

Thoughts on the Gaza-Israel Conflict (2023)

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Hamas launched a massive rocket attack on southern Israel on 07 October, with simultaneous assaults by squads of heavily armed fighters. Within hours, Hamas fighters had penetrated several miles into southern Israel, attacked Israeli settlements and a music festival in the Negev, killed several hundred Israelis and seized some 200 hostages. Israel responded with massive air attacks on northern Gaza cities. The Hamas-Israeli war had begun.

While it might be easy to characterize this conflict as a continuation of a long-standing Arab-Israeli struggle, a more nuanced understanding requires some clarity concerning the current situation.

At its most basic level, this conflict, as well as many others in the region, is a struggle over who “owns” the land. Does Israel “own” the territories it claims based on right of conquest? Do Palestinians “own” the land by right of continuous occupation? If 19th century Zionists bought lands in Palestine from Ottoman landlords, does that give them undisputed ownership? What about Palestinian farmers whose families have tilled the land, harvested the olives, grazed the sheep on these same lands since Biblical times?

These questions of ownership, of rights to the land, defy easy unraveling. In a sense, the current Hamas-Israel conflict is but the latest version of a struggle having roots back several thousand years.

Hamas, an acronym of *Harakat-al-Muqawama-al-Islamiya*, the Arabic for Islamic Resistance Movement, was established in Gaza in 1987, as a militant subset of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood.ⁱ Hamas has been the *de facto* government of Gaza since 2007 when Hamas candidates defeated those from Fatah, the political party of the Palestinian Authority (PA), in local elections, promising more responsive, less corrupt governance than that provided by the PA. Experience in Gaza since then has demonstrated these promises to be hollow.

The United States has identified Hamas as a terrorist organization since 1997.ⁱⁱ Hamas’ stated goal is to expel all Israelis from the lands between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, sending them back to where they came from. In pursuit of that goal, Hamas has employed a combination of terrorist attacks on individuals and small groups, rocket attacks on targets in Israel, and more recently cyber attacks on Israeli commercial enterprises. The 07 October attacks have been the most massive thus far.

Israel responded to the October attacks with massive air attacks on cities in northern Gaza, targeting suspected Hamas command centers and concentrations of Hamas fighters. The Prime Minister declared war on Hamas; Israel called up reservists, and armored and mechanized forces moved to the border with Gaza. On 09 October, the Israeli government announced a “complete siege” of Gaza; the next day, the Minister of Defense called for “a full-scale response [and] removed every restriction.”

Caught in the crossfire are Palestinian residents of Gaza, by some estimates numbering about 2.1 million on 07 October. Of this population, active Hamas members number an estimated 20,000 to 25,000, about one percent of the population.ⁱⁱⁱ The Gaza Strip is about twice the size of Washington, DC: 360 square kilometers; most of the population lives in a few cities in the north, Gaza City being the largest urban area with 780,000 residents.

If this enduring conflict is about ownership of the land, a summary of the conflicting narratives of ownership may be useful. On both sides, these narratives go back to antiquity.

While it is difficult, and perhaps valueless to identify what group originally settled in the land known as Palestine, the name itself derived from the Philistines, probably an element of the so-called “sea people” mentioned in Egyptian inscriptions from about 1190 BCE^{iv} and settled in the coastal region of the eastern Mediterranean. “Palestine” originated as the Greek term *Philistia*, for the land of the Philistines. The Philistines settled the coastal plain roughly from what is now Gaza north to the region of Tel Aviv.

The ancient Israelites, arriving from the east at about the same time, fought the Philistines for control of the land, a struggle memorialized in the Biblical account to Samson,^v for about two centuries. The ancient Israelites were not notably successful in the struggle, in part due to the superior weapons technology of the Philistines: iron edged weapons.^{vi} About 1050 BCE, Israelite King David succeeded in establishing a kingdom centered on the former Jebusite city of Jerusalem; Israelites and Philistines maintained an uneasy coexistence until both were conquered by the Assyrian Empire.

Israel’s founding narrative asserts the land of Israel was promised to them through the prophet Moses “by God” after they escaped from Egyptian bondage. A competing Palestinian narrative would posit that their forebearers were in possession of the land before the Israelites’ arrival and that they successfully retained possession, even after conquest by the Assyrians.

Fast forward about a thousand years, and Palestine was a province of the Roman Empire, a restive one at that. Urban trading centers in Palestine were populated by descendants of both Philistines and Israelites. They also housed Greek and Roman merchants as well as people from all over the Roman Empire, as documented in the New Testament account of Pentecost: people from “Parthia, Media, and Elam; from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia; from Pontus and Asia, from Phrygia and Pamphylia, from Egypt and the regions of Libya near Cyrene. . . from Rome . . . from Crete and Arabia.”^{vii} The text identified all as “Jews,” but as coming from “all over the Empire,” which logically demonstrates they did not live in Palestine. Much of the population around Jerusalem was likely to be Jewish, but just as likely a significant proportion of the resident agricultural population was descendant from the Philistines. The Samaritan population, for example, was identified by Biblical authors as definitely not Jewish.

Jewish revolts against Roman rule, brutally suppressed, seems to have resulted in the near extermination of Jews in Palestine, which arguably terminated their continued “ownership” of the land.

Some five hundred years on, and the land of Palestine was part of the Arab-dominated Muslim empire, having been seized from the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire. Part of the historic Greater Syria, Palestine and in particular, the city of Jerusalem, was the focus of European Crusader energy. Jumping forward another two hundred years, the Crusader kingdoms were gone, and Palestine was ruled by Muslims, inhabited by Muslims, Jews, and Christians of many sects. Fast forward again some four hundred years, and the region was an Ottoman province. Ottoman Palestine became the epicenter of conflict over land ownership, as Zionist leaders sought a place in which European Jews could live without fear.

Theodor Hertzl, an Austro-Hungarian journalist, is usually credited with founding the modern Zionist movement in 1897. His work built on earlier European ideas of nationalism, specifically concerning the establishment of an independent Jewish state. Hertzl’s 1896 pamphlet was entitled *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*), in which he argued that only the establishment of a sovereign Jewish state would enable Jews to join the family of nations and escape European antisemitism. In his view, a recognized Jewish state would both provide a place of refuge for European Jews and provide a diplomatic voice in the international community to protest, and work to reduce, the growing antisemitism threat as experienced by Russian and other eastern European Jewish communities, most notably the pogroms in Tsarist Russia.^{viii}

Building on ideas Hertzl and others promulgated, Jewish philanthropists began purchasing agricultural land in Palestine, with the intent to create Jewish socialist farming communities. Ottoman landowners, mostly resident in Istanbul, Aleppo, and other urban areas of the Empire and not in Palestine, were happy to sell lands they rarely, if ever, visited. From their perspective, this was probably just transferring title to new landlords and did not concern the Palestinian farmers occupying the land. It is likely the farmers knew little of these transactions until the newcomers arrived and began building settlements, the original kibbutzim. These Jewish agricultural settlements, displacing Arab farmers, would become a continuing source of conflict.

The Ottoman Empire sided with the Central Powers in World War One, in part due to the influence of German military training missions with the Ottoman Army, in part also due to the long-standing enmity between the Ottomans and the Russians. This led directly to Palestine becoming a pawn in play among multiple combatants.

The British government, through Sir Henry McMahon, High Commissioner resident in Cairo, sought to encourage an Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule by agreeing to recognize an independent Arab Kingdom, led by Hussein, the Sharif of Mecca, in return for Arab support against the Ottoman Empire. This commitment was contained in a series of letters between McMahon and Sharif Hussein in 1915 and 1916.

At about the same time as the McMahon-Hussein correspondence was taking place, two diplomats, Mark Sykes for the British government, and Francois Georg-Picot for France, initialed an agreement between their two governments regarding the eventual dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire after its defeat. The Russian government, although not participating directly in the negotiations, concurred in the division into French and British areas of influence, while the British and French agreed to Russian control of the Straits and western portions of Armenia. ^{ix}.

The third Great War promise relating to ownership of the land came in 1917 with Lord Balfour's note to Baron Rothschild: "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people . . . It being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities."^x

These conflicting promises, made to help ensure the survival of Great Britain and France as leading international powers, set the stage for subsequent conflict.

On the basis of the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, the League of Nations gave Great Britain the Mandate for Palestine: colonial rule in all but name. The British were charged with security in Palestine and its economic development, with the stated intention to prepare its people for eventual independence. Less than twenty years later, another pogrom, this time at the hands of Nazi Germany, sent thousands of European Jews fleeing in search of safe harbor. Between 1935 and 1938, some 60,000 European Jews sought refuge in Palestine. Arab Palestinians protested this influx, often violently. In May 1939, the British determined to restrict Jewish entry into the Palestine Mandate to appease Arab protesters. At the same time, Nazi programs to eliminate European Jewry, along with other "undesirables," gained momentum. The aptly named Holocaust resulted in an estimated 6 million Jewish deaths. Again, as in the 19th century, many Jews seeking a refuge headed for Palestine. The post-War refugee flood overwhelmed British security authorities as Arab and Jewish armed gangs and militias fought for dominance. Faced with this "no win" situation the British tossed the problem to the fledgling United Nations.

In one of its first actions to resolve conflict, the United Nations established a commission to devise a plan to designate Arab and Jewish areas in Palestine. The commission's proposed map of Palestine identified areas with a significant Jewish population and those primarily Arab, resulting in a patchwork of non-

contiguous enclaves. The Jewish minority population accepted the partition plan, presumably arguing that something was better than nothing, while the Arab majority did not. The Arab argument: they are taking from us what is rightfully ours. The immediate result: the first Arab-Israeli War (1947-1948).

The current conflict between Israel and Hamas is the sixth major conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors. It is the second major conflict involving the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and non-state actors, although the IDF and other Israeli security elements have been engaged in conflict at lower levels of intensity since Israel declared its independence.

From an Israeli perspective, the most effective deterrence to conflict is demonstrating a willingness to strike back with overwhelming force and the ability to destroy the adversary. The narrative, implicit or explicit, is “attacking us will bring on your own destruction.” The narrative’s assumption seems to be that Israelis can kill enough militants to ensure civilian security. Israel’s stated political goal in the current conflict is to destroy Hamas; the unstated cultural baggage behind this can be summarized as “Never Again,” referring to the essential paranoia of Israeli political life that every potential adversary poses an existential threat to the state.

The counter-narrative, espoused by Hamas most recently, but heard from other Palestinian and Arab sources as well, is that Israelis are foreign interlopers and European occupiers who have stolen Arab lands. A Hamas spokesman reportedly emphasized their goal is to kill enough of them (Israelis) to destroy “the Zionist entity” and send them (Israelis) back where they came from.

Both narratives may contain grains of truth but ignore certain realities.

Israel’s use of high-tech military systems and overwhelming force demonstrably eliminates some militants, but at the cost of hundreds of civilian casualties. An aircraft-delivered bomb does not discriminate, and killing here-to-fore uncommitted civilians likely creates more militants than it eliminates. Surveys of public opinion in Gaza before the current conflict indicated “the vast majority of Gazans have been frustrated with [Hamas’] ineffective governance” since taking over control in 2007. Regardless of that, current Israeli combat operations “will likely drive Gazans into the arms of Hamas.”^{xi}

The Hamas narrative equally fails to account for certain realities. If Hamas and its militant allies have a combined available force of 50,000 fighters in Gaza, as estimated by a member of the Israeli security cabinet and likely to be an overestimate for political reasons, there is insufficient manpower to oppose the 400,000 IDF soldiers currently mobilized.^{xii} Equally, the goal of sending “them” back where they came from ignores the reality that the current Israeli population has been born in Israel. Whereas two generations ago, “back where they came from” might have identified a specific location, in Europe or elsewhere in the Middle East for the Sephardic Jews, the idea is no longer relevant. The current generations of native-born Israelis (Sabras) have as much attachment to the land as do Gazans.

The problem with both narratives is that they express ideologies. Each identifies a current imperfect situation, provides a vision of the perfected future, an Israel totally secure or a Palestine free of Jews (or at least Zionists), and a means for achieving that vision, in both cases, the use of extreme violence. Neither narrative has room for political compromise.

In at least one sense, Israel’s paranoia since its founding has been instrumental in creating the on-going conflict. By treating every Palestinian, including its own Palestinian citizens, as potential adversaries, Israel has effectively eliminated avenues for hope. Without hope for an improved future, politically, economically, or socially, striking out at the cause of that hopelessness becomes a logical reaction. Israel’s isolating Gaza from most (and now all) outside resources is only one element of hopelessness. The Israeli government’s turning a blind eye, and in some cases abetting, settler violence against West Bank Palestinian communities is another.^{xiii}

Hamas capitalizes on Palestinian hopelessness. Since its founding in 1987, Hamas has proclaimed itself to be the leader of Palestinian, specifically Gaza Palestinian, resistance to oppressive Israeli (Zionist) occupation. Hamas' political logic runs something like this: we (Hamas) lead the struggle against the Zionist occupation therefore what we do (suppress dissent, engage in corrupt practices) cannot be held against us. If Gazans must suffer now, it is the price to be paid for the future. Similar arguments have been made by authoritarian leaders throughout history.

While the current conflict may have had the trappings of major conflict, the Gaza-Israel conflict is actually a large-scale terrorist operation. Generally speaking, "terrorists are too weak to impose their will by force of arms,"^{xiv} but Hamas, as a terrorist organization, uses "the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear . . . in the pursuit of political change."^{xv}

Hamas in this conflict is acting exactly as a terrorist organization should be expected to act. The firing of thousands of rockets into southern Israel, with near simultaneous ground attacks may have looked like a large-scale combat operation, but in fact it was a Hamas provocation to assure an Israeli over-reaction, with the intent to publicize the plight of Gazans under Israeli (and Egyptian) sanctions. Additionally, the assault could be considered a spoiling attack, to derail the ongoing negotiations between Israel and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia regarding normalization of relations.^{xvi}

Hamas' using Gaza's civilian population as cover can also be viewed, in a perverse way, as demonstration of commitment to the cause of Palestinian freedom: Hamas is demonstrating its willingness to shed blood (that of civilians, not of its own members, however) to publicize the cause and undermine international support for Israel. In this aspect of the conflict, it appears Hamas has achieved notable success. Israel's use of overwhelming force to destroy Hamas without apparent regard for civilian casualties has been condemned almost universally, by regional neighbors as well as governments outside the immediate region, and multiple international bodies.

From a military perspective, Israel has a much more difficult targeting problem than does Hamas. For Hamas, launching rockets from Gazan locations towards southern Israel is relatively straight-forward. No matter where they land in Israeli territory, the rockets will serve to remind the world that Hamas remains active, and to provoke an exploitable Israeli reaction. The ground incursions, surprising Israeli security forces, seizing Israeli hostages as well as killing Israeli civilians and security personnel, targeted the Israeli population's belief in the effectiveness of their government and the government's popular support. Here, too, it seems to have achieved its purpose as news reports indicate declining levels of trust in the Netanyahu government.^{xvii}

In contrast, Israel's military faces a daunting challenge in targeting Hamas. Air strikes against suspected, or even known, Hamas facilities in the crowded urban centers of north Gaza inevitably cause civilian casualties. Mao's guidance that the guerrillas hide among the people is well understood by most terrorists, and Hamas is no exception. Even the most precise targeting with laser- or GPS-guided munitions cannot eliminate collateral damage and civilian casualties, especially when the munition employed is expected to destroy a building or underground command bunker.

The Israeli alternative would be to employ massive numbers of infantry in urban combat operations.

Neither option is risk-free. On the one hand, using massed fires to destroy Hamas infrastructure limits risking Israeli soldiers' lives unnecessarily but killing and wounding hundreds of Gazan civilians: men, women, and children, risks international condemnation and the possibility of sparking wider conflict. On the other hand, sending perhaps 150,000 infantry soldiers (a ratio of one soldier for every 1000 Gazan civilians) into a dense urban environment to locate, isolate, and destroy Hamas leaders and infrastructure, where hostile fighters are unlikely to be easily identified, risks death and injury to hundreds of Israeli soldiers. Given the relatively small population of Israel, this risks significant loss of

popular support. Both options are politically risky: one internationally and diplomatically risky, the other risky in domestic politics.

Given the evidence of the week-long cease fire arranged for the release of Israeli hostages and the reception of humanitarian relief supplies, it is possible that the Gaza-Israel War of 2023 could subside into another stalemate with Hamas damaged but not destroyed, and with the IDF in continual readiness to invade Gaza or defend against Hezbollah in the north. But stalemate is not resolution. Polling results among Palestinians prior to the October attacks indicated massive support for a two-state solution. Polling among Israelis after the initial shock of the October attacks and the IDF's massive response seems to indicate declining fortunes of right wing and ultra-right-wing politicians in their government, although whether this would mean increased support for a two-state solution is problematical.

The Oslo Peace Accords of 1993 held the promise of an eventual two-state solution to Palestine-Israel conflict. That promise was destroyed two years later with the assassination of the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin by an Israeli religious extremist. The apparent failures of the current Israeli government to predict and prevent the current Gaza-Israel conflict may bring about the downfall of the current government of Israel, whether Hamas is destroyed or not. Should that happen and a more liberal government result, it may be possible for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank to see a glimmer of hope for their future.

Palestinians' hope for their future would conceivably lessen the attraction of inflammatory rhetoric from Hamas, Hezbollah, and other violent extremist organizations. In turn, Hamas' grip on political power, in Gaza at least, would likely be lessened and its claim to represent Palestinian aspirations deflated. Conceivably, increased hope for the future among Gaza Palestinians could spread to Palestinians in the West Bank as well, leading, one hopes, to better cooperation between the Palestine Authority and a more liberal Israeli government. This, in turn, might make it less politically expedient for extremist Israeli politicians to stoke the fires of violence in the West Bank. Only then might the question of who "owns" the land be settled on the basis of negotiation and compromise.

In truth, God gave the land not to Jews nor to Palestinians, but to both.

ⁱ Counter Terrorism Guide, Director of National Intelligence, updated Sep 2022. www.dni.gov Accessed 07 Nov 2023.

ⁱⁱ Sands, Leo. Why are Israel and Hamas at War? A Basic Explainer, *The Washington Post*, 30 October 2023, Accessed 07 Nov 2023 <washingtonpost.com>

ⁱⁱⁱ The World Factbook, CIA.gov "Gaza Strip" People and Society; Counter Terrorism Guide, "Hamas", DNI. Both accessed 07 Nov 2023.

^{iv} Britannica.com, accessed 08 Nov 2023.

^v Judges, 13-16.

^{vi} 1 Samuel, 13: 19

^{vii} Acts, 2:6-12

^{viii} The Pogroms: 19th and early 20th century efforts to massacre or expel "undesirable" ethnic groups, usually Jewish, from their communities. In more recent times, this would be characterized as "ethnic cleansing."

^{ix} After the Russian Revolution (1917), the Bolshevik government released the text of the agreement as evidence of the imperial designs of France and Great Britain and to bolster its claims to be the champion of oppressed peoples.,

^x Balfour Declaration, Britannica.

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- ^{xi} Amaney A. Jamal and Michael Robbins, "What Palestinians Really Think of Hamas," *Foreign Affairs* 25 October 2023.
- ^{xii} Bill Hutchinson, "Israel-Hamas Conflict: Timeline and Key Developments," ABC News, 19 October 2023.
- ^{xiii} Mairav Zonszain, "What is Happening in the West Bank?" *International Crisis Group*, 6 November 2023
- ^{xiv} Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security*, Vol 31, No. 1, Summer 2006. 50.
- ^{xv} Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, 40.
- ^{xvi} Kydd and Walter, 69-79.
- ^{xvii} Neri Zilber, "Why Israel's Netanyahu Faces Rising Anger and Distrust," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 02 November 2023.