

Hamas, Israel, and the U.S. Have Learned Nothing

After Hamas's attack, Israel—with Biden's full support—is waging a war of revenge with no regard for the lives of Palestinian civilians.

The killing of [more than 1,000](#) Israelis and internationals from rockets and direct attacks by Hamas is a staggering blow for Israel, a small country which has [repeatedly](#) been a victim of violent attacks throughout its history, but never anything close to this scale. Tragically, the civilian death toll in Israel will likely be only a small fraction of the [civilian death toll](#) of Palestinians in Gaza in the face of the [ongoing](#) Israeli assault on the crowded enclave, which has [included](#) bombings of residential buildings and refugee camps and will surely escalate in intensity.

Hamas, once again, has failed to recognize that killing civilians is not just morally reprehensible but politically counter-productive. They aren't like Israel and Saudi Arabia, which can kill thousands of civilians with impunity and [still receive](#) massive military and diplomatic support from the United States.

The terror inflicted upon Israel over the weekend will only harden U.S. and other Western support for the country and make it easier for supporters of its far-right government to depict the Palestinians as somehow collectively guilty of atrocities against Jewish people. It will also make it easier to rationalize Israel's [ongoing denial](#) of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, as well as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's efforts to consolidate [dictatorial power](#) through control of the judiciary. It is unlikely there will be a resumption of the [massive pro-democracy demonstrations](#) on the streets of Tel Aviv, which have been occurring weekly for most of this year, for the foreseeable future.

Terrorism is obviously wrong, regardless of the ideological orientation of those killed, but one of the tragic ironies of the Hamas attacks is that [many](#) of the victims were Israelis who lived in kibbutzim (rural communities) along the border and ravers at a [music festival](#)—people who tend to be leftwing opponents of Netanyahu's policies.

Few believed that Hamas fighters could sweep into such a wide swathe of Israeli territory. Israel certainly had the means to block the passage of Palestinians across the border. When thousands of unarmed Palestinians [held demonstrations](#) near the fence separating Gaza from Israel in 2018, Israeli forces opened fire—killing more than 150 protesters.

But at the time of last weekend's invasion, the [Gaza Division of the Israeli Defense Forces](#) that was supposed to secure that border area had been dispatched to the West Bank to support illegal settlements. In total, thirty-one Israeli battalions [were stationed](#) in the occupied Palestinian territories rather than protecting Israelis inside Israel. Netanyahu was more concerned about enforcing apartheid in the West Bank than defending his country.

It took [two days](#) for Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) to reclaim the towns and kibbutzim seized by Hamas. By the time the IDF arrived, many of the residents were kidnapped or dead.

While the Biden Administration was certainly correct to condemn the attacks in strongest possible terms, it was [incorrect in saying](#) that they were "unprovoked." Israeli forces and settlers in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, in the past year, have [bulldozed hundreds](#) of Palestinian homes, confiscated Palestinian farming and grazing land, destroyed orchards and vineyards, engaged in arson attacks against Palestinian properties, and

violated Muslim holy places. Israelis have killed scores of Palestinian civilians, [including children](#), since 2022 and Hamas had been warning it [would retaliate](#) if they continued.

Hamas had the support of only a small minority of Palestinians when the [Oslo Accords](#) were signed in 1993. The secular nationalist Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), led by Yasir Arafat's Fatah organization, unilaterally recognized Israel and renounced the armed struggle in the hopes that Israel would allow for the creation of a Palestinian mini-state in the West Bank and Gaza—a mere [22 percent](#) of historic Palestine—with a shared co-capital in Jerusalem. Hamas [angrily opposed](#) the agreement, arguing that the PLO was naïve to think that Israel, with the United States as the chief mediator in the peace process, would allow for a viable Palestinian state to emerge.

As Israeli colonization of the West Bank and political repression increased, and as the PLO-led Palestine Authority, which came to govern most of the urban areas of occupied territories, became increasingly inept and corrupt, [support](#) for Hamas grew. The failure of the United States to be an honest broker and successive administrations' insistence on providing unconditional military, diplomatic, and economic support to Israel's increasingly rightwing governments seemingly vindicated Hamas's skepticism.

Just as the lives of Israeli civilians were expendable in the eyes of Hamas, the Biden Administration and the Israeli government may prove to be similarly dismissive of the lives of Palestinian civilians.

In the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections, Hamas captured a plurality of the vote and the majority of the legislature. At the [encouragement](#) of the Bush Administration, Fatah attempted to force Hamas out of power, prompting a three-day civil war that resulted in Hamas seizing control of Gaza. They have ruled the enclave ever since, effectively banning any political opposition.

In the periodic clashes between Israel and Hamas in subsequent years, in which Hamas would fire rockets into Israeli territory and Israel would retaliate with massive air strikes and an occasional ground incursion, the majority of victims have been non-combatants. Between January 2008 and September 2023, seventy-eight Israeli civilians and 2,789 Palestinian civilians were [killed](#). Despite this skewed ratio, successive U.S. Administrations and [large bipartisan majorities in Congress](#) have denounced Hamas's attacks while defending Israel's killing of Palestinian civilians, insisting that it was all in self-defense and blaming Hamas for the Palestinian deaths in Gaza on the false grounds that the victims were all being used as "[human shields](#)."

It appears very likely Israel is preparing an all-out aerial and ground assault on Gaza that will dwarf the casualties in the devastating wars of recent years. Even after Netanyahu [announced](#) he would release "all constraints" by the Israeli armed forces regarding war making—a clear indication there will be no regard for the lives of the nearly two million Palestinian civilians packed into Gaza—President Biden has pledged to increase the \$4.3 billion of annual military aid to Israel.

This would not just include defensive weaponry, such as the anti-rocket defense system known as the Iron Dome—which, despite the hype, failed miserably to counter the swarm attack— but ordinance and weapons systems specifically for use in a full-fledged assault on Gaza.

Israel has imposed a [total blockade](#) on Gaza, cutting off electricity, water, food, and medical supplies—a war crime according to international humanitarian law—and has begun intensive bombing. The death toll in the days and weeks to come could be absolutely staggering. White House press secretary [Karine Jean-Pierre](#) has attacked calls by liberal members of Congress for a cease-fire to end the Hamas shelling of Israeli towns and the Israeli onslaught against crowded urban neighborhoods in the Gaza Strip as "repugnant and disgraceful."

Just as the lives of Israeli civilians were expendable in the eyes of Hamas, the Biden Administration and a large bipartisan majority of Congress, like the Israeli government, may prove to be similarly dismissive of lives of Palestinian civilians.