

Justifying Collective Punishment: Israel's Assault on Gaza

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"Erroneous doctrines are current in the world, which declare a man culpable and responsible merely because he is a member or part of a determined country, without taking the trouble to seek or examine whether on his part there has been any personal sin of deed or omission." —Pope Pius XII, New York Times, Feb 21, 1946.

For anyone concerned about the moderating restraint international law is meant to offer, especially when it comes to the use of force by states, Israel's approach against the imprisoned populace of Gaza is bound to cause profound despair and lingering disgust.

Since the brutal and for Israel's security apparatus, unnerving attack by Hamas on October 7, the Israeli State has been busy laying the patchwork for the use of force promises to be limitless. In a part of the world where the warring parties see themselves as the privileged proprietors of history and religion, the exceptional battling the unwashed, retaliatory violence is a purifying sacrament.

In its modern, public relations iteration, Israel's way of waging war is seen as cleaner, more observant of international rules, than the swarthy, ill-kept barbarians who hold them in such contempt. It is couched in medical, operational terms. The killing is more surgical, more civilised, if you will. This is a reductive, machine morality, dehumanising and deidentifying victims. When slaughtered by shells, missiles and advanced weapons of war, humans are merely unintended targets.

This often seems like an attempt to square a particularly difficult circle, given such absolutist, apocalyptic aims being advanced by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli Defence Forces. How do you utterly and totally extinguish Hamas as an organisation without the mass killing of civilian personnel and civilians in general? The answer: you can't.

Gaza City, according to Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, is a reprobate agglomeration within which a wicked organisation, Hamas, operates. The conflation, which Netanyahu made in his [October 7 speech](#), is effortless, purposeful. It follows that those living in such a morally regressive environment escape for their sake – lest they be tarnished by biblical wickedness. “I say to the residents of Gaza: Leave now because we will operate forcefully everywhere.”

This morning, on Shabbat and a holiday, Hamas invaded Israeli territory and murdered innocent citizens including children and the elderly. Hamas has started a brutal and evil war.

We will be victorious in this war despite an unbearable price. This is a very difficult day for all...

— Benjamin Netanyahu - בנימין נתניהו (@netanyahu) [October 8, 2023](#)

This gives some skimpy moral leverage to the exterminatory force to follow. “All the places which Hamas is deployed, hiding and operating in, that wicked city, we will turn them into rubble.” There are no distinctions on personnel, civilian, combatant, age or status. The logic here is one of justified collective punishment.

There is an undertow of atavism to the whole exercise. We are already well acquainted with the remarks of Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, [who](#) declared that Israel was fighting “human animals, and we are acting accordingly”. To this can be added the punitive, scalding views of Major General Ghasan Alian, who [lectured](#) Gazans on October 10 with withering disdain. “Kidnapping, abusing and murdering children, women and elderly people is not human.” So said the Alian to children, women, and the elderly who could hardly have been blamed.

Alian, who serves as Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, went on to state that Hamas had morphed into ISIS, and gravely noted how “the residents of Gaza” had taken delight in their exploits against Israeli citizens. “Human animals must be treated as such. There will be no electricity, no water [in Gaza], there will only be destruction. You wanted hell, you will get hell.”

Other officials have reiterated the same motif of cataclysmic, undifferentiated destruction. An IDF spokesperson [told](#) Channel 13 News that no buildings would survive an assault on the strip. “Gaza will eventually be turned into a city of tents.” Netanyahu, likewise, [promised](#) that Gaza would be turned “into a deserted island”.

Things were not much better in the Knesset. Ariel Kallner of the governing Likud Party [yearned for an ethnic cleansing](#) to rival the dispossession of Palestinians in 1948, known in Arabic as the Nakba:

“Right now, one goal: Nakba! A Nakba that will overshadow the Nakba of 48. Nakba in Gaza and Nakba to anyone who dares to join!”

Efforts are well underway for that objective. On October 13, the Israeli government ordered 1.1 million people living in North Gaza to evacuate their homes within 24 hours. What awaits those tormented souls on return – if they return – are charred ruins and mountains of rubble.

But this was untroubling to the Israeli President Isaac Herzog, [who sees](#) all Gaza as culpable and therefore punishable. “It is an entire nation out there that is responsible... It is not true this rhetoric about civilians not being aware, not involved.”

To therefore draw distinctions in the operation against Gaza in terms of military discrimination regarding targets is a spurious exercise. Nothing of the sort is taking place, though lip service is bound to be paid at intervals. We have not, in that sense, come much further [than the debates](#) that took place during the Second World War about mass civilian bombing, one vigorously endorsed by the likes of Air Marshal Arthur Harris of the Royal Air Force in targeting Germany.

The methods of “Bomber” Harris tallied with the views of the British diplomat Lord Robert Vansittart, much echoed in the assumptions of broad Palestinian guilt being expressed by Herzog and company. On that occasion, it was the inherent culpability of the German people. “You not only *can* indict a nation; you cannot escape from doing so,” he blustered in his 1944 work, [Roots of the Trouble and the Black Record of Germany](#). “The appalling cruelty of the German nation, and its calculated causes, will be remembered as long as men go upright.”

Agnès Callamard, Amnesty International’s Secretary General, [finds](#) the Israeli efforts to annihilate Hamas as indifferent to civilian, combatant, law and convention, in other words, symptoms of Vansittartism. “In their stated intent to use all means to destroy Hamas, Israeli forces have shown a shocking disregard for civilian lives. They have pulverized street after street of residential buildings killing civilians on a mass scale and destroying essential infrastructure, while new restrictions mean Gaza is fast running out of water, medicine, fuel and electricity.”

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner [also released a statement](#) on October 12 condemning “the horrific crimes committed by Hamas” while also condemning, in strong terms, “Israel’s indiscriminate military attacks against the already exhausted Palestinian people of Gaza, comprising over 2.3 million people, nearly half of whom are children.” The relevant UN experts also reiterate the all-punitive nature of the “unlawful blockade [of] 16 years” and the “five major brutal wars, which remain unaccounted for”. And unaccounted such acts of violence will continue to remain, except in a cycle of permanent, retaliatory acts that resist a political solution.

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