

Dossier: Israel-Palestine Conflict

7 October 2023, and the Destruction of Gaza

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In the Mediterranean region, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the oldest and hardest to resolve. It perfectly epitomizes the settler colonial dynamic that has developed in Palestine from 1897 until today, the ripple effects of the conflict affecting the stability and security of the whole Middle East and the Euro-Mediterranean area. And it is a perfect example of structural asymmetry between the powerful State of Israel and a population that has been driven out of its land or is living under siege and occupation. In a certain sense, this is the mother of most conflicts in the region and “stability in the Middle East and across the Euro-Mediterranean area is dependent upon resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”¹

If all peace conferences, shuttle diplomacies and mediation efforts have pathetically failed to forge a just and lasting solution, it is mainly because of the dire misunderstanding of the root causes of the conflict, its centrality in the region and even its “global importance.”² The lethal Hamas attack of 7 October 2023, and the heartbreaking devastation of Gaza are a textbook example of this misunderstanding.

7 October was a horrific attack with many innocent Israelis killed, injured or kidnapped. But it is not the beginning of history: it is the result of a long history of denial, dispossession, and humiliation of the Pal-

estinian people. It is the history of 76 years of zero accountability and total immunity for Israel.

7 October shattered many illusions, first and foremost that the Palestinian question is not a central issue or that Israel can pursue its merciless occupation and rampant expansion while enjoying security and peace.

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7 October 2023

Hamas’ deadly attack, called “the Al-Aqsa deluge,” was the spark that started a geopolitical wildfire. The attack took everybody off guard. In one day, 1,200 Israelis were killed, and some 240 hostages were abducted. Fences and barriers were easily demolished. Israel’s surveillance technology was ridiculed. For the current government of Israel, led by Netanyahu, that attack amounted to a personal and strategic failure, Netanyahu priding himself as “Mr. Security” and often boasting that Israel has never known a more peaceful time, protected by a powerful army, and shielded by the Iron Dome system capable of intercepting rockets from Gaza and elsewhere.

Why the Israeli army was taken by surprise, despite many warnings, remains a cause of bewilderment and controversy. For the time being, questions about military and intelligence failures remain unanswered. But they will certainly be looked at in due course.

¹ CALLEYA, Stephen, *Security Challenges in the Euro-Med area in the 21st century: Mare Nostrum*, Routledge, London, 2013, p. 67

² COLLINS, John, *Global Palestine*, Hurst and Company, London, 2011.

What is sure, however, is that Israel's postulate was built on a series of illusions, aptly summarized by Joshua Leifer³: "that the Palestinians and their aspirations for freedom could be hidden behind concrete barriers and ignored; that any remaining resistance could be managed through a combination of technology and overwhelming firepower, and that the world, and especially Sunni Arab States, had grown so tired of the Palestinian issue that it could be removed from the global agenda, and consequently, that Israeli governments could do as they pleased and suffer no consequences." Hamas' attack put these assumptions to rest. It shattered Israel's society to the core. It discredited Netanyahu's vision for the future of Israel.

Yet, Israeli politicians and most commentators turned a blind eye to the very drivers behind the attack. For them, it was driven by "the murderous antisemitic hatred of Jews" and stems from a "Nazi-like mentality." For them, history begins on 7 October. The broader historical context is simply ignored or discarded: 57 years of tyrannical occupation, failed negotiations, rampant annexation, criminalization of non-violent resistance, four Israeli offensives in Gaza from 2008 until 2021, American complicity, European complacency and a general disillusionment with an international system that enabled Palestinian dispossession and eroded Palestine's "ability to employ non-violent means to change the status quo and achieve self-determination."⁴

The Jordanian Foreign Minister, Ayman Safadi, puts the debate in a nutshell: "It is the conflict that made Hamas, not Hamas that made the conflict." For Israel, this assumption is blasphemy. Worse, contextualizing is antisemitism. Not only can Israel not be criticized, but the mere hint to the suffering of the Occupied Palestinian people or a simple call for a ceasefire are deemed as an "apology of terrorism." Belgian Prime Minister, Alexander De Croo, and Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sanchez, have been accused of "supporting terrorism" just for

calling for a humanitarian ceasefire. Even the Pope has been reprimanded by Israel. Antonio Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations infuriated Israel just because he recognized that the Hamas attacks (which he vehemently condemned) "did not happen in a vacuum," adding that "the Palestinian people have been subjected to 56 years of suffocating occupation, their economy stifled, their people displaced and their homes demolished. And their hopes for a political solution to their plight have been vanishing." But he went on to reiterate that the "Hamas attacks cannot justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian People." The following day, Israel demanded that Guterres apologize and submit his resignation. For Netanyahu, Hamas is "Isis" and Israel's policy is an "anti-terror one." But the same Netanyahu asserted in 2019: "Those who want to thwart the establishment of a Palestinian state should support the strengthening of Hamas and the transfer of money

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to Hamas."⁵ For him, this is the guarantee that no unified Palestinian movement might arise. Receiving a Honoris Causa Doctorate from the University of Valladolid, on 19 January 2024, HR/VP Josep Borrell did not beat around the bush, saying that "Hamas was financed by the government of Israel in an attempt to weaken the Palestinian Authority led by Fatah."

³ *The Guardian*, 21 November 2023, www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/21/the-netanyahu-doctrine-how-israels-longest-serving-leader-reshaped-the-country-in-his-image.

⁴ SAMUEL, M.T.: "The Israel-Hamas war: historical context and international law." *Middle East Policy*, vol. 30, 4, winter 2023: 3-9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12723>.

⁵ *Haaretz*, 9 October 2023, www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-10-09/ty-article/.premium/another-concept-implodes-israel-cant-be-managed-by-a-criminal-defendant/0000018b-1382-d2fc-a59f-d39b5dbf0000?mid3846=open.

Immediate Motivations of Hamas

The broader context of the attack should not overshadow the immediate motivations. Without being exhaustive, I may suggest the following:

1. The siege of Gaza, which became an open-air prison, and the regular Israeli offensives, since 2007, had convinced Hamas that the situation had become unbearable and Gaza “uninhabitable.” In its first 16-page report on the 7 October attacks, made public on 20 January 2024, Hamas justified the attacks, stating that they were a “a necessary step” to “confronting all Israeli conspiracies against the Palestinian People.”
2. Hamas was losing popularity as it started to be perceived as another governing authority and not a “resistance movement.” By launching the attack, Hamas wanted to bolster its political fortunes and to prove that it remains the “real resistance” and the Guardian of the Holy Mosque of Jerusalem.
3. Hamas felt that the normalization agreements between Israel and some Arab States were side-lining the Palestinian question and ignoring the horrendous plight under occupation. The attack was meant to undermine an Israeli-Saudi deal.
4. Hamas is aware of the structural military asymmetry as Israel remains the dominant military power in the region. But by taking Israel off guard, Hamas wanted to send a message to the Palestinians and to the Arab States that Israel is not as “invincible,” as it makes out. Hamas wanted to shatter this myth by saying that it is not because Israel is strong that Palestinians and Arabs do not dare, it is because they do not dare that Israel is strong.
5. The Hamas attack is also meant to showcase, in the eyes of the Palestinians, the ineptitude and incompetence of the Palestinian Authority of Ramallah, so that Hamas will be more likely reckoned with in future negotiations.
6. The new Israeli government, which is the most extremist and racist government in Israel's history, not only divided Israeli society but also encouraged the Israeli army and Jewish settlers in the West Bank to harass and even kill the Pales-

tinians (more than 300 Palestinians killed since 7 October and some 4,500 imprisoned), while extreme-right ministers, such as Ben Gvir and Smotrich, pushed for the expansion of settlements and formal annexation of large swaths of West Bank territory. Hamas wanted to ignite the West Bank.

To put it in a nutshell, Hamas sought to demonstrate, albeit cruelly, the brutality of an unbridled occupation, the complicity of the West, the betrayal of some Arab states and the failure of the Palestinian Authority, even at the risk of unleashing a devastating war. And indeed, Israel's response to the Hamas attack has been devastating. Its air and ground offensives were completely out of proportion: in the first five months after 7 October, more than 31,000 Gazans had been killed, two thirds of them women and children, 72,000 injured, thousands trapped, probably dead, beneath the rubble, entire families have been wiped out. 85% of Gaza's health facilities have been destroyed and some 150 staff members have been killed, the highest loss of medical staff ever in a conflict: the indifference of Israeli forces to the severely wounded and sick patients is quite appalling. 75% of homes have been destroyed, 1.9 million inhabitants (85% of the population) displaced. Nowhere is there a safe haven. Relentless bombardment and indiscriminate attacks on schools, mosques, churches, hospitals, bakeries, water pipes, sewage and electricity networks have brought horrific suffering to the people of Gaza. Lack of food and drinkable water, and the proliferation of diseases are another “genocide in the genocide.”

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Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary General, has made it clear: “Israel's military operations have spread mass destruction and killed civilians on a scale unprecedented during my time as Secretary General”

In an interview in the Spanish Newspaper, *El País* (19 January 2023) Francesca Albanese, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Occupied territories since 1967, gave a heartbreaking figure: 1,000 children have been amputated without anesthesia.

It is the irony of history that almost 80% of the inhabitants of Gaza are children and grandchildren of Palestinian refugees who were expelled from their homes in the first *Nakba* of 1947-1949. There is a real worry that they will have the same fate as their grandparents.

Today, Gaza is the world's "biggest urban wasteland." Charles Dunne comments: "The scale of destruction on the ground in Gaza has only reinforced the now widely-held view that Israel intends to render the enclave uninhabitable in order to force the Palestinians out."⁶

The Reaction of the Global West

Soon after the 7 October attack, Western leaders travelled to Israel to display their compassion and unwavering support for Israel. In a briefing during his visit, Joe Biden detailed the atrocities committed by Hamas, promised more military assistance to Israel, announced that the US had moved two aircraft carriers (Ford and Eisenhower) to the eastern Mediterranean, pompously adding "If Israel didn't exist, we would have to invent it." In another declaration he said candidly "I don't believe that you have to be a Jew to be a Zionist, and I am a Zionist." Nevertheless, he warned Israel "not to be consumed by rage" and to show restraint, as "The vast majority of Palestinians are not Hamas."

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, qualified the Hamas attack as an "unspeakable tragedy," adding that Israel "has a right to defend itself: in fact, it has the duty to defend its people," no word on Palestinian suffering. Emmanuel Macron, President of France called for the establishment of "an international coalition to combat Hamas," equating the Palestinian Group with Isis

(the Islamic State), a proposal which has been qualified as unrealistic, insensitive and futile. British, Czech and Austrian leaders, and others, hit the road to visit Israel in a show of solidarity. The Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sanchez, and the Belgian Prime Minister, Alexander de Croo, were the first to visit the Egypt-Gaza border. They condemned the Hamas attack but were appalled by the Palestinian plight and called for a "cease fire."

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The case of Germany is emblematic: during his visit to Israel, the German Chancellor has been the most outspoken, declaring that the brutal terror against innocent civilians "sends a chill down the spine." From the outset, Germany has been steadfast in siding with Israel and totally espoused Israel's narrative and supported the country's brutal military campaign. The images of the atrocities inflicted on the population of Gaza have rarely been shown in the German media. Pro-Palestinian demonstrations have been banned. And when, on 29 December 2023, South Africa sued Israel before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the German government intervened at the ICJ to take Israel's side, claiming that South Africa's accusation was "without any foundation," and that Israel was merely "defending itself." In a stunning declaration, Olaf Scholz declared in mid-November 2023 that the Netanyahu Government "was complying with international law and human rights," calling accusations that Israel is violating these rights in Gaza "absurd."⁷

⁶ DUNNE, Charles "Egypt, the Gaza war, and fears of another Nakba." in [Arabcenterdc.org](https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/egypt-the-gaza-war-and-fears-of-another-nakba/), 7 February 2024, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/egypt-the-gaza-war-and-fears-of-another-nakba/>.

⁷ SCHEIDLER, Fabian: "Gaza, the German Far-Right and the hypocrisy of the ruling class." *ScheerPost*, 6 February 2024, <https://scheerpost.com/2024/02/05/gaza-the-german-far-right-and-the-hypocrisy-of-the-ruling-class/>.

Such declarations tell us a lot about the loss of moral compass in Germany today. Fabian Scheidler raises a good question: "What lessons has the German political leadership learned from its history, when it supports a government whose members refer to Palestinians as "animals?"⁸

Ukraine is not an EU Member State. Yet, President Zelensky's declaration on Hamas is quite stunning. By casting Hamas as the equivalent of Russia and Israel as the equivalent of Ukraine he exhibited a high degree of ignorance or bad faith. As H.A. Hellyer wisely contends: "Israel is the equivalent of Russia" (as an occupying power) and the Palestinians are the equivalent of Ukraine (both are occupied)."⁹

With its indiscriminate bombardments, Israel squandered Western sympathy. Its relentless onslaught on Gaza sounded the alarm bells in the United States and Europe and sparked great indignation in the "Global South." Anthony Blinken, US Secretary of State, warned that: "Far too many Palestinians have been killed." In a BBC interview, the French President, Emmanuel Macron, voiced his concern: "...these babies, these ladies, these old people are bombed and killed, so there is no reason for that and no legitimacy. So, we do urge Israel to stop." Other leaders piled pressure on Israel. Yet as of this writing (end of February 2024), Israel is giving the cold shoulder to even its most reliable and supportive allies, pursuing its relentless and pitiless assault on the inhabitants of Gaza.

There have been some days of humanitarian pause, allowing for the release of some 100 hostages and 300 Palestinian prisoners. But, soon after, Israel renewed its appalling bombardments and rejected calls for a ceasefire. Whether in the Security Council or the General Assembly, the United States voted against resolutions calling for a ceasefire. The UN General Assembly's vote, on 12 December 2023, on a non-binding resolution, called for a humanitarian ceasefire in war-torn Gaza. In what seems to be a rebuke of the United States and Israel, the resolution was overwhelmingly adopted by 153 votes,

with 23 abstentions and 10 votes against: among those who voted against were Israel and the United States. EU Member States, once again, were divided, with two countries voting against the resolution (Austria and Czechia), 16 voting for and eight abstaining.

The General Assembly vote came on the heels of a scuttled UN Security Council resolution, vetoed by the United States, spurring the Secretary General to take the extraordinary step of invoking Article 99 of the United Nations Charter, which allows him to issue warnings about serious threats to international peace. The vote in the Security Council this time was postponed several times and finally a watered down and edulcorated resolution was adopted, which fell short of a permanent ceasefire. This speaks volumes about American double-talk.

Indeed, shielded by the United States, Israel continued its inhuman onslaught, that "is unique" comments Raz Segal, an Israeli American associate professor of genocide and Holocaust studies, in the sense that it is "genocide," "because the intent is so clearly articulated. And it is articulated through Israeli media and society and politics."¹⁰ Indeed, there has been a flurry of genocidal incitements by Israeli officials dehumanizing the Palestinians of Gaza. Isaac Herzog, Israel's President, unshakingly declared: "it is an entire nation out there that is responsible: it is not true this rhetoric about civilians not aware, not involved." Yoav Gallant, the Minister of Defence, went even further, calling for "a complete siege on the Gaza Strip," adding that "there will be no electricity, no food, no fuel," and that "we are fighting human animals." Amihai Eliyahu suggested "nuking Gaza." The adviser to the Minister of Defence, Giorna Eiland, demanded that Gazans be left "with two choices: to stay and to starve or to leave." There are countless other examples. South Africa's document setting out the genocide case at the International Court of Justice, dedicates nine pages to the genocidal statements made by Israeli officials. Obviously neither the global alarm nor calls for ceasefire seem to deter the Israeli government. The

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ HELLYER, H.A. "Why Gaza forces Europe to act." in *Diwan*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Middle East Program. 19 February 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2024/02/why-gaza-forces-europe-to-act?lang=en>.

¹⁰ Quoted by JONES, Owen: "The brutality and inhumanity of Israel's assault on Gaza is no surprise. It is just what was promised." *The Guardian*, 13 January 2023, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/jan/13/israel-hamas-gaza-war-crimes.

massacre goes on. “A cataclysm is born” write Leonard Rubenstein and Stephen Morrison.¹¹ Israel asks the inhabitants to leave: but where? Is this “self-defence”? Is this proportionate retaliation? Or is it a Third *Nakba* in the making: pushing the Palestinians out of their land, as Zionists did in 1947-1949, and after 1967? A 10-page document, dated 13 October 2023, bearing the logo of the Intelligence Ministry, recommends a full population transfer with no hope of returning. This is the definition of ethnic cleansing.

President Biden and his Secretary of State, Antony Blinken warned Israel about the forceful transfer of Palestinians, calling it a non-starter. But if history is any guide, one may doubt the sincerity and efficacy of a US that proved to be incapable of reining in its Israeli ally, which has gone “over the top,” as Biden himself declared in a briefing at the White House on 8 February 2024.

Conclusion

This essay is a perfect illustration of the “Structural Asymmetry” concept. Indeed, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is marked by a clear structural asymmetry and unless this imbalance in power is not reversed or, at least, corrected, there is no realistic chance of a sustainable peace. As of today, there are some 720,000 Jewish settlers in Occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem. Palestinian territory is, as *The Economist* summarized it: “an archipelago in an expanding sea of Israeli settlements.”¹² Gaza is cut off by an Israeli and Egyptian blockade. The Palestinian Authority has no authority and Palestinians look at it as “an agent of Israel’s occupation.” Palestinian internal divisions are another stumbling block.

The occupation is an asset allowing Israel to expropriate land and water resources. Given the “unbreakable bonds” between Israel and the US, there is no actor capable of convincing Israel to negotiate. The EU’s diplomacy is “declaratory but toothless.” The Arab countries are either beset by internal up-

heavals, protests or civil wars, or normalizing their relations with Israel.

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That’s why the only battle that Israel did not win is the battle of peace. 57 years after the Six-Day War, the “idea of temporary occupation rings increasingly hollow.”¹³ Yet, “it is no small feat that no one state has formally endorsed Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory,” as Edward Said used to hammer home. More importantly, while Israel is tightening its grip on Palestine, the global Palestine Solidarity movement has grown rapidly, despite Israel’s pressure on the US and European governments to criminalize the BDS campaign. Israel’s frequent assaults on Gaza have tarnished the image of the country abroad and a fast-growing number of non-Israeli Jews are becoming increasingly estranged from Israel and outraged by its defiant policies, and by the fact that Israel, which was founded as a “safe haven,” is becoming an important “arms and Pegasus devices’ exporter.” Organizations, such as Amnesty International or the Israeli B’Tselem, are overtly speaking about “Israel’s apartheid.” Israel’s constant endeavour to dangerously conflate antisemitism with the legitimate right to criticize Israeli policies in the Occupied Territories is backfiring, prompting exasperation as it seeks to silence the country’s critics. Israel’s Declaration of Independence stated that: “the State of Israel will ensure complete equality to all its citizens regardless of religion, race and

¹¹ RUBENSTEIN, Leonard and MORRISON, Stephen: “Gaza’s Human Crisis Demands a Rethink.” in [CSIS.org](https://www.csis.org), 12 January 2024, Center for Strategic and International Studies, www.csis.org/analysis/gazas-human-crisis-demands-rethink.

¹² *The Economist* “Two States or one?” 29 May - 4 June, 2021, p. 9. www.economist.com/leaders/2021/05/27/two-states-or-one.

¹³ Ibid.

gender." But the passing of the Nation-State Law (19 July 2018) contradicts the Declaration, as it proclaims that "Israel is the Nation-State of the Jewish people," enshrining Jewish supremacy over its Palestinian citizens (22% of Israel's population), disregarding their rights and undermining the proclaimed principle of equality.

Even in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Palestinian rights are brushed away in favour of the settlers' rights. Thus, whether in Israel or in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, we have two populations with unequal rights. The dilemma for Israel therefore is the following: either Israel pursues its current policies in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, imposing a regime of "apartheid" (something unacceptable for the Palestinians), or it absorbs the Palestinian population, gives them equal rights and ceases to be Jewish (something unacceptable for convinced Zionists). It cannot remain both Jewish and democratic. That's why the current shift of the international discourse on the two-state solution has become so salient.

On the eve of 7 October, it was obvious that the status quo was not sustainable, the never-ending occupation of the West Bank and "siege" of Gaza were suffocating the Palestinians. Indirectly, the occupation exacted a moral toll on Israel itself: it induced a "bunker mentality"¹⁴ among Israelis, breeding an aggressive Jewish ethnic nationalism – epitomized by the results of the 1 November 2022 elections –, it paralyzed the Israeli political system, undermined its proclaimed democratic principles, and kept relations between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel trapped in a cycle of mutual hatred and distrust.

The Global North, mainly the US and EU, turned a deaf ear to frequent warnings that the situation had

become a timebomb, that their declaratory policies were entrenching and perpetuating Israel's occupation and that they should come away from the trodden path and impose a lasting and just solution to the Palestinian question, because it is a just cause and a moral quest for dignity, equality and humanity. Both the US and the EU should recognize the Palestinian State, something which should be the premise of peace and not left to never-ending bilateral negotiations.

The horror of the 7 October attack and the ensuing onslaught of Gaza have provided convincing proof that Gaza has become a "pressure cooker," and that all Occupied Palestinian Territories have become a "powder keg" whose explosion might set the whole region ablaze. The tit-for-tat exchange of fire between Hezbollah and Israel, the Houthis' disruption of maritime traffic and Western drone attacks in Yemen, Iraq and Syria bear testimony to the "domino effect" of the Palestinian question.

The only battle that Israel did not win is the battle of peace. There is no military solution for the conflict

They also prove that there is no military solution for the conflict, that there is widespread support for Palestinian's right of self-determination and condemnation of Israel's policies in the West Bank and its devastating bombardments in Gaza, qualified by a former UN official as "a textbook case of genocide," and finally, that only a just and lasting solution can avert another 7 October and another Palestinian tragedy.

¹⁴ KREBS, Ronald "Israel's bunker mentality: how the Occupation is Destroying the Nation." in *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, No .6 November - December 2011. www.jstor.org/stable/23039625.