

International Pressure Is The Only Way To Halt Israel's Devastation Of Gaza



Tariq Kenney-Shawa of Al-Shabaka warns Palestinians are being deemed “subhuman” by Israel and the U.S.

Israel's ground invasion of northern Gaza [has in effect begun](#), following the Israeli military's announcement on Friday of its plan to “expand” its ground attacks.

“Explosions from continuous airstrikes lit up the sky over Gaza City for hours after nightfall,” according to the [Associated Press](#), and families with loved ones in Gaza were terrified to learn on Friday that Israel has taken down internet and communications throughout the region, largely cutting off contact between the 2.3 million people who live there and the outside world, and making it difficult for journalists to track the scale of ground attacks. According to the [Washington Post](#), “The Hamas media center reported heavy nighttime clashes with Israeli forces at several places, including what it said was an Israeli incursion east of Bureij. Asked about the report, the Israeli military reiterated early Saturday that it had been carrying out targeted raids and expanding strikes with the aim of ‘preparing the ground for future stages of the operation.’”

This is an escalation of the massive retaliatory strikes that Israel has been taking against the population of Gaza since October 7, when an attack led by the militant group Hamas killed roughly 1,400 people inside Israeli territory, including many civilians. The collective punishment that Israel has wreaked in response has destroyed much of Gaza's infrastructure and has already killed [more than 7,000 Palestinians](#), including [3,000 children](#).

In the exclusive interview for *Truthout* that follows, Tariq Kenney-Shawa, policy fellow at the independent transnational think tank Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian

Policy Network evaluates the prospects for a shift in United States foreign policy toward Israel and explains why Palestinian resistance will never die as long as Israel fails to recognize Palestinian rights under international law.

C.J. Polychroniou: Gaza, home to 2.3 million Palestinians, has been under direct Israeli occupation for nearly 40 years and has been under blockade for the last 16 years while Israel has retained exclusive control over Gaza's airspace and territorial waters. Since 2006, which is when Hamas won the last legislative election, Gaza has also been subjected to numerous deadly Israeli assaults. The latest round of massive bombardments, which is taking place in the context of an Israeli plan for the "complete siege" of Gaza and has already resulted in the death of [more than 7,000 Palestinians](#), including [3,000 children](#), are in response to the unprecedented October 7 Hamas attacks on Israeli territory. Hamas fighters killed as many as 1,400 people and seized perhaps as many as 200 hostages. What do you think Hamas hoped to gain with its attacks on Israeli civilians, which, unsurprisingly, have triggered a massive retaliation with the stated goal of destroying Hamas while employing collective punishment as a method of war?

Tariq Kenney-Shawa: To be honest, I think Hamas was as surprised as many of us in the sheer success and scope of their operation. I don't believe even Hamas's leaders and those closest to the operational planning expected that they would get as deep into Israel as they did, and perhaps more importantly, that other rival groups were also able to participate at the level they did. This means that Hamas exercised little operational control on the ground once the scope of the operation exceeded the expected parameters. A lot of the killing of civilians took place in the chaos of the unexpected advance in which fighters found themselves in places they never imagined they would, and [reports continue to emerge](#) that the indiscriminate response by Israeli forces also contributed to the civilian death toll.

Again, the October 7 operation was unprecedented in just about every sense of the term, especially in terms of overturning the idea that the Israeli military is inherently invincible. Of course, the power asymmetry between the Israeli military and even the most capable Palestinian resistance groups is immense. Israel is a nuclear-backed force that fields the most advanced weapons (like F-35 fighter jets, Merkava battle tanks, advanced spyware, etc.) on the market and an army that is widely recognized as one of the most capable in the world. But the al-Qassam Brigades were able to take Israeli forces by surprise. So, it's very clear that what happened on the ground on October 7 likely exceeded what Hamas

even intended in the first place.

In terms of the wider strategy, we can speculate on what Hamas hoped to achieve, even if what happened went a lot further. Hamas has come to understand that Israel only communicates, understands and responds to the language of force and violence. Palestinians in Gaza have watched as they become increasingly isolated from the rest of Palestine and the world within the open-air prison that the Gaza Strip is. They have watched political tracks dissolve, they have seen peaceful protesters get sniped by Israeli regime forces, and they have also seen growing international solidarity with the Palestinians translate into nothing but tighter blockade and occupation.

It's pretty clear that Hamas no longer cares about winning the hearts and minds of the international community, because after more than 75 years of occupation and 16 years of suffocating blockade, those public opinion victories have brought the people of Gaza nothing tangible. To Hamas, disrupting the Israel-imposed status quo is the only thing that gives them leverage, and what that looks like is armed resistance. The truth is that armed resistance played an integral role in forcing Israel to withdraw settlers from Gaza in 2005 and can be argued to have even forced Israel's hand over recent years in easing aspects of the blockade of Gaza when it comes to expanded fishing zones and the entry of goods.

Hamas knows that Israel will respond with disproportionate force to any act of resistance, but it seems that their goal was to break the status quo at whatever the cost because to them, it is a matter of dying on their feet rather than silently on their knees. People outside of Gaza may disagree with their tactics, but it is critical to understand their reasoning.

Since the late 1990s, Hamas has gained widespread popularity among Palestinians for its stance toward Israel, though it doesn't represent all Palestinians, and there are conflicting accounts about the support that Hamas actually enjoys among Gazans in particular. In fact, nearly half of Gazans today were not even alive when Hamas won the 2006 legislative election, so it's not easy to get a handle on the matter. What is your assessment of the state of Palestinian support for Hamas?

It's extremely difficult to accurately gauge the level of support Hamas has in Gaza and even within the wider Palestinian political environment. Reliable polling is

hard to come by right now, and it's always tough to get accurate polling numbers from people who fear being surveilled.

It's also extremely important to recognize that when people say that Hamas was democratically elected, this refers to a parliamentary election that took place over 18 years ago. More than half of Gaza's population is [under the age of 14](#), which means the vast majority of Palestinians in Gaza today either were not even alive or were not old enough to vote for Hamas (or anyone else, for that matter) the last time elections were held. With that in mind, Hamas has been ruling Gaza against the democratic will of Gazans simply because there have been no elections. It's also well known that Hamas has violently suppressed opposition to its rule and policies repeatedly over the last decade.

Palestinian public opinion is also known to be extremely diverse, in part due to the fractured nature of the Palestinian polity as a result of decades of Israeli settler colonialism and divide-and-conquer rule. What this means is that a Palestinian in Nablus might ascribe to different tactics and strategy than a Palestinian in Gaza or in the global diaspora. But what unites most Palestinians is a shared support for resistance or *sumud* (steadfastness) in the face of Israeli occupation and apartheid.

A lot of the support that Hamas does receive is because of its perceived commitment to resistance as opposed to the alternative, which is the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, widely viewed by Palestinians across the spectrum as corrupt subcontractors of the Israeli occupation. To many Palestinians, at least Hamas and other resistance groups continue to fight back against their occupiers, as opposed to alternative parties like Fatah, which is widely seen as having sold out the Palestinian people. This is where Hamas continues to receive support.

Israel has vowed to destroy Hamas. Isn't this a fantasy of sorts given that Israel has no intention of recognizing Palestinian rights? I mean, even if Hamas is destroyed militarily, wouldn't something else take its place? Peace requires justice, and the current Israeli regime, unfortunately, doesn't care about justice.

What Israel wants to destroy, to wipe off the face of the map, is Palestinian resistance in whatever form it may come in. Israel has spent decades doing its best to suppress any and all forms of Palestinian resistance. When Palestinians attempt nonviolent tactics — such as boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS)

campaigns aimed at making occupation economically unsustainable for Israel — we are rebuked, smeared as antisemites and suppressed by lawsuits and lawfare.

Nonviolent protests are crushed. During the Great March of Return in 2018, for example, Israeli forces killed at least 223 protesters and maimed thousands as they marched to the border of Gaza to demand their right of return and an end to the blockade. Thousands of Palestinian administrative detainees and political prisoners — prisoners held without charge, trial, or access to lawyers — are tortured and killed. Even piecemeal efforts to bring our case to the International Criminal Court, the supposedly internationally accepted path in our “rules-based-international-order,” are met with accusations of “diplomatic terrorism.”

Israel’s crushing response to each of these efforts is proof that the issue has never been the method of resistance but rather the fact that Palestinians dare to resist their oppression at all.

Israel may kill off thousands of Hamas fighters and leaders by the end of their campaign, but they cannot defeat the resistance of which Hamas is just one component. As long as Palestinians live under blockade, occupation and apartheid, wherever they are, resistance will continue in all its forms. If you need further proof for this, just remember that Israel has carried out devastating assaults on the Gaza Strip in 2008, 2012, 2014 and 2021 all with the stated aim of defeating resistance groups. What each of these onslaughts, which they call “mowing the grass,” has achieved is a further deepening of the Palestinian will to resist as they’ve been forced to witness family and friends killed and futures destroyed under endless siege.

The U.S. and other Western nations have given Israel the green light for the leveling of Gaza in retribution for the Hamas attack — a decision that has made many conclude that they value Israeli lives more than Palestinian ones. Does that seem like an accurate assessment to you? Could you talk about efforts within these nations that are trying to challenge this greenlighting of a massive assault against Palestinians? Is there anything that gives you hope that U.S. policy could be swayed in a different direction?

The U.S. and the West at large have, since day one, always valued Israeli lives over Palestinians. That’s because Israelis are seen as brethren, both in terms of ethnic/racial backgrounds and religious affiliation, while Palestinians are

considered subhuman and lumped into wider hatred of Arabs and deeply rooted Islamophobia. Just days ago, National Security Council Spokesman John Kirby cried on national television for the Israeli civilians killed on October 7. Days later, he stood in front of cameras during a press briefing and shrugged off the deaths of Palestinian civilians as unfortunate but inevitable collateral damage.

I have little hope right now that official U.S. policy can be swayed in a different direction. Even before the current crisis, official U.S. policy was far removed from the demands of public opinion. Over the last few years, the narrative has been shifting around Israel-Palestine, and that has led to substantial shifts in public opinion. Recent polling found that, for the first time in history, [Democrats sympathized more with Palestinians](#) than with Israelis. More importantly, younger generations across the political spectrum are not only more supportive of the Palestinian struggle, but are actively calling for Israel to be held accountable for the war crimes and human rights violations it routinely commits. But you wouldn't be able to tell by just looking at Biden administration policy, which is arguably the most anti-Palestinian out of any administration in recent U.S. history.

Remember, during the 2020 campaign, Joe Biden made all sorts of lofty promises about centering human rights, promoting democracy and so on, only to, as president, abandon those objectives in favor of embracing autocrats and pursuing the Trump administration-brokered Abraham Accords with absolutely no regard for holding Israel accountable for occupation and apartheid. So basically, Biden's assumption — and this was shared by both Israeli and Arab governments — was that Palestinians could effectively be swept under the rug, maybe offered some crumbs here and there to keep quiet while these security deals were made without the support of the masses across the region.

What we saw on October 7 shattered that assumption — the assumption that we could just forget about Palestinians, forget about the occupation, forget about holding Israel accountable for the conditions it keeps Palestinians under.

So now here we are, two weeks into what has become a total massacre, and it's clear the Biden administration isn't learning its lesson. President Biden wasted no time in basically grinding into gear to ratchet up unconditional support of Israel to new levels. He deployed the *USS Gerald Ford* to the coast of Gaza to provide combat support if Israel faced a second front against Hezbollah in Lebanon, and reportedly has marines and advisers on the ground with the Israeli military to

participate in their offensive if need be. Biden is replenishing the artillery shells, missiles, and other lethal munitions that Israel is using to massacre Gazans as we speak, and is seeking at least \$14 billion of our taxpayer dollars (on top of the \$3.8 billion we give them every year) in humanitarian and military aid to Israel. If all that wasn't enough, he has continued to explicitly discourage calls for a ceasefire and is even entertaining plans to facilitate the mass displacement of Palestinians from Gaza.

Some analysts seem to think that Biden is somehow playing 3D chess by publicly supporting Israel unconditionally while working backchannel diplomacy to supposedly temper their assault, but it's hard to buy that when more than 6,000 Palestinians have been massacred across Gaza and the West Bank in just over two weeks. Couple that with everything I just listed, and it's pretty obvious that Biden is giving Israel carte blanche.

Israel's latest assault on Gaza is already going down as a major war crime. But what happens next? Is there really an alternative to the vicious cycle of violence?

It is extremely difficult to predict what will come next for Palestinians. But we can be sure that Palestinians are facing an ongoing *Nakba* (catastrophe), a repeat of 1948 and worse as we speak.

The Israeli regime has given every indication that it intends to drastically alter the status quo in Gaza, and that is going to look like genocide and ethnic cleansing.

Israel's order to evacuate northern Gaza is an indication of what they have planned. Israel's ground invasion will likely focus on northern Gaza, where the bulk of Hamas's tunnel infrastructure is. Israel recently warned that it would consider any civilians remaining in the area to be "accomplices" of Hamas — which, apart from being a blatant war crime, indicates Israel intends to all but flatten the entire area and turn it into a demilitarized zone at the expense of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians. More than 2 million Gazans, who were already confined to one of the most densely populated slivers of land on this planet, will now be forced into a space half the size or will be pushed out entirely in a process of ethnic cleansing that will surpass what happened in 1948.

Keep in mind, this has always been Israel's goal — full control of the territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea with as few Palestinians as

possible. The only thing that has stopped them from wiping out every last Palestinian in one fell swoop in the past has been the international community, but considering the West's unconditional support of Israel over the last couple weeks, can we depend on them anymore?

There absolutely is an alternative to all of this — but it involves international pressure aimed at bringing an end to the conditions that led to October 7 in the first place, namely Israel's occupation of Palestine and its suffocating blockade of Gaza. As long as those conditions remain in place, as long as Palestinians are oppressed, resistance will continue. That is the plain reality of the situation. You want to end the cycle of violence? End Israel's occupation, end Israeli apartheid, lift the blockade and give Palestinians the rights and freedom we are entitled to.

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