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THE PSYCHO-POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC CAUSES AND RAMIFICATIONS OF THE 2023–2024 ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN WAR: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE^{2, 3}

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is over one hundred years old. It has been undergoing significant shifts since the 1990s. The relations between the two sides have been shifting between peace accords and several cycles of vicious violence. Since October 7th, 2023, a turning point occurred in the relationship between the two sides. The violent exchange, which started on October 7th, 2023, marks a watershed that seems to make the conflict even more intractable than it has been so far. The sudden, surprising, and unprecedented Palestinian attack on Israel caused hundreds of deaths and injuries in one day. It entailed atrocities, human rights violations, and humiliation of basic human dignity. From a strategic point of view, this was the first time that the Palestinians gained a unique strategic success by surprising the Israeli intelligence, landing a blow to the strongest army in the region, occupying Israeli territories for hours, and causing an unprecedented number of casualties that left most if not all Israelis in shock, grief, rage, and humiliation. The besieged Palestinians of Gaza, especially the hegemonic power Hamas, managed to establish a military might that posed a strategic threat on Israel. This reality, which was created with the indirect help of the Israeli government, especially the government of Benjamin Netanyahu, has led to Israel's subsequent ruthless war in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli longest war has led to the killing of tens of thousands, most of whom are innocent civilians, and the devastation of hundreds of thousands of residential buildings, leaving their inhabitants without shelter. The Israeli brutal

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² It is important to note that this article was submitted for publication while the war was still ongoing in October 2024.

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tactics in the Gaza Strip are also shocking, painful, infuriating, and exasperating. The conduct of the Israeli security forces is in magnitude and scale not seen before. As a result, this war is expected to have a long-standing psycho-political impact on both sides' future behavior and considerations, not that previous painful events have been missing between the two sides.

When going beyond the human suffering, to the extent that is possible, aiming to think about the strategic dimensions of this war, especially its causes, reasoning, goals, and implications, one is obliged first to consider when and how it began and whether it is possible to disconnect it from a more profound development on both sides in the last couple of decades. That said, many questions come to mind when seeking to explain this war and provide some logic to its timing, causes, reasonings, and implications. Although it is hard to answer many questions about the October 7th war, it is possible to tackle some of them, such as the one, why did the Palestinians attack Israel at a time when Israel is ruled by the most extreme nationalistic government in its history, being aware of the disproportionate balance of power and a harsh retaliation that could be expected? Another set of questions that come to mind are: What are the goals of Hamas and its allies? Why did the Israeli army fail to prevent the attack despite the existence of sufficient intelligence about the intentions and training of Hamas soldiers? Why did Israel retaliate in the way it did, and what are the objectives the government is seeking to achieve? What is this war's strategic meaning, and what are its possible ramifications for the two sides and the region?

This article aims to answer some of these questions by providing a psycho-political and strategic analysis of the timing, causes, and reasonings behind this war, while locating it in its regional and international context. For that purpose, the following analysis goes beyond simple framing of current events, arguing that wars are always an integral component of a system composed of a balance of power between multiple players (Waltz 1979; Wagner 2007). Accordingly, wars are never only local and motivated by the will of a particular player, even when players have a central role in their instigation (Gilpin 1981; Walt 1987; Dierauer 2013; Mann 2023). As we shall demonstrate, they result from polarity in a regional and international system of power in which players seek to either maintain the status quo or change it to their advantage (Mearsheimer 2001). That given, when seeking an explanation for a particular war, it is necessary to bring together all its causes and look at how local, regional, and international factors play in a systemic power structure rather than just agent-based structure.

Notwithstanding the causes, war entails a hierarchy of suffering, according to which the suffering of one's side is always more valued and counted than the sufferings of others. Therefore, we must consider the psycho-social dimensions of wars to understand them better (Payne 2015). The hierarchy of suffering has strategic ramifications, especially when we consider the immediate relationship between suffering

and humiliation, and the urge of human beings to retaliate or take revenge (Zabad 2019). The politics of feelings is a pivotal factor in why war continues to characterize human societies and those that have experienced enlightenment, modernization, and cultural elevation (Nussbaum 2003). The brutality and devastation of the October 7th war challenge the argument that the level of human damage resulting from wars has been markedly reduced in modern societies compared to pre-modern societies (Pinker 2013). The enduring amount of human suffering necessitates thinking about the causes, reasoning, and ramifications of wars (Mann 2023).

The following analysis demonstrates that it is the profound interrelationship between internal developments on both sides of the conflict on the one hand and regional and international polarization on the other that provides the reasoning behind the tragic events of October 7th, 2023. It is the rise of messianic nationalism in Israel and its occupation of the highest ranks in government and partially the security forces and simultaneously the upsurge of fundamental religious forces, especially Hamas and Islamic Jihad, in Palestinian society, that took over the Gaza Strip and launched a liberation struggle against Israel that constitute the local deep causes of the October 7th war. These internal developments have led to new attrition wars between the two sides, sidelining moderate forces that could have facilitated a more peaceful communication between the two sides (Ben-Ami 2022). Although the impact of the sides on the conflict is incomparable, it is the antagonistic developments within them that have led to the October 7th explosion. These internal developments are negatively dialectical, especially given the fact that Israel was an important active player behind the rising power of Hamas, aiming to weaken the Palestinian Authority (PA) as an officially recognized representative of the Palestinian cause and thereby to avoid negotiations based on former peace agreements with it. At the regional and international level, one must consider the efforts made by the subsequent US administrations and its allies in Europe to promote normalization of relations between what they have defined as moderate Arab states and Israel, thereby accepting the Israeli strategy of sidelining the Palestinians, sustaining the occupation of the West Bank and the siege of Gaza, and disregarding their aspirations for liberation and statehood.

In other words, the following analysis shows that contextualizing historically and strategically the Hamas attack of October 7th is indispensable to understand where it came from and why. Unlike some viewpoints, mainly in Israel, which claim that contextualizing the Palestinian attack is a form of relativization or justification⁴, the following analysis shows that it is another cycle of violence, albeit more brutal, that has been caused as a result of long-standing causes. Contextualizing this war, going

⁴ Eva Illouz has argued that the contextualization made by Judith Butler of the October 7th events may sound like justifying them. See: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/03/16/eva-illouz-judith-butler-s-remarks-on-hamas-remind-us-that-intellectuals-too-can-indulge-in-deception_6624620_23.html.

beyond the official discourse of the parties involved enables us to avoid the trap of the propaganda war and provide comprehensive answers to part of the questions raised above. The contextualization of grand events in the psyche and memory of the two sides is of great epistemological and ethical importance (Stocking 1993), allowing us to better understand the players' behavior and strategic goals without belittling the tremendous human suffering and pain. Contextualization means path-dependent analysis and process tracking (Goertz, Mahoney 2012), following what has been recommended by many philosophers of social science. Therefore, we seek to meticulously trace the steps taken by all sides, deconstructing their initial intentions, behavior and what they thought they would achieve as a result. Furthermore, contextualizing the October 7th war condition our ability to better understand the causes, reasoning and intended strategic and regional goals of the sides (Hesselgrave, Rommen 2013). It helps in providing a partial explanation of the reasons behind its breakout, its brutality and ruthlessness, the falling astray of many Israeli misconceptions and prejudices regarding the daring and capacity of the Palestinians in Gaza, and the black holes in the Israeli defense strategy that allowed the fighting to last so long. Looking at the broader context of the October 7th war also helps us clarify, why the unfolding reality's severity has a deep regional foundation and therefore necessitates a different pattern of international intervention if we are to avoid future cycles of violence (Tannam 2014; Spitka 2016; Huber 2021).

Furthermore, the following analysis demonstrates that the brutality of this war has to do with deep psycho-social processes taking place in Israeli and Palestinian societies and therefore necessitates impartial and fair international brokers to shift the course of history and give both peoples some hope for a better future (Mihaylova, Ezekiel 2023). The human suffering and pain this conflict is causing will unfortunately continue unless the structured bias in the involvement of external players, especially the US and its allies, changes. This means that they will morally and practically cease the long-standing double standard politics they practice and ethically and practically balance the asymmetry of power between the two sides of the conflict, not only to bring them to the negotiating table, but also to agree on the principles on which the institutional solution is to be promoted. Confirming the use of excessive violence by the powerful side to determine the wished-for solution one-sidedly is not and cannot be the way to deal with the roots of the conflict and deconstruct the causes of its intractability.

■ THE BEGINNINGS AND THE PROLONGED NAKBA

Making the argument that timing is an important factor in understanding the October 7th, 2023 Israeli-Palestinian war challenges attempts to decontextualize it and frame it as if it were the beginning of the conflict between the two sides. This

war, while unprecedented and initiated by radical Palestinians, is not the conflict's inception or a sudden eruption. It is another phase in the national clash that started when Zionist Jews, mainly from Europe, began immigrating to Palestine, seeking to establish a national home in a land already inhabited by native Palestinians (Beit Hallahmi 1993; Morris 2008; Tessler 2009; Masalha 2018; Khalidi 2020). The meeting between immigrant Jews and indigenous Palestinians was conflictual from the beginning (Gorny 1983; Bernstein 2000; Segev 2001). The Jewish immigrants did not come to the land with good faith and have so far continued expanding their "lebensraum" in territories inhabited by Palestinians (Schoenman 1988). Although Jews have had justifications for their immigration to Palestine and the superpowers of the time have had strategic reasons for supporting this historical transformation (Halpern 1987; Gendzier 2016), from the standpoint of the innocent Palestinians, they were the victims of a foreign colonial project that compromised their right to a state of their own in their homeland (Sayegh 1965; Said 1980; Muslih 1988; Karmi 2007). This conviction was backed by the fact that the British mandatory government provided support and backing to the Zionist institutions and did everything possible to suppress Palestinians' ability to build their institutions while opposing their plans to organize and train their military power to defend themselves (Jung 2004; Bunton 2007). The Palestinians did not have the diplomatic wisdom necessary in the early decades of the twentieth century to face the growing challenge with political means. They engaged in an armed conflict with the well-equipped Israeli army units. This military engagement has led to the Palestinian Nakba, in which hundreds of thousands of Palestinians became refugees either in the West Bank and Gaza or in neighboring Arab states (Pappe 2006; Masalha 2012).

The continuous efforts made by the Palestinians to undo, at least partially, the consequences of the 1948–1949 Nakba and the expansionist settler policies of the Israeli state keep the flames of war burning. For the Palestinians, the Nakba is a tragic event that is unfolding since 1948–1949 (Sa'di, Abu-Lughod 2007). The fact that most Palestinian refugees still reside in camps around the state of Israel, whether on Palestinian territory in the West Bank (occupied by the Jordanian Army in 1948 until 1967), the Gaza Strip (occupied by the Egyptian army in the same years), or in neighboring Arab countries, such as Lebanon and Syria, feeds their aspirations for liberation and statehood (Makdisi 2008). Therefore, for them, the Nakba, manifested in their expulsion from their land in 1948, is ongoing (Sa'di, Abu-Lughod 2007; Allan 2021). They remain occupied, controlled, and oppressed, with the help of the US and its allies, who veto every Palestinian effort to gain liberation and independence, whether by military or peaceful means.

Contrary to Palestinian national aspirations for self-determination, Israel, with the full support of Western powers, was able to gain independence and use its military power to expand into a settler colonial project (Masalha 2000). In 1967, the IDF's „Iron Wall” strategic policy led to the occupation of the West Bank and

the Gaza Strip, resulting in a second wave of expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and placing hundreds of thousands – 1948 refugees and local inhabitants – under Israeli military occupation until today (Brenner 1984, Bilski Ben-Hur 1993; Shafir 2017; Khalidi 2020; Ben-Joseph 2024). Palestinians have been experiencing a continuous Israeli engineering of their demographic and geographic landscape and therefore perceive this situation as a continuation of the Nakba (Samman 2013; Allan 2021). The Israeli settler colonial policies since 1967 have confirmed their suspicions regarding the Jewish state's real intentions, namely putting a hand on the entire territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea and looking for an opportunity to fully expel them from the entire area (Weizman 2007, 2016; Zureik 2016; Shafir 2017). Many Palestinians believe that their opposition to the partition plan of 1947 was justified, as it is impossible to live with the expansionist nature of colonial Zionism (Khalidi 2007; Safty 2009). The construction of hundreds of Jewish settlements in densely populated Palestinian areas in the West Bank, aiming at Judaizing the territory, provides daily evidence of their right to resist the takeover of their homeland (Allan 2021).

The literature on war shows that it is challenging to endure injustice without resisting it (Finlay 2015; Mann 2023). Resistance can be an attempt to restore lost rights and resources, but it can also seek revenge (Waldron 2010; Zabad 2019). Palestinians, who have been expelled from their homeland, living as refugees and poorly treated by inefficient authoritarian Arab regimes, have become determined to resist the injustice done to them (Sayigh 2004). They gradually realized that they were the only ones who could liberate their homeland and change the power balance with Israel (Said 1980). The Israeli occupation has led to a new consciousness among young Palestinian leaders, who sought new strategies to keep their aspirations for liberation and statehood alive (Sayigh 1979, 2004). Different resistance organizations have emerged, part of which, such as the Fatah movement, have abandoned armed struggle and chosen diplomatic means instead, and other parts, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, who continued to oppose recognizing the right of the Israeli state as Jewish state to exist and utilize military strategy to struggle for liberation and independence.

A major rationalizing argument behind the Palestinian struggle for liberation and statehood is not only the suffering and misery of refugees and other Palestinians under occupation. It is also the injustice embedded in the right of the Zionist movement to have claimed a homeland the Jewish people arguably lost two thousand years ago and have the right to it, while the right of the Palestinians to be entitled to their homeland that they lost seventy-five years ago is not recognized. This injustice, which is not a mere ethical argument, as a result of the Israeli uninterrupted policies of territorial expansion and settlement in the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967, in contradiction to article 49 of the Geneva Convention and considered illegal by all international organizations and Israel's allies, is

intolerable for most of Palestinians and keeps the flame of conflict alive. This is true no matter whether the Palestinian aspiration for liberation and statehood is carried out under the banner of secular nationalism, willing to compromise for a mini-Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, or under an Islamic banner, considering the entire land of Palestine holy that cannot be compromised.

Most Israeli governments have continued to promote strategic plans that involve building infrastructures, roads, electricity, water supply systems, and settlements in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. The objective has been to gain greater control and tighten its grip over the entire territory of historic Palestine (Gordon 2008; Weizman 2016; Shafir 2017). To enhance the domination and control of these territories, Israeli governments have sought to deepen the divisions between different Palestinian communities, aiming to abolish a common Palestinian identity, sentiment, and aspiration (Lentin 2008). This has been true for all five main components of Palestinian communities: citizens of Israel (approximately 1.7 million), residents of the West Bank (around 3 million), residents of the Gaza Strip (about 2.2 million), people living in surrounding Arab countries, particularly in Lebanon (around 1 million), and those residing in other Arab and Western countries (around 3 million).

Israel has devised advanced military, economic, and diplomatic strategies to portray itself as the victim and to reduce the Palestinian issue to a conflict between a liberal, progressive Western state and terrorist movements that must be defeated. Palestinian attempts to gain recognition as a people entitled to liberation, independence, and the resolution of the refugee problem have been mostly met with firm Israeli objections or manipulations aimed at dissolving peaceful agreements, also when such agreements were signed (Kimmerling 2003; Hussein 2015; Raz 2024).

This brief overview of the conflict's roots does not provide us with all the details, but it does demonstrate that the brutal war that erupted on October 7th, 2023 is a continuation of a conflict that began decades ago. It also shows that the collaboration between Israel and the current world superpower, along with its allies, is a repetition of the pattern that Palestinians have had to face since the beginning of the conflict. The fact that the US, the UK and Germany have been supplying Israel with weapons to conduct its operations in the Gaza Strip is a reminder to Palestinians of what has happened since 1948 and before, and is, therefore, relevant in understanding the sentiments driving the current situation, even when we fully agree that not all means are legitimate in the struggle for liberation and statehood.

■ THE MOMENT OF APPEASEMENT AND ITS SYSTEMATIC IMPAIRMENT

Israeli-Palestinian relations underwent tremendous transformations. These included partial appeasement, which led to the signing of the Oslo Accord in 1993 and the establishing of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the Gaza Strip and parts

of the West Bank. Although these agreements led to de-escalation and some cooperation between the two sides, the peace process has been impaired by spoilers on both sides (Ben-Ami 2022). The Israeli government faced strong internal opposition that led to the assassination of the main broker of the peace process, namely Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on 5 November 1995. On the Palestinian side, Hamas and Islamic Jihad challenged the Fatah movement, which dominated the PA (Shanzer 2008). They utilized armed clashes and conducted terrorist attacks in Israeli civilian areas to sabotage the PA's willingness to accept compromising part of Palestine for the sake of national independence on parts of it (Brown 2003). These brutal armed operations, which culminated into the second Palestinian intifada in the summer of 2000 and terrorized the Israeli civilian population, have led to nationalist radicalization in Israeli society and brought the Likud party under the leadership of Ariel Sharon back to power in 2001. Sharon, who opposed the Oslo appeasement process, had to accept the diplomatic status quo. Nonetheless, he and the Chief of Staff of the Israeli army at the time, Shaul Mofaz, began initiating crucial moves that aimed at promoting the divide-and-conquer strategy of the Israeli political and military establishment at the time (Kimmerling 2003).

Sharon's strategy was based on deepening the divisions between the Palestinians, mainly those in the West Bank and those in Gaza. He began discrediting Arafat's leadership, accusing him of supporting terrorist attacks in Israeli cities. In 2002–2003, he led a destructive military operation called „Defensive Shield” in the West Bank, which intended to weaken the PA and its leadership. He placed Arafat under siege and although there is no clear-cut evidence, he has been suspected to have encouraged ending Arafat's life in a very mysterious form.

In 2005, Sharon decided to unilaterally withdraw from Gaza and evacuate all the Israeli settlements there. His plan was introduced as an attempt to show Israel's willingness to compromise with the Palestinians. At the time, Arafat's successor, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), and his leadership were unable to prevent terror attacks on Israeli cities and towns. Although Sharon faced strong opposition from within his political party, the Likud, when promoting the withdrawal plan, and even though he was accused of betraying national values, he was convinced that it would serve best Israeli national security strategy (Landau 2014). His difficulty in gaining a majority to support his plan within his party led him to form a new party called Kadima and start preparing for elections to regain the support of the Israeli public. On 4 January 2006, he suffered a hemorrhagic brain stroke that left him in a coma until he died in 2014. His deputy, Ehud Olmert, replaced him as the head of the Kadima party and won the Israeli elections on 28 March 2006 against Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud and Amir Peretz's Labor.

After Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005, the US administration urged the Israeli government to hold elections in the Palestinian

territories. The reason was that the elected leadership of the Palestinian Authority, which had been in power since 1996, had lost the people's trust and needed to renew it through new elections. The Olmert government agreed to allow Hamas to participate in the elections on a list called Change and Reform. One of the hidden reasons for allowing Hamas to participate was to pressure them into accepting the Oslo Accords and joining the PLO, which did not happen (Charrett 2019). Hamas ended up winning a majority in the parliamentary elections but faced obstacles in forming a government due to its refusal to recognize the commitments made by the PA towards Israel. Israel and the US put pressure on the Palestinian Authority president, causing a delay in the transfer of power to the newly elected majority (Brenner 2017). These obstacles led Hamas to take control of the Gaza Strip, ousting PA officials from their offices (Hilal 2007; Lybarger 2007). This violent strategy has resulted in an ongoing division among Palestinians, allowing the Israeli government to exploit internal Palestinian divisions and to maintain the status quo (Schanzer 2008; Singh 2021).

The unsuccessful negotiations between the Olmert government and the PA from 2006 to 2009 provided more proof to an increasing number of Israelis that they were not responsible for the inability to reach a fair agreement with the Palestinians (Mitchell, Sachar 2016). Conservative nationalists, including the settler movement and many Israelis who support peace, turned their back on the Palestinian issue, leaving the Palestinians to suffer under oppressive conditions (Del Sarto 2017). Most Israelis' stance indirectly supported a military policy that sought to destroy any Palestinian resistance to Israeli control. As a result, surveillance and sudden military operations to target militant organizations or assassinate their leaders, known in Israeli military jargon as „mowing the lawn”, have become a prevalent concept among security forces. This policy aimed to deter Palestinians from undertaking resistance actions and to prevent pressure on the political leadership while continuing negotiations with the PA. Although the negotiations were ineffective, they convinced most Israelis that they were just and reasonable and that the Palestinians were entirely to blame for their grim reality under direct occupation in the West Bank and the siege in Gaza (Bar-Tal 2023).

After his return to power as Prime Minister of Israel in 2009, Benjamin Netanyahu made a significant change to the country's diplomatic efforts. As a result, all the efforts made between 2006 and 2009 by then Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and PA President Mahmud Abbas failed. Netanyahu exploited the differences between the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, arguing that since the PA does not represent all Palestinians and Hamas does not recognize Israel, it makes no sense to negotiate with the Palestinians. To support this theory, Netanyahu encouraged the policy of nurturing Hamas by allowing large amounts of cash from Qatar to flow into Gaza to pay the salaries of the security forces and the government administration

(Bar-Joseph 2024; Raz 2024)⁵. Prior to the Hamas attack on October 7th, the Israeli government used the excuse of either tempting Hamas to seek pragmatic ways to survive and thereby moderate its enmity with Israel or provide a reason not to negotiate with the PA, as they could not guarantee that all Palestinians would accept and respect agreements reached with Israel. One of the key components of Netanyahu's policy was to bolster Hamas' control over Gaza, which absolves Israel of responsibility for the territory while simultaneously tightening the siege that has been in place since 2007. The siege, along with the funds provided by Qatar, enabled Hamas and other resistance groups to build their military capabilities, including developing missile technology that allows them to launch attacks on Israeli towns in the south during times of conflict. Netanyahu, with the backing of radical nationalist groups in Israeli society, utilized the Hamas and Islamic Jihad attacks to sideline all Palestinians. He has argued that the common perception that resolving the conflict with the Palestinians is a precondition for normalizing Israel's relations with what he coined as moderate Arab states should be turned upside down. According to him, peace with „moderate Arab states” is possible and is the right way to reach solution to the conflict with the Palestinians. The Abraham Accords, promoted under the auspices of the Trump Administration, were a clear result of this strategy.

To reach this point, the Israeli army has engaged in several military clashes with Hamas. The clashes of 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2021 gradually made Hamas the most prominent Palestinian player in the conflict, thereby marginalizing the PA. Netanyahu's strategy has shifted the world's attention towards the state of war rather than the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians. This shift was a part of Netanyahu's strategy to maintain control over Gaza and ensure that life goes on there without having to pay a heavy price on the economic-military or diplomatic-international levels. It has fed the mutual suspicion between the PA and Hamas, blocking all efforts to form a unity government that could represent the entire Palestinian people in the struggle for liberation and independence (Singh 2021). Beyond the ideological differences between the two movements, the PA, entirely dependent on the Western support, demanded that Hamas fully recognize the legal commitments made toward Israel and submit to a diplomatic track that would void its military capability. This demand, imposed by Israel with American support, made reconciliation between them impossible (Baconi 2018). As a result, the commitments towards and loyalty to regional and international camps occupied the Palestinian agenda (Khalidi 2013). The PA has been closely affiliated with the American coalition and what has become known as the „moderate” Arab states, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Hamas was backed by the „resistance” camp of Iran and Syria, indirectly supported by Turkey and Qatar. Although this constellation made the

⁵ Tal Scheider, *For Years, Netanyahu Propped up Hamas: Now it's Blown up in Our Faces*, „Times of Israel”, 8.10.2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/for-years-netanyahu-propped-up-hamas-now-its-blown-up-in-our-faces/>.

Palestinians an important issue in the regional power games, their policies became wholly dependent on foreign powers' interests and political will. The balances of power within the regional system became a crucial factor determining the behavior of the Palestinian political actors, especially the PA, Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The encounter between the latter and Israel has become determined by external regional changes not less than from internal dynamics within each of them.

■ SIDELINING THE PALESTINIANS AND THE OCTOBER 7TH WAR

The complex situation in the region, particularly in Palestine, helps us understand the cause and motive behind the attack on Israel on October 7th. Israel's policies in the region are deeply connected to this attack, as stated by Prime Minister Netanyahu himself on multiple occasions. He admitted to undermining the Oslo Accords and opposing the establishment of a Palestinian state⁶. Netanyahu's diplomatic strategy has been turning negotiations on the terms of the negotiations as the primary engagement with the Palestinians. Simultaneously, he has been working to sideline the Palestinians and establish relationships with the Arab states. As a result, the Israeli strategy, with the rise of nationalist right-wing movements in Israel, has shifted from managing the conflict to shrinking it⁷ (Raz 2024). This change reflects a growing belief that Israel does not need to wait for the Palestinians to agree to its conditions for peace. Instead, it can bypass them to achieve normalization and peace with the „moderate” Arab states (Shindler 2015). To justify the normalization of Israel's relations with Arab states, Netanyahu employed a strategy of imposing conditions that he knows the Palestinians cannot accept, while simultaneously accusing them of obstructing peace in the Middle East.

However, this strategy is not solely based on strategic insight but is also rooted in political interests related to extensive shifts in Israeli Jewish society. To fully understand this strategy, it is important to consider both the internal socio-political changes taking place in Israeli Jewish society, and the rapidly shifting regional conditions resulting from the instability in many republican Arab states during the Arab Spring, the rising regional power of Iran, and the fears of Arab monarchies for their security and stability. We will discuss each factor separately before demonstrating how they have influenced each other.

I. The internal social shifts in Israel, particularly the rise of conservative nationalist segments of society, have been ongoing for a long time (Shindler 2015). However, they became more evident after the turn of the millennium when the conservative

⁶ Kirti Pandey, *Netanyahu on Oslo Accords: I'm Proud I Blocked a Palestinian State*, „Times”, 17.10.2023, <https://www.timesnownews.com/world/netanyahu-on-oslo-accords-im-proud-i-blocked-a-palestinian-state-looking-at-gaza-article-106066583>.

⁷ The Israeli official stand is that the conflict should be narrowed to economic and administrative issues rather than about national aspirations, territorial control and mutual security guarantees.

neo-Zionist forces, along with nationalist-religious segments, such as the settlers in the West Bank, started seeking control after the second Palestinian Intifada and the withdrawal from Gaza (Del Sarto 2017). For space reasons, we will discuss two central changes in Israeli society through two related phenomena. The first is what Israeli scholars refer to as the „religionization” of society and the theocratization of the Israeli army (Levy 2013; Peled, Herman-Peled 2018). There has been a noticeable increase in religious, nationalistic, and hawkish individuals in public institutions, such as the media, the civil service, and the security forces. This rise in numbers has resulted in the promotion of national-religious policies in all aspects of life, including the expansion of settlements in the occupied West Bank and an uncompromising stance towards the Palestinians. This shift in ideology is the reason behind the Likud party’s dominance in the Israeli political system. Without the Likud, no governing coalition could have been formed between 2009 and 2019. The party has maintained its dominance since the elections in November 2021. It is expected to continue until the next election, which is planned to take place in October 2026.

The second significant shift in this context is related to the increasing influence of nationalist social and political forces, which has resulted in the weakening of public institutions such as the civil service, the judicial authority, academia, and the media system (Hazan et al. 2021). This process cannot be detailed in full. However, it is worth noting that Netanyahu has attempted to control various central media outlets, including the public service, the viral news website Walla, the popular daily „Yediot Aharonot”, and the daily „Yisrael Hayom”. These efforts have led to Netanyahu’s indictment in three different criminal cases. Another manifestation of this process is the judicial reform introduced by Netanyahu’s 6th government in January 2023⁸. The reform aims to undermine the horizontal accountability prevalent in Israel’s constitutional tradition. This effort has led to extensive opposition, with hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets to protest the weakening of the judiciary and establishing an authoritarian democracy.

The following two processes are connected. They are the root causes of political instability in Israel. The same processes are also behind the delegitimization of anyone, including former prime ministers, ministers of defense, chiefs of staff, and many other officials, if they support policies that are contrary to the policies of dominant nationalistic leadership. This is especially true if it concerns expressing views that speak of reconciliation with the Palestinians. The internal split within Israel was one of the motivating factors behind the timing of the October 7th attack⁹.

⁸ For more details on the reform see: <https://en.idi.org.il/tags-en/47383>.

⁹ Paul Adrian Raymond, *Fighting Hamas Puts Israeli Protesters on Ice, but Political Divide Remains*, „Al-Jazeera”, 9.10.2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/10/9/fighting-hamas-puts-israeli-protests-on-ice-but-political-divide-remains>.

II. The instability in many Arab states during the Arab Spring, particularly in Egypt and Syria, caused significant regional shifts (Brownlee, Masoud, Reynolds 2015). This period saw public upheavals in many autocratic Arab republics, resulting in a battle between the primarily secular elites and those affiliated with the security services and opposition religious movements, specifically the Muslim Brotherhood (*ibidem*). The resulting instability in several states, particularly Libya and Syria, was exploited by radical Islamist movements, such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS/Daesh), to launch attacks and wage wars against the regimes. Between 2010 and 2020, a significant regional shift allowed countries like Turkey, Iran, and Israel to promote their interests and gain more power in the region. The growing influence of Iran and its nuclear program caused concern for many Arab regimes, particularly those that had managed to avoid public protests and instability, such as Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Additionally, in many Arab Sunni states, there are Shia minorities that show loyalty to Iran, making them important players in the regional power struggle. The instability in several Arab states, including Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, made them vulnerable to social forces that sought to overthrow the regimes in the name of democratization. This process is closely tied to the American strategy of promoting democracy in the Arab region (Diamond 2008). This strategy, initially supported by the George W. Bush administration and later by the Barack Obama administration, led to significant tensions with moderate Sunni states, including Saudi Arabia. The emergence of fundamentalist Sunni groups in the region transformed it into a battleground between pro-American and anti-American forces. Iran was at the forefront of radicalization in this regional dynamic.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was particularly effective in persuading the Trump administration to withdraw from the nuclear agreement with Iran. At the same time, Netanyahu emphasized the emerging areas of interest with Arab monarchies, who were concerned about their stability and sought new coalitions to counter the rising influence of Iran in the region. This dynamic was evidenced by the Abraham accords with the UAE and Bahrain, a normalization agreement with Sudan in October 2020, and Morocco in December of the same year.

The dialectical relationship between the internal and external processes discussed above has strengthened Israel's belief that its strategy towards the Palestinians is correct. Netanyahu believes that instead of seeking a resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians as a precondition for normalizing relations with Arab states, it should be the opposite. Israel should pursue normalization with moderate Arab states to allow for a genuine treatment of the conflict with the Palestinians. This change in priorities is a rational move, as it takes advantage of the rising tensions between Iran and neighboring pro-American Arab states to shift the balance of power in the region. The Trump administration adopted

this new regional policy, which was heavily influenced by the strategic alliance between Israeli conservatives and the Evangelical establishment in the US (Del Sarto 2017).

Netanyahu's success in normalizing relations with several Arab states has led to Netanyahu's and Trump's unwillingness to accept any compromise with the Palestinians. The Trump peace plan, which echoes the rhetoric of the settler movement, aims to maintain Israel's historical policies of territorial expansion and settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The plan shares the neo-Zionist belief that the West Bank is not only an integral part of the Jewish homeland but also a strategic area for Israel's security. This view stems from Israel's experience with what has been coined as the establishment of „Hamastan” in Gaza after the Israeli withdrawal in 2005. The plan also includes significant changes, such as the relocation of the American embassy to Jerusalem and the recognition of Israeli annexation of the occupied Syrian Golan Heights.

In summary, the Abraham peace accords, which emerged during the Trump administration, have assisted in sidelining the Palestinian cause. Netanyahu, in full coordination and cooperation with the Trump administration, has imposed extreme conditions on the Palestinians, making it almost impossible for them to receive any redress for their grievances. This did not change much under the Biden administration, which continued to promote normalization between Israel and the Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, following Netanyahu's strategy. Although the Saudis have stated that the Palestinians must be integrated into any appeasement process between the kingdom and Israel, they were only referring to the PA and not to all Palestinians. The Israeli government does not seem interested in engaging in a peace process that could jeopardize its stability. In May 2021, Israel intensified its crackdown on Gaza and, with the support of the US, claimed the right to defend itself. This argument ignored the Palestinians' right to defend themselves and only added to their feeling of neglect. In a world where might is right, the Palestinians, particularly those in Gaza, felt abandoned. As a result, Hamas leaders started planning the attack on Israel that occurred on October 7th, 2023.

■ THE OCTOBER 7TH HAMAS INVASION AND THE ISRAELI REVENGEFUL WAR

It is this local, regional, and international picture that provides the context for the October 7th Hamas attack on Israel and the Israeli brutal and revengeful war against Gazans. That said, the following analysis explores the reasons and strategic goals behind the brutal Palestinian attack and its ramifications for the centrality of the Palestinian issue. It also explores the reasoning behind the Israeli war, its declared

and hidden goals, and its implications for the future. After clarifying these points, we conclude with a few insights regarding future scenarios and a few recommendations.

While the context provides the rationale for war, it should not be mixed with the causes that explain its timing and characteristics (Falleti, Lynch 2009). It certainly cannot explain the cruelty inflicted by both sides and the disproportionate damage and human suffering it causes. A combination of strategic and psychological theories is necessary to address these aspects (Payne 2015). The tragic events require a realistic understanding of both sides' planned steps and calculated measures to achieve their goals, making realist theory necessary (Waltz 1979, Walt 1987). However, a simple, realistic understanding is not sufficient. The cold-mindedness of realism must be combined with understanding the psychology of maltreatment, fear, shock, and awe. Political philosophers, from Aristotle to Martha Nussbaum (2003), have recognized that human conduct is loaded with emotions and pathos. Every human action entails acting upon something or someone and being affected by it (Rorty 1984). Human interactions involve multiple aspects, including rational, psychological, and ethical factors. If we seek a comprehensive understanding of the motivations, meaning, and implications of such interactions, whether they are calculated behaviors, emotional ones, or a combination of the two, these aspects are important. In conflict settings and wars, the two processes of acting and being acted upon are essential features of the human condition. Understanding this can provide a constructive perspective to better explain the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and ways to heal the wounds it has caused.

The Palestinians

Hamas' attack on October 7th is called the „Al-Aqsa Flood”. This naming has immediate religious connotations, given that Hamas and Islamic Jihad are religious movements. However, this attack had a strategic purpose and political goals. These were clarified in the official documents issued by Hamas on 21 January 2024. According to Hamas, the operation against Israel is a response to Israel's long-standing colonization of Palestine, which can be justified based on seven factors¹⁰. These factors include Israel's plans to Judaize the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the annexation plans of the Israeli government, the thousands of Palestinian detainees in Israeli jails, the blockade on Gaza, the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, seven million Palestinian refugees living in extreme conditions in refugee camps, and the prevention of establishing a Palestinian state by the superpowers.

Despite the circumstances, the operation was meticulously planned using advanced rational and strategic calculations. From a military standpoint, Hamas

¹⁰ The Hamas document is titled *This is our Story: Why the Al-Aqsa Flood*, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2024/1/21/%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%B7%D9%88%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%82%D8%B5%D9%89-%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B3-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%8A>.

managed to strike the most powerful regional force at the heart of its strategic doctrine, which includes early warning, deterrence, and quick, short, and decisive warfare on enemy's territory (Eilam 2018; Rodman 2024). The fact that they were able to neutralize all Israeli surveillance mechanisms, subdue all security forces, and launch a coordinated air, sea, and land attack reflects a military capability gained through training for years under the watchful eye of Israeli intelligence.

The planners of the attack were aware of the power imbalance between their abilities and the Israeli army's capabilities. Therefore, they chose October 7th as the attack date for four interrelated reasons. The first reason was symbolic. It had to do with the sudden and surprising attack of the Egyptian and Syrian armies on Israel on 6 October 1973 and their ability to quickly change the balance of strategic power between the two sides. The second reason was tactical. The attack was planned on the Israeli holiday and was kept secret until the last moment. The Hamas leadership based their plan on well-studied intelligence, considering that the Israelis would not be on high alert during one of the central Jewish holidays. They had information that there would not be many soldiers on the border with Gaza, and those who were there would not be ready for a sudden and heavy attack from outside. This was a decisive factor in carrying out the operation on that day. According to the Israeli army's information, the Hamas leadership was entirely correct. The Israeli government and army leadership believed that Hamas and its allies were deterred and had no intention of engaging in a new war (Raz 2024). Therefore, the number of soldiers was too small to face thousands of Palestinians, some of whom were highly trained and determined to break the siege, occupy Israeli territory, and kidnap as many Israelis as possible. Thirdly, the timing of the October 7th attack was strategically planned to take advantage of the internal division in Israel over judicial reform. Many pilots in the Air Force, as well as officers in other elite army units, had threatened to suspend their voluntary service, which prompted the defense minister to publicly warn of the dangers to Israel's national security. These threats created a sense of vulnerability and unpreparedness in Israel's special elite army units. Additionally, there were rumors of a possible breakthrough in the normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. In the lead-up to October, the media in Israel were discussing a possible breakthrough in the US-sponsored Israeli-Saudi normalization negotiations. However, if this normalization were to occur, it would deal a heavy blow to the Palestinians, especially since Saudi Arabia holds significant symbolic weight as the guardian of the holiest sites in Islam and a leading Arab country in the Persian Gulf. This factor played a crucial role in the efforts to sabotage the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia, playing a role in determining the timing of the attack. This fourth reason emphasized the centrality of regional and international factors in determining the eruption of wars.

Hamas and its allies were not only able to surprise the Israeli army, but they also surprised themselves. Initially, they did not expect their operation to be as

successful as it was and have not anticipated that their operation would break the Israeli security myth so quickly¹¹. Secondly, they were taken aback by the fact that many Palestinian civilians participated in the attack, causing damage and unnecessary civilian casualties, as well as kidnapping civilians that became difficult to hide and sustain for an extended period in order to be exchanged with Palestinian prisoners jailed by Israel in a future deal. The fact that hundreds of civilians were involved in the attack, part of which conducted atrocities, overshadowed the military success of the operation. The kidnapping of women, the elderly, and children played a decisive role not only in how the Israeli response took place but also in the response of many Muslim countries that condemned the violation of Islamic principles in war. Thirdly, they were taken aback by the fact that Israel had been allowed to invade Gaza without any hindrance. Even when it became evident that Israel's actions violated international humanitarian law, the official support for its right to self-defense, also when it has become overflowed and exploited as a form of impunity, remained unchanged. Fourthly, they were surprised that their allies, particularly those from Lebanon, shied away from a total war with Israel, which could have drastically changed the balance of power and altered the situation.

The involvement of Hezbollah in the war on the northern border which until mid-September 2024 remained bound to limited mutual engagements, allowed the Israeli army to occupy Gaza without fearing for another front in the north. Hamas and its allies misjudged the reactions of the world's superpowers to Israel's systematically and brutally conducting massive killings by bombing and bombarding densely populated areas with tons of explosives from the air and the ground. They may have expected the Israeli retaliation to be severe, causing regional instability and leading to a significant international intervention. Otherwise, it is plausible to assume that the Hamas leaders and their allies believed that the price all Palestinians would pay is worth the risk and better than the humiliating and undignified reality in which they have lived under arrogant Israeli control for years.

Based on interviews given by Hamas leaders, the recent attack was a long-planned operation, with daily trainings conducted in front of the Israeli intelligence forces¹². Hamas and its allies demonstrated the capacity to carry out a broad-scale attack. They successfully faced one of the world's most sophisticated and well-equipped armies, overcoming fences built with the best technology. This operation displayed sophistication and the ability to wage war, with humble air forces, land troops, and marines coordinating their attack to surprise and destabilize the other side's ability to respond. These tactics were successful, leading to the humiliation of the Israeli army. The goal was to retaliate and defeat the Israeli arrogant sense

¹¹ Interview with Saleh Al-Aroui before his assassination in Beirut, <https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2023/12/18/716613/interview-with-Saleh-al-Aroui>.

¹² Ibidem.

of human and technological superiority, leading to a change in the strategic local and regional military and political formula.

The Israelis

Regarding the Israeli side, numerous questions need answering, which may not all be covered in this context. Nevertheless, the questions about why the Israeli security forces were caught off-guard and defeated, why it took them many hours to respond, what the objectives of the Israeli war are, and how future relations between the two sides would develop after such a traumatic engagement can be briefly answered.

Many Israeli analysts argue that the surprise and breakdown of the Israeli defensive mechanisms on October 7th resulted from a combination of arrogance and a deep conviction in Israeli superiority (Bar-Joseph 2024; Goodman 2024; Raz 2024). As the historian Uri Bar-Joseph argued, there was a significant measure of indifference in the Israeli security forces, rooted in two interconnected factors¹³. The first factor relates to information collection methods about the opposing side, which proved inadequate in providing a complete picture of Hamas' intentions and plans. The second factor relates to the government's dominant political perspective, which viewed Hamas as a partner in sabotaging any peace process with the PA based on the initiative of the Arab League. As a result, despite the information available to the Israeli army intelligence and the National Security Service (Shabak), they were unable to decipher Hamas' plans, misread its intentions, and underestimated its capabilities. They believed that they would have enough time to react and „ring the bell” if Hamas and its allies decided to attack. The army thought that even if they did not manage to know of an attack in advance, they had enough power to defend the border and the settlements close to it until reinforcements arrived. However, this assumption also proved to be false.

The army did not come as fast as expected and faced significant difficulties in responding to the Palestinian forces that had infiltrated deep into many settlements and towns, making it challenging to locate them and directly fight them in densely populated areas, such as in Sderot¹⁴. The delay in a massive and organized response, even though many individuals volunteered to fight and protect the civilians, gave the invading forces time to occupy Israeli territory for the first time since 1948, killing hundreds, injuring thousands, and traumatizing an enormous number of civilians. The chief of staff, Herzl Halevi, has repeatedly admitted that the army did not do its job on

¹³ Uri Bar-Joseph, *The Indifference that led to War is not Rooted in an Intelligence Failure Only*, „Haaretz”, 1.11.2023.

¹⁴ The IDF conducted one of its first internal investigations regarding what happened in kibbutz Bei'ri, in which its various failures were documented. To see all internal investigations see: <https://www.idf.il/%D7%90%D7%AA%D7%A8%D7%99-%D7%99%D7%97%D7%99%D7%93%D7%95%D7%AA/7-10-%D7%94%D7%AA%D7%97%D7%A7%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%91%D7%A6%D7%A2%D7%99%D7%99%D7%9D/>.

October 7th¹⁵. Halevi's statements could be attributed to a rooted belief in the invincibility and technological superiority of the army (Sariel 2021; Heilbrunn 2024)¹⁶. The Israeli army was also influenced by the dispute over judicial reform, causing most units to be ill-prepared for a quick action during the combat on October 7th¹⁷.

The attack led by Hamas caused chaos and terror among most Israelis, as it was broadcast live, making it personal for everyone, regardless of where they lived in Israel. Israelis suddenly realized that they could be vulnerable to a sudden, sophisticated attack and subjected to acts of revenge and humiliation. If such a frightening possibility became a reality within a few hours by what Israelis considered to be under-equipped and poorly trained Palestinians, it could become even worse with better-trained forces like the Radwan (commandos) of Hezbollah on the northern border. This realization established a considerable gap between the image of security created by Israeli security forces and the reality on the ground. Many civilians and soldiers were neglected during the attack, and the government's decision to evacuate all residents of the area, as well as many settlements near the northern border, created a deep sense of insecurity. The displacement of Israelis by their own government in such security situations, not being able to allow them back for over a year after the beginning of the war, was unprecedented and unforgivable from the standpoint of these citizens. It became an alarming example for all Israelis of what could happen to people living near the borders (Bar-Joseph 2024; Goodman 2024; Shavit 2024). The Israeli disappointment in the security forces was as high as their expectations as a result of their unfortunate response on October 7th, especially given the fact that the army intelligence had a clear picture of the planned attack and all details necessary about it except for its exact timing¹⁸. Notwithstanding, the timing has been provided several times by many observant female soldiers located near the border and equipped with the proper technology to track unusual movement near it. They were silenced by their officers, resulting in their deaths during the attack¹⁹.

¹⁵ Emanuel Fabian and Amy Spiro, *IDF chief admits failures and promises investigation; vows to „dismantle” Hamas*, „Times of Israel”, 12.10.2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-chief-admits-failures-and-promises-investigation-vows-to-dismantle-hamas/>.

¹⁶ The almost blind reliance on the ability of technological machines to replace human being in collecting intelligence and defending the borders has been heavily criticized by many veteran army officers.

¹⁷ TOI Staff, *IDF had no Plan for Responding to a Hamas Attack of October 7's magnitude – NY Times*, „Times of Israel”, 30.12.2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-had-no-plan-for-a-hamas-attack-of-october-7s-magnitude-ny-times-reports/>.

¹⁸ Ronen Bergman and Adam Goldman, *Israel Knew Hamas's Attack Plan More than a Year Ago*, „The New York Times”, 30.11.2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/30/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-attack-intelligence.html>.

¹⁹ Jamie Dettmer, *Our Warnings on Hamas Were Ignored, Israel's Women Border Troops Say*, „Politico”, <https://www.politico.eu/article/israel-border-troops-women-hamas-warnings-war-october-7-benjamin-netanyahu/>.

The strategic defeat of Israel, the humiliation of its army, and the abuses of civilian dignity made the Israeli response indispensable (Raz 2024; Shavit 2024). Too many Israelis were hurt, and the state sovereignty was violated. Given the combination of the two and the fact that Israel is led by the most nationalist government in its history and by the most experienced prime minister, whose worldview revolves around the arrogant manifestation of power, the retaliation was a question of time. Although Israel, as we have explained earlier, is neither innocent when it comes to the Palestinians nor is the underdog in the conflict with them, the Palestinian attack reminded the Israelis of the Jewish past in exile (Goodman 2024). The inefficiency of the government and the dysfunctionality of the army twisted the feelings of most Israelis from being confident and completely trusting in their capabilities to fear, shock, and awe (Bar-Joseph 2024; Shavit 2024).

After the attack, officials portrayed Israel as the victim and attempted to create an image of it as an innocent oasis of peace, attacked by „human animals” and savages²⁰. This perception obscured the fact that Israel is the colonial power that has been leading a brutal policy of oppression and systematic repression of the Palestinian aspirations for liberation and statehood for decades. Framing the October 7th attack as a sudden aggression, disconnected from former military engagements and torn apart from the long-standing conflict reflected the shock and awe in the Israeli political and military establishment. The attack was also framed as a war between good and evil and between the liberal West and the Islamic fundamentalism²¹. Its scale motivated the empathy and support Israel immediately won from its Western allies, especially the US, UK, Germany, and France.

The Israeli shock and humiliation facilitated its way to respond brutally, viciously, and inhumanely with a free hand. As a result, Israel has been accused of conducting genocide and causing intentional unnecessary destruction all over the Gaza Strip. It also led to accusing its army of conducting war crimes and breaking international humanitarian law. The evidence has been the massive killing and devastation. Until mid-September 2024 over 42,200 were killed, 16,795 of whom are children, 11,378 are women, around 95,337 have been injured and over 10,000 remained missing under the rubbles²². The massive Israeli air strikes have made it impossible to differentiate between combatants and innocent civilians. They have led to the destruction of tens of thousands of buildings and houses. The devastating Israeli war has also led to the displacement of most Palestinians from their homes

²⁰ TOI Staff, *Likening Hamas „Savages” to IS, Netanyahu Vows Victory in War for „Our Existence”*, „Times of Israel”, 9.10.2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/likening-hamas-to-isis-netanyahu-vows-victory-in-war-for-our-existence/>.

²¹ Benjamin Netanyahu’s speech in the American Congress on 25 July 2024 illustrates best this common perception, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/were-protecting-you-full-text-of-netanyahus-address-to-congress/>.

²² These data change constantly since the war continues as to early October 2024. For a reliable source see: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(24\)01169-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(24)01169-3/fulltext).

to which they cannot return, creating a new Palestinian Nakba with over 1.8 million refugees, a large part of whom have suffered from starvation and famine.

The Israeli brutality expressed the urge to take revenge and purposeless collective punishment, while also serving far-reaching strategic goals. The Israeli government has defined several main goals for the war, mainly dismantling Hamas' military and governmental capabilities, preventing the Gaza Strip from endangering Israeli security in the future and the return of the hostages. Almost a year after the beginning of the war, and despite the Israeli military upper hand, it has not achieved its declared war goals. It does not seem to be able to achieve what has been repeatedly defined as „total victory” by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu²³. This is especially true given the fact that Hezbollah has opened another front in the northern border of Israel, leading the government to evacuate over sixty thousand citizens from their homes. In September 2024 the government added the safe return of the evacuated inhabitants of the northern borders to their homes to the main goals of the war, thereby opening another front before achieving any of the war goals in Gaza.

The Causes of Brutality

A key factor that led to the brutal, and to large extent immoral Israeli response was strategic-psychological (Raz 2024). The fact that the entire Israeli security forces and they are many, having the best technology available, were taken by surprise, led to the breakdown of the Israeli's internal conviction as superior and undefeatable and humiliated their honor. This is especially true given the fact that the Israelis have built the most sophisticated fences possible, having the technology that allows them to oversee every movement and gesture in Gaza, and have engaged in several cycles of violence against the Palestinian resistance movement to guarantee their deterrence (Heilbrunn 2024). Neither of these means and policies has stood the reality of a sudden attack by thousands of well-trained Palestinians who utilized relatively primitive technology to manipulate the entire Israeli security system. As a result, and beyond the suffering and pain caused to many citizens, the patriotic code of the security personnel was disgraced (Levi-Belz et al. 2024). This sense of betrayal of the code of duty made vengeance necessary to compensate, regain honor, and reacquire the confidence of the Israeli public. This is done in light of the world's initial empathy with Israelis, who paid the price for the politics of arrogance and neglect of their leadership. The Israeli security forces exploited the circumstances to „teach the Palestinians a lesson” and take revenge not only on Hamas' people but on all Palestinians living in the Gaza

²³ Amos Harel, *After Six Months, Few of the Israel – Gaza War's Goals Have Been Achieved*, „Haaretz”, 5.04.2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-04-05/ty-article/.premium/after-six-months-few-of-the-israel-gaza-wars-goals-have-been-achieved/0000018e-aa80-d029-a78f-faa25a8a0000>.

Strip. Many Israeli leaders spoke of the affinity between the brutal and intentional killing and destruction and the aspiration to deter other enemies, especially Iranian-sponsored movements, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon. To justify revenge, many Israeli leaders have argued that it is necessary to speak a language that the Palestinians best understand (Harari 2024). This orientalist tribal claim has been rooted in the Israeli colonial mind for years. It is utilized every time the arrogant Israeli self-perception is broken by a Palestinian resistance operation (Thrall 2017). Therefore, when looking at the scale of violence against civilians and the devastation of almost all human facilities, one can argue that the Israeli government is seeking to topple not only Hamas, but also the idea of a Palestinian national problem. Politicide (Kimmerling 2003) has returned, this time on the wings of the F-16s and the wheels of panzers in Gaza and later in Lebanon. As most of the Knesset (99 out of 120) clarified in its decision of February 21st 2024²⁴, this war is not only a response to the October 7 attack. It is also political, aiming to kill the Palestinian dream of liberation and independence, as the brutal invasions into cities in the West Bank demonstrate²⁵.

The second factor behind Israel's brutal war is cultural. It is the long-standing colonial mentality that is evident in the disrespect for Palestinian lives and the failure to recognize their right to liberation and statehood (Harari 2024). This attitude has been evident in the mainstream Israeli discourse, which has referred to Palestinians as „human animals” who are responsible for their own suffering and have themselves to blame for what is happening to them. This disregard for Palestinian lives is not new. Israel has always treated Palestinians as inferior (Bar-Tal, Teichman 2007). This policy has been declared publicly, framing all Palestinians as responsible for the actions of Hamas and other resistance groups. This framing has made Israel's retaliation against all Palestinians seem legitimate to most Israelis, including many who supported the peace process before October 7th and has prevented sufficient criticism to stop the war²⁶.

The Israeli president, the minister of defense, several prominent politicians, army officers, and ordinary citizens have accused all Palestinians of being responsible for the attack and the atrocities conducted against Israeli civilians on October 7th. The International Court of Justice documented these accusations after South Africa accused Israel of violating the UN Genocide Convention. Whereas many Israelis, including the president, have named all Palestinians as „human

²⁴ Tovah Lazaroff, *Israel's Knesset Votes against Unilateral Recognition of Palestinian State*, „The Jerusalem Post”, 21.02.2024, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-788123>.

²⁵ See Amnesty International's report on this brutality: *Israel/OPT: Palestinians face drastic escalation in unlawful killings, displacement as Israel launches West Bank military operation*, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/08/israel-opt-palestinians-face-drastic-escalation-in-unlawful-killings-displacement-as-israel-launches-west-bank-military-operation/>.

²⁶ Many surveys show that Israeli public opinion has become radicalized as a result of the atrocities conducted by Palestinians on October 7th, <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/52496>.

animals”, „Amalek”, „savages”, „monsters”, and „Satan” and wished them painful deaths, the Israeli media has refrained from showing the devastation in Gaza and censored any use of wording utilized in the world to criticize the inhumane conduct of the Israeli army²⁷. Despite the existence of a small minority and various channels of communication, such as „Haaretz”, +972, Sicha Mekomit, and several human rights organizations that report on the war in Gaza, they hold little influence in shaping the minds and emotions of the Israeli public (Tiripelli 2016). When the public is exposed to graphic footage from Gaza, their primary reaction tends to be either that the people of Gaza have brought the violence upon themselves or that the footage is fake news and rooted in anti-Semitic propaganda²⁸.

It seems that Israel’s strategy in the October 7th war is two-fold. Firstly, the Israeli government aims to prevent Palestinians from having any options for self-defense. Secondly, it aims to undermine the Palestinians’ dream of having self-government, which could lead to their right to self-determination in the future. The massive killing, devastation, and destruction in Gaza reflect an undeclared attempt to revert the region to what it was like fifty years ago so that Palestinians must start their struggle against occupation all over again. This means that Israel is not looking to end its occupation, but rather to make it easier to deal with its costs in the future, especially given the pressure to reestablish Jewish settlements on the shore of the Strip.

The Israeli war on Hamas is framed as a total war against a splinter group of a broader radical Islamic jihadist movement, equating it with Daesh (ISIS). This approach aims to justify the massive killing in Gaza (Levy 2024) and to leave the door open for a long-standing Israeli military intervention there, similar to the American war on terror, without losing the official support Israel receives from Western countries. However, this approach has not been successful in the international media, leading to a significant public pressure from Israel’s allies. Although the official positions of the US, the UK, Germany, France, and several other European countries have not seriously changed, Israel has been accused of targeting densely populated areas with intense air strikes, leading to the killing of thousands of innocent civilians, destroying their homes, and leaving public institutions and infrastructure dysfunctional. Despite these accusations, Israel claims that it does everything possible to avoid harming civilians, and this claim is met with partial consent. When Israeli officials are faced with criticism of their military operations, they often make references to the colonial history of European states, arguing that they have not done any better. Israeli officials make the same

²⁷ B. Michael, *The Updated War Lexicon*, „Haaretz”, 23.01.2024, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/2024-01-23/ty-article-opinion/.premium/0000018d-3037-daf5-a1bf-b4777e550000>.

²⁸ Laura Silver and Maria Smerkovich, *Israeli Views of the Israel-Hamas War*, Pew Research Center, 30.05.2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/05/30/israeli-views-of-the-israel-hamas-war/>.

claim made by the US after 9/11, 2001, and the attack on the World Trade Center that self-defense is not only necessary but also obligatory when confronting what the Western world considers to be an existential threat, namely fundamentalist Islam. Israel is positioning itself as a defender of the Western world, waging war in their name, and is using the just war doctrine, which was developed in the West, to justify its actions (Walzer 1977; Brooks 2013). Western states have officially supported Israel's right to self-defense, a position that the Israeli nationalist government has exploited in its efforts to carry out what one of its ministers has called a second Palestinian Nakba. However, in practical terms and the context of the current war, as it was before 1948, the Palestinians are not granted, as if not deserving, the right to defend themselves.

The third factor behind Israel's brutal war is strategic. Various strategic factors drive Israel's brutal military strategy in Gaza at the local, regional, and international levels. At the local level, the Israeli security forces operate under the urgent need to regain the confidence of the Israeli public, who fear that they would not be defended if attacked. The ease with which civilian settlements were invaded and the government's decision to evacuate thousands of Israelis from the southern and northern borders have led to a psychological factor where returning the confidence of the Israeli public is crucial. It is widely accepted in the Israeli military elite that this can be achieved by demonstrating the Israeli army's superiority and ability to inflict significant damage on Palestinian civilians, accused of showing empathy with the October 7th attack.

At the regional level, most Israeli governments have been striving to establish themselves as a powerful regional player that cannot be defeated and is, therefore, a valuable ally in the battle for power and leadership. This strategic framing has been used to promote the recent normalization of relations with the Arab countries. However, when negotiations to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia were at their peak, the attack by Hamas and its Palestinian allies, the Israeli military's inadequate response, and the government's inability to take control of the situation created an impression that Israel was not a reliable partner. This gap between the image projected by Israel and the reality on the ground has made it necessary for the Israeli leadership to demonstrate the country's military might and strength, especially since Hamas and its allies are backed by Iran, which Israel considers to be its major enemy in the region. This Israeli effort, despite some critical statements and slight differences, is fully backed by the American administration that has been fully drawn into the war by providing endless military and logistical help to the Israeli army, estimated to be around 6.5 billion dollars, to rebuild its deterring image and strategic reliability.

At the international level, Israel is required to prove that it is a dependable ally that can not only defend itself and cause harm to its enemies but also assist in promoting Western interests in the region. This is particularly true

regarding American interests in ensuring the security of Arab states that cannot face Iran alone. Nevertheless, the Israeli government's misconduct and security forces' failure could undermine its position as a trustworthy ally. The war on Gaza's brutality is an attempt to exert pressure on Western allies to uphold their commitments to Israel's security. Otherwise, Israel may resort to other methods to achieve its goals. However, these tactics have sparked public outrage in most Western countries, and governments remain loyal to their commitments while urging Israel to ease its hand on civilians and concentrate on defeating Hamas. As a result, the Israeli government has managed to hold Western powers hostage to its brutal measures.

■ CONCLUDING REMARKS

The war in Gaza has captured global attention due to its shocking atrocities, war crimes, and violations of international humanitarian law. It has sparked unprecedented widespread protests in many cities worldwide, having regional and international repercussions and causing regional instability. The Palestinian attack, which took place unexpectedly, surprised Israel, the region, and the world. The surprise was not only in the timing but also due to the effectiveness of the Palestinian invaders and the ineffectiveness of the Israeli defense forces and technologies. The invaders' success in occupying Israeli army installations and civilian settlements, causing atrocities to take place, has prompted many world leaders to visit Israel to express their support and empathy.

The Israeli shock, humiliation, and shame have led to a deplorable response. The high number of Palestinian casualties and devastation and, as a result, the starvation of hundreds of thousands of fleeing Palestinians have drawn massive public criticism in many countries of the world. Israel's brutal and inhumane response, which has caused intense human suffering without achieving the declared goals of the war, has led to a shift in world opinion, causing many countries, including the US, the UK and Germany, to feel uneasy. Although these countries have not changed their official policy towards the war, providing Israel with sophisticated weapons and lethal ammunition even in the face of criticism, they publicly express concern and pressure the Israeli government to minimize civilian casualties and provide enough aid to avoid starvation and famine. This pressure, which comes rather too late and seems to be mainly practiced for internal political reasons, does not reflect a sudden discovery of human morality, and may leave no choice, but to impose changes in the Israeli determination not to allow the possibility for normal life anymore in the Gaza Strip.

The scale of human loss, devastation, and starvation is unprecedented. This grim reality will most likely lead to further violence, at least by some of those who have lost their families and, as a result, lost hope for a better life. Even though

Istishhad (martyr death) is not necessarily a proactive act of seeking death and does not mean belittling the value of life, as Israeli and Western propaganda assert, given the vast numbers of people who lost their houses and families, the willingness to make sacrifices in the search for justice through revenge, may become a common phenomenon in the future. This is a real possibility because the dismantling of Hamas' military capabilities does not mean the repression of the Palestinian people's ability to resist and retaliate. The Gaza war has established the psychological and political motivation for carrying on the struggle for liberation and independence, convincing every Palestinian that Israel is determined to keep oppressing their aspirations and violating their national and individual rights. The combination of emotional grief and mourning, psychological entrapment, and deep belief in their just struggle are expected to keep motivating Palestinians to resist what they have endured for decades. Therefore, if not given a glimpse of hope for a better future (Bloch 1974; Shade 2001; Mihaylova, Ezekiel 2023), the willingness of an increasing number of Palestinians to take revenge will soar.

Meanwhile, the radical nationalist Israeli government is intentionally prolonging the war, endangering its own hostage civilians, for reasons that are not necessarily strategic. The Israeli army has not managed to fully dismantle Hamas' ability to fight or free the hostages for more than a year. By seeking an exchange deal that allows an honorable exit from the indecisive situation, the Israeli government indirectly admits that Hamas is a partner with whom to negotiate. This reality unfolds amid widespread public rage and increasing condemnation and boycott of Israel in many countries in the world. The Israeli government continues to act based on the long-standing and ineffective belief that military might is the only way to facilitate the freeing of the hostages without having to pay the necessary political price for it. The unfortunate result of such a failed strategy could be the tragic death of all the hostages, a price that the current Israeli government seems to be willing to pay, as its behavior and the announcements made by some of its members demonstrate. Opening another active front in the north with Hezbollah in late September 2024 demonstrates that the Prime Minister is not in a rush to strike a deal to free the Israeli hostages, since for him ending the war in Gaza means submitting to the deterrence strategy established by Iran in the region.

The October 7th war in Gaza has a significant impact on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the balance of power in the region. No matter how much harm remains to be caused and how many lives are still to be lost, Israeli strategists have learned that they have a weak enemy they can defeat in battle but cannot effectively overcome in war despite their superior military and technological power. Israel's economic, military, and technological superiority has become its Achilles' heel in its conflict with the Palestinians. Israel is too strong to be able to use its capabilities against them and to further justify its endless and merciless control of millions of them while the world is constantly watching. Therefore, Israelis will

learn the hard way that there are around seven million Palestinians between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea who intend to remain and defend their right to a dignified life in their homeland. Israel's military and technological upper hand has proven to be ineffective against sudden attacks by Palestinians who face the daily aggression of the Israeli army and seek revenge (Azoulay, Ophir 2012; Natanel 2016). Even though the Palestinians do not pose an existential threat, they have the potential to cause harm and disrupt the normal way of life for many Israelis. The Palestinian situation also presents a moral dilemma for many Israelis. Israel's technological and economic advantage makes it appear unjust compared to the misery of Palestinians who have to endure its aggressive and well-equipped military might. Furthermore, an increasing number of Israelis are realizing that no matter how many peace agreements their government signs with the Arab states, their real challenge is with the Palestinians²⁹. Israel needs Palestinian recognition if it seeks to legitimize its claim to the land both people consider their home (Jamal 2017a).

Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that any attempt to sideline the Palestinians or ignore their national rights will only lead to more violence and prevent Israelis from feeling secure, since Palestinians don't seem to be willing to give up their struggle for liberation and independence. Peace and reconciliation seem to be the only just path to guarantee security. Therefore, they better be an integral part of Israel's strategy to resolve its conflict with the indigenous Palestinians.

Given the fact that the conflict did not start on October 7th, any attempt to reduce it to a conflict between a righteous state and a terrorist organization, ignoring Israeli settler colonial policies in the areas occupied by the state in 1967, will not dismantle Palestinian insistence to struggle for their national rights. Misrecognition and violence only cause further human suffering and harm innocent lives on both sides. While it is true that the Palestinians must take responsibility for their actions, it is vital to acknowledge that Israel's upper hand and its ability to disrupt any peaceful solution make it more responsible for the unfolding tragic reality. Without taking into consideration that all inhabitants of Israel/Palestine have the unalienable right to security, prosperity, and happiness, this bloody conflict is not resolvable.

The resolution of the conflict should follow a fundamental principle that both sides agree upon, but the lack of trust between them has made it difficult (Jamal 2017b). The conflict is not just between the two sides, but also involves the regional and international community. The perception to integrate the entire Arab region in the appeasement and reconciliation process with Israel is sensible, but

²⁹ For more details on Israeli public opinion from a trusted source see: <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/55018>.

only if the Palestinian right to self-determination and national dignity is taken into consideration. Therefore, it is important to promote a long confidence-building process involving international intervention and pressure. However, for such a process to work, it must be ethical (Walzer 2004; Waldron 2010; Finlay 2015). This cannot be achieved as long as Israel's leading Western allies, which speak the language of human rights and morality, continue to apply them selectively and manipulatively, denying the Palestinians the fundamental right to have rights. It also cannot be realized if moral agents in world politics, including several European states and many human rights organizations continue to either sit on the fence or lead a policy of one-sidedness, according to which only the victims of one side count, such as in the case of the hostages (Weizman 2012). This one-sidedness is demonstrated in the way powerful Western countries have been acting in the conflict and is a significant cause behind the despair of many Palestinians and the arrogance of radical nationalist Israelis. It is this one-sidedness that provides the enemies of peace, especially those that have the power to push others into the hill of war, with the reasoning and justifications they need to advance their inhumane behavior. Therefore, all parties involved must act fairly and justly to achieve peace. It is difficult to have hope, given the grim reality in Palestine/Israel. However, hope can be fostered and wisely created in people's hearts and minds if we are to facilitate their ability to forgive (Lysaker, 2023). There is a clear need to assist people to avoid desperate actions and instead work towards peaceful solutions. Public protests around the world against the war grant Palestinians hope that somebody hears their cries. These protests do not and should not be exclusively perceived as being anti-Israeli, but rather as a way to show empathy towards all innocent victims of the conflict. This urge was behind the empathy that Israelis received after October 7th, but unfortunately, it was wasted by the behavior of the nationalist government. The same empathy is now being extended to hundreds of thousands of fleeing and starving Palestinians. It is essential for those seeking ethical human coexistence to direct public empathy toward creating hope for a better future for all. For this to happen, both sides must be encouraged to give peace a chance.

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THE PSYCHO-POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC CAUSES AND RAMIFICATIONS OF THE 2023–2024 ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN WAR: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

The following analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian war, which erupted on October 7th, 2023, contributes to explaining its causes, reasoning, consequences, and the necessary measures to end human suffering caused by it. It is argued that to understand its eruption, unfolding, and ramifications, we must look at the broader interplay between local, regional, and international factors. This integrative approach means that it is crucial to explore the context that has fed its flames and determined its timing and brutality. This means that it is not possible to disconnect this war from profound developments in Israeli and Palestinian societies in the last couple of decades. It also means that although this war was instigated by a particular player, it is an integral component of a system composed of a balance of power between multiple players. Therefore, it resulted from polarity in a regional and international system of power in which players have sought to either maintain the status quo or change it to their advantage. Such an understanding enables us to highlight its strategic meaning and emphasize the moral measures that international players must take to avoid further Israeli-Palestinian wars in the future.

Keywords: Israeli-Palestinian Conflict; October 7th War; War Crimes; Hope; Peace; International Intervention