

ORIGINAL SIN: ON THE ATTACK ON ISRAEL AND THE OCCUPATION OF PALESTINE

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The unprecedented surprise attack by Hamas on Israel on Saturday, killing some 700 people, should serve as a reminder of the unsustainability of the situation in the occupied and blockaded Palestinian territories and the dangers that non-state actors such as Hamas pose to Israel, no matter how strong their military and intelligence agencies are. Tensions have been flaring in the West Bank for months, but nobody expected such a coordinated, low-tech yet lethal incursion from Gaza. The West Bank has seen violence on a daily basis in recent months. Before Saturday's attack, some 200 Palestinians and 30 Israelis were killed this year alone. The Benjamin Netanyahu government largely ignored the violence, and went ahead with its other policy preferences, including the overhaul of the judiciary. The Israeli military described the situation in Gaza as "stable instability", noting that the situation, though volatile, was under control. And then came the Hamas attack, reminiscent of the 1973 Yom Kippur war when Egypt and Syria shook Israel. Hamas, an Islamist militant organisation that carried out suicide attacks in the 1990s and early 2000s, showed no distinction between civilians and soldiers, dealing the bloodiest blow to Israel in recent history.

The attack raises moral and pragmatic questions. Hamas's indiscriminate violence against Israeli civilians is repugnant and is not going to help the Palestinian cause in any way. On the contrary, it will put more Palestinian lives at risk as Israel, equally disregarding civilian casualties, is pounding the besieged enclave. But at the same time, Palestinian territories, under the yoke of the longest occupation in modern history, have been a fuming volcano. There is no peace process. Israel has continued to build settlements in the West Bank, raising security barriers and checkpoints, limiting Palestinian movements, and never hesitating to use force or collective punishment to keep organised Palestinians under check. This status quo has only turned Palestinians more radical and Hamas even stronger. Israel has now declared war. But past attacks — ground invasions and air strikes — have done little to weaken Hamas. West Asia has also witnessed geopolitical realignments in recent years — from the Israel-Arab reconciliation to the Iran-Saudi détente. But these changes have conveniently sidestepped the occupation of Palestine, West Asia's original sin, letting the status quo prevail. But the status quo cannot prevail without consequences. If Israel and other regional and international players want lasting peace and stability in the region, their focus must turn to finding a solution to the question of Palestine. The military operations without addressing the core issue would only be cosmetic interventions.

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