

[Transcript] Global News Podcast / Mideast Special: Israeli retaliation after Hamas assault

You're listening to a special edition of the Global News podcast from the BBC World Service.

Hello, I'm Oliver Conway.

We are recording this at midday GMT on Sunday, the 8th of October.

More than a day after Hamas militants launched a surprise attack from Gaza, gun battles are still raging in southern Israel.

Hundreds of Israelis have been killed and dozens taken hostage.

I was lying in the floor and they were going three by three shooting everywhere and I saw many people dying all around.

In the Gaza Strip, hundreds of Palestinians have been killed and thousands been injured in Israeli airstrikes.

It was described as a slaughterhouse.

There were many dead bodies in the morgue and the medical staff were unable to cope with the huge influx of the casualties that they were receiving.

We'll hear from our correspondents in Jerusalem and Gaza and ask what this means for the Israelis and Palestinians.

So in the podcast, the BBC speaks to a senior leader of Hamas and asks him what he was hoping to achieve with this attack.

We'll have analysis from our Arab Affairs editor and ask a defence and diplomatic expert what happens next.

More than 30 hours into the worst crisis to face Israel in half a century, battles with Hamas militants are still underway in the south of the country.

Israel was taken completely by surprise early on Saturday as fighters stormed out of the Gaza Strip, attacking Israeli towns and seizing hostages.

Israel responded by launching airstrikes on the densely populated Palestinian territory.

Hundreds of people on both sides have died, while Hamas has thought to have taken dozens of hostages from Israel back into Gaza, complicating Israeli plans to wreak vengeance.

Richard Hatch is a spokesman for the Israeli Defence Forces.

It's the second day of war that Hamas unleashed on the State of Israel, specifically on the communities of around the Gaza Strip, multiple communities.

As we speak, they're still fighting going on.

We're dealing slowly with special forces to take care of the terrorists that came in hundreds into Israel, butchered, killed, kidnapped civilians, mainly civilians and soldiers.

The main firefights are more or less over.

We're still dealing with a few communities and military locations where there's still firefights as we speak with terrorists.

Hopefully, as the day goes on, we'll be able to, at first stage, secure the communities around the Gaza Strip.

Will you negotiate with Hamas for a prisoner swap?

Right now, we're focusing on the fight.

That's what we're in right now.

It's a very, very dire situation.

Slowly, we're doing what we need to do to get the communities back and safe.

And we are now planning our future severe response on Hamas' inhumane attack into Israel.

Plustiges right now, and that's probably going on in other channels.

Right now, the IDF is focused mainly on stabilizing and responding to this terrible attack.

Israeli defence spokesman Richard Hatch talking to my colleague Celia Hatton.

Joe Floto is the BBC's Jerusalem bureau chief.

He told me about Israeli efforts to regain control from the Hamas militants.

The Israeli military are telling us that they're still carrying out mopping up operations in the handful of towns and villages on the border with the Gaza Strip.

They have taken a long time to clear out militants who streamed across the border yesterday morning.

And overnight, they managed to release some hostages who've been taken in a dining room of a kibbutz.

That's a small agricultural community.

And about 50 of them have been taken by government.

That was resolved in the early hours of this morning.

They're still not 100% sure that the area is clear, that there's still the possibility that there could be militants hiding away.

And we've just been told that they have attacked with a drone, a group of militants approaching the border fence from Gaza.

So that operation isn't over yet.

And furthermore, they're telling us that they're now starting to evacuate the remaining civilian population.

So thousands of people are going to be bused out of the area surrounding the Gaza Strip.

And that might give us a clue as to the intensity of the military operation that might follow in the next few days.

Now Israel has been hitting Gaza overnight with airstrikes.

And as you'll know, that is a common response from the Israelis.

But now they're talking about a severe response to what was seen yesterday.

What exactly could that mean?

Well, we've seen the mobilization of thousands of reservists.

We've seen them move tens of different battalions into the area currently operating to more than two dozen battalions.

They are drafting in three divisions.

These are thousands of soldiers.

I mean, it's slightly technical issues, but thousands of soldiers are being moved into position, including a good number of tanks and armoured vehicles.

And we can only assume that that means that they are planning some kind of ground operation.

Now the presence of those soldiers, those hostages, sorry, will obviously complicate that.

But they are determined to exact a price for what the Israeli prime minister calls a black day yesterday.

Now, in recent months, we've seen an escalation of tensions, particularly in the West Bank as well as attacks in different parts of Israel.

But how does the country feel today after what happened yesterday?

I think the country feels vulnerable and angry and shocked and stunned that such a military

catastrophe could turn into civilian massacres on that scale.

This was precisely the objective that Hamas had signaled long ago, which was to bring the violence into Israeli homes that was being seen in the West Bank.

This was advertised, but we were told that this wasn't possible, that the level of fortification, the level of sophistication of the Israeli military meant that this couldn't happen.

But what we saw yesterday very clearly were Hamas militants overrunning Israeli military positions and then going on to enter civilian population areas near the Gaza Strip and shoot indiscriminately.

There's a bus stop in Sterot where we're just littered with bodies as people waiting for the bus were moaned down by the gun when we've seen people shot in their homes.

We've seen this party that was taking place in the desert.

People just moaned down by militants attacking from two sides.

These are unarmed party guys.

So I think the level of savagery that is being commented on at the moment and the disgust at the treatment of these hostages is universal and that's why you're seeing the very divided Israeli political landscape unifying very strongly today and we're likely to see a unity government as a result.

Our Jerusalem bureau chief Joe Floto, one of the party goers Joe was referring to is Gili Yoskovich.

She was among hundreds of young people that had danced music festival in southern Israel near the Gaza Strip when the gunman attacked.

The terrorists be coming from four or five places not like one direction so we didn't know where to go.

I got into my car, I drove a little bit, some people were shooting on me, I left the car, I start to run, I saw a place with many many pomelo trees like 200 trees.

So I was going in the middle and I was lying in the floor it was the second hidden that I find and they were just all around me and they were going three by three and shooting everywhere from two sides and I saw many people like dying all around I was very quiet I didn't cry I didn't do anything but in one hand I was like bruising I said okay I'm gonna die it's okay just breathe just close your eyes because it was shooting everywhere very very close to me and then I heard the terrorist I heard them they opened a big van and all the time they got more weapons from this car.

They were in the area for three hours no one was there no one policeman from the party yes I saw but they were in one side other side I was sure like the army will come I heard some helicopters I was sure like soldiers are going to come down with robes and go into this field and saved us but no one was there just all the terrorists they were very close to me so my leg was starting to I didn't I didn't control myself it was like this so

I tried I did my best I moved a little bit when they were in this side I heard them talking Arabic when they were in this side I moved a bit here when they were in this side I moved to the other side and try to be much under the tree so maybe when the shooting will come they will not touch my face I was lying there for like three hours and did you know what happened to your friend was she alive I was sure she was dead I was just thinking about my kids about my friend about everything and I was said it's not the time to die for me not yet Gili Yoskovich local media in Israel are currently reporting that more than 500

Israelis have been killed over the past 24 hours in those Hamas attacks in Gaza Palestinians have described desperate conditions as Israeli airstrikes continue to batter the territory health officials there say more than 300 people have been killed so far many of them civilians including children and a pregnant woman hospitals in Gaza are overwhelmed as thousands of people have been injured Mahmoud Shalibi is the Gaza director of medical aid for Palestinians it's really a grim situation in Gaza yesterday my colleagues were phoning you know people inside the hospitals we found people inside Shifa hospital which is the largest trauma hospital in all of Palestine it actually is located in Gaza it was described as a slaughter house there were no spaces many people were on the ground in the emergency department there were many dead bodies in the morgue and the medical staff were unable to cope with that huge influx of the casualties that they were receiving well for more details about the situation in Gaza we spoke to our correspondent in the Palestinian territory Rushdie Abu Aluf fighting has been continued throughout last night and this this morning with the Israeli airstrikes targeting mainly Hamas infrastructure Hamas banks Hamas military compound but also about 12 houses belong to Hamas senior leader in Gaza the death toll according to health ministry is 313 in the streets of Gaza Gaza is like 10 into a ghost town it's deserted all of the shops are closed some of the collapsed building because of the Israeli airstrikes are uplooking the down the main roads in downtown Gaza I had the chance this morning to drive through this area the scale of destruction is really huge and the debris is closing some of the main roads around the area yeah and would people have had time to to evacuate from those areas before the Israeli airstrikes hit well Israel has been targeting places for Hamas we are talking about infrastructure installations banks and within among the cities we're not talking about like separate buildings for Hamas so for example in downtown Gaza Israel said that this building is 11 story building is used by Hamas as a command center and they have destroyed this building around it it's a very densely populated neighborhood so many of the shops and houses around the building will also damage the I was working in this area this morning the last shattered underground cars were like 10 behind the road and the situation in like in especially in this downtown Gaza is a bit of a surprise for the people because this area was considered for a quite a long time as a safe area in another location the Israeli army IDF issued warning for people to leave their house and we have seen we have get report from people near the border that many families have left flee their homes and they are taking shelters in the UN schools in Gaza we have seen this before during the last four wars that because Hamas and Israel engaged in four wars before and small battles in between so always people in dangerous area they flee their homes they go to the UN school to take it as shelter also because Gaza has no like proper shelters for people so they have no other option but to leave for a more safer area the sound of explosion can easily be heard everywhere in Gaza I can see from my balcony overlooking the downtown the smoke still in the horizon from the collapsed building and the only sound is the ambulances sounds and the civil defense sounds like on the streets rushing to the places that has been hit by Israel the BBC's Rushdie Abu Alouf in Gaza so why did Hamas launch this operation now and what did it hope to achieve our Middle East analyst is Sebastian Asher I don't think there is any one answer to that what we've seen over the past couple of decades is that Israel and Hamas engage in serious conflict but within certain limits and that limit obviously been bypassed and that limit is Hamas entering

Israel and taking hostages and killing people there I mean this was never as is the way with red lines made clear but it seems somehow that that was the lid that was being kept on it that has now been broken so you have to ask question why is Hamas playing what is its ace card essentially from its perspective now because it's going to have a huge backlash obviously militarily from Israel Israel each time that these conflicts suddenly erupt says that it's going to degrade Hamas's ability to carry out such attacks again it never really succeeds Hamas manages for a variety of reasons despite being landlocked despite the blockade on it by Israel to get weapons to make weapons etc and this extraordinary thing this time of having its fighters use hang gliders to go in I mean many people are asking question how on earth did they do yeah is that Iran's help perhaps I mean Iran definitely backs Hamas there's no doubt about that both financially and militarily but it doesn't 100% pull the strings just like with Hezbollah the connection between Hezbollah and Iran is closer but even there Hezbollah has its own objectives and its own lines but it doesn't really want to cross as we've seen today it doesn't essentially want to cross a line that would bring huge retribution from Israel across the whole of Lebanon and Hamas has seemed to be in that situation as well now we've had the Abraham Accords obviously for several years now and in recent months we've had increasingly the sense that Saudi Arabia which is the one thing that really matters in the Middle East is preparing to do a deal a normalization deal with Israel which many people like me kind of thought wasn't on the cards for a long time but the kind of planning that was needed to put this together predates the build-up there's been in the past few weeks for sense that there really is momentum towards a deal so I think it can't just be to do that but it certainly is a message from Hamas both about its own existence and its own power and the Palestinians in general but they can't be left out of the equation and that they have up their sleeves we're now seeing the ability to change the equation to an extent that they can't be neglected just by Israel and Israeli governments but also by the wider Middle East the Arab governments that used to say that Palestine was at the center of Arab identity and the move away from that that can be seen as a huge gesture by Hamas of saying you cannot leave us out of this changing the equation in a big way by taking those hostages where's this going to play out it took years of negotiations to get that soldier Gilad Shalit back and that was in return for something like a thousand jailed Palestinians absolutely and that was deeply unpopular within Israel there's a saga in Lebanon of a soldier who died many many years ago and that is still a major issue so imagine we don't know how many hostages have been taken we don't know how many soldiers

how many are civilians but we know it's at least dozens this is a hugely complicating fact to both in the way of trying to de-escalate the situation but how Israel actually reacts we've heard how the troops are building up at the border we're expecting a ground offensive as far as one can understand from Hamas's perspective they are using the hostages exactly as you say as a way to get the release of thousands of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails as you said in past incidents like that it's taken years to get to that stage I think there's a huge urgency about this but at the same time the Israeli public isn't going to accept that exchange for the prisoners to essentially say that Hamas has achieved its objectives but absolutely the heart of a way that it sees itself is that it doesn't allow one of its citizens whether a civilian or a soldier to be in the hands of an enemy they will bring them back whatever way that they can our Middle East analyst Sebastian Asher will for more detailed

analysis of the devastating actions by Hamas my colleague Tim Franks questioned Osama Hamdan a senior representative of Hamas based in the Lebanese capital Beirut Israel has attacked harshly Al Aqsa Mosque and Jerusalem in the last few weeks with this new government led by Nakhin Yahu all the political actions couldn't protect Al Aqsa and as far as we have information that they are going to take over part of Al Aqsa to build what they call the Temple of Cinnamon which is a very clear red line for the Palestinians not only Hamas the second issue which they conducted building new settlements planning to kick out the Palestinians from West Bank and to us clear that there is no political solution with Israelis the third point which is also important the talks about some normalization with the region which means that they want to say finally there is no Palestinian cause there is some people who are against the Israeli government and all the region have good relations with Israel which is not true in fact so just to be clear Mr Hamdan this was a this was a message as much as any to for example the rulers of Saudi Arabia that they should not engage in repression with Israel it's not a message for anyone except for the Israeli government the Palestinians are still standing they are fighting for their rights and for the international community you have to understand that you can't treat Israel as a spoiled child you have to know that the instability in the region is because of Israel the presence of Israel as a debauchy any solution has to start from implementing the rights of the Palestinians not the needs of Israel I hear what you're saying that there is concern about what's happening with Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem on the West Bank and that you think the Israelis have been ignoring Palestinians with their push for normalization with countries in the region all that having been said how an earth do you think that the cause of the Palestinians has been advanced by the indiscriminate killing of civilians in Israel and then what is bound to be the very heavy response of Israel inside Gaza with the tremendous loss of life that that will inevitably entail well our people are used for the Israeli massacres all the time Israel was killing the Palestinians and the international community was just watching and West Bank this year was the worst we are talking about hundreds of Palestinians who were killed by the Israelis what have been sent yesterday for the old international community no stability if the Israeli occupation is still on the Palestinian lands if you want and we want the Palestinians a stability in the region you have to make an in for the occupation Osama Hamdan a senior leader of Hamas in the Lebanese capital Beirut talking to Tim Franks well Israel has called its response to the assault sword of iron but what do these attacks mean for the country and its aura of military invincibility in the region I asked the defense and diplomatic analyst Jonathan Marcus for his take I think they have shattered not just perceptions of Israeli military power in the region but many of Israel's own citizens perception of the Israeli defense forces ability to protect them I think the dangers are of course now that if this war extends into a major military incursion on the ground into the Gaza Strip clearly there will be huge civilian casualties there there are already numerous civilian civilian casualties from the air bombardment but equally too there will be significant Israeli military casualties we've seen this in previous Israeli incursions fighting in the built-up area of Gaza is very difficult very dangerous and is going to lead to significant losses but I think the scale of the initial set back for Israel and the scale of the set back to the Israeli Prime Minister Mr Netanyahu I think means that there is now going to be a significant military operation that may last for some considerable time yeah I mean some people are talking about this as a 9-11 moment for Israel

9-11 strengthen the US president at the time ultimately what could this mean for Israeli politics going forward well I think it's a 9-11 moment in terms of the shock to the system of course many people might argue that the Americans overreacted to 9-11 and set in train a whole series of wars which they ultimately didn't win so I don't think it's quite like that in that sense I think in terms of the impact in Israel itself it's like that I think look initially there is going to be a massive unity around prosecuting this struggle the shock as I say with the numerous casualties and youngsters and women and children and grandmothers abducted by Hamas gunmen that's

going to be a huge shock to the system but remember for a year or more prior to this war Israeli society has been deeply divided the prime minister has taken on ever more extreme political allies on the right wing millions of Israelis have been out in the street demonstrating against many of his proposed reforms which have been seen as anti-democratic and so on so I think when the dust settles eventually when this war is over there is going to be a huge political reckoning and it isn't just going to be you know blaming the military or the intelligence services for failures and there were clearly failures and lapses but I think a lot of it is going to come back to Mr Netanyahu's door as well what about efforts to end the crisis UN Security Council meeting later there's also calls for an emergency Arab League meeting I'm sure we will see all the panoply of diplomatic meetings that you would expect to see in such circumstances but I think given the scale of the casualties so far given that Israel's perceived need to reestablish some kind of deterrence we are not going to see a rapid end to this crisis and it's all complicated of course by the large number of hostages that the Hamas government have taken back to Gaza defense and diplomatic analyst Jonathan Marcus and that is all from us for now the global news podcast will be back very soon this edition was mixed by Ricardo McCarthy and produced by Siobhan Lehi our editors Karen Martin I'm Oliver Conway until next time goodbye