

Israel Is Doing Exactly What Hamas Wants It to Do

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The conflict between Hamas and Israel is a tragedy in a world already rife with too many crises. Hamas's massive attack on Israel, predominantly targeting families and children, [cannot be justified by the prolonged history of Israel's occupation of Palestine](#), no matter how brutal and indifferent the approach to the fate of Palestinians may have been. Just yesterday, [a hospital in the north of the Gaza Strip was bombed](#), causing the loss of hundreds of lives. The ongoing blame game between the two parties further illustrates the deepening hostilities, no matter who is ultimately found to be responsible.

In carrying out this attack, Hamas [never believed it would overthrow the Israeli state by military force](#). Rather, it has followed a well-worn [playbook](#) of terrorist organizations that [aim to provoke excessive retaliation by military and state forces](#), fostering further grievances and creating a broader base of civil resistance and strife. This basic strategy has been followed by terrorist groups as diverse as the [Red Army Faction](#), [Irgun and the Stern Group](#), and [Al-Qaeda](#).

The State of Israel is now, unfortunately, [following this playbook](#), responding with lethal actions in the Gaza Strip. The degree of shock and outrage in Israeli society cannot be overestimated—the more than 1,400 dead are, in proportion to Israel's size, the equivalent of more than 45,000 dead in the United States. Yet, its response is disproportionate and [knowingly breaches international humanitarian law](#). Israel has demanded that one million Palestinians evacuate their homes and has cut off energy, food supplies, medical supplies, and water to the Gaza Strip.

Such sieges [are illegal under international humanitarian law](#) for good reasons: just as children and the elderly were among the victims in Israel, these vulnerable populations, already suffering from intense and continuing aerial bombardment, are the primary casualties as vital healthcare infrastructure in Palestine is disrupted. [The United Nations \(UN\) Independent Commission of Inquiry has condemned Russia for targeting critical infrastructure in Ukraine](#). The world cannot have it both ways: what is an outrage in one context is an outrage in another. Failing to condemn breaches by both sides of international human rights and international humanitarian law risks exacerbating the [perception of double standards, which has been a factor in rising divisions between Global North and Global South since COVID-19 and the invasion of Ukraine](#).

Many analysts have noted that, for Israel, these events should not only be interpreted as an intelligence and security failure but as a political failure: the idea that more than two million people could be contained, oppressed, and ignored under occupation in the Gaza Strip, without cost to the Israeli population, proved not to be as easy a proposition as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu seems to have assumed. Israel can certainly carpet bomb from the sky and may even deploy ground forces in Gaza, although at high losses for its own soldiers. However, it can neither actively reoccupy nor contain Gaza without incurring a prohibitive cost to its own society. These attacks have already demonstrated that in only too stark and tragic a form.

Likewise, for Hamas, the route of using force is unsustainable. The population of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) cannot face this degree of devastation. This may play out over time—in crisis, the tendency is to unify against what is perceived as a common enemy, and both Hamas and Israel have now,

by their actions, given the justification for that response. However, as time progresses, maintaining this unity in the face of the immense human costs will become increasingly challenging for both sides.

Globally, the justified outrage at the attack by Hamas should not lead to knee-jerk reactions that punish the entire Palestinian population. The [ill-judged decision](#) by the European Commission to suspend vital aid to the Palestinians in the OPT would have been tantamount to collective punishment. Rightly, it was immediately reversed by EU foreign ministers.

This is not just another episode in the tragic history of violence in Israel and the Occupied Territories. It is a game-changing set of events that extends beyond the protagonists and their civilian populations. Its impact will continue to resonate throughout the region and the world, exacerbating narratives of conflict-related trauma on both sides and further [triggering antisemitism, islamophobia, and extremist attacks in countries far distant from the conflict itself](#).

So, what should the international community do to prevent an irreversible downward spiral in both societies, in the conflict between them, and in the spillover to the rest of the world?

The UN has assumed an [important role in addressing the conflict between Hamas and Israel by standing up for victims, human rights, and international humanitarian law for both sides](#), providing protection through the UN agency dedicated to Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), and [attempting to negotiate humanitarian access](#). UN Secretary-General António Guterres's swift involvement sent a powerful message, [urging the international community to unite in safeguarding civilians and working towards a lasting solution to this enduring conflict](#). All concerned member states should support these efforts.

The UN and [member states that have channels to both Israel and Hamas](#) should indeed look ahead for opportunities to help the two societies back away from the abyss of escalating conflict and restart the peace process. Although in the heat of combat, it is too early to land this idea, it is not premature to start to discuss it—the founders of the UN convened while bombs were still falling during World War II.

The UN Security Council [was prevented today](#) from passing a Brazilian-led resolution by a US veto. Russia abstained on the basis that the resolution was not strong enough on the need to “stop the bloodshed,” in itself demonstrating an almost surreal sense of double standards given its actions in Ukraine. This deadlock in the UN Security Council, however, should not stop the admirable focus by the secretary-general and some member states to prevent further escalation and gain immediate, urgent humanitarian action.

Let us draw lessons from this crisis, including the recognition that indiscriminate force and indifference to shared humanity, in the end, have a boomerang effect—they come back to bite, and they bite hard.

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