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Israel's Operation Swords of Iron Update February 16, 2024

JINSA's [Israel at War](#) webpage is a dedicated resource for analysis, commentary, webinars, and media coverage about the 10/7 attacks and the ensuing Israel-Hamas conflict. Next week, JINSA will release the Swords of Iron Update on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday. An update with the latest information and analysis about the war is below.

Analysis

- During a February 15 JINSA [webinar](#) about the Israel-Hamas war and escalating Hezbollah attacks, JINSA Distinguished Fellow IDF MG (ret.) Yaakov Amidror said, "I think that Israel does not have any other option but to go to take Rafah in the way that we did in the other parts of the Gaza Strip. This is the last stronghold of Hamas. We don't know what is there under the ground and on the ground. Maybe when we pushed the leadership from the north to the south ... it is logical to assume that some of them or all of them went down to Rafah."
 - » Amidror also explained the evolution of Hezbollah's tactics against Israel since October 7: "At the beginning, Hezbollah tried to bring to the border teams of Palestinians [to] infiltrate into Israel ... I think there were seven attempts ... they never succeeded to cross the border ... and Hezbollah moved to another option, and they use rockets, missiles, and many anti-tank missiles. Why? Because [they are] so low that the Iron Dome cannot intercept it. And the range is a good range, it's 10 kilometers ... and most of their targets are empty real estate."

Last 48 Hours

Attacks Against Israel

- At least 13,000 rockets, mortars, drones, and other projectiles have been [fired](#) at Israel during the war.
- On February 16, six people were wounded in a shooting [attack](#) targeting a bus stop near the central Israeli town of Gedera, according to Magen David Adom medics, and two [victims](#) eventually succumbed to their injuries.

Gaza

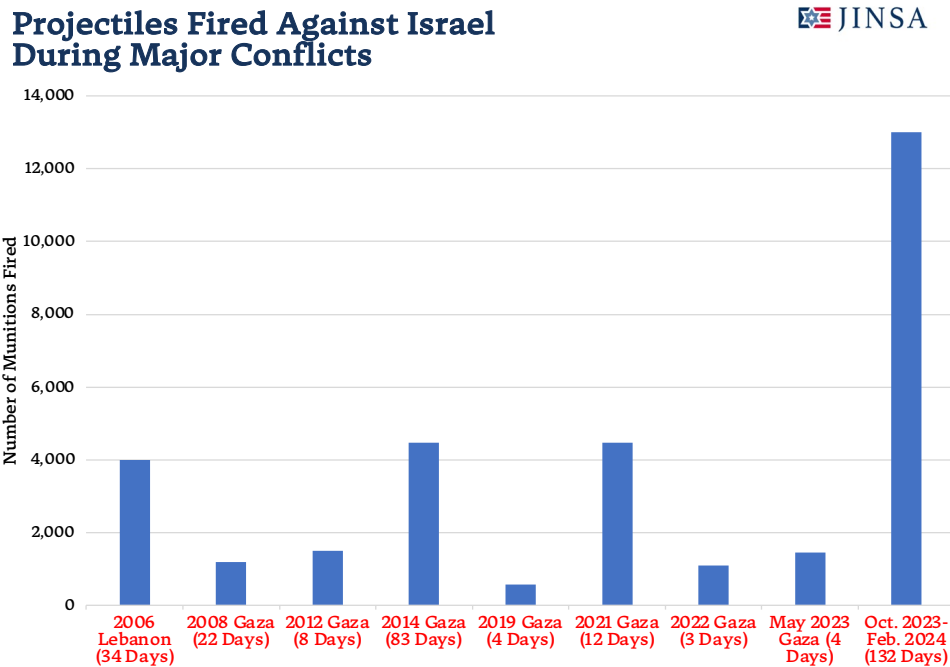
- Sirens sounded in [Zikim and Ashkelon](#).

Lebanon

- Rockets struck [Kiryat Shmona](#) and [Margalit](#), and sirens sounded in [Kiryat Shmona](#).
- On February 16, a projectile [fired](#) from Lebanon exploded in the northern Israeli city of Kiryat Shmona, causing damage to a building. The projectile was reportedly part of a barrage of about four rockets fired from Lebanon. No injuries were reported.
- On February 16, a projectile [fired](#) from Lebanon struck a chicken coop on a property in the northern Israeli town of Margalit, killing many chickens and causing property damage.
- On February 15, terrorists in Lebanon [fired](#) roughly 20 rockets toward Kiryat Shmona in Israel's north, causing blackouts in certain areas but no injuries.
- The IDF [said](#) on February 14 that the rocket barrage that day that killed one in Safed consisted of 11 imprecise Grad rockets. Nine struck unpopulated areas, and the remaining two struck infrastructure, including an IDF base.

West Bank

- On February 15, *i24 News* [reported](#) that Israel confiscated six drones found in United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) donations supplied to the West Bank via Jordan.



IDF Operations

Gaza

- On February 16, the IDF [conducted](#) airstrikes against a number of Hamas targets across Gaza, striking Hamas's operations headquarters, military facilities, projectile launchers, and additional targets.
- On February 16, the IDF's Paratroopers Brigade [raided](#) several Hamas targets in the southern Gazan city of Khan Younis, killing two Hamas operatives. The IDF Armored Corps' 7th Brigade killed 12 terrorists that day in Khan Younis.

- On February 16, the IDF's Nahal Brigade [eliminated](#) several terrorist operatives during operations in central Gaza.
- Israeli government spokesperson Eylon Levy [announced](#) on X on February 15 that “the @IDF is conducting a precise & limited operation in the Nasser Hospital, after issuing adequate warning for Hamas to stop abusing it for military purposes. The goal is to reach Hamas terrorists, including suspected October 7 perpetrators. Suspects have been apprehended.”
 - » IDF spokesperson Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari [said](#) that evening during a press conference that the IDF arrested dozens of individuals during the operation, including two who participated in the October 7 massacre. On February 16, the IDF [said](#) that it had arrested 20 perpetrators of the brutal attack and apprehended dozens more for interrogation. The military also said that it confiscated weapons.
 - » In a [video](#) of an interrogation that the IDF published, a captured Hamas operative admitted that it held 10 hostages captive in the hospital.
- On February 15, the IDF [conducted](#) strikes in the southern Gazan city of Khan Younis, eliminating at least 15 Hamas operatives, including terrorists who participated in the October 7 attack.
- On February 15, the IDF announced it had [eliminated](#) several terrorists, including a Hamas commander, in strikes across the Gaza Strip. The IDF said strikes also eliminated underground targets, weapons caches, and rocket launchers.
- On February 14, the IDF and Israel's internal security agency Shin Bet jointly [announced](#) the killing of a commander in Hamas's Shati Battalion, Ahmed Ghoul, in a drone strike in Gaza City that day.
 - » Ghoul participated in the October 7 attack and also [guarded](#) IDF soldier Cpl. Noa Marciano while Hamas held her hostage in Gaza's Shifa Hospital until she was murdered by the terror group.
- On February 14, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [said](#) on social media, “we will fight until complete victory,” and “this includes a powerful operation also in Rafah after we will allow the civilian population to leave battle zones.”
- Prime Minister Netanyahu [said](#) in a filmed statement on February 14, “this week we freed two of our hostages in a careful military operation,” and “so far we have freed 112 of our hostages with a combination of strong military pressure and firm negotiations. This is also the key to freeing more of our captives — strong military pressure and firm negotiations.”
 - » He also said, “I insist that Hamas drop its delusional demands, and when they drop these demands we can move forward.”
- On February 14, the IDF's Arabic-language spokesperson Lt. Col. Avichay Adraee [claimed](#) that *Al Jazeera* reporter Ismail Abu Omar, who was injured in an IDF airstrike near Rafah on February 13, was also a deputy commander of the East Khan Younis Battalion of Hamas.

Lebanon

- On February 16, the IDF [said](#) that it killed “several terrorists” in airstrikes targeting a Hezbollah facility in the southern Lebanese town of Qantara and struck additional Hezbollah military targets in the area.
- On February 15, the IDF [said](#) that it killed Ali Muhammad al-Debes and his deputy, Hassan Ibrahim Issa, in an airstrike targeting a building in Lebanon's south. The IDF specified that

al-Debes was a commander of Hezbollah's elite Radwan unit and that he orchestrated the March 2023 roadside bombing in Israel's Megiddo Junction that wounded a civilian.

- On February 15, the IDF [struck](#) Hezbollah facilities in the southern Lebanese towns of Qantara, Labbouneh, Taybeh, and Yarine in response to earlier rocket attacks.
- An unnamed Lebanese security source [told AFP](#) on February 14 that "three civilians [are] dead in the Israeli strike [in Nabatiyeh in Lebanon], including two women." The Israeli strike followed a deadly rocket barrage from Lebanon targeting the northern Israeli city of Safed that killed an IDF soldier.

West Bank

- On February 15, the IDF [said](#) that it, the Shin Bet internal security agency, and Israel's Border Police apprehended 12 wanted individuals in the West Bank on February 14. The forces seized six devices for producing ammunition and equipment in Ramallah used to disseminate Hamas materials.

Humanitarian Efforts

- On February 14, after the Knesset voted 33-10 in favor of a preliminary reading for a bill barring UNRWA operations on state-owned land in Israel, Israeli MK Boaz Bismuth [said](#), "UNRWA serves as a platform for incitement and education to hatred of Israel and harm of its Jewish residents. In the schools that it operates in Jerusalem, antisemitic content is studied, and the textbooks glorify terrorists who have murdered women and children."
- On February 14, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [said](#), "we're looking for a temporary pause as part of the hostage deal, and then to build on that into something more enduring," and "what that looks like exactly, on what parameters, where Hamas fits into that all, those are things we're going to have to work through with our partners in Israel and with others."
 - » He also said, "the idea is that you have multiple phases as part of the hostage deal, and you try to move from one phase to the next so that the initial period of the pause can be extended."

Post-War Planning

- On February 15, Israel's *Channel 12* reported that Israel's military intelligence, Aman, circulated a document to Israel's leaders on February 11 asserting that even if the IDF succeeds in dismantling Hamas as an organized force, it will [survive](#) as "a terror group and a guerrilla group."
 - » The intelligence document, drafted by Aman's research division, also said that absent a plan for the "day after" in the Gaza Strip, the enclave "will become an area in deep crisis."
 - » The document also reportedly states that "authentic support remains" for Hamas among the people of Gaza.
- During a February 15 interview with the Saudi outlet *Asharq al-Awsat*, Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas [said](#), "we have been and continue to be responsible for Gaza, and we will remain so."
 - » He also said, "we've had several meetings with top US officials, including [US Secretary of State Antony] Blinken, [National Security Advisor Jake] Sullivan and [CIA Director

William] Burns, and they've assured us of their commitment to the two-state solution and supporting peace efforts based on international law.”

- » Abbas argued that U.S. support for Israel impedes movement toward Palestinian statehood, that Palestinians are independent decision-makers, and that there is no “Israeli partner” for peace.
- On February 15, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) director Richard Kozul-Wright [said](#) that if the war in Gaza “stops now,” the reconstruction costs to rehabilitate Gaza would be around \$20 billion.
 - » Kozul-Wright also noted that a new “Marshall Plan” is needed, a reference to the U.S. economic recovery program for Europe after World War II.
 - » According to Kozul-Wright, the \$20 billion estimate is based on satellite imagery. He noted that a more precise estimate would require researchers to enter Gaza to conduct an analysis.
- During a press conference on February 14, U.S. State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller [said](#), “you saw a number of issues [in Hamas’s demands amid hostage negotiations] that were obvious non-starters, for example, the status of Al-Aqsa is not going to be resolved in a negotiation of hostages.”
 - » He added, “it is extremely unfortunate that, at times, that [Kerem Shalom] crossing has been blocked [by protesters]. We have engaged with the Israeli government and made clear that it is the position of the United States that [the crossing] ought to remain open and they ought to take whatever steps they can to make sure that it remains open.”

Casualties and Hostages

- Over 1,200 people were [killed](#) in Israel, and 13,000 Israelis have been [injured](#) in the war.
 - » 572 Israeli soldiers have been killed.
 - 235 IDF soldiers have been [killed](#) during ground combat in Gaza so far.
 - The IDF [announced](#) the deaths of Staff Sgt. Rotem Sahar Hadar, 20, from Kfar Aviv, and [Staff Sgt. Noam Haba, 20, from Jerusalem](#).
 - » Numerous foreign nationals have been killed in the war, including at least 33 [American](#) nationals, 34 [Thai](#) nationals, 39 [French](#) nationals, 19 [Russian](#) nationals, 12 [British](#) nationals, 10 [Nepalese](#) nationals, 9 [Argentinian](#) nationals, 6 [Canadian](#) nationals, 4 [Philippines](#) nationals, 4 [Austrian](#) nationals, 4 [Romanian](#) nationals, 4 [Portuguese](#) nationals, 4 [Chinese](#) nationals, 3 [Brazilian](#) nationals, 3 [Belarusian](#) nationals, 3 [Italian](#) nationals, 3 [Peruvian](#) nationals, a [Cambodian](#) national, a [Chilean](#) national, an [Irish](#) national, a [Spanish](#) national, an [Australian](#) national, an [Azeri](#) national, a [Honduran](#) national, a [Swiss](#) national, a [Tanzanian](#) national, and a [Turkish](#) national.
- According to unverified figures from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Health Ministry, at least 28,775 people have been [killed](#) in Gaza, and 68,552 have been injured during the war.
 - » On October 25, 2023, President Biden [cautioned](#) against trusting Gaza Health Ministry casualty figures, stating: “I have no notion that the Palestinians are telling the truth about how many people are killed ... I have no confidence in the number that the Palestinians are using.”
- According to the Palestinian Authority-run Palestinian Ministry of Health, at least 394 people have been [killed](#), and an additional 4,440 have been [wounded](#) in the West Bank.

- The IDF [claims](#) that it has killed at least 1,500 infiltrators from Gaza since the start of the war.
- So far, [105](#) hostages in Gaza have been released, [three](#) have been rescued by the IDF, [seven](#) have been [found](#) dead, three have been [mistakenly](#) killed by the IDF, and one was [killed](#) during an IDF attempt to rescue him.
 - » 81 Israeli hostages have been released.
 - » 46 hostages with foreign nationalities—some also holding Israeli citizenship—have been released.
 - Thus far, 23 [Thai](#) nationals, 6 [Argentinian](#) nationals, 5 [German nationals](#), 3 [French](#) nationals, 4 [Russian nationals](#), 1 [Dutch](#) national, 1 [Filipino national](#), 1 [Mexican](#) national, 1 [Uruguayan](#) national, and 1 [American](#) national have been released.
 - Hamas has released [36 children](#) and still holds two as hostages.
- Israel has said that terrorists in Gaza currently [hold](#) 134 hostages, and according to IDF spokesman Rear Adm Daniel Hagari, the IDF has [notified](#) the families of 31 of the 136 hostages that their loved ones died, including two who were abducted prior to October 7.
 - » Many of the hostages are foreign or dual nationals, including up to 8 [American](#) nationals, 6 [German](#) nationals, 13 [Thai](#) nationals, 4 [Portuguese](#) nationals, 3 [British](#) nationals, 2 [Italian](#) nationals, 4 [Romanian](#) nationals, and 2 [Mexican](#) nationals.

Iranian Involvement and Response

- On February 15 at approximately 4:30 p.m. local time, the Iran-backed Houthis [launched](#) an anti-ship ballistic missile toward the Gulf of Aden at the MV *Lycavitos*, a Barbados-flagged, U.K.-owned and -operated bulk carrier. The ship reported no injuries but very minor damage and continued its voyage.

U.S. and International Response

- On February 15, U.S. President Joe Biden [spoke by phone](#) with Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.
 - » According to a White House readout, the two leaders discussed hostage negotiations, and President Biden “reaffirmed his commitment to working tirelessly to support the release of all hostages as soon as possible, recognizing their appalling situation after 132 days in Hamas captivity.”
 - » The readout stated that the two discussed “the urgency of ensuring that humanitarian assistance is able to get to Palestinian civilians in desperate need.”
 - » The readout also noted that President Biden “raised the situation in Rafah, and reiterated his view that a military operation should not proceed without a credible and executable plan for ensuring the safety of and support for the civilians in Rafah.”
- On February 15, the U.S. House of Representatives [passed](#) with a vote of 418-0 a resolution condemning Hamas’s use of rape and sexual violence during the October 7 attack. Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) voted present.
- On February 15 between 3:10 p.m. and 8 p.m. local time, the United States [struck](#) three Houthi anti-ship cruise missiles that were prepared to target ships in the Red Sea.

- On February 15, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby [reinforced](#) the U.S. position that Hamas is a terrorist organization in the wake of UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths' claim that it is not. Kirby argued, "Hamas is a terrorist organization. We've said so. It is. It just is. You don't have to look any further than what they did on the seventh of October to see it in stark terms."
 - » Kirby added, "take a look at their manifesto, even the one that was so-called watered down in 2017. There's no doubt that they just want to wipe out Israel off the face of the map. This is a terrorist organization. Pure and simple. Period,"
 - » On February 14, Griffiths had said during a *Sky News* [interview](#) that "Hamas is not a terrorist group for us, as you know, it is a political movement. But, I think it is very very difficult to dislodge these groups without a negotiated solution, which includes their aspirations." He added, "I cannot think of an example offhand of a place where a victory through warfare has succeeded against a well-entrenched group, terrorist or otherwise."
 - » Griffiths later [clarified](#) on February 15 that "Hamas is not on the list of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United Nations Security Council. This doesn't make their acts of terror on 7 October any less horrific and reprehensible, as I've been saying all along."
- On February 15, *NBC News* [reported](#) that the U.S. had recently conducted a cyber attack against the MV *Behshad*, an Iranian warship that had been collecting intelligence on cargo vessels in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The cyber attack, which occurred more than a week before the report, reportedly intended to diminish the ship's ability to share intelligence with the Iran-backed Houthis as they continue to carry out maritime attacks.
- On February 14 between 1 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. local time, the United States [struck](#) seven Houthi anti-ship cruise missiles, three drones, and one explosive unmanned surface vessel (USV) that were prepared to target ships in the Red Sea.
- On February 14, the U.S. Department of Treasury [sanctioned](#) a procurement network "responsible for facilitating the illegal export of goods and technology from over two dozen U.S. companies to end-users in Iran, including the Central Bank of Iran."
 - » Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian E. Nelson said in a statement, "the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) has played a critical role in providing financial support to the IRGC-QF and Hizballah, two key actors intent on further destabilizing the Middle East."
 - » According to a Department of Treasury press release, the designations "target three individuals and four entities tied to the procurement of sophisticated U.S. technology for use by CBI in violation of U.S. export restrictions and sanctions."
- *The Washington Post* [reported](#) on February 14 that during the coming weeks the United States and Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Palestinian representatives might announce a plan to foster Israeli-Palestinian peace and bring about a Palestinian state.
 - » The report indicated that the components of the plan under discussion are an Israeli "withdrawal of many, if not all, settler communities on the West Bank; a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem; the reconstruction of Gaza; and security and governance arrangements for a combined West Bank and Gaza."

- » In addition, the report said that there is “hope” that the plan will involve security guarantees for Israel and normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia and other regional countries.
- On February 14, the U.S. Office of Palestinian Affairs [said](#) in a statement posted on X, “we are devastated by the killing of 17-year-old U.S. citizen Mohammad Ahmad Khdour.”
 - » The statement also added, “we urgently call for a quick, thorough, and transparent investigation, including full accountability.”
 - » According to *The Washington Post*, Khdour was shot and killed on February 10 in the West Bank town of Bidu under unclear circumstances.
 - » Palestinian activist groups [asserted](#) that Khdour was shot by Israeli forces, and the State Department requested additional information from Israel regarding the incident earlier this week. The IDF has said its forces were not present at the location of the incident when the shooting took place.
- On February 14, Congress held a closed [event](#) on Capitol Hill during which two Israel Police officers and a doctor who treated victims of the October 7 massacre briefed members of the Biden administration and Congress about ongoing investigations into sexual violence during the attack.
 - » After attending the event, Rep. Debbie Wasserman-Schultz (D-FL) said, “I can’t go into the specifics of the investigations and the details that were shared with us, but I have never seen more sadistic evil perpetrated against another human than in the photos and videos that we saw earlier this morning.”
 - She also said, “the evidence is abundant and beyond compelling. Through survivors coming forward, witnesses, video footage and independent analysis, we know that Hamas’ use of sexual violence including rape, mutilation, and brutality was not an anomaly. It was a premeditated part of its strategy to purposefully use sexual violence as a weapon against innocent civilians.”
 - » Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff said, “the evidence is there...you cannot ignore the facts and the evidence when they’re right in your face. Do not ignore it. You cannot deny it,” and “we need to be able to clearly and unequivocally denounce this violence against women no matter what your thoughts or feelings are about any other issue that is happening with this conflict.”
 - » Israel’s Ambassador to the United States Mike Herzog added, “this is about basic human values. This is about humanity. And when you understand that, you understand why the Israeli sense of security... was shattered on [October] 7.”
- U.S. State Department spokesperson Mathew Miller [condemned](#) Israel’s demolition of Palestinian activist Fakhri Abu Diab’s home in Silwan, East Jerusalem, which Israel claimed was because he did not have the correct permits.
 - » Miller argued that “these acts obstruct efforts to advance a durable and lasting peace and security that would benefit not just Palestinians but Israelis...They damage Israel’s standing in the world, and they make it ultimately more difficult for us to accomplish all the things we’re trying to accomplish that would ultimately be in the interest of the Israeli people, and so we condemn them and will continue to urge that they not continue.”
- On February 16, a German spokesperson [said](#) that the German government has approved the deployment of Germany’s armed forces as part of the European Union’s naval mission to protect Red Sea shipping, Aspides.

- » Germany’s participation in the mission still requires parliamentary approval, and a vote has been scheduled for February 23. According to Reuters, the vote is “widely expected to go through.”
- » France, Greece, and Italy are among the other nations currently participating in Aspides. A German air defense frigate was sent to the naval mission earlier this month.
- A February 15 Associated Press [report](#) indicated that satellite imagery has shown Egypt building a wall and leveling land near its border with Gaza, possibly in anticipation of Palestinians leaving Rafah once Israel begins its ground operation.
- On February 15, Prime Minister of Australia Anthony Albanese, Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau, and Prime Minister of New Zealand Christopher Luxon released a [statement](#) that read, “we are gravely concerned by indications that Israel is planning a ground offensive into Rafah” because of humanitarian risks, and “we urged the Israeli government not to go down this path.”
 - » The statement also noted that “Palestinian civilians cannot be made to pay the price of defeating Hamas” and that “an immediate humanitarian ceasefire is urgently needed.”
 - » Referencing South Africa’s accusation at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza, the statement noted that “the [ICJ] has been clear: Israel must ensure the delivery of basic services and essential humanitarian assistance and must protect civilians.”
 - » The leaders called on Hamas to “lay down its arms and release all hostages immediately” and condemned the group’s October 7 massacre. They also endorsed “the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, where Palestinians and Israelis live side by side in peace, security, and dignity.”
- On February 14, Germany’s Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock [stated](#) that Germany is asking the European Union to examine joint sanctions against West Bank settlers involved in violence against Palestinians. Baerbock stated, “let’s agree on sanctions together in Europe. For this, we need all 27 member states. We, as Germans, have pushed this on the European path.”
 - » Baerbock also cautioned Israel against conducting a major military operation in Rafah, arguing that “if the Israeli army were to launch an offensive on Rafah under these conditions, it would be a humanitarian catastrophe.”
- On February 14, U.K. Foreign Secretary David Cameron [said](#) that Britain wants an “absolute guarantee” that UNRWA will not employ staff who are willing to attack Israel, saying, “let’s be clear here that it looks as if there were people working for UNRWA who took part in the October 7 attacks on Israel. That is unacceptable. That’s why we paused our funding.”

Rising Antisemitism, Islamophobia, Protests, and Attacks

- On February 15, American Jewish singer Matisyahu [accused](#) two music venues of antisemitism after they both canceled his concerts hours before they were due to start. Although both theaters cited unspecified safety concerns, Matisyahu said, “They do this because they are either antisemitic or have confused their empathy for the Palestinian people with hatred for someone like me who holds empathy for both Israelis and Palestinians.” Local pro-Palestinian groups [claimed](#) to be responsible for the cancellation.
- On February 14, Italian police [conducted](#) raids in the homes of 24 individuals under investigation for distributing material glorifying Hitler and Mussolini during an event in

Ferrara's Jewish quarter. The suspects levied death threats toward bystanders who attempted to intervene.

- On February 14, police in Paris, France [arrested](#) a 35-year-old man for an antisemitic stabbing attack earlier this week. The man had previous complaints filed with the police against him by the victim for antisemitic threats.

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