



By [Stephen Zunes](#) | October 31, 2023

To begin with, Washington has failed to be an honest broker in the peace process.

[How U.S. Policy Failures Have Helped Hamas](#)

In what seems like a throwback to U.S. policy in Central America in the 1980s, the United States is supporting a repressive rightwing government that is engaged in the large-scale killing of civilians. The current administration is making the same kind of rationalizations by insisting that the United States is supporting a democracy defending itself against terrorists, discounting the death toll as unreliable, accusing Amnesty International and other human rights groups of bias in reporting war crimes and other human rights abuses, arguing that the civilian casualties are not the fault of the U.S.-backed government but the “terrorists,” attacking opponents of U.S. policy for supporting violent totalitarian ideologies, and blocking the United Nations from trying to end the conflict.

Unlike circumstances involving U.S. aid to repressive far-right governments during the Cold War, however, the armed force targeting the recipient of U.S. support is not leftist and is not advocating a more progressive egalitarian society. Hamas is not just a violent manifestation of a nationalist movement. It is a reactionary, authoritarian, theocratic organization that—in part due to disastrous policy decisions by Israel and the United States—has become the dangerous destructive entity that it is.

In trying to justify Israel’s collecting punishment of the Palestinians in Gaza for the crimes of Hamas, some are claiming that the people of the Gaza Strip share responsibility for electing Hamas as their ruling party. But the majority did not. Hamas received a 44 percent plurality of the vote in the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections—and much of that total was a protest vote against Fatah’s corruption than support for Hamas’s terror and reactionary agenda. Hamas then went into a coalition with the more moderate secular Fatah, which had recognized Israel’s right to exist and sought a two-state solution. With the [encouragement and active support of the Bush administration](#), however, Fatah attempted to force Hamas out of power in 2007, prompting a three-day civil war that resulted in Hamas seizing control of Gaza by force. It has ruled the enclave ever since, crushing any political opposition. Only a [small minority of Gazans](#) support Hamas overall and presumably an even a smaller amount supported the horrendous terrorist attacks in Israel in early October.

The Failures of U.S. Policy

As I and other analysts have written, [Hamas’s rise](#) from a movement supported by a tiny religious ultra-conservative minority of Palestinians to a major player in Palestinian politics is a direct result of Washington’s failure to be an honest broker in the peace process. If a viable independent Palestinian state had emerged as a result of the Oslo peace process that began in 1993, something the United States failed to support, extremist elements would have been marginalized. Despite lip service towards a two-state solution, successive U.S. administrations have never pushed Israel to make the necessary compromises for peace.

Not only has the United States opposed armed struggle by Palestinians against both civilian and military targets, it has opposed conditioning the billions of dollars of U.S. military aid on Israel’s willingness to end the

occupation and has opposed the Palestine Authority seeking recognition for Palestinian statehood at the United Nations and by foreign governments, even while pushing Arab regimes to unilaterally recognize Israel prior to ending the occupation and colonization of the West Bank. In addition, the United States has vetoed and otherwise blocked scores of UN Security Council resolutions that would have moved the peace process forward and has even opposed nonviolent international civil society campaigns like the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement (BDS).

The U.S. position has been that the United should not push Israel to end its occupation because the Palestinian nationalist movement opposed to the Israeli occupation is divided and has an authoritarian structure while and some factions don't recognize Israel and commit terrorism. Yet the nationalist struggle in [Western Sahara](#) against the Moroccan occupation of their country is unified, it has never engaged in terrorism, it is relatively democratic, and it has never questioned the occupying power's right to exist. Despite this, the U.S. government also refuses to support the Western Saharan people's right to self-determination. The United States (along with Israel) is the only country in the world to formally recognize Morocco's illegal annexation of the occupied territory.

So, even if the Palestinians got their act together like the Western Saharans have largely done, the United States would probably continue to support the Israeli occupation anyway. The U.S. government has provided virtually no incentive for Palestinians to become more moderate. This too has contributed to the rise of Hamas.

As UN Secretary General [Antonio Guterres](#) described it, in a comment widely condemned by U.S. officials,

It is important to also recognize the attacks by Hamas did not happen in a vacuum. The Palestinian people have been subjected to 56 years of suffocating occupation. They have seen their lands steadily devoured by settlements and plagued by violence, their economy stifled, their people displaced and their homes demolished. Their hopes for a political solution to their plight have been vanishing. But the grievances of the Palestinian people cannot justify the appalling attacks by Hamas, and those appalling attacks cannot justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people.

Debunking Common Myths

Another rationalization for Israel's war on Gaza is the myth that Israel withdrew from the territory in 2004 only to be attacked thereafter. Some have even used this myth as a cautionary tale regarding an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied West Bank. In reality, although Israel has largely kept its occupation forces outside the territory, it has maintained a siege on the enclave, controlling the land, sea, and air. This had resulted in an ongoing humanitarian crisis even prior to the outbreak of the current war. According to international law, having such total control over the movement of people and goods still constitutes a foreign belligerent occupation, which has further strengthened Hamas militancy.

Israel has also brutally suppressed nonviolent protests. When thousands of unarmed Palestinians [held demonstrations](#) in 2018 near the fence separating Gaza from Israel, Israeli forces opened fire, killing more than 150 protesters. In 2010, Israeli forces attacked an unarmed international humanitarian aid flotilla on the high seas, killing 10 passengers and crew, including an American teenager. A large [majority of U.S. House members](#) signed a letter defending the attack.

Increasingly desperate conditions inside the besieged enclave and the failure of diplomatic means and nonviolent resistance to end the siege only increased the fanaticism of Hamas. In the periodic clashes between Israel and Hamas over the past 15 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, 28 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, despite investigations by [Human Rights Watch](#), [Amnesty International](#), the [United Nations Human Rights Council](#), and others, which have failed to find a single documented case of any civilian deaths caused by Hamas using [human shields](#).

After not finding evidence of the actual use of human shields, according to the definition under international humanitarian law, Congress decided to redefine it. Following a previous round of fighting between Israel and Hamas, the House of Representatives passed [a resolution](#) sponsored by Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) calling on the international community to "condemn Hamas for deliberately embedding its fighters, leaders, and weapons in private homes, schools, mosques, hospitals, and otherwise using Palestinian civilians as human shields." A Hamas leader living in his own private home, attending a neighborhood mosque, and seeking admittance to a local hospital does not constitute "embedding" for the purpose of "using Palestinians as human shields." Indeed, the majority of leaders of most governments and political parties live in private homes in civilian neighborhoods, go to local houses of worship, and check into hospitals when sick or injured, alongside ordinary civilians.

Furthermore, given that Hamas is a militia rather than a standing army with military bases housing its forces, virtually all of its fighters also live in private homes and go to neighborhood mosques and local hospitals. What Congress was doing in passing this resolution was essentially to declare that crowded urban enclave a free-fire zone.

Even if Hamas was using human shields, [Protocol I](#) of the Fourth Geneva Convention states that if one side is shielding itself behind civilians, it "shall not release the Parties to the conflict from their legal obligations with respect to the civilian population and civilians." (To use a domestic example: If bank robbers were holding hostages and were shooting at people from among them, the SWAT team could not get away with killing the hostages as well by simply saying that the criminals were using human shields.)

The civilian death toll in from Israel's ongoing bombing campaign in Gaza has now topped 5,000 people. Biden and members of Congress are once again blaming Hamas for [using "human shields,"](#) yet none of the accounts about the air strikes killing civilians so far indicate that Hamas fighters or officials were doing so. Despite well-documented cases of war crimes by Israeli forces, Biden and a huge bipartisan majority in Congress are pushing to provide even more arms to Israel to kill even more Palestinians.

A Wider War?

If U.S. support for the ongoing carnage in Gaza weren't bad enough, [those seeking a wider war](#) in the Middle East have been pushing the line that Hamas is some kind of proxy for Iran's regional ambitions. The reality is very different: Iran does have proxy militias in Syria and Iraq, maintains very close ties to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and supports the Houthis in Yemen. However, Iran has *not* been particularly close to Hamas.

Unlike these other allied militia, there is no evidence that there have been Iranian advisors or trainers on the ground or heavy Iranian equipment in the Gaza Strip. Some elements of the Iranian military have provided some small rockets and some financial support, but that's about it. Iran is closer to Islamic Jihad, a rival Palestinian militia. Iran and Hamas were on opposite sides in the Syrian civil war and have had other disputes.

The terrifying success of Hamas's October 7 incursion into Israel was not a result of Iranian planning but Netanyahu's decision to dispatch the [Gaza Division of the Israeli Defense Forces](#) that was supposed to secure that border area to the West Bank to support illegal settlements. In total, 31 Israeli battalions that should have been protecting Israel's borders [were stationed](#) in the occupied Palestinian territories supporting right-wing settlers.

Despite Hamas's lack of close international allies, there is fear of some kind of spillover. After weeks of warning various Middle Eastern adversaries not to widen the war, the Biden administration on Friday launched a series of air strikes in Syria.

Meanwhile, though Hamas has never engaged in or even threatened any terrorist attacks outside of Israel or the occupied territories, Congressional Republicans are pushing the absurd notion that the Biden administration has to crack down further on immigration and migration and further fortify the Mexican border to protect Americans from a supposed Hamas threat.

Although the violent, reactionary nature of Hamas should certainly not be ignored or downplayed, the follies of U.S. policy historically and at present must be forcefully challenged.