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Israel's Operation Swords of Iron Update March 18, 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. JINSA will release the Swords of Iron Update on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. An update with the latest information and analysis about the war is below.

Analysis

- The IDF's [operation](#) on March 18 to seize control of the Shifa Hospital and arrest roughly 80 terror suspects and kill several Hamas operatives, including Faiq Mabhouh, the head of operations in Hamas's internal security force, marks an important step toward degrading the terrorist group's capabilities in Gaza. Hamas's presence at the Shifa Hospital, which the IDF had previously controlled, also indicates that Hamas continues to operate in northern Gaza and is seeking to retake areas where the IDF has decreased its presence.
- On March 15, John Hannah, Elliott Abrams, Lewis Libby, and Rob Danin, who are members of the Gaza Futures Task Force, a joint project by JINSA and the Vandenberg Coalition, joined JINSA's Director of Foreign Policy Jonathan Ruhe for a [webinar](#) to discuss the Task Force's new report [The Day After: A Plan for Gaza](#), which recommended establishing an International Trust for Gaza Relief and Reconstruction.
 - » JINSA's Randi and Charles Wax Senior Fellow, Member of the Vandenberg Advisory Board, and the Task Force's chair, John Hannah, explained that "defeating Hamas is essential. It's essential to Israel ... It's essential to restoring Israel's broader deterrence in the region ... It's also critical for giving Arab states renewed confidence that they can move forward with things like [normalization with Israel] ... It should go without saying that absent an Israeli defeat of Hamas, it will be impossible to ... build any kind of better Palestinian future."
 - » Vandenberg Coalition Chairman and Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations Elliott Abrams noted that "some of the ideas [for a day after in Gaza that others envisioned] immediately present the downside. The notion that Israel should remain in Gaza ... [like] after the '67 war ... in the face of a population that would presumably be quite resistant to this, seemed like a really bad idea, certainly to most Israelis, but to us as well ... [and the] same conclusion when it comes to the United States."
 - » Former White House, Pentagon, and State Department national security official and member of the Vandenberg Advisory Board Lewis Libby indicated that the Trust "does

not have an international mandate to run Gaza, it is an entity that would help people do it, including local Gazans ... Then it would work towards ... governance, or rather issues like that to help the Gazans govern themselves ... and they could do that through education efforts, through deradicalization efforts.”

- » Principal at Georgetown Global Strategies and Middle East Counselor at Dragoman Rob Danin argued that the Trust is "something that can be used immediately ... while some of these larger aspirations and goals [like a Palestinian state] are being sorted out ... [Some of those issues] in some sense, they're theoretical debates that are not about to happen today under any circumstances ... [but the Trust] provides an immediate solution to some real immediate needs.”

Last 72 Hours

Attacks Against Israel

- At least 15,000 rockets, mortars, drones, and other projectiles have been fired at Israel from all fronts combined during the war, according to JINSA data.
- On March 17, Israel's cabinet [approved](#) the 24th day of the Hebrew month of Tishrei as an annual national day to commemorate the October 7 massacre and ensuing war, which will involve two yearly ceremonies—one for soldiers killed during the war and one for victims of Hamas's massacre.

Gaza

- Sirens [sounded](#) in Nahal Oz, [Sderot](#), and [Kibbutz Mefalsim](#).
- On March 16, *The Times of Israel* cited a [report](#) from Israel's *Channel 12* indicating that IDF soldiers confiscated documents in Gaza detailing plans for the October 7 massacre that Marwan Issa, Hamas's third-highest-ranking member whom Israel targeted in a recent airstrike, signed. According to the report, the documents indicated that Hamas leaders kept the attack secret by informing commanders of the plans hours before the terror group carried them out.
- On March 15, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) [claimed responsibility](#) for two rockets that were fired at Sderot. One of the rockets was intercepted, and the other landed in an open area.

Lebanon

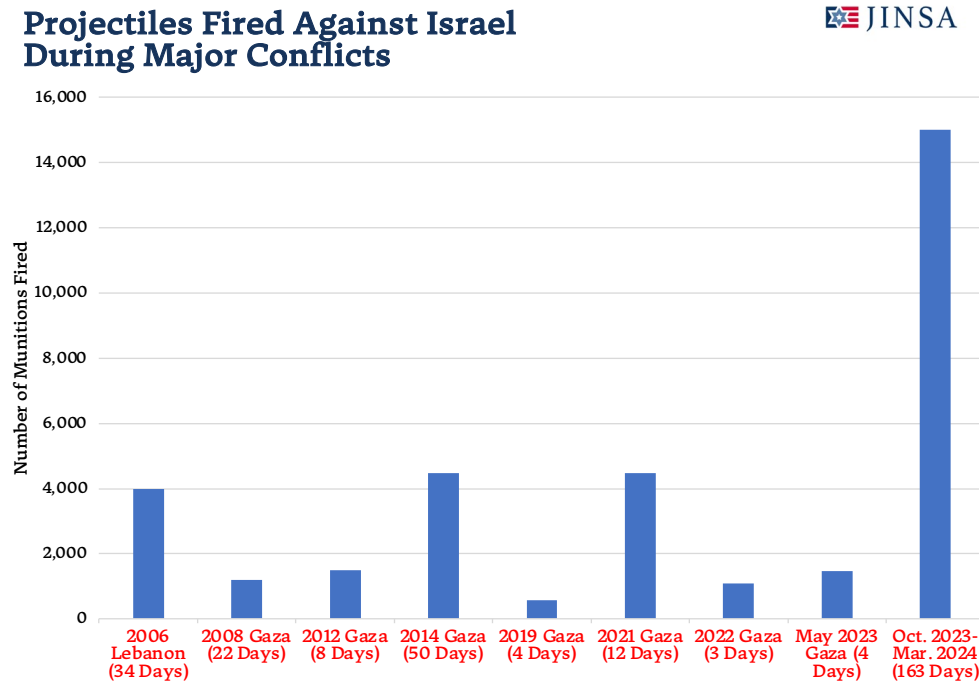
- Sirens sounded in [Hanita](#), [Kiryat Shmona](#), [Yesod Hama'ala](#), and [Hulata](#).
- On March 18, suspected drone infiltration alarms also [sounded](#) in Sde Nehemia, Amir, Gonen, Shamir, Kfar Blum, Kfar Szold, Neot Mordechai, and Lehavot Habashan. The IDF said the incident concluded without providing further detail.
- On March 17, the IDF [said](#) a “suspicious aerial target” was intercepted near Acre.
- On March 16, terrorists in Lebanon [fired](#) projectiles toward Mount Dov, Malkia, and Misgav Am. No injuries were reported.
- Hebrew-language [reports](#) from March 16 indicated that tourists discovered an enemy drone, which police subsequently destroyed, in Ramat Sirin near the southern end of the Sea of Galilee.

West Bank

- The IDF [said](#) on March 16 that it shot and killed the terrorist who fired at an Israeli neighborhood near Hebron that day. The terrorist’s attack did not inflict injuries.

Red Sea

- On March 18, the IDF [said](#) that a “suspicious aerial target” had crossed into Israeli territory from the Red Sea, landing in an open area north of Eilat. According to the statement, there were no injuries or damage.



IDF Operations

Gaza

- On March 18, IDF troops [took control](#) of Shifa Hospital in Gaza City after receiving intelligence that Hamas operatives arrived there and sought to turn the hospital into a command-and-control center.
 - » The IDF arrested approximately 80 terror suspects and killed several Hamas operatives, including [Faiq Mabhouh](#), the head of operations in Hamas’s internal security force who was responsible for “synchronization” of various Hamas units in Gaza during the war. During the operation, IDF soldiers seized weapons caches from inside the hospital.
 - » Videos posted to social media [appeared](#) to show civilians evacuating in an orderly manner from the facility, and other videos uploaded to social media appear to show parts of the hospital engulfed in flames.
- On March 17, the IDF [detailed](#) its ongoing operations against Hamas in central Gaza, where the Nahal Brigade eliminated approximately 18 Hamas members during the past day, and in the southern Gazan city of Khan Younis, where the Givati and 7th Armored Brigades killed numerous Hamas combatants and confiscated weapons.

- On March 17, the IDF said it [destroyed](#) part of one of the longest Hamas tunnels in the northern Gaza Strip, demolishing about 2.5 kilometers of a network that connected various Hamas battalions and brigades in northern and southern Gaza.
- Israel's President Isaac Herzog [told](#) Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz during a March 17 meeting in Jerusalem that Israel's "prime objective" in the war is freeing the hostages held in Hamas captivity. Herzog also stated that the war was being "waged by the proxies of Iran in our region."
- On March 17, IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzi Halevi [said](#), "in war, it is very important to allow the commanders on the battlefield the freedom required to carry out their missions, I trust them and appreciate them very much. In the same breath, I say the obvious: It is impossible to fight when the discipline and rules are not clear and not strict."
 - » He added, "the balance between them is the key to success. A commander cannot override an order without authorization if there is no operational, clear, and urgent need or reason for this," and "commanders who violated the rules will be investigated and dealt with as soon as possible. This is our duty."
 - » He noted further that despite commanders' bravery, "in places where they made a mistake or deviated from the orders, there was learning. There were also disciplinary and command measures amid the fighting."
 - » Halevi's words come in the wake of the IDF's March 15 [announcement](#) that Halevi issued a "severe reprimand" to 98th Division commander, Brig. Gen. Dan Goldfus, who previously urged Israeli politicians to "be worthy of us." Halevi informed Goldfus that he "used the trust given to him in a way that harmed the dignity of the IDF, and the boundaries between the political and military echelons in a democratic country."
- On March 17, Israel's Defense Minister Yoav Gallant [said](#) following a visit to an IDF base in central Israel, "thanks to the ground operation, we reached information that led to [eliminations] and successes. This is true for northern Gaza, the central camps in Nuseirat, and Rafah." *The Times of Israel* noted that this might be a reference to a successful targeting of high-ranking Hamas military commander Marwan Issa.
 - » Referring to recent operations against Hamas operatives, including the one against Issa, IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzi Halevi [said](#) on March 17 that the military has "attacked senior Hamas commanders ... whose fate Hamas tries very hard to hide."
 - » He added, "we embarked on this operation after many days of complex planning, creating the operational conditions, and gathering sufficient intelligence. This is a very important achievement for the IDF. A capability we have built over the years together with the Shin Bet, a combination of high-quality intelligence and precise fire from the Air Force, which enables the elimination of senior officials underground."
 - » He said further, "this attack is an expression of the IDF's ability to reach the most complex places, at the right time, and with high precision. We will continue the effort to eliminate the senior officials. This is a major goal in the war."
- On March 17, British outlet *The Guardian* [reported](#) that Hamas leaders stopped communicating with one another for 72 hours after Israel struck Marwan Issa, which the group has historically done numerous times following Israeli assassinations of Hamas leaders. The outlet also suggested that Israel is gleaning intelligence from high-level Hamas operatives.

- On March 16, the IDF [said](#) the Nahal Infantry Brigade had killed more than 250 Hamas operatives in the central Gaza Strip over the past two weeks in gun battles and by calling in airstrikes and tank shelling.
- On March 16, the IDF [outlined](#) additional details of its ongoing operations against Hamas in central Gaza and in Khan Younis. The IDF said that it killed approximately 15 Hamas operatives in an airstrike in Nuseirat in central Gaza on March 15 and that it targeted a weapons depot and two Hamas combatants with airstrikes in Khan Younis.
- On March 15, the IDF [said](#) that it had struck a rocket launcher site with aircraft and artillery shelling within minutes after it had fired a rocket targeting Sderot. PIJ [claimed](#) responsibility for the initial attack.

Lebanon

- Overnight on March 18, IDF fighter jets [struck](#) a building and observation post used by Hezbollah in the southern Lebanese town of Rameh.
- On March 17, the IDF [struck](#) a Hezbollah site in Naqoura.
- On March 17, the IDF [said](#) fighter jets struck Hezbollah sites in four areas of southern Lebanon, including a building in Aalma ash-Shab and observation posts in Ayta ash-Shab, Aitaroun, and Marwahin.
- Overnight on March 16, IDF fighter jets [struck](#) a building that Hezbollah had used in the southern Lebanese village of Tayr Harfa as well as infrastructure in Labbouneh.
- On March 16, the IDF [said](#) that it launched airstrikes against two buildings that Hezbollah used in Mays al-Jabal and Marwahin in Lebanon as well as a separate observation post for the terror group in Marwahin. The IDF added that it fired artillery toward the site of an earlier projectile attack targeting Mount Dov, Malkia, and Misgav Am in Israel.
- On March 15, the IDF [said](#) it struck Hezbollah infrastructure in several sites across southern Lebanon, including an observation post in Ayta ash-shab, a building in Aalma ash-Shab, and another site and building in Labbouneh. IDF troops also shelled areas near Hamoul and Houla with artillery to “remove threats.”
- On March 15, the IDF [carried out](#) airstrikes against Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon, including a military compound in Houla, a facility in Kafr Kila, and an observation post in Marwahin.

Syria

- Overnight on March 17, Israel reportedly [struck](#) at least two sites in Damascus province, including a weapons depot, and Syrian state media claimed that a Syrian soldier was wounded from the strikes.

West Bank

- On March 18, the IDF, Israel’s internal security agency Shin Bet, and Israel’s Border Police announced that they [conducted](#) raids overnight across the West Bank, arresting 14 terror suspects and locating weapons caches.

Humanitarian Efforts

- On March 18, a [report](#) from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, with which several UN agencies are involved, concluded that famine will likely afflict roughly 70% of

households in northern Gaza between now and May. The report also claimed that 1.1 million people, about half of Gaza's population, now face "catastrophic hunger."

- On March 18, Israel [denied](#) that it blocked Philippe Lazzarini, the head of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), from entering Gaza. Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry had claimed that Israel had stopped Lazzarini from entering during a joint press conference they held in Egypt.
- On March 16, the United States and Jordan jointly [conducted](#) an airdrop of humanitarian aid into Gaza. The airdrop consisted of "16 375-pound bundles of rice, flour, milk, pasta, and canned food," according to U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM).
- On March 16, Cyprus's foreign ministry [announced](#) that the second ship to use the maritime aid corridor for Cyprus to Gaza, the *Jennifer*, was ready to depart for Gaza "today or tomorrow." The ship will carry approximately 240 tons of food to Gaza as well as a crane and forklift to streamline the delivery process.
- The World Central Kitchen (WCK) announced on March 16 that its team on the ground in Gaza had finished [offloading](#) the charity's first shipment through the Cyprus-Gaza maritime aid corridor that day, and that the shipment was "being readied for distribution in Gaza." The shipment included around 200 tons of food.

Ceasefire and Hostage Negotiations

- On March 18, ceasefire and hostage negotiation talks will [resume](#) in Doha, Qatar with a meeting between Mossad chief David Barnea, Qatar's Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, and Egyptian envoys.
- On March 15, Reuters [reported](#) that Lebanon's foreign ministry sent a letter the same day to the French foreign ministry indicating that the Lebanese government views a French proposal to end fighting with Israel and resolve a border dispute as a possible "significant step" towards peace.
 - » The French proposal outlines three phases during which military operations would wind down and eventually cease, and Hezbollah and other terrorist groups would withdraw from southern Lebanon and be replaced by the Lebanese Armed Forces.
- Israel's *Walla* news site [reported](#) on March 15 that Hamas is demanding that Israel release over 1,000 Palestinian security prisoners, including approximately 100 who are serving lifetime sentences for murdering Israelis, in exchange for Hamas's release of 40 female, elderly, and wounded hostages.

Post-War Planning

- According to a March 15 report from *The Times of Israel* citing Israel's *Channel 13*, Israel's Defense Minister [said](#) during a cabinet meeting that day that local Gazans affiliated with the Palestinian Authority (PA) represented the best option to rule Gaza from Israel's standpoint.
 - » Gallant reportedly contended that Israel occupying the Gaza Strip permanently would siphon resources away from addressing security threats in the West Bank and Lebanon and would likely lead to high-profile incidents that would increase pressure from the international community against Israel.

- » Gallant advocated for local Palestinians governing Gaza, but with that government “look(ing) at what is being said in Ramallah,” the PA headquarters in the West Bank, every “once in a while.”
- » Israel’s Justice Minister Yariv Levin and Transportation and Road Safety Minister Miri Regev reportedly gave a scathing response to Gallant’s comments and asserted that he was “promoting the Palestinian Authority.”
- On March 15, Hamas sharply [criticized](#) PA President Mahmoud Abbas for appointing Mohammad Mustafa, a businessman who helped oversee the reconstruction of Gaza after a previous conflict, to be the next PA Prime Minister and oversee reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip.
 - » Hamas said in a statement that “making individual decisions and engaging in [superficial](#) and empty steps such as forming a new government without national consensus only reinforces a policy of unilateralism and deepens division.”
 - » When appointing Mustafa as prime minister on March 14, Abbas tasked Mustafa, Abbas’s longtime economic advisor, with [formulating](#) a plan to create a unified administrative government incorporating both the West Bank and Gaza, tackle corruption, and oversee reforms in the civil administration, security, and economic sectors.

Casualties and Hostages

- Over 1,200 people were [killed](#) in Israel, and 13,000 Israelis have been [injured](#) in the war.
 - » 593 Israeli soldiers have been [killed](#).
 - 250 IDF soldiers have been [killed](#) during ground combat in Gaza so far.
 - As of March 5, 1,453 IDF soldiers have been [injured](#) during ground combat in Gaza so far, including 303 who have been severely injured.
 - » Numerous foreign nationals have been killed in the war, including at least 34 [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 31,726 people have been [killed](#) in Gaza, and 73,792 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.”
 - » Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [said](#) on March 10 that Israel has killed approximately 13,000 Hamas operatives over the course of the war.
- According to the Palestinian Authority-run Palestinian Ministry of Health, 435 people have been [killed](#), and an additional 4,700 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 deceased hostage bodies.
 - » Israeli officials have confirmed the [deaths](#) of at least [35](#) of the 134 hostages captured on October 7, as well as two additional hostages who were abducted prior to October 7.
 - » Many of the hostages are foreign or dual nationals, including up to 5 [American](#) nationals, 6 [German](#) nationals, 13 [Thai](#) nationals, 4 [Portuguese](#) nationals, 3 [British](#) nationals, 2 [Italian](#) nationals, 4 [Romanian](#) nationals, and 2 [Mexican](#) nationals.
- On March 17, the IDF [announced](#) that Cpt. Daniel Perez, 22, from Yad Binyamin was killed and his body abducted during the October 7 attack.

Iranian Involvement and Response

- An Agence France-Presse [report](#) on March 17 cited a Houthi official who claimed that the group had discussed “expanding confrontations and encircling” Israel during a meeting last week in Lebanon with Hamas, PIJ, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.
- On March 17, British security firm Ambrey [reported](#) that a Yemeni fishing vessel was hijacked in the Gulf of Aden.
- On March 17, Ambrey also [reported](#) a detonation near a ship in the Gulf of Aden.
- On March 16, between 7:50 a.m. and 8:15 a.m. local time, the Iran-backed Houthis [launched](#) two drones from Yemen toward the Red Sea. U.S. forces destroyed one of the drones, and the other presumably crashed into the sea. There were no reported injuries or damage from the other drone.
- On March 15, between approximately 8:30 and 10:50 p.m. local time, the Houthis [launched](#) three anti-ship ballistic missiles from Yemen toward the Red Sea. The missiles caused no reported injuries or damage.
- On March 15, the U.S. Treasury [announced](#) sanctions against a number of Turkey- and United Arab Emirates (UAE)-based companies for acting as front companies for, and subsidiaries of, the Informatics Services Corporation, the technology arm of the Central Bank of Iran.

U.S. and International Response

- On March 17, Prime Minister Netanyahu responded during interviews on [Fox News](#) and [NBC News](#) to Senator Chuck Schumer's (D-NY) speech on March 14 calling for elections in Israel. Netanyahu claimed Schumer's comments were "totally inappropriate," that elections are "for the Israeli people to decide," and that "it's wrong to try to replace the elected leaders of a sister democracy, a staunch American ally, at any time, but especially during a time of war."
- On March 16, between 9 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. local time, the United States [struck](#) five Houthi unmanned surface vessels and one drone in Yemen that were prepared to target ships.
- On March 15, President Biden [argued](#) that Schumer "made a good speech ... He expressed serious concerns, shared not only by him, but by many Americans." Biden also stated, "Senator Schumer contacted my senior staff [to say] he was going to make that speech."
- On March 15, Secretary of State Antony Blinken [claimed](#) that the United States had still not seen a clear and implementable plan for Israeli operations in Rafah that would include moving civilians away from the fighting.
- On March 17, Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz traveled to Jordan and then Israel.
 - » In Jordan, Scholz met with Jordan's King Abdullah and later [said](#) that the high number of civilian casualties that he believes would result from an Israeli offensive into Rafah would make regional peace "very difficult."
 - » In Israel, Scholz [met](#) with Prime Minister Netanyahu, where he indicated at a joint press conference that Germany "stands with the people of Israel ... By fighting Hamas terrorists Israel is fighting a legitimate goal."
 - Scholz also [claimed](#) that "we need a hostage deal with a longer-lasting ceasefire ... We understand the hostage families who say after more than five months, 'the time has come for a comprehensive hostage deal for saving those who are still captive.'"

Rising Antisemitism, Islamophobia, Protests, and Attacks

- On March 17, *The New York Post* [reported](#) that a Lebanese migrant who was caught illegally crossing the U.S. border on March 9 outside of El Paso, Texas, admitted to being a member of Hezbollah and planning to build a bomb. According to U.S. Border Patrol documents, the migrant, 22-year-old Basel Bassel Ebbadi, planned to go to New York.
- On March 16, Tel Aviv police forcibly [dispersed](#) protesters who were blocking the Ayalon highway in Tel Aviv, using water cannons and horses. The protesters were calling for the release of the hostages and early elections.
- On March 16, the Florida Las Olas Chabad Jewish Center was [targeted](#) in an arson attack that damaged the synagogue, Hebrew school, and community center. The suspect, Scott Hannaford, 50, was a homeless man who had previously trespassed on the property.
- On March 15, President Biden [issued a statement](#) on the International Day to Combat Islamophobia, "we recognize the violence and hate that Muslims worldwide too often face because of their religious beliefs—and the ugly resurgence of Islamophobia in the wake of the devastating war in Gaza. Islamophobia has no place in our nation. Yet Muslims in the United States frequently endure baseless fear-mongering, blatant discrimination, harassment and violence in the course of their everyday lives."

Recent and Relevant JINSA Products About Israel at War

- Webinar: [Report Rollout: The Day After: A Plan for Gaza](#), with John Hannah, Elliott Abrams, Lewis Libby, Rob Danin, and Jonathan Ruhe, March 15, 2024
- Webinar: [Gaza Update 3/14](#), with IDF MG (ret.) Yaakov Amidror, IDF MG (ret.) Yaacov Ayish, and Jonathan Ruhe, March 14, 2024
- Webinar: [Until They All Come Home: Congressional Efforts to Help Free U.S. Hostages in Gaza](#), with Senator Ted Budd (R-NC) and Michael Makovsky, March 13, 2024
- Yoni Tobin and Myles Behar, [Egypt-Gaza Tunnels Pose Threat to Israel's War Aims](#), March 12, 2024
- John Hannah, Elliott Abrams, and Lewis Libby, "[The Day After: A Plan for Gaza](#)," *Fox News*, March 7, 2024
- The Gaza Futures Task Force, [The Day After: A Plan for Gaza](#), February 29, 2024
- The Gaza Futures Task Force, [The Day After Action Plan](#), February 29, 2024