

The Gaza Horror and US Policy

Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson

On 7 October 2023, Hamas, the militant Islamist Palestinian group that controls Gaza and is dedicated to eradicating the Israeli state, led a coordinated, large-scale surprise attack across Israel's border with Gaza. Some 1,500 Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad fighters breached about 30 points along the border barrier, killing over 1,200 Israelis, including more than 300 soldiers, and taking around 240 hostages.¹

Officials and analysts have various theories about exactly why Hamas chose to stage a major attack at this moment, but most are mere speculation.² All anyone has to go on are a few scattered statements from Hamas officials, none of which clearly states the group's war aims. Accordingly, any assessment is highly inferential and tentative. *New York Times* reporting, based on interviews with Hamas leaders in Gaza, portrays the group as seeking to re-establish itself as a military force and the Palestinians' primary agent of violent confrontation, as opposed to Gaza's caretaker, and to decisively reinvigorate the armed struggle with Israel by creating a 'permanent' state of war.³ Other theories include a move to pre-empt Israeli–Saudi normalisation, which was thought to marginalise Palestinians for good. By drawing Israel into an extremely violent response, Hamas might have calculated that

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it would be harder for the Saudis to proceed. Planning for the 7 October attack, however, seems to have begun well before Israeli–Saudi normalisation had been formally broached, so it is hard to argue that 7 October was a reaction to it. Thus far, Israeli prisoner-of-war interrogators have had access only to low-level fighters who have shed no reliable light on the questions of why and why now. But that might change in the coming weeks.⁴

The scale and sadistic zeal of the Hamas attack were shocking. The incursion was the most lethal in Israel's history, more Jews having died in a single day than on any other since the Holocaust.⁵ In proportion to Israel's population, it was the equivalent of about 15 9/11s.⁶ Beyond that, Hamas heedlessly killed civilians – many of them women, children and the elderly, and most non-military – in close quarters, and apparently executed some captives.⁷ The torture and mutilation of civilian victims were distressing features of the raid. The secular Palestinian Authority (PA), Hamas's sclerotic political nemesis with which Israel has had an uneasy security partnership, condemned the attack. Hamas, by its charter, is doctrinally jihadist, and sees Muslim and Jewish interests in a zero-sum framework. Its foundational eschatology calls for the extermination of Jews, even if some more recent documents made a nod towards religious tolerance. The stated determination to eradicate the Jews' nation-state is, in any event, unaltered.⁸ But the group is also descended from the Muslim Brotherhood, which contemplates politically controlling traditional states. The Brotherhood had taken pains to separate itself from groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. It has not relied on violence to press its objectives in a very long time. Moreover, Brotherhood offshoots in Egypt, Jordan and Syria differ programmatically depending on their local political contexts. Thus, the degree to which Hamas's Muslim Brotherhood origins are useful for understanding Hamas's current posture is debatable.

In any case, times change. Nearly a decade of gruesome Islamic State videos of beheadings and other atrocities, combined with that group's reputation for success in Iraq and Syria, have apparently recast the culture of jihadism.⁹ Hamas, however, is not the Islamic State; among other things, it enjoys open state support, specifically embraces Palestinian nationalism and does not have a global agenda. But on 7 October, it behaved like the

Islamic State.¹⁰ The nature of the Hamas assault, and the lengthy period of preparation that preceded it, signalled the organisation's abandonment of its long-standing transactional approach to managing its relationship with Israel. From Israel's standpoint, this shift will necessitate Hamas's complete removal from Gaza, and has therefore complicated Washington's attempts to regulate its actions. Many observers have noted correctly that Hamas represents an idea that resonates deeply in Gazan society and that such ideas cannot be erased, especially by violence.¹¹ This is true, but irrelevant since many Israelis assume that the idea of resistance is fundamentally ineradicable, which is why they do not place much stock in the idea of land for peace. Their objective is therefore to destroy not an indestructible, intangible phenomenon but rather the heavily armed, deeply entrenched and implacable organisation that attacked them on 7 October.

Hamas and Israel in Gaza

Israel captured Gaza a second time from Egypt (the first time was in 1956) in the 1967 War, in which it also took the West Bank from Jordan and the Golan Heights from Syria. In the years after the Palestinians' second intifada erupted in July 2000, following the Camp David Summit's failure to produce a final-status accord, Ariel Sharon, who was elected Israel's prime minister a year later, concluded that Israel's best option vis-à-vis the Palestinians was to sever Israel's ties to at least some part of the occupied territories, in much the same way as King Hussein of Jordan had done with the West Bank in July 1998. In August 2005, Sharon took an audacious step towards this objective by withdrawing Israel's presence from Gaza, dismantling settlements, redeploying Israeli forces and leaving Gaza to the PA. Pruning Gaza from Israel might have been a good thing had it been negotiated with the Palestinians. But it was not. The Israelis' attitude seemed to be that one doesn't negotiate the amputation of a gangrenous toe with one's foot. In any case, the initiative was controversial in Israel and had not been carefully thought through.

The George W. Bush administration cynically and carelessly pushed the PA to reclaim its local legitimacy by holding elections, which Hamas jarringly won in January 2006. The White House believed that the resulting mayhem

would ‘rip the ugly mask off Hamas’, which it considered a more important objective than a durable, stable outcome for ordinary Palestinians.¹² The PA tried to negate the results, but Hamas killed or ejected its operatives and exerted a tight grip on Gazan society. Because Hamas refused to recognise Israel, renounce violence or abide by agreements already made between the PA and Israel, Washington and Jerusalem considered it ineligible to compete in subsequent elections.¹³ Hamas had split the Palestinians and, owing to poor governance or simple indifference, did little to improve their lives. In Hamas’s view, Israel is responsible for Gazans’ welfare as an occupying power and, as a practical matter, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East exists to ensure it. Hamas also perversely served as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s ‘objective partner’, since both were opposed to a two-state solution. Satisfied with this state of affairs, Netanyahu was content to periodically ‘mow the grass’ of Palestinian militancy rather than seek a political solution. In a 2015 interview, Bezalel Smotrich, Israel’s present finance minister and among its most extreme-right cabinet members, voiced Israel’s theretofore tacit assumptions: ‘The Palestinian Authority is a burden, and Hamas is an asset. It’s a terrorist organization, no one will recognize it, no one will give it status at the [International Criminal Court], no one will let it put forth a resolution at the UN Security Council.’¹⁴

For the last 17 years, Israel’s strategy has been to neuter Palestinian politics by using Hamas to weaken the credibility of the PA, which in turn helped to undermine it as a plausible partner for peace. Over that period, armed conflict in Gaza has flared up repeatedly. In June 2006, Hamas captured Israeli army conscript Gilad Shalit in a cross-border raid from Gaza, prompting Israeli air raids and incursions. In December 2008, Hamas rocket attacks on the southern Israeli town of Sderot prompted a 22-day Israeli military offensive in Gaza – officially dubbed *Operation Cast Lead* and known as the Gaza Massacre among Palestinians – in which about 1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis were killed. In November 2012, Israel killed Hamas military chief of staff Ahmad Jabari, following up with eight days of air raids. In summer 2014, Hamas’s kidnapping and killing of three Israeli teenagers led to a seven-week war in which more than 2,100 Palestinians

and 73 Israelis, including 67 soldiers, were killed. In response to Palestinian protests at Gaza's fenced border with Israel in March 2018, Israeli troops opened fire. More than 170 Palestinians were killed in several months of protests, prompting fighting between Hamas and Israeli forces. In May 2021, after weeks of tension during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, Israeli security forces injured hundreds of Palestinians at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem. Hamas demanded that Israel withdraw security forces from the compound and fired rockets on Israel from Gaza, giving rise to Israeli air raids. In fighting that lasted 11 days, at least 260 people were killed in Gaza and 13 in Israel. More than 30 Palestinians, including women and children, died in Israeli airstrikes in August 2022. Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which lost commanders in the airstrikes, fired dozens of rockets into Israel. This ongoing carnage did not sway Israel from its instrumental approach to Hamas. The 7 October attack, however, indicated decisively that it had backfired.

The US response

The United States has two strategic interests related to the Gaza crisis: a geopolitical interest in preventing the conflict from widening; and a reputational interest in forestalling an even worse humanitarian catastrophe. The unsustainability of the status quo ante and Israel's willingness to inflict heavy civilian casualties there have shaped the United States' current crisis-management effort. In attempting to restrain the Israeli government, the US has had to account for Israel's predisposition towards punitive counter-terrorism, its horror over Hamas's jaw-dropping cruelty, and its need to rebuild its deterrent and re-establish the safety, security and confidence of its people after a massive intelligence and military failure.¹⁵ Hamas's meticulous planning was a rude revelation. It used drones to take out key Israeli surveillance and communications towers, effectively blinding the Israeli military, and explosives and tractors to obliterate border barricades, paving the way for a first wave of 200 attackers and 1,800 more later that day. On motorcycles and in pickup trucks, with precise intelligence, they located and assaulted eight military bases and more than 15 villages and cities.¹⁶ Also notable were Hamas's unexpectedly airtight operational security and

innovative penetration tactics. These factors combined with Israel's confirmation bias, institutional complacency and diversion of forces from the south to the West Bank to deal with the repercussions of settler violence to produce major vulnerabilities.¹⁷ Devastating retaliation was in the cards, as was the lure of pre-empting Hizbullah's intervention in the north.

Washington has exuded sympathy with Israel's declared intention to wipe out Hamas. But President Joe Biden's noted bear hug with Netanyahu – towards whom he has been cool for years – and his rousing words of friendship and support for Israel were not intended as expressions of blank-cheque acquiescence in all-out Israeli payback. Biden's very public trip to and presence in Israel appeared intended to serve as a kind of deterrent, giving all sides pause about initiating major hostilities and imperilling a US president while cooler heads prevailed on strategic issues.¹⁸ Although the administration has not questioned whether Israel should act decisively, it has weighed in on how it should do so, counselling caution and deliberation to buy time for hostage negotiations and to shape operations that minimise civilian casualties while achieving Israeli objectives. It is likely that, in private, many American officials would concede that Netanyahu's callous policies – expanding West Bank settlements, shelving the two-state solution, embracing the religious ultra-right at home and the Arab Gulf monarchies – had set the conditions for a major Hamas operation, albeit not one of such utter perversity. The real aim of the speech, the hug, and US military and economic support was to ensure American influence and leverage over Israel's decisions at a time when its impulse towards vengeance was extraordinarily high.¹⁹ Indeed, the key line in Biden's speech stressed that what separated the US and Israel from Hamas was their aversion to targeting civilians. In short, Biden approached Netanyahu on Israel's response the way he did Senator Joe Manchin on domestic economic legislation: as a potential obstacle to US policy objectives who needed to be placated.

Over the first three weeks of the crisis, this design appeared to work, to some extent capitalising on Netanyahu's reluctance to commit to an all-out invasion.²⁰ Israel did, of course, rain abundant indirect fires and airstrikes on Gaza – killing far more Palestinians than Hamas killed Israelis on 7 October²¹ – as well as imposing a security crackdown on the West Bank and punishing

Hizbullah for anti-tank missile attacks in the north intended to harass Israel.²² More strategically, it undertook a massive military mobilisation – among Israel’s biggest ever, at nearly 500,000 soldiers including 360,000 reserves – in less than 36 hours, deploying forces around Gaza and in the north near Lebanon, and established a substantial naval deployment off the Gaza coast. And Israeli officials have issued numerous threats of annihilation. But US officials and analysts worried that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), designed for state-on-state manoeuvre operations in open terrain, were unprepared for the bloody, close-in urban warfare that it would inevitably encounter in Gaza, and that a full-scale invasion would invite opportunistic piling on by Iran and Hizbullah.²³ Biden slowed down the Israeli ground campaign, got the humanitarian corridor to Gaza that he wanted and staved off Israel’s pre-emption of Hizbullah by reinforcing his rumoured private warning not to proceed by augmenting Israeli air defences and deploying two US Navy carrier strike groups to the Mediterranean to bolster Israel’s deterrent. In late October, however, the IDF finally entered Gaza in force.

Prospects

The IDF’s commencement of its ground incursion into Gaza has generated more open friction with the United States.²⁴ Yet Israeli ground forces, at least initially, refrained from moving heavily into Gaza City and declined to call the operation an invasion. Israel’s ambiguity about the nature of the operation – officials said merely that it was ‘expanding ground activity’ and Netanyahu blandly characterised it as the ‘second stage’ of the war²⁵ – suggested some deference to US admonitions of restraint, or at least the appearance thereof. Israel’s posture also afforded it a measure of tactical unpredictability, aided by its disabling of Gaza internet and telecommunications networks. The IDF’s envelopment of Gaza City initially deferred penetration of the city’s interior by infantry, such that Israel’s fight on the ground largely involved armoured manoeuvring to seal off the urban centre, with its network of underground tunnels and fortifications, without engaging in messy urban combat. Israeli caution bought it time to assess the effect that a full-blown Israeli invasion would have on dangerous allies of Hamas – in particular, Iran and Hizbullah – but did not

really keep a lid on mounting international criticism of Israeli conduct and pressure for a ceasefire.

At the same time, Netanyahu rejected a ceasefire as tantamount to 'surrender to terrorism' and attributed civilians' deaths to Hamas's practice of using human shields.²⁶ The law of armed conflict prohibits the killing of civilians interposed in this way by combatants, depending on the proportionality between military necessity and the expected toll in civilian lives. But these factors are very much in the eye of the beholder and thus not a very compelling constraint for either side. As it is, Israeli airstrikes have already claimed more than 10,000 Palestinian lives, including thousands of children, since 7 October and set the stage for a public-health crisis that will endanger many more.²⁷ On 8 November, Israel agreed to four-hour daily humanitarian pauses in northern Gaza.²⁸ These were not insignificant: two humanitarian corridors were established, enabling thousands of Palestinians to reach safer ground, while 96 trucks carrying needed supplies entered Gaza territory on the first day and 106 on the next. US officials applauded these developments and were pushing for 150 trucks daily, but stressed that Israel was running the military operation in Gaza.²⁹ Neither Israel nor Hamas is likely to agree to a sustainable ceasefire in present circumstances insofar as it could jeopardise its tactical advantage – Israel's by allowing Hamas and allied militants to regroup, Hamas's by permitting the IDF to consolidate its positions in Gaza and rest its troops. For a cessation to be plausible, independent monitors would have to be in place and empowered to enforce compliance with the status quo, and no state would be inclined to volunteer its forces for this mission. Israel will remain resistant to any durable cessation until it has achieved its war objectives.³⁰

In the near to medium term, the Israelis intend to chew through as much of Gaza as necessary to capture or kill Hamas leaders and fighters, destroy its subsurface infrastructure and dismantle its missile factories. As of mid-November, Israel had enveloped Gaza City and cut the strip in half crosswise, delinking northern and southern Gaza. Israel anticipates a long, bloody slog. To the extent possible, the IDF will try to shunt the casualty burden of urban combat onto its adversary, but this in turn will ramp up civilian casualties in a self-defeating way. On 6 November, Netanyahu declared that Israel

would continue to police Gaza well after it had dispensed with Hamas.³¹ On 21 November, Hamas and Israel agreed to a four-day truce to allow for Hamas's release of 50 hostages and Israel's release of 150 Palestinian prisoners.³² This reflected the intense pressure on both parties to focus on the hostages, but it was unclear whether it also signified a more subtle change in either side's overall game plan.

The United States' strategic priority, however, remains avoiding a wider war that involves Iran and Hizbullah. Provided it continues to be able to impress the importance of restraint on Israeli leaders, it stands a good chance of succeeding insofar as neither Iran nor Hizbullah is likely to consider a major war to be in its current interest. Iran's leadership faces a restive domestic population that is divided about its support for Hamas, and cannot risk a direct military confrontation with the United States, having taken conspicuous pains to deny an Iranian role in the 7 October attack.³³

Hizbullah has equities to protect in Lebanon: if it is not already at risk for its participation in a multiparty regime that has cannibalised Lebanon and its population, it could be if it presides over a smouldering replica of Gaza. Iran and Hizbullah will continue to support Hamas politically and materially on principle and to retain regional clout. But their military restraint in the wake of the Hamas attack suggests that they prefer to hang back as long as Israeli military action stays below the threshold at which they would lose face absent robust military action. Easily thwarted missile and drone attacks on Israeli targets by the Houthi rebels, Iran's proxies in Yemen, would seem to confirm this reading.³⁴

A regional war could still erupt if Israel crossed an as yet unspecified red line. The only one Iran or Hizbullah has articulated thus far has been the Israeli military's entry on the ground into Gaza, which has so far proceeded without drawing significant fire. In a speech on 3 November, Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbullah's leader, diverted the question of intervention thresholds and deadlines by insisting that Hizbullah had in fact been engaged in the fight against Israel in support of Hamas since 7 October, incurring nearly 60 fatalities, and was prepared to endure more.³⁵ Iran and Hizbullah

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have suggested that Israel's imminent or actual destruction of Hamas might constitute another red line, as it is key to the credibility of their 'axis of resistance'.³⁶ It is not certain, of course, that this eventuality would trigger Iran's or Hizbullah's entry into the war; red lines can shift during critical moments, as they have on occasion for the United States. Biden's ongoing aim will be the same as his initial one: to temper Israel's impulse to retaliate to the maximum. Merely presenting the alternative of a grislier, open-ended status quo is unlikely to be persuasive. Moreover, the rococo horror of the 7 October attack makes the argument for restraint more difficult to make. To minimise chaos and maximise manageability, the US would ideally present to Israel, other regional actors and especially Palestinians a more agreeable future that, improbable as it sounds, recasts the crisis as cut-rate catharsis. Given the multiplicity of conflicting stances, this is a tall diplomatic order.

One concept that has gained traction, put forward by one of us as well as others, is that of re-establishing PA control in Gaza, which might require the deployment there of a peacekeeping force – mainly Arab and possibly United Nations-mandated, problematic though that would be for Israel – pending PA reform and possibly new elections in Gaza to re-establish its legitimacy.³⁷ While this would require the abject marginalisation of Hamas, it would not require Israel to hunt and kill every Gazan affiliated with it.³⁸ It would call for committed buy-in from key Arab countries that have peace or normalisation agreements with Israel – Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates – as well as support from Saudi Arabia, which would presumably carry the labouring oar on Gaza reconstruction, and Qatar, a key Hamas patron. This will not work in the absence of a revived peace process, presumed dead for years, and a priori Israeli concessions to the PA. The war cabinet and public opinion in Israel will likely reject a plan along these lines, at least initially. It will not get much of a reception until the Israelis assess that Hamas at a minimum has its back to the wall and is incapable of sustained resistance. Indeed, Netanyahu has indicated that it would be unacceptable to Israel for a Western-backed PA to administer Gaza unless the PA condemned the 7 October attack and were thoroughly reformed, and Gaza comprehensively demilitarised.³⁹

Egypt and Jordan, which strongly condemned the Hamas attack, both have interests in containing spillover violence and insecurity as swiftly as possible, and would be receptive to a dispensation that ends the war while preserving the Palestinian cause.⁴⁰ The four Arab Abraham Accords signatories likewise favour an expeditious restoration of relative security and stability.⁴¹ Saudi Arabia, which condemned the Hamas attack but has been diplomatically somnolent, similarly prioritises stability, retains some hope of normalisation with Israel and might ultimately welcome the regional disempowerment of Iran that corralling Hamas would imply.⁴² Qatar has hosted Hamas's leadership and economically supported Gaza, and has long seen the Brotherhood as the wave of the future. But on this score, insofar as it also seeks full legitimacy as a regional player and is enabled as well as constrained by the substantial US military presence in-country at Al Udeid Air Base, it has flown close to the sun, and must now be having second thoughts about Hamas's viability. Qatar too may be convincible.⁴³

Washington's quandaries

Although the extreme nature of Hamas's provocation no doubt diminished international sympathy with the group, an Israeli overreaction has boosted it – a factor Hamas may well have been counting on.⁴⁴ Probably on account of long-standing distaste for Israeli policies under Netanyahu, a creeping tendency has developed to minimise and thus to under-appreciate Israeli motivations and objectives that flow from it.⁴⁵ To the extent that this tendency has affected American officials, the Biden administration is compelled to hold it in check, as it seems to have done so far. Senior American and Israeli officials also need to maintain the close, minute-to-minute liaison that they appeared to establish in the first weeks of the crisis. This would of course strengthen perceptions of US complicity in what many regard as an inexcusably excessive Israeli response. Unfortunately, there is not much Washington can do to counter this. While the savvy and craftiness reminiscent of a Henry Kissinger would be useful and welcome, American officials today face an even more formidable task than he did in 1973 during and after the Yom Kippur War. Back then, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat and his

Israeli counterparts were already open to some kind of accommodation. Netanyahu and the Hamas leadership are not.

Adding to the Biden administration's burden, domestic political fallout in the United States is unavoidable. In a sharply divided Congress, and especially the incohesive and unruly House of Representatives, backing for White House policy is likely to be tethered to concessions in other areas.⁴⁶ Over the course of the next year, Biden and his team will be obliged to take the 2024 US presidential election into account in formulating and implementing policy on Gaza. His support for even calibrated Israeli retaliation has already incurred the wrath of Arab-American voters, critical in swing

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states, who have urged a ceasefire. According to an Arab American Institute poll taken after the Gaza crisis erupted, only 17% supported him, down from 59% in 2020 and 35% immediately before the crisis.⁴⁷ Support for the president among Democrats more broadly, especially those under 35, has also flagged, fracturing Democratic

unity.⁴⁸ US government employees from some 40 federal agencies, many of them political appointees, have also opposed the Biden administration's support for Israeli policy – in particular, its refusal to demand a ceasefire – by way of a letter to Biden as well as several internal State Department 'dissent cables'.⁴⁹ Overall, however, a slight plurality of 47% of Americans still favours Biden's policy on Gaza.⁵⁰ If the administration tilted in a more neutral direction, moderates and traditional conservatives hardwired for strongly backing Israel would surely object.⁵¹ Presumably, Israelis can read these survey results too, and, if they assess that Biden is merely a speed bump en route to a second Trump administration, might feel immune to American pressure.

International perceptions are also significant factors in US calculations. American support for Israel against Hamas has increased scepticism and distrust of the United States among countries in the Global South, which consider the US to be hypocritical in light of what they see as an inconsistent stance in favour of Ukraine – like the Palestinians, an underdog – against Russia.⁵² The fear is that in backing Israel, and to some appearing an accomplice in

something akin to ethnic cleansing, Washington will increasingly lose credibility to the point where its influence on other strategic issues – including the Russia–Ukraine war – flags. With India firmly in Israel’s court and most Global South states lacking a stake in the Gaza conflict, time will tell whether this concern is warranted. Nevertheless, questions will undoubtedly arise as to how the US can move Israel away from a maximally aggressive posture to preserve its bona fides with the rest of the world.

Critics of the Biden administration have focused mostly on a ceasefire, which the US endorses to the extent of brief, localised halts to the fighting to allow the delivery of humanitarian assistance, facilitate the evacuation of civilians and permit the return of hostages. As noted, in early November the Israelis provisionally agreed to such pauses. Mechanisms for compelling broader Israeli cooperation have not been addressed – perhaps because the same critics tacitly acknowledge that there are no promising ones. Notionally, the US could threaten to withhold ammunition shipments; to withdraw air defences, deployed troops and maritime assets; to disavow the 2016 Memorandum of Understanding on US security assistance for Israel; to vote in favour of anti-Israel UN Security Council or UN General Assembly resolutions; or to send American aid convoys into Gaza and dare the IDF to attack them.

Most of these measures would skewer other US interests without moving Israel’s needle. Withholding certain munitions would merely push Israel into using less accurate ones producing more collateral damage. Removing air defences would open the door to Iranian, Hizbullah and Houthi missile attacks that would put thousands of Americans, as well as Israelis, in Israel at risk, and give the appearance of not merely chastising Israel but siding with its enemies. Withdrawing US troops, which are there mainly for hostage rescue and evacuation missions, would have the same effect. Redeploying carrier strike groups could encourage the wider war the US wants to avoid. Israel does not need foreign military financing, so cutting it would merely ignite a firestorm in Congress, potentially to Biden’s domestic political detriment. US assertiveness at the UN would impress third countries – especially those in the Global South – while inflaming Israel and eroding whatever influence it now has on Israeli decisions. Finally,

making US forces a tripwire in a combat zone would clearly be reckless. Given that Hamas itself is impeding the throughput of humanitarian assistance, pressures could mount for US forces to directly confront Hamas, conjuring memories of the US Marine barracks bombing in Lebanon in 1982 and ‘*Black Hawk* down’ in Somalia in 1993.

Even leaving aside the own-goal character of most of the foregoing measures, the general rub now would be as it has been in the past: if the US acts or threatens to act punitively, Israel will feel isolated but also free to do whatever it wants, thus depriving the US of the very leverage it seeks to apply. It could also damage its credibility with allies and partners by appearing to stiff one of them, emboldening its adversaries. If Washington bears with Israel, it might be able to marginally restrain its conduct, though Israel is likely still to act in ways that damage US interests. Pressure on Israel in such circumstances often works by offering Israeli leaders political cover for steps that they themselves have concluded are necessary but would raise questions about the wisdom of their policies. In reversing their positions, Israeli leaders could argue that Washington forced them to do so, which, as usual, would be cast as its having snatched Israeli defeat from the jaws of victory. Such whipsawing considerations, both domestic and international, suggest that the United States should continue a middle course, supporting Israel’s suppression of Hamas while doggedly counselling restraint, and devising an affirmative multilateral plan for the day after, as remote as that day might appear at this time.

Notes

- ¹ See Shira Rubin and Loveday Morris, ‘How Hamas Broke Through Israel’s Border Defenses During Oct. 7 Attack’, *Washington Post*, 27 October 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/27/hamas-attack-israel-october-7-hostages/>; and ‘Israel Lowers Oct. 7 Death Toll Estimate to 1,200’, *New York Times*, 10 November 2023, [nytimes.com/live/2023/11/10/world/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news](https://www.nytimes.com/live/2023/11/10/world/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news).
- ² See Graeme Wood, ‘Hamas May Not Have a Step Two’, *Atlantic*, 11 October 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/10/hamas-strategy-israel-gaza-war/675618/>.
- ³ See Ben Hubbard and Maria Abi-Habib, ‘Behind Hamas’s Bloody Gambit to Create a “Permanent” State

of War', *New York Times*, 8 November 2023 (updated 9 November 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/08/world/middleeast/hamas-israel-gaza-war.html>.

- ⁴ See, for instance, 'Why Hamas Attacked – and Why Israel Was Taken by Surprise: A Conversation with Martin Indyk', *Foreign Affairs*, 7 October 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/martin-indyk-why-hamas-attacked-and-why-israel-was-taken-surprise>. Hamas might have felt the need to put the Israeli–Palestinian conflict back in the headlines, get Washington's attention and reassert its claim to be the avatar of resistance. This hypothesis also jibes with the smaller-bore view that Hamas had taken this huge gamble to wrongfoot its rival, the Palestinian Authority. But that would be like flying transatlantic because you like those little bowls of soggy almonds. Moreover, Hamas does not address itself to the US, but rather to regional audiences. Hamas also does not regard the US as its saviour, even in some imagined, long-range scenario in which Washington and Jerusalem become adversaries because the US no longer countenances Israel's collective punishment of Gazans and denial of Palestinians' demand for self-determination. A more likely but still hypothetical explanation is that Hamas might have hoped to trigger a regional conflict drawing in Iran and Hizbullah. If so, why then did Hamas not coordinate its plan with either notional ally? Perhaps Hamas simply saw the handwriting on the wall and aimed to go out in a blaze of glory.
- ⁵ 'Hamas's Attack Was the Bloodiest in Israel's History', *The Economist*, 12 October 2023, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2023/10/12/hamass-attack-was-the-bloodiest-in-israels-history>.
- ⁶ See David Martin, 'Gen. David Petraeus: Hamas' Attack on Israel Was "Far Worse Than 9/11"', CBS News, 15 October 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/general-david-petraeus-hamas-attack-on-israel-was-far-worse-than-911/>.
- ⁷ See, for example, David Clarke and Sophie Meyer, 'The Deadly Hamas Rampage Across Southern Israel', Reuters, 12 October 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/ISRAEL-PALESTINIANS/MASSACRES/zgporzedjvd/>; Sheera Frenkel and Steven Lee Meyers, 'Hamas Seeds Violent Videos on Sites with Little Moderation', *New York Times*, 10 October 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/technology/hamas-violent-videos-online.html>; and Meg Kelly and Sarah Cahlan, 'Video Shows Apparent Death of Israeli Hostages in Hamas Custody', *Washington Post*, 9 October 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2023/10/09/israel-hamas-hostage-death/>. Some of the fighters are believed to have taken the amphetamine Captagon before the operation, but that would hardly explain the scope or manner of the carnage. See James Jackson, 'Hamas Gunmen Were "High on Drugs" During Terrorist Attacks on Israel', *Telegraph*, 22 October 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/10/22/fighters-took-captagon-attacks-israel-hamas-war/>.

- ⁸ See Hamas, 'A Document of General Principles & Policies', May 2017, <https://irp.fas.org/world/para/docs/hamas-2017.pdf>. See also Bruce Hoffman, 'Understanding Hamas's Genocidal Ideology', *Atlantic*, 10 October 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/10/hamas-covenant-israel-attack-war-genocide/675602/>.
- ⁹ See Anna Schecter, 'Videos of Hamas Attack Suggest a Chilling Evolution of Jihadist Tactics', *NBC News*, 28 October 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/investigations/videos-hamas-attack-suggest-jihadism-evolved-chilling-new-ways-rcna122564>.
- ¹⁰ See Monica Marks, 'What the World Gets Wrong About Hamas', *Time*, 30 October 2023, <https://time.com/6329776/hamas-isis-gaza/>; and Graeme Wood, 'Hamas Is Not ISIS', *Atlantic*, 27 October 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/10/hamas-isis-war-in-gaza/675786/>.
- ¹¹ See Daniel Levy, 'The Road Back from Hell', *New York Times*, 8 November 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/08/opinion/israel-hamas-cease-fire.html>.
- ¹² The quoted phrase is from a member of the Bush administration's National Security Council staff, in a conversation with one of the authors.
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