

Analyzing Israel's response to Hamas' October 7 attack

Palestinians will never give up national aspirations

Netanyahu straining world's patience



A demonstrator waves the Palestinian flag as he stands on the Neptune Fountain during a protest in support of Palestinians under the slogan 'Free Palestine' in Berlin, Germany, on November 4, 2023.

AFP

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OPINION EXCLUSIVE

On October 7, the Palestinian organization Hamas, which is headquartered in Gaza City and governs the Gaza Strip in the Palestinian territories, carried out a surprise attack by land, air, and sea on southern Israel.

According to Hamas officials, Operation Al-Aqsa Storm was in retaliation for Israel's hitherto violent raids and clashes with worshippers on the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in occupied East Jerusalem, as well as to draw the world's attention to the dire conditions of Palestinians in Gaza and the occupied West Bank, where Israelis in illegal settlements have been increasingly engaged in deadly attacks on Palestinians.

Soon after Hamas' deadly attack, which was unprecedented in terms of speed, coordination, and scope, as well as the number of Israelis killed and injured (as reported by Israeli officials; some accounts suggest, however, that this number also includes Israeli civilians who might have been killed by Israeli crossfire), the Israeli government declared war on Hamas.

This war, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry and Palestine Red Crescent Society, has so far led to massive civilian casualties in Gaza, including the deaths of thousands of children and the internal displacement of around 1.9 million Gazans across the Strip due to Israel's relentless bombardment of the besieged enclave.

Though both Hamas and the Israeli military have been accused of war crimes in this latest round of fighting, the horrific nature of Israel's military response in Gaza prompts us to ask: Why did Israel decide to respond so disproportionately to the Hamas attack, knowing that its military intervention might involve acts that would likely be viewed by the international community and judicial authorities as gross violations of the rules of war, formally known as international humanitarian law, and the human rights of Palestinian civilians?

Possible explanations

With the focus here being on the extremely disproportional nature of the Israeli response to the Hamas attack, two explanations seem plausible, one of which is politico-ideological in nature and the other geostrategic.

The first is the long-held Israeli ultranationalists' desire (rooted in the biblical view of historical Palestine as the Promised Land) of taking possession or further control of the remaining Palestinian territories, for the realization of which far-right elements in the current Israeli coalition government led by Benjamin Netanyahu have been especially hard at work. The second is the Netanyahu government's interest in maintaining or expanding its control over the Palestinian territories' vast oil and gas resources.

Let us start by taking a closer look at the first explanation.

In 2017, Bezalel Smotrich, the incumbent Israeli finance minister, published a propaganda piece titled "Israel's Decisive Plan," which is perhaps one of the most significant expressions of the Israeli ultranationalists' desire to take possession of the remaining Palestinian territories in recent times.

The core argument of the lengthy article is that the "two-state solution," a framework for the partition of historical Palestine originally put forward by the United Nations in 1947, must be replaced by a new plan, one that utilizes a "right-wing, Zionist, faith-based approach".

Thus, according to Smotrich, who has made no secret of his hatred for Palestinians and genocidal tendencies against them, Palestinians must give up their "national aspirations" in the Land of Israel and accept, as a result, one of three options: live as a part of Israeli society as a subordinate population without equal rights; voluntarily migrate to other countries (a suggestion made by early political-Zionist Theodore Herzl in his Diaries); or be killed if they choose to fight to realize their national ambitions.

Echoing Golda Meir, the fourth prime minister of Israel, Smotrich continues in the same article (and again in Paris this year) by rejecting the notion of Palestinian nationalism or nationhood altogether, presenting the "Palestinian people" as merely "a counter-movement to the Zionist movement". Theirs, he says, is a nationalism that simply does not exist absent the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

What Smotrich does not realize, however, is that the same can be said about Jewish nationalism.

According to Israeli-Palestinian conflict experts Rosemary and Herman Ruether, for example, "Jewish nationalism (Zionism) was shaped in response to an ethnically or racially exclusivist European nationalism and reproduced a similar racial-ethnic exclusivism of its own. Its plan for a Jewish state was for Jews only."

Interestingly, however, David Ben-Gurion (formerly

David Green), the secular founder of Israel and its first prime minister, like Chaim Weizmann, Israel's first president, was under no illusion that Palestine had an Arab population of its own, who called Palestine their home and country.

In his book *The Jewish Paradox* (1978), Nahum Goldman, the head of the World Zionist Organization, quotes Ben-Gurion as saying to him: "If I were an Arab leader, I would never sign an agreement with Israel. It is normal; we have taken their country. It is true God promised it to us, but how could that interest them?"

"Our God is not theirs. There has been anti-Semitism, the Nazis, Hitler, Auschwitz, but was that their fault? They see but one thing: We have come and stolen their country. Why would they accept that?"

What is more, Rosemary and Herman Ruether remind us that prior to the systematic effort by the Nazis to exterminate Jews in Europe, "Zionism [that is, Jewish nationalism] remained a minority view among 19th- and early 20th-century Jews."

The American Jewish community, for example, "dominated by Reform Judaism, even reacted with outrage when Christian Zionists in 1891 appealed to president Harrison to support a renewed Jewish state in Palestine.... For these Reform Jews, Judaism was a universal religion of Jews who were citizens of many nations."

Thus, without denying the religious and historical

significance of the region to Jews worldwide, it may be said that the establishment of Israel in Palestine was not just a state-building project, but also a nation-building project on the part of the political-Zionist movement in Europe, one that was hastened by Nazi anti-Semitism and facilitated by Britain through the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which was designed to protect British interests in Palestine vis-à-vis those of France and Russia.

But as Rosemary and Herman Ruether have noted, the British promised "only to facilitate a 'national home' for the Jews, not a 'Jewish state'." Nothing is said about Jewish rule in this 'home,' where Arabs "comprised more than 90% of the population" at the time.

Clearly, then, Smotrich's assertions with regard to Palestinian and Jewish nationalisms are highly distorted and historically flawed.

And his "right-wing, Zionist, faith-based approach," which the Netanyahu government seems to have happily adopted in this latest round of fighting, may plausibly be viewed as representing an attempt on the part of ultranationalists in Israel (particularly of the religious kind) to establish a moral basis for the kind of depraved violence that would be required for Israel to take possession or further control of the remaining Palestinian territories, an attempt that has so far elicited much opposition among Jewish and non-Jewish populations in and outside Israel since October 7.