in intros and to the reports that we've been doing. And the form of words they've been using is that Hamas, which is being classified as a terrorist organization by many governments in the West, including the United Kingdom, at the BBC, we don't say, well, they're terrorists or they're not terrorists. Why is that? It's because it's a very loaded word. Some people say that the definitions are very simple, but they're not. And what we're after is clarity. So the way I approach it is that I try and describe what's happened and what they stand for and what they're trying to do. Give you another example. There are plenty of people, plenty of people not very far from where I'm in Jerusalem or in the West Bank, who would say that Israel, repeatedly over many years, has been guilty of state terrorism as far as the Palestinians and other countries their neighbours are concerned. Now, I don't call them a state terrorist and we don't get into that business of using this word because it's so controversial. I can even feel now supporters of Israel bristling that I even mentioned that. I'm not trying to make comparisons. This is not about comparisons. It's about clarity. So what I try and do in my writing and my reporting is I try and describe what's going on. And for the record, I'd say that Hamas carried out an absolutely murderous attack against innocent civilians. And the massive shock of that is having a profound effect, not just on the fact that Israel has been dealt an act of war and is responding. It's also completely upset what people believed was the status quo. And now in the Middle East, they are into a terrible new period of uncertainty because what happens the day after Israel finishes its military operation? What kind of governance will be left there? That's the kind of things we want to look at. But instead, people who oppose what we do in London are very critical of the BBC have been using this as a reason to have a go at us. And I think that actually what we're after is accuracy. Well, listeners do care about language. Let's hear from a couple more.

My name is Keith Schlesinger from Corvallis, Oregon, USA. And my question is, why have all the news outlets in the West uniformly use the term hostages to refer to those who have been captured by the Hamas and Islamic Jihad forces? Why doesn't the BBC refer to these captured people as prisoners of war? Please, that one's for you. Yes, and language is very important, but also respect for the conventions of war. We, I think both Jeremy and I continue to mention in our coverage that targeting civilians in a time of war is a war crime. And the convention is also very clear on who are prisoners of war. And I'm going to read from the convention because I want this to be very clear. It says that members of the armed forces of a party to the conflict, as well as members of militia or volunteer corps forming part of such armed forces. In other words, prisoners of war usually refers to those who have taken up arms. But there is an exception, and I will read it so we're absolutely clear. Any other non-combatants or civilians affiliated with but not part of a diligent military, such as reporters and contractors, have the right to be treated as a prisoner of war. So you can request if you're part of an armed force, but you're not actually fighting, you're affiliated in some way, you could ask for that. That obviously doesn't apply in this case. These were innocent civilians from 18 month old babies to 80 year old Holocaust survivors. These are innocent civilians. And what about the siege warfare question?

Siege. Well, Jeremy and I both covered Syria, where a siege, laying siege to entire villages and parts of big cities, was one of the most powerful weapons of war used by President Assad's forces. Yes, it is a medieval term, but such is the finality of war in our time, the mercilessness of war in our time that starving fighters into submission was used in Syria. The siege is also

being used here in Gaza. That is the word that Israel used because they've made it clear they're not going to turn on the water or allow food or fuel in, turn on the switch on the electricity until all the hostages are returned. This is a war crime. It is targeting civilians in a time of war. And yes, it is as brutal as the medieval sieges of old. And reporting on something like this, on a crisis like this, it's very difficult, isn't it, to be accurate, to be sure that the information that you are receiving is true. We've had some questions about how we verify information.

So Jeremy, how do you do that? Well, in terms of the numbers of people who've been killed or wounded, I think sometimes it is an approximation and it still is at the moment in terms of those who were killed in that Hamas attack because, frankly, they're still finding bodies. They don't really know. In terms of verifying things like those videos you see, I mean, one thing that's really changed reporting since the advent of the smartphone is the fact that so much videos around. So, you know, we try and prove things. We don't just stick them out there.

And we hear a lot about just how intractable a conflict this is. And of course, our listeners have questions about how to resolve it. First, there was this suggestion about a short-term solution. Hi, this is Sam Oppenheim, a New York City public school teacher. And my question is, would Israel consider a humanitarian corridor and a temporary ceasefire that could allow women and children out of Gaza, for example, into Egypt or an army camp or all the way to the West Bank?

I understand that the Israeli military is looking for a military solution, but in all the interviews that you've posted on the BBC podcast, they claim to value civilian lives of innocent, non-Hamas actors. So, could Israel put weight behind those statements?

Please.

This one is under huge pressure now. Most of all, pressure from its own people after these atrocities committed by Hamas. There is deep, deep anger and fear in this society, and a very strong feeling of the need to retaliate, to use their phrase to crush Hamas. But there is also pressure on Israel from its closest of allies, including the United States, to use the phrase used by the U.S. How you respond matters as well, that there are rules even in war. And one of the most important rules is not targeting civilians. That is a war crime. So Israel seems to be, I mean, listening to that. There's also discussions with Egypt about trying to keep that crossing open. But Egypt has its own concerns. It doesn't want a huge influx

of Palestinians onto its territory. And there's the graph crossing. It can't move people quickly enough through it. Israel does not want to be delayed. It's not in a mood to compromise in any way. The clock for its military operations matters more than the clock on the time it would take to open a humanitarian corridor. There's not even a window, much less a corridor now. And I think we'll see in the days to come how far they're willing to heed these expressions of concern, which grow ever louder, about the price that civilians will pay for Israel's military operations, which of course Israel has a lot of support for that from its allies too.

And finally, the biggest question of all.

Hi, it's Alex from Colchester. My question is, what is the solution? What would it take from both sides for a lasting peace to be brought about? Which of you wants to go first? Jeremy or Liz? I'll have a go if you like. Go for it. Go ahead, Jeremy. Once upon a time, there was something called the peace process. Back in the 90s, it raised an awful lot of hopes. The idea was that through negotiation, there would be a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Now for

a number of complicated reasons, which we don't have time to get into, that did not work. It was in intensive care for a while. Diplomats, particularly some very hard working Americans, tried to jolt it back into life, but it didn't succeed. Perhaps it was never going to succeed. Perhaps the differences between the two sides were too great. And for the last 10 years or so, since the Americans last had a go at trying to revive that peace process, the conflict has effectively been left to fester. And a feeling has grown up, particularly I think among Mr. Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, and his allies, and also some of his allies abroad as well, that it could be managed, that it was a conflict that could be contained and Israel could get on with other things, like dealing with Iran, like maybe having a rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, and they could build a new Middle East. But there was always this terrible problem of the Arab-Israeli, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. And I would argue it's really central to the problems of the region. And I think that that has been shown once again by the tragic, horrendous, brutal events, starting with that Hamas raid. So, you know, you could say that perhaps there was a moment back in the 90s when they might have got close to it, that might have had a chance, but that moment went away. And I thought for some time that an explosion was coming.

I didn't expect it the way it was. The optimistic way of looking at it, if you want to find a silver lining somewhere in the cloud, is that perhaps this will jolt all parties. I'm not talking about Hamas. I'm talking about Palestinians, I'm talking about Israelis, their allies, into doing some kind of a deal, to at least talking about doing some kind of a deal. That's the optimistic one. The pessimistic one is we go even further down from here. And Lee's. The mantra was land for peace. And for the Palestinians, the land meant returning to the borders of the territory seized by Israel in the 1967 war, or land swaps, so that they had enough territory to make an effective and a cohesive Palestinian state. And when those negotiations were started and there were hope that they could be concluded, there had to be a corridor which connected Gaza with the West Bank. So I think for the majority of Palestinians, a Palestinian state control over their own lives is what they want. And I think Israelis would want to be out of Palestinian lives. For a long time, they talked to peace, then they talked about separation. They don't want to have each other to interfere, and especially not in the way they're doing now. The big question is what does Hamas want? Israelis get really worried and angry that Hamas has not changed its founding charter, which calls for the destruction of the state of Israel. Now, in recent years, they have come up with documents which talked about their readiness to accept that there could be a state, if principles like the right of Palestinians to return are respected by Israel, it's carried out, that it's possible that they could move towards some kind of an agreement. But I think what this current crisis tells us is that Hamas is divided. There are political leaders in Hamas who didn't know about this assault, who don't support this assault, who were trying to move away from the rule of the gun, but the military wing, which seems to be the one in charge now, the big question is, what do they want? Lee's, thank you. That was Lee's du set. We've also heard from Jeremy Bowen. Thank you both for participating and please stay safe. Jackie, let me say what a great honor it is to join you on your very successful Much Listen To Global News podcast. And it's really good to know that so many of your listeners have so many questions about this conflict unfolding in the Middle East, that they want to know what's happening and even more, they care about what's

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happening. And that's it from us for now, but there will be a new edition of the Global News podcast later. Our thanks to Lee's du set, her podcast is called The Conflict and you will find it wherever you get your BBC podcasts. Thanks to Jeremy Bowen, our international editor, and our security correspondent, Frank Gardner. And thank you if you sent in a question and our apologies if we didn't get to yours. If you want us to, we might return with another Q&A in future, so do please keep emailing in. The address is globalpodcast at bbc.co.uk. You can also find us on X, formerly known as Twitter, at Global NewsPod. This edition was mixed by Philip Ball. The producers were Anna Murphy and Judy Franco. Our editor is Karen Martin. I'm Jackie Leonard. Thank you for listening.

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