

Hamas's Narrative of 7 October and the Impossibility of Ignoring It

Menachem Klein

Hamas' barbaric attack on 7 October and Israel's ruthless retaliation against Hamas and Gaza Strip residents are unprecedented shocking events in their severity, repercussions and impact on both peoples' collective memory. Only few of those Israelis who agreed that Hamas underwent a political change since 2017¹ – when it issued its *Document of General Principles and Policies*² – still maintain that view. Similarly, Western government officials who engaged in direct or indirect dialogue with Hamas claim that the crimes it committed on

7 October were driven by its adherence to a fundamentalist Islamic ideology inspired by ISIS.

An aftermath of contradictory feelings

The majority of the Israeli public justifies Israel's harsh retaliation and even supports escalating the attack to the extent of deporting as many Gaza residents as possible to Egypt and demolishing their remaining structures. Palestinian public reactions vary widely and can coexist within the same individual. Privately, Palestinians criticise Hamas for the widespread harm to civilians and the kidnapping of women and children. Some express anger towards Hamas for not considering the severe destruction and casualties Israel would inflict in response, holding Hamas responsible for the catastrophic consequences of the war.

Simultaneously, there is pride in the fact that no Palestinian organisation or Arab state has hit Israel with such force since 1948, avoiding turning the Israeli-

¹ In its 2017 *Document of General Principles and Policies*, Hamas significantly deviated from the fundamentalist views outlined in the group's original Charter from 1987, and indicated that if the Chairman of the Palestinian National Authority Mahmoud Abbas presented a permanent status agreement with Israel that included a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, in line with the Arab League's plan, Hamas would likely accept the new reality. See Menachem Klein, "Hamas' New Charter Reveals a Willingness to Change", in *+972 Magazine*, 10 April 2017, <https://www.972mag.com/?p=126572>.

² "Hamas in 2017: The Document in Full", in *Middle East Eye*, 2 May 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-2017-document-full>.

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Palestinian conflict into a regional and international confrontation. Unlike the failing Palestinian Authority and Fatah, which collaborate with the occupation, Hamas fighters have exposed Israel's technological and intelligence weaknesses with simple weapons, precise planning and high motivation. There is also satisfaction that Israel is experiencing suffering similar to what Palestinians have endured for many years. Emotions and thoughts are mixed and contradictory.

To somewhat reconcile these contradictions, the Palestinian narrative overemphasises media reports about civilian casualties caused by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and attributes most of the war crimes committed on 7 October to the chaos caused by the rapid and unexpected collapse of Israel's defence system. Yet, the underlying question remains unanswered: What does Hamas seek to achieve by its attack and what does it suggest for the day after?

Hamas's official narrative: The attack as "plan B"

Hamas's leadership has felt obligated to provide accountability in a carefully crafted briefing document in English and Arabic titled *Our Narrative – Operation al-Aqsa Flood*. The briefing document is an official, well-designed piece, both visually and meticulously edited, bearing the signature of Hamas's communication office. It comprises 16 pages with five chapters. Hamas deems it important that its version of the war is heard and understood, not only by the Palestinians but also within the international political arena.

Hamas emphasises its commitment to the principles and policies outlined in its 2017 Document where it accepted the Oslo Accords as an existing political fact. Furthermore, unlike the movement's founding Covenant of 1988, the 2023 briefing document does not extensively refer to Allah's will as expressed in the Quran.

Most importantly, against the anti-Semitic context in which Israel places Hamas, the briefing document stresses that Hamas fights against Zionism, not Jews, challenging Israel's argument that Judaism and Zionism are identical. Hamas strives to distance itself from anti-Semitism and asserts its opposition to suppressing anyone's universal right to define their national, religious or collective identity. However, Hamas ignores answering why then it rejects the Jews' right to self-determination.

Twice in the briefing document Hamas presents itself, as it did in 2017, as a national liberation movement, legitimising its struggle through the right to self-determination. However, only once does it add the title "Islamic" to its characterisation as a national liberation movement. Islam provides a framework but does not serve as the exclusive or decisive principle in its policy. It is worth noting that Hamas differs in this regard from religious Zionism and Jewish supremacy Israeli parties as the latter's political worldview is based on ethno-religious exceptionalism rather than universal values or rights.³

³ See the Religious Zionist Party website: *Party Platform*, <https://zionutdatit.org.il/?p=3041>; Otzma Yehudit website: *The Political Platform of Otzma Yehudit*, <https://ozma-yeudit.com/?p=1520>.

Khaled Mashal – the former chief of Hamas's political bureau and current leader of Hamas's diaspora office – recently stated that the movement refuses to grant legitimacy to Israel within the 1948 borders as part of a two-state solution.⁴ Even if it remains a dream, the movement does not give up on the aspiration to control this territory one day. At one point, however, Mashal mentioned that in the 2017 Policy and Principles Document, Hamas recognised that the Palestinian, Arab and international consensus supports the establishment of a state within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Hamas accepts this under the condition that there is no waiver of the right of return.⁵

Hamas states in the briefing document that its struggle is not only for liberating 1967 territories. The historical account it presents refers to colonialist Zionism that displaced Palestinians from their homeland, including within the territories of 1948. This is the overall context for the attack carried out on 7 October which went beyond 1967 occupied territories. The specific context is the necessity to break the stranglehold that Israel has imposed on Gaza Strip since 2007, with the

⁴ "Hamas Leader Abroad Khaled Mashal: 'We Reject the Two-State Solution; October 7 Proved that Liberating Palestine from the River to the Sea Is Realistic and Has Already Begun'", in *MEMRI TV*, 18 January 2024, <https://www.memri.org/node/63957>.

⁵ It is important to emphasise that this is not a return to the phased plan of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) from 1974 since Hamas links the realisation of the dream to the existence of internal, Arab and international consensus, whereas in the PLO's phased plan, the transition between stages was open and not contingent on occasional political factors.

implicit or explicit support of the West. The document expresses a sharp sense of emergency. Israel undermined the Oslo Accords and openly declares its opposition to a Palestinian state. The extreme right in Israel, currently in control, plans to annex the West Bank and expel its residents, while the world keeps silent. It was imperative to take the initiative, to confront the occupation with determination. Thus, the attack is presented as plan B, not the preferred option.

An unconvincing enough excuse

Like the Palestinian population in general, the crimes committed on 7 October embarrass Hamas, and the movement feels an obligation to disassociate itself from them. It notes, apologetically, that, in accordance with Islamic values, instructions were given not to harm women, children and the elderly. According to the briefing document, Hamas fighters did not assault women or slaughter infants. The attack aimed to target military objectives and capture only soldiers, including men who are, according to Hamas, potentially IDF reservists and armed settlements defenders. If there were casualties among non-combatants, it was unintentional during an impossible-to-control military confrontation.

Acknowledging that this is an unconvincing enough excuse, in the briefing document, Hamas admits that its forces may have made mistakes, but these errors occurred due to the rapid and unexpected collapse of the Israeli defence system and the ensuing chaos. To strengthen its claim, the document

states that Hamas treated civilian captives with dignity, as attested by the released hostages. The Israeli army, on the other hand, systematically targets civilians, and the document states that in its heavy bombardments, nearly 60 Israeli hostages were also killed. It is worth noting that, unlike the popular Palestinian narrative, which tends to blame the mob who entered Israel following the fighters for war crimes, Hamas's document avoids doing so. The movement does not want to create animosity between itself and the population.

Planning for the post-conflict

Appealing to the international community, Hamas implicitly states that it is ready to be investigated by the International Criminal Court (ICC) alongside Israel's crimes against Palestinian civilians. Hamas calls for the international community to put pressure on Israel to end the occupation and abide by international law. It indirectly addresses intense discussions about the post-fighting order, emphasising that only the Palestinian people have the right to decide who will rule Gaza Strip through elections.

This statement is crucial for post-conflict planning. Hamas does not insist on remaining exclusively in power under any condition but to let the people vote even if it means losing some or all of its current power.

In other words, Hamas does not rule out the return of the Palestinian Authority, revised or the old dysfunctional one, to Gaza Strip, leaving the decision to the

Palestinian people. However, it warns that any institution or reconstruction agency for Gaza Strip not supported by the public will be considered cooperating with the occupation and subject to attack.

Accepting the people's vote is an old guiding principle that helped Hamas adjust itself to the reality that the Oslo Accords created and accelerated its politicisation by providing it with political leeway. Indeed, in February and March 2021, Fatah and Hamas had reached an agreement to hold elections for the presidency of the Palestinian Authority, its Legislative Council and Hamas's entry into the PLO. The elections were planned to take place in accordance with the Oslo Accords, after which negotiations would continue with Israel toward the establishment of a Palestinian state. But Israel and the United States wrongly exerted heavy pressure on Abbas to cancel them.

Planning the day after, elections with de-militarised or indirect Hamas participation should be considered. It is impossible to ignore Hamas. The Israeli extra aggression increased Hamas's popularity in Palestine to the extent that Fatah once enjoyed. Israel may end the war destroying Hamas's ruling administration and its semi-regular army but not its transformation to anti-occupation guerrilla units operating inside their homeland and among supportive communities. No local alternative administration that Israel hopes to establish in collaboration with its occupation or an external one run by Arab countries and UN agencies, nor the old or renewed Palestinian Authority would be ready or capable to rule and

reconstruct Gaza Strip against Hamas's resistance. Israel's aggressive war, most probably, will push young Gaza Strip men to join the guerrilla fighting. Thus, Hamas enjoys veto power over any plan that totally excludes it.

As its 2017 General Principles and Policies Document, Hamas's recent briefing document signals that Hamas accepts positions approved by the majority of the Palestinians. General elections are a key instrument if not a precondition for successful reconstruction of Gaza. Hamas's agreement with Fatah in 2021 shows that it wishes to integrate into the political institutions established by the Oslo Accords. Instead of closing the door on its face, it is better to ask Hamas to pay for its entrance, as Israel will have to. The two-state solution terms and conditions that recently came back from the dead can serve as the price that the international community asks both sides to pay.

8 February 2024

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