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Fair Observer
Independence, Diversity, Debate

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www.fairobserver.com | info@fairobserver.com

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The Israel-Hamas War Triggers Startling Division Between Young Americans

India Nye Wenner
February 03, 2024

As division over the Israel–Hamas war has found its way onto school campuses, Jewish and Muslim students alike feel threatened and unwelcome. Harvard University in particular faces backlash for being unable to prevent hate speech while upholding the principle of free expression on campus. School officials choose to be silent at a time when silence cannot be afforded, and people feud at a time when communication is imperative.

As the ongoing Israel-Hamas war triggers mounting violence on American campuses, Jewish and Muslim students feel increasingly unwelcome. Schools struggle to balance the principle of free speech with a moral obligation and pressure to condemn hate speech. There seems to be no way for people or institutions, especially schools, to address the situation without attracting criticism.

Seemingly straightforward statements are interpreted into double-edged swords. The political correctness required to satisfy all groups is nearly impossible to find. People with polarized views hostilely refuse to hear different perspectives, and civil discourse has become impossible.

The Israel-Hamas war began on October 7, 2023. The terrorist group Hamas, in control of the Gaza Strip, launched a land, sea and air assault on Israel. They killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians.

The next day, Israel declared war. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) began conducting air strikes and ground attacks upon Gaza, killing tens of thousands.

The conflict has reignited decades of hostility between the Jewish and Palestinian diasporas. Antisemitism and Islamophobia have intensified in the US as Americans have become increasingly engaged in debates about the war. Many have used the violence of Hamas to justify Islamophobia, while others have used Israel's violent counterattack to justify antisemitism.

As ethnically charged brutality continues in the Middle East, Jews and Muslims in the US have divided into distinct blocs that heighten ethnic and religious division. These groups are often blinded to each other's suffering and view any support of the other group, regardless of humanitarian intention, as inherently hostile towards their group. This creates a gap between intention and impact; in this discourse, their advocacy serves little to help their co-religionists abroad and instead inflames feelings at home. The two factions are too angry to recognize their shared outrage at inhumanity, and they are too polarized to acknowledge the duality of Israel and Palestine as both perpetrators and victims.

Strife over the war has permeated schools

The controversy has fostered fervor in American colleges and schools. The US Department of Education has launched multiple investigations into US colleges and schools where students have reported instances of antisemitism and Islamophobia.

At elite college Harvard University, numerous student coalitions joined with the Palestine Solidarity Committee to issue a statement on the conflict. They declared the Israeli regime "entirely responsible for all unfolding violence." Although

the statement was not explicitly directed against Jews or Israelis as an ethnic group, they received it as such. Jewish students interpreted the declaration as pro-Hamas, although the students responsible for the statement denied any support for the terrorist organization. Members of the pro-Palestinian student groups experienced a doxxing campaign as backlash to the statement. These pro-Palestinian students stated they were “flooded with racist hate speech and death threats.”

Instead of fostering open discussion to rectify the hostile discourse, pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian students continued to resort to rigid rhetoric. On December 8, an anonymous group flew a plane towing a Palestinian flag and a banner proclaiming “Harvard hates Jews” over Harvard and its vicinity. The intent of the message was unclear. Was it condemning Harvard’s attitude toward its Jewish students? Or was it endorsing the hatred of Jews? No matter the interpretation, the vague message exacerbated agitation on campus. Once again, people used inflammatory methods instead of rational articulation to send a message.

Many Jewish and Muslim families are now reevaluating the schools to which their children will apply. Early applications for Harvard University declined 17% this year. Although the decline is not directly linked to antisemitic and Islamophobic hostility, the timing provides circumstantial evidence. Jewish students report feeling unsafe, alienated and afraid at Harvard.

Antisemitism is rising in high schools as well as colleges, creating unwelcoming environments that are harmful to students’ well-being. A high school sophomore attending an elite private school in New York City confided in me that seeing “the blatant antisemitism and justifications that emerged from these attacks is absolutely horrifying and heartbreaking to me.”

At Columbia University in New York, one student beat a 24-year-old Israeli student with a stick. The victim approached his peer, who was ripping down flyers with names of Israelis taken hostage by Hamas. The student responded violently, shouting obscenities and leaving the victim with a broken finger. In a separate instance, a Columbia administrator declared in an interview with the school’s radio station his hopes that “every one of these people die,” about pro-Palestinian protestors on campus.

These schools pride themselves on their liberalism and inclusivity. However, current antagonistic discussions lead to competitive attitudes of whether Palestinians or Israelis have it worse. The way college leaders handle the continuing conflict will impact which schools families feel comfortable having their kids attend.

Education officials face backlash for addressing the issue

On December 5, 2023, Harvard’s president Claudine Gay gave testimony to a Congressional hearing about antisemitism on college campuses. She intended to soothe the controversy surrounding Harvard, but her words intensified backlash against herself and the university.

Representative Elise M. Stefanik pressed Gay down a line of questioning. Stefanik laid down a rhetorical trap, asking whether calls for the genocide of Jews violate Harvard’s code of conduct. Gay struggled to respond as she grappled with the difference between using the phrase “globalize the intifada” to support Palestinian freedom as opposed to using it as a call for the genocide of Jews.

Additionally, Gay wrestled with the issue of the right to free speech. She stated: “We [Harvard] embrace a commitment to free expression even of views that are objectionable, offensive, hateful —

it's when that speech crosses into conduct that violates our policies against bullying, harassment, intimidation ..." If Gay responded that language like "globalize the intifada" was against the code of conduct — even if not expressly genocidal — she would be prohibiting free speech on campus. There is a fine line between controversial free speech and outright threatening free speech. Gay was unable to clarify the difference during this narrow line of questioning. In an attempt to explicate this distinction, Gay stated that "it depends on the context."

Gay could not, in truth, give a straightforward moral answer because the application of Harvard's code of conduct depends on the context of specific speech or actions. Gay released a post-hearing statement: "There are some who have confused a right to free expression with the idea that Harvard will condone calls for violence against Jewish students ... Let me be clear: Calls for violence or genocide against the Jewish community ... have no place at Harvard, and those who threaten our Jewish students will be held to account."

The presidents of the University of Pennsylvania and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) also spoke in front of Congress. They appeared to similarly evade the question of whether students who called for the genocide of Jews should be punished. 74 members of Congress signed a letter urging for the removal of all three presidents. The president of UPenn, Elizabeth Magill, resigned on December 9. Gay, after backlash over her handling of antisemitism led to investigation of her academic integrity, resigned on January 2, 2024. She had served less than six months as Harvard's first black president. Many argue the scrutiny that led to her resignation is a symbol of partisan tensions and a discriminatory level of probing.

Does pressure to remain politically correct make silence a better option?

As colleges struggle to address the conflict in ways that satisfy all parties, some have begun to wonder whether silence is a better option. After being criticized intensely by students and donors alike over its public statements, Harvard has started to consider a neutrality policy. American public schools, as well as colleges, have contended with the issue of how — and whether — to engage with the war between Israel and Hamas.

Colleges are under immense pressure from donors to stamp out antisemitism. Donors are overwhelmingly older Americans, who tend to have more favorable attitudes towards Israel than younger people do. These donors are shocked by the failure of colleges to take unequivocal stances about the murder of Israelis on October 7. Consequently, they have begun to withdraw their funds from colleges. Colleges face a paradox of retaining donor support while upholding their valued principle of free speech and preventing overall controversy. The attempt to balance appeasing donors and the happiness of students is a tricky task, especially with the looming standard of political correctness.

Politically correct language is used to appease members of particular societal groups. In this case, institutions must avoid offending both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian individuals. They will provoke anger if they make a statement that is not wholly politically correct. Making a wholly politically correct statement is nearly impossible, as supporting Palestinians is taken as antisemitic and supporting Israelis is taken as Islamophobic. Attempting to support both Palestinian and Israeli citizens, likewise, is received as spineless and conciliatory. Vague statements merely condemning "terrorism" simply trigger more frustration. Silence now seems like the only acceptable option.

Yet silence, incessant division and relentless anger will never result in anything productive. The whole principle of successful democratic politics requires working together with multiple perspectives to devise a course of action. Americans should be able to recognize common human rights violations and their shared goal of peace instead of amplifying violence and tensions.

People and politicians must meet in the middle to have a sensible dialogue instead of wielding the controversy for their own purposes — whether those purposes be antisemitism, Islamophobia, or, in the case of American politics, right-wing politicians attempting to discredit opponents such as Claudine Gay. There is no such thing as a side that is so right that the other side has nothing to say worth hearing. The public must open their minds and listen to the other side. Democracy and discourse depend on it.

[[Cheyenne Torres](#) edited this piece.]



India Nye Wenner is an intern and an author with Fair Observer. She is a high school student at The Brearley School, New York City.

Under the guidance of her writer and editor father, India has grown up with a passion for writing. She is an active contributor to her school newspaper, *The Zephyr*, and writes everything from short stories to poems and edits others' work in her free time.

India's New Justice Code: What You Need To Know

Mahesh Jethmalani
February 04, 2024

Since gaining its independence from colonial rule in 1947, independent India has been saddled with the outdated, ineffective and unjust 1860 Indian Penal Code (IPC), which has perpetuated injustice for countless victims of crimes over the decades. Finally, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita ("Indian Justice Code") replaced the IPC on December 25, 2023, taking a long overdue step in righting past wrongs.

In matters pertaining to substantive criminal law, independent India has intriguingly persisted with the Indian Penal Code (IPC), a statute enacted by the British Colonial Government in India in 1860.

The act was amended a few times since independence in 1947. But the amendments were mostly formal: for instance, offenses by or relating to public servants under sections 161–165A were repealed by section 31 of the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988. Corruption was instead to be punished under sections 7–16 of the Prevention of Corruption Act.

On the rare occasion that substantial amendments were made to the code itself, they were done as a knee-jerk response by the government of the day to public outcry over a heinous crime. This is true of the Nirbhaya case, a 2013 criminal case in which a student was gang raped and murdered. The case resulted in a radical

redefinition and punishment of rape under sections 375 and 376 of the IPC. It also created new provisions dealing with rape in aggravated form, such as rape on a women under 12 years of age and gang rape etc, prescribed under new sections 376A–376E.

A new law, Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (“Indian Justice Code”), 2023, replaces the Indian Penal Code, 1860, on December 25, 2023. Similarly, Bhartiya Nagrik Suraksha Sanhita (“Indian Civil Protection Code”), 2023, and Bhartiya Sakshya Adhiniyam (“Indian Evidence Act”), 2023, replaced the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Indian Evidence Act, respectively.

The new justice code is to be welcomed if only because it constitutes an exercise in independent India’s complete review of a partly obsolete colonial law, presumably crafted to serve the interests of the colonial power, and supplants it with a new, substantive law that retains what has proven effective post-independence but amends existing provisions. Additionally, it adds fresh ones that consider 76 years of experience in the operation of the repealed law. At one stroke, the Sanhita retains the bulk of the Code but introduces significant new provisions. So the approach to the repealed colonial law is not ideological and radical, but adaptive and reformist.

Sedition penalized

One of the main concerns reflected in the amendments of IPC provisions and the introduction of new ones in the Sanhita is the security of the Indian state. Ever since independence, the experience of the Indian state has been not only one of external enemies aiming to annex its territories, but of the debilitation of the state by instigating constant internal violence. Since the 1990s, the destabilization of India by its enemies witnessed a marked increase as the country dealt with internal turbulence of all kinds.

There have been secessionist movements in Jammu and Kashmir, the northeast and Punjab. Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Army and China’s People’s Liberation Army have promoted terrorism and insurgency. The country has been a victim of cross-border terrorism and Maoist violence. Existing laws including the IPC were found to be inadequate at preventing the subversion of the Indian state. The Sanhita seeks to redress this weakness.

The first step in defeating the ISI’s campaign to undermine India was to nip it in its most nascent stage: advocacy. This advocacy could be through propaganda or ostensibly intellectual articles, in print or digital, attempting to foment separatism and secession under the guise of free expression and legitimate dissent. The Indian state often invoked section 124A of the IPC, which prescribed the offense of sedition, to counter secessionist movements. However, the wording of that section punished exciting “disaffection towards the government established by law in India,” which was a colonial legislative exercise designed to protect the colonial regime from disaffection by its subjects. The wording was wholly inappropriate to deal with secessionist literature and speeches in independent India. Section 124A was thus subjected to virulent criticism on the grounds that it stifled dissent against an incumbent government.

The Sanhita seeks to remove this anomaly with the new section 152. It eschews the word “sedition,” in view of its contentious past, and describes the offense as an “act endangering sovereignty, unity and integrity of India.” The section imposes a life sentence of imprisonment or imprisonment up to seven years and a fine for anyone who by written or spoken words “excites or attempts to excite, secession or armed rebellion or subversive activities, or encourages feelings of separatist activities or endangers the sovereignty or unity and integrity of India.” It dispenses with the words “brings ... into hatred or contempt or

excites ... disaffection towards the government established by law in India” of section 124A.

Section 152 thus makes explicit the acts it seeks to punish: those that advocate secession, armed rebellion, subversive activities, separatist tendencies and any act that endangers the sovereignty, unity or integrity of the Indian state — not threats to British colonial rule. It is extremely surprising that this legislative change was undertaken 75 years after the establishment of Swarajya — self-governance.

Abetting murder in India or abroad

The Sanhita has removed two other colonial relics in the IPC. The illustration to section 108A dealing with the abetment in India of offenses outside India has been replaced. In its stead, there is now an illustration that takes cognizance of the significance of the Liberation of Goa from the Portuguese in December 1961.

The old illustration to section 108A read as follows: “A, in India, instigates B, a foreigner in Goa, to commit a murder in Goa, A is guilty of abetting murder.” Evidently, the illustration to section 108A suggested that Goa is outside India and not a part of the country. Section 47 of the Sanhita, which corresponds to section 108A, removes this anachronism. The illustration to the new section 47 now reads as such: “A, in India, instigates B, a foreigner in country X, to commit a murder in that country, A is guilty of abetting murder.”

For 62 years (1961–2023), the main substantive criminal statute has by legislative neglect treated Goa as a foreign territory. The Sanhita mercifully reflects the reality that Goa has been a part of India since 1961.

Another colonial legacy consigned to the dustbins of history is affected by section 48 of the

Sanhita. It creates the offense of “Abetment outside India for offence in India.” The illustration to section 48 made it clear why the acts prescribed as an offense by section 48 did not find favor with the British. If a section corresponding to section 48 in the Sanhita existed in the IPC, a British native instigating someone to commit a murder in India would be liable for punishment in India for abetting murder. This effect was unacceptable to the colonial government.

Section 48 of the Sanhita makes a person outside India liable to be tried and punished in India for abetting offenses in India. Most significantly, the illustration to section 48 would permit the Indian government to try and punish the masterminds behind terrorist offenses in India. The aim of section 48 is to facilitate the trial and punishment of several militants: Hafiz Saeed and Sajid Mir of the Lashkar-e-Taiba jihadist group, and Gurpatwant Singh Pannun of the separatist Khalistan movement. These men conspire, abet and instigate the commission of serious offenses in and against India.

Crime and terror strongly punished

To further ensure the security of the Indian state, the Sanhita contains provisions pertaining to defining and punishing organized crime (section 111) and terrorist acts (section 113). States like Maharashtra have witnessed a rash of crime syndicates indulging in kidnapping, robbery, extortion, contract killing and the like. To counter this, they have enacted legislation — the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act, 1999 (MCOCA) — containing stringent provisions against persons arrested and charged under the act. These provisions pertain to bail and burden of proof. Some of the syndicates perpetrate their unlawful activities on a pan-India basis, so the Union of India has adopted the provisions of State Acts, such as Maharashtra’s MCOCA. The

provisions of section 111 of the Sanhita are in line with those of the MCOCA.

Similarly, section 113 of the Sanhita defines and punishes terrorist acts. Again, the provisions of this section are in line with the provisions of Chapter VI of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA), which defines a terrorist act and prescribes the punishment for it. It also punishes a host of other acts concerning terrorism, such as conspiring or abetting terrorist acts, organizing camps to train terrorists, recruiting persons for committing terrorist acts, becoming a member of a terrorist organization and harboring or concealing terrorists.

So which of the two provisions — the UAPA or section 113 — will be applied in a given case of terrorism? This question is answered by the explanation to section 113: “The officer not below the rank of Superintendent of Police shall decide whether to register the case under this section or under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967.” The discretion of the officer in the explanation will presumably be governed by his opinion, deciding whether a specific case requires investigation by the National Investigation Agency (NIA). The NIA is vested with exclusive jurisdiction to investigate offenses under the UAPA.

Women empowered and punishments redefined

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s declared resolve to usher in an era of Nari Shakti — women’s empowerment — first expressed in the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, finds further impetus in the Sanhita.

The IPC, profuse with Victorian morality, is replete with provisions displaying patriarchy. Thus, the offenses of outraging the modesty of women, sexual harassment, forcible disrobing, voyeurism, stalking, rape and gang rape were all to

be found in Chapter XVI of the Code dealing with offenses affecting the human body. These were grouped together with offenses such as murder, suicide, culpable homicide, causing death by negligence, grievous injury, wrongful restraint and wrongful confinement. Even within Chapter XVI, offenses against women were subsumed under a sub-chapter titled, “Of criminal force and assault.” Offenses such as cohabitation caused by a man deceitfully inducing a belief of lawful marriage found its place in Chapter XX, titled, “Of offences relating to marriage.” Thus the IPC did not recognize that there was a genre of offenses distinct to women.

The Sanhita, on the other hand, devotes the entirety of Chapter V to offenses against women and children. The Sanhita recognizes women and children as a distinct category of victims who are subjected to degrading and unspeakable crimes. It accepts that their investigation and trial require sensitive procedural safeguards and enhanced punishment.

Regarding punishment, the Sanhita displays a judicious blend of various principles. For the heinous crime of gang rape of a woman under age 18, the death sentence is introduced as an option. Another punishment allowed is imprisonment for the remainder of the guilty party’s natural life. This sentence incorporates the principle of deterrence as well as the expressive function of punishment that reflects total societal disapproval of such a monstrous crime.

For the offense of causing death by any rash or negligent act, a deterrent punishment of imprisonment for up to five years and a fine is prescribed. This likely is to reduce the avalanche of road accidents that the country has witnessed in more recent times — spoiled young adults in turbo-charged vehicles hitting and killing pedestrians and pavement-dwellers. Simultaneously, doctors are spared the enhanced

punishment, as death by their negligence is punishable with a maximum imprisonment of two years and a fine. This is presumably on the grounds that their negligence is far less culpable than that of the brats in fast cars.

The Sanhita also introduces a new punishment: community service. It prescribes this for a few petty offenses including, conspicuously, the offense of defamation. This offense is now punishable under section 356(2) of the Sanhita.

The IPC imposed fines as a punishment, be it as the entire penalty, as an alternative to or an addition to imprisonment. These had not been increased, in some cases, since their inception in 1860. Thus the fine for voluntarily causing pain extended to a maximum of 1,000 rupees (\$12). The Sanhita has enhanced these fines to a maximum of 10,000 rupees (\$120). Section 338 of the IPC also punished human endangerment resulting in grievous injury to others with a maximum fine of 1,000 rupees. The Sanhita likewise enhances the fine to 10,000 rupees. The maximum punishment under the IPC for wrongful restraint was 500 rupees (\$6) and for wrongful confinement was 1,000 rupees. These offenses are now both punishable with a maximum of 5,000 rupees (\$60). In like vein, fines unchanged in 81 other offenses since 1860 have now been appropriately enhanced by the Sanhita.

Correcting words and laws

Admirably, the Sanhita eschews the use of offensive and pejorative terms peculiar to a colonial age. Words like “lunatic,” “insane” and “idiot” are absent in the Sanhita. For instance, section 89 in the General Exceptions chapter contains the heading, “Act done in good faith for benefit of child or insane person or by consent of guardian.” Section 27 of the Sanhita replaces the words “insane person” with a more benign expression, “person of unsound mind.” Section

305, which deals with the “abetment of suicide of child or insane person,” uses the terms “insane person” and “idiot.” The corresponding new section 107 of the Sanhita omits these and uses the expression “person of unsound mind.”

Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 is an eminently erudite law enacted after deep consideration and wide-ranging discussions with all stakeholders. It is long overdue legislation that seeks to break the shackles of a law belonging to a colonial past — a law that is out of touch with independent India’s needs. The Sanhita enhances the security of the state, the safety and dignity of women and law and order in general.

The Sanhita’s critics are primarily those who replaced the colonial government but failed to replace colonial laws during their tenure. Their legislative neglect is culpable for India having to endure an obsolete and inefficacious law from 1947 to 2014. This colonial law allowed criminals to escape punishment and victims to suffer injustice. In hindsight, perhaps that was their intent. After all, some of the biggest crimes were committed by those rulers who succeeded the colonial regime and perpetuated the looting and exploitation of India just as their colonial predecessors did.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



Mahesh Jethmalani is an Indian lawyer and a politician. He is a Member of Parliament in the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Parliament of India. Mahesh was also a member of the National Executive of the Bharatiya Janata Party until 2012. Born in 1956, Mahesh studied at St.

Israel Didn't Predict the October 7 Massacre. The Reasons Why Are Important.

Mordechai de Haas
February 05, 2024

The government of Israel and military leadership believed that previous engagements had broken Hamas's desire to fight. They were convinced that Hamas was interested in maintaining the status quo. Sticking to this assessment, Israeli leaders ignored early warning signs from intelligence analysts at all levels. The army was only prepared for small incursions and caught completely by surprise on October 7.

On October 7, 2023 (7/10), some 3,000 thousand Hamas terrorists invaded Israeli communities and army bases near Gaza. They killed around 1,200 people — most of them civilians — took some 240 persons hostage to Gaza.

Since the day of the massacre, many fragments of information have come to the surface, revealing that for years the political and military leadership at all levels have erred in recognizing the upcoming threat — sometimes by miscalculation, sometimes by sheer mistake. Although there is a lot of information available, it is all bits and pieces, without any line of thought or direction. My aim is to give them order and thus gain insight into where and when things went wrong in military and civilian policy circles.

Currently, two state inquiries into Israel's policy and intelligence failures regarding 7/10 are

underway. At the end of December 2023, Israel's State Comptroller, Matanyahu Englman, announced that he will look into all aspects of the failures including examining those with "personal responsibility" for the "failures on all levels — policy, military and civilian." He stated that his investigation will take up the larger part of 2024. Englman is unwilling to wait for a formal state inquiry committee or for the end of the war. In January 2024, he already submitted a long list of questions to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF).

Subsequently, in January 2024, Lieutenant General Herzi Halevi, the IDF Chief of Staff and Israel's highest military actor, formed a team to probe the 7/10 massacre. Though the right-wing part of the coalition government heavily criticized the decision, it seems wise since having an evaluation now could help Israel make correct operational decisions in the current war. Israel is currently fighting Hamas in Gaza and may soon be fighting the terrorist organization Hezbollah in Lebanon, at Israel's northern border.

Conversely, on the political side, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has stated that an investigation on the decision-making before and during the Hamas War will only be conducted after the end of the conflict. However, it is unclear when the war against Hamas will end; it may well last the whole year of 2024. Even if the fighting with Hamas were concluded, Israel might still be fighting Hezbollah. Besides, the outcomes of such a state investigation could take years.

In the current absence of results of state inquiry commissions, I will deliver a preliminary analysis of the Israeli policy and intelligence failings. Why preliminary? First of all, because the Hamas War is ongoing. Secondly, because as a private Israeli citizen, I do not have access to governmental documents; I will have to base my conclusions upon media reports.

Methodology: the levels of warfare

I will apply the “levels of warfare” (or “levels of military operation”) analysis. Scholars of military studies commonly use this schema to describe how national interests are translated into national objectives. States generally use hard military power only in the case of a serious violation of national interests. We examine the way in which they use military power at four descending levels: political strategy, military strategy, operations and tactics. The division into these four levels is not strict; they influence each other, and there is overlap.

The highest level, political strategy or “grand strategy,” involves the coordinated use of all the economic, diplomatic, psychological, military and other political instruments the state has at its disposal to achieve its objectives. The actor at this level is the government of the State of Israel.

At the level of military strategy, we see the use of military means of power to guarantee the security of the state. The actors at this level are the IDF Chief of Staff and the commanders of the different services, i.e. the army, air force and navy.

Operational strategy comprises the execution of particular joint campaigns (conducted by the army, air force and navy) in order to achieve a military-strategic objective. In the current situation, the war against Hamas in Gaza is called Operation Swords of Iron. This operation serves the military strategic objective of the destruction of Hamas.

At the tactical level, individual military units are deployed and operate in combat to achieve the operational aim of a campaign. For example, within Operation Swords of Iron, the 7th Armored Brigade raided a Hamas command center in Gaza.

7/10 scrutinized at the political strategic level

On the eve of 7/10, the Israeli government was convinced that Hamas was deterred from starting a war with Israel. Political and military officials of Israel had frequently stated that Hamas was discouraged from a large conflict with Israel. Aryeh Deri, Member of Knesset and political leader of the ruling coalition party Shas, has admitted that the Israeli political and military leadership failed by not recognizing the Hamas threat. According to Deri, Israel underestimated Hamas’ strength and overestimated the IDF’s military power.

This belief was based upon the fact, among others, that Hamas kept aside from several rounds of conflict between Israel and the terrorist organization Palestinian Islamic Jihad in 2022 and 2023. Hamas had ostensibly learned its lesson from its 2014 and 2021 conflicts with Israel.

Hamas intentionally encouraged Israel to believe it was interested in a quiet situation. They gave the impression that they were focusing on economic build-up and avoiding conflict with Israel. Allegedly, Hamas even provided Israel with intelligence on Palestinian Islamic Jihad to reinforce the impression that they were willing to cooperate with Israel.

At least a year before 7/10, the IDF had acquired a Hamas manual that described how to take control of the Israeli area near Gaza. It explained how the operation was to be conducted (see the operational level below). The manual also described the objective to deceive Israel into inactivity, creating a low threat perception by holding negotiations for some form of long-term arrangement to create a false sense of security while at the same time conducting regular exercises and carrying out small security incidents on the border. The details of the manual were forwarded to senior IDF officers. Their reason for dismissing this threat was

that Hamas would not be capable of carrying out such a large-scale attack.

Besides the Hamas attack manual, in spring 2022 Hamas TV broadcasted a series which dramatized a huge assault on Israel with pickup trucks, deactivating IDF communications, kidnapping soldiers and civilians and attacking kibbutzim (rural settlements) and IDF bases, among them the location of the Gaza Division. Presumably, neither news of Hamas's intent to create a false sense of security (as mentioned in the manual) nor of the attack scenario (as mentioned in the series) ever reached the political decision-makers.

In the summer of 2023, a human source from Gaza informed Israel's internal security agency, Shin Bet, that Hamas was planning a large attack on Israel soon after Yom Kippur. The information was regarded as irrelevant: Hamas simply could not operate on such a large scale. Consequently, the information did not reach Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar. Obviously, the upper political and military echelons did not hear about it either.

In order to shore up intelligence weaknesses discovered during the Yom Kippur War of 1973, the IDF maintains an intelligence unit of different thinking. The task of Ipcha Mistabra, or the "Devil's Advocate Unit," is to doubt intelligence assessments and offer alternative conclusions. In the weeks before 7/10, the head of the Devil's Advocate Unit sent out a number of warnings to all senior decision-makers in the army and the political echelons, assessing an impending attack by Hamas. The unit thus succeeded in its primary task, contradicting the conventional view shared by intelligence, military and political officials. Senior leadership dismissed the assessment, and Netanyahu has denied receiving the warning.

The military strategic level

The IDF leadership assumed that Hamas was deterred because of the impact of the losses they suffered in the 11-day conflict of May 2021, dubbed by IDF "Operation Guardian of the Walls." Furthermore, the IDF was convinced that, in that operation, they had destroyed the larger part of Hamas' underground tunnel network. On 7/10, both assumptions proved to be totally wrong.

On October 6, 2023, some hours before the Hamas attack, the IDF's most senior officers were alerted to some irregular activities on the Gaza border and that Hamas was preparing to launch an offensive. On the night between October 6 and 7, Herzi Halevi held an encrypted telephone call with the head of the Operations Directorate, Major General Oded Basyuk, and the head of Southern Command, Major General Yaron Finkelman. They discussed reports from military intelligence and from Shin Bet on irregular activities by Hamas.

The head of the IDF's military intelligence directorate, Aharon Haliva, was not invited for the talk. But even if Haliva had participated in the meeting, his military intelligence would have given no indication of an imminent wide-scale attack by Hamas. Military intelligence estimated that the detected activities by Hamas were likely to be routine exercises, similar to previous months.

Consequently, the nightly meeting only resulted in limited action. Halevi ordered that the reported information be checked. He entertained the possibility that the prevailing assessment may have been wrong. Nevertheless, these doubts did not convince Halevi to prepare for a major Hamas assault.

For the intel check-up, three drones and a combat helicopter were activated. In addition to this, Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar decided to dispatch Tequila teams to the Gaza border. Tequila is an

elite undercover unit of Shin Bet, seen as a last resort in stopping one or a few individual terrorists who are already preparing to launch an attack. The use of Tequila teams, thus, confirms that Shin Bet also did not have the impression that a large Hamas offensive was looming.

The IDF thus prepared their defenses around Gaza for limited incursions by small groups of terrorists, not a large-scale invasion by thousands of Hamas operatives. As a result, when 7/10 came the IDF were unprepared to counter such a massive attack. According to standard procedures, battalions are expected to deploy within 24 hours in the event of an invasion, after being forewarned by military intelligence. Clearly, no such warning had gone out before 7/10.

The IDF's response was slow and disorganized. It took considerable time to comprehend the size of the attack; hence, the initial units deployed were ill-equipped to counter the assault.

The Israeli Air Force (IAF) also missed out on 7/10. Only a pair of combat helicopters was on standby, but they were located in northern Israel. Some unmanned aerial vehicles were quickly deployed in the Gaza area, but they could not cope with the scale of the attack. IAF fighter jets arrived shortly after, but they did not understand what was going on and returned to base without taking any action.

The operational level

The terror manual mentioned above can be considered as Hamas's operational plan. It mentioned conquering IDF army bases and posts, capturing communities, killing and abducting Israelis and taking hold of the cities of Sderot, Ofakim and Netivot. The vehicles to carry out these tasks would be pickup trucks, motorbikes and hang gliders. Large-scale rocket fire from

Gaza was to give cover. The manual accurately described what would happen on 7/10.

Israeli intelligence had further knowledge of Hamas's operational plans. Allegedly, Aharon Haliva visited Unit 8200, a unit of the IDF Intelligence Corps responsible for signal intelligence. They had signaled an upcoming Hamas attack (see "The tactical level," below). But the warning was not passed on to Haliva. On the contrary, the assessment that he received suggested that Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar had no intention of causing the situation to deteriorate.

Already in July 2022, an unnamed intelligence officer belonging to the IDF's Gaza Division gave a briefing on "The Mass Invasion Plan of Hamas." It described Hamas terror squads invading southern Israel from Gaza, together with engineering teams to breach the border fence on multiple spots. The presentation warned that this invasion constituted a very serious threat to the defense of Israel.

Subsequently, in October 2022, a document drafted in the Gaza Division described in detail the Hamas attack that would take place a year later. This document listed details of the impending Hamas operation, concurrent with those mentioned in the aforementioned Hamas manual in possession of the IDF: invading army bases and kibbutzim, killing, destruction and hostage-taking. This was to be preceded by breaching the fence at several spots, neutralizing the IDF technological warning, communications and remote weapon systems. Hamas would penetrate Israel with pickups, jeeps, motorcycles and paragliders, as well as with boats.

Allegedly, the document was sent to the top of the Military Intelligence Directorate. Its head, Aharon Haliva, was also aware of the contents of the report. Nevertheless, no conclusions were apparently drawn nor any action taken.

On October 1, 2023, the commander of the same Gaza Division ordered a situational assessment, which noted a sharp increase in Hamas drills — six battalions were exercising once or twice a week. The division’s intelligence officer described, on the one hand, the economic benefits for Hamas for absence of violence and, on the other hand, a continuation of disturbances at the Gaza border. However, he assessed that there was a development towards détente and a decrease in disturbances.

How could this intelligence officer come to such a conclusion in the light of a sharp increase in exercise activity by Hamas? What happened with the July 2022 briefing on “The Mass Invasion Plan of Hamas”? Considering the fundamental opposite views, the intel officers most likely of July 2022 and of October 1, 2023 were not the same. Nevertheless, how could such divergent views be held in the same division?

The tactical level

On different occasions, Unit 8200 presented warnings about Hamas preparing for a major assault. In July 2023, they warned that Hamas was conducting large-scale exercises aiming at invading kibbutzim and several Israeli towns near Gaza. In September 2023, personnel from this unit noticed a Hamas military exercise which included preparations for a mass invasion with multiple entry points into Israel. The exercise included the use of vehicles to carry out the attack and practiced taking over Israeli towns. Subsequently, Unit 8200 warned a senior officer that Hamas was preparing a well-organized and planned invasion. However, their warnings were met with disbelief, and the senior officer failed to act on the information.

For at least three months before 7/10, lookouts from the Combat Intelligence Corps had reported on training, unusual activity and preparations near the border. They warned about a number of

peculiar activities. For instance, more people who had not been previously observed in the area were arriving; the usual Palestinian farmers had been replaced by others; Hamas members were frequently conducting training sessions, digging holes and placing explosives along the border, et cetera. The lookouts saw furthermore that Hamas operatives had models of a tank and weapons on the Israeli fence; the operatives showed how to blow them up. The lookouts also noticed that the Hamas operatives observed the cameras on the fence and were taking pictures of them.

The lookouts passed information about what they were seeing to intelligence and higher-ranking officers, but were powerless to do more. As with Unit 8200’s findings, the lookouts from the Combat Intelligence Corps too had to experience their senior officers disregarding their warnings and consequently declining to forward them up the chain of command. Beyond this, the lookouts were threatened with legal action if they continued bringing up such alarming reports.

Conclusions

The policy and intelligence failures demonstrate shortcomings throughout the system. Intelligence warnings of a looming assault by Hamas were disregarded at all levels of warfare: warnings by Unit 8200 and lookouts of the Combat Intelligence Corps at the tactical level; Gaza Division intelligence at the operational level; warnings by the Devil’s Advocate Unit at the military and political strategic levels. Leaders were convinced Hamas was sufficiently deterred and interested in maintaining the status quo.

With these policy and intelligence deficiencies in view, we cannot help comparing 7/10 to the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the other war that took Israel by surprise. The big difference, of course, is that in 1973 regular armed forces of neighboring states (Egypt and Syria) attacked Israel, whereas in

the current war, paramilitary troops (Hamas) did so.

Nevertheless, similar failures occurred. In 1973, the Israeli government was wary of starting a war. The US government exercised political pressure on Israel to remain the status quo. This likely also played a role in Israel's reluctance to prepare for war or to launch a pre-emptive strike in spite of several intelligence warnings. Equally, in 2023 the Israeli Government was convinced that Hamas was aimed at a calm relationship with Israel. Thus, the government neglected intelligence warnings on a threat by Hamas and was unprepared for warfare. As in 1973, in 2023 the US government under President Joe Biden was putting pressure on Israel to avoid conflict. In this case, Biden hoped to improve the circumstances of the Palestinians.

After the Six-Day War of 1967, in 1973 Israel considered itself invincible; any enemy would stay far away from IDF's superior military power. Likewise, after 2014 and 2021, Israel considered itself as having soundly defeated Hamas. As Aryeh Deri has admitted, Israel misjudged the threat.

In the months preceding the Yom Kippur War, Israel received a number of warnings about a potential attack by Syria and Egypt. In the same way, over a year before 7/10, Israel received intelligence reports on a forthcoming assault by Hamas and did not act on them.

In 1973 Israel felt safe and secure behind the Bar Lev Line, a fortified set of defenses along the eastern bank of the Suez Canal, built shortly after the 1967 Six-Day War. But on Yom Kippur, Egypt quickly seized all the fortresses except for one. Similarly, before 7/10 Israel was sure that its high-tech sophisticated barrier with Gaza (consisting of remote controlled electronic signaling, camera surveillance and weapon systems) would be a reliable defense against Hamas. In December 2021, Minister of Defense Benny Gantz had

ensured that an expensive, state-of-the-art upgrade to the wall would protect the bordering Israeli communities from terror attacks by Hamas. The fence was supplemented by a number of army bases surrounding Gaza. As with the Bar Lev Line, the fence around Gaza was also sparsely guarded, because the IDF relied on its high-tech capabilities. On 7/10, Hamas rapidly breached the fence at multiple locations and overran most of the army bases.

The inquiry committees of the State Comptroller, the IDF and of the State of Israel will have to deal with the question of why all these intelligence warnings were ignored. Was it out of sheer arrogance — Israel considering itself invincible? Or did the political and military leadership regard all the intelligence warnings that came from below as insignificant because it did not concur with the rosy outlook coming from above? Or were policymakers and senior officers afraid that setting off a false alarm might affect their careers?

Did careers outweigh the security of the nation and the lives of its citizens? Why did Israel not learn from similar failures 50 years earlier in the Yom Kippur War? These questions can only be satisfactorily answered if the political and military leadership of Israel is willing to do some deep soul-searching. Without such an introspection, Israel is likely to make the same mistakes again.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]



Dr. Mordechai de Haas is a retired Lieutenant Colonel of the Royal Netherlands Army. Mordechai de Haas holds a PhD on Russian security policy. He was an Affiliated Professor and Research Fellow on Russian security policy

towards the Middle East at the National Security Studies Centre of Haifa University.

Indonesia Will Pick a New President in a Time of Democratic Erosion

Patrick Ziegenhain
February 06, 2024

Indonesia elects a new president on February 14. With Indonesian democracy under pressure, all eyes are on the election. But change may be in short supply as top candidates look set to extend existing policies — and the current president's son may even become vice president.

On February 14, 2024, the world's largest election held on one day will take place in Indonesia. More than 200 million Indonesians will vote for a new president, as well as both chambers of the national parliament, provincial governors, and local legislatures. Of particular importance is the presidential election, which will determine who will succeed incumbent President Joko Widodo (usually abbreviated to Jokowi). After two five-year terms, Jokowi is constitutionally barred from running for office again.

The three candidates for the presidential elections are current Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, long-time Central Java governor Ganjar Pranovo and former Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan. A month before the election, Prabowo Subianto led in opinion polls with a margin of

around 20%. He is supported by almost all parties represented in parliament and wants to continue Jokowi's policies, including the movement of the capital from Jakarta to Nusantara on Borneo Island.

Subianto's competitor Ganjar Pranovo also does not want to make any major changes to Jokowi's current policies. However, he is supported almost exclusively by his party, the PDI-P (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia – Perjuangan).

The only candidate who wants some degree of change is Anies Baswedan, a political opponent of Jokowi, who was nominated by two smaller Islamic parties.

This election takes place against a backdrop of overall democratic erosion, as highlighted in the 2022 Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI). The BTI country report for Indonesia concluded that despite the decline in democratic quality, Indonesia remained an electoral democracy. Unlike other states in the region, Indonesia has not crossed the line to electoral authoritarianism, although it risks doing so in the medium to long term. Formally, though, the institutions of democracy remain in place and elections continue to be competitive.

Jokowi and sons — a family affair

It is unlikely that the upcoming elections will steer the nation towards more democratization. Rather they may well seal the trend of declining democratic credentials. In a surprising move, Jokowi has refrained from promoting the candidate of his long-term party PDI-P, Ganjar Pranovo. Instead, he more or less openly supports the candidacy of Prabowo Subianto, whom he defeated twice after the polarized election campaigns in 2014 and 2019. Jokowi's endorsement of Prabowo is conveyed by thousands of billboards and posters throughout the country,

which depict the two together, and also by Prabowo's choice of his running mate. On the last day of the candidates' registration in November 2023, Prabowo Subianto named Jokowi's 36-year-old son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, as his vice presidential candidate. In doing so, he wants to signal he has the political support of the incumbent and still very popular President Jokowi.

Jokowi's political maneuver to lift his politically quite inexperienced son Gibran to the vice presidency is both questionable and damaging to Indonesia's fragile democracy. The Constitutional Court's decision to allow Gibran to run despite being younger than the minimum age of 40 was largely made by Jokowi's brother-in-law, Constitutional Court Chairman Anwar Usman. A few weeks later, the Ethics Council of the Constitutional Court ordered the removal of Anwar Usman from his leadership post and banned him from participating in electoral matters. He was found guilty of a "serious ethical breach" when he used his position to pave the way for the candidacy of Gibran. However, the questionable decision remained in force.

Family dynasties are a bad feature for any democracy because they contradict the principle of equality. Jokowi's dynastic intentions are further exacerbated by the fact that he also sent his second son, 29-year-old Kaesang Pangarep, into politics. Two days after he joined the Indonesian Solidarity Party without any previous political experience, he was elected as the new party chairman.

Authoritarian tendencies on the rise

During the election campaign, Jokowi has said several times that it would be better and cheaper for the country if there were only one round of voting, meaning that one candidate receives more than 50% of the votes in the first round of voting. Since the candidate pair Prabowo/Gibran, which is supported by Jokowi, is currently polling at around

40%, the government apparatus has launched numerous initiatives to score the missing percentage points in the first round of voting. There are clear signs that state funds are being used for the Prabowo/Gibran election campaign. In addition, the military, the police and the secret services, whose leadership is staffed by Jokowi's confidants, do not appear to be neutral. State media and national/local government officials are also under pressure to support the incumbent president's favorites.

Especially during Jokowi's second term in office in the last five years, more and more authoritarian tendencies have emerged. The democratic achievements of the so-called Reform Era, which started after the resignation of long-term authoritarian ruler Suharto in May 1998, (freedom of speech and press, a strong anti-corruption agency KPK, the independence of the courts, free/fair elections, decentralization/elected local governments, reduction of the political influence of military police and more) were not completely abolished, but they were modified so that they do not impede the president's policies. Jokowi, who many saw as a beacon of hope for Indonesia's democracy, unfortunately turned out to be the opposite. This development is also reflected in the BTI 2022 report, which flagged a decline in commitment to democratic institutions between 2016 and 2022.

Under Jokowi, Indonesia witnessed remarkable economic growth and was able to navigate the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The outgoing president will be remembered for this, as well as for his bold decision to move the capital. However, his leadership has tarnished Indonesia's democratic credentials. His successor, whoever it may be, faces the difficult task of maintaining political stability and improving Indonesia's economy, while preventing Indonesia from sliding back into being an authoritarian political system. A fix to this situation remains

elusive: None of the three presidential candidates has democracy as their top priority should they win the country's top post for the next five years.



Dr. Patrick Ziegenhain is an Associate Professor at the Department of International Relations at President University,

Cikarang/Indonesia. His main areas of research are economic, political and social developments in Southeast Asia and Europe as well as International Relations in both regions.

History, Heritage, Hegemony: The Truth About the Taliban Emirate

Ali Omar Forozish
February 08, 2024

After 20 years of warfare, the Taliban retook Afghanistan in 2021. They claim legitimacy as the nation's rightful rulers on three pillars: their self-proclaimed connection to Afghanistan's historical emirate, their Pashtun ethnic identity and their Deobandi religious doctrine. They have banned art and music, forbidden women from receiving formal education and marginalized minority groups in Afghanistan. The Afghan populace and the rest of the international community condemn these oppressive policies.

The Taliban are an Islamist militant group that emerged as a political force in Afghanistan in the early 1990s, following the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the civil war that ensued. The Taliban claimed to restore peace, security and Islamic law in the country. They managed to capture most of the territory by 1996, establishing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Only three countries recognized them: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The Taliban regime was notorious for its oppressive rule, especially towards women and minorities. Equally infamous was its support for terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda.

A US-led invasion ousted the Taliban from power in 2001. Despite their removal, they continued to wage a guerrilla war against the Afghan government and foreign forces. Fast-forward to 2021. The world witnessed a seismic shift in Afghanistan's geopolitical landscape when the Taliban launched a massive offensive and seized control of the entire country. This resurgence followed the US announcement of its withdrawal, marking the end of a 20-year war. The Taliban declared they would re-establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, a statement that would reverberate globally and pose complex questions about the legitimacy of their rule.

The Taliban assert their legitimacy as Afghanistan's rightful rulers although they have the support of neither the Afghan populace nor the global community. The organization's claim to legitimacy is rooted in its ideology, relying on three pillars: its supposed connection to the Afghanistan's historical emirate, its Pashtun ethnic identity and its adherence to the Deobandi school of Islam.

Rekindling the emirate

The Taliban's right to rule starts with their self-proclaimed position as heirs to Afghanistan's

historical monarchy, officially called the Emirate of Afghanistan. Established in 1826 by Emir Dōst Moḥammad Khān, the emirate symbolized unification under Pashtun leadership and staunch resistance against foreign incursions, particularly from the British and Persians. It marked the country's first independent state, solidifying its borders and identity.

While facing internal and external challenges like the Anglo-Afghan Wars and Panjdeh Incident, the emirate witnessed significant advancements. Constitutions, flags, anthems, a currency, postal systems and even a nascent railway network all marked notable strides during this period. In 1926, the emirate came to an end when Emir Amanullah Khan declared Afghanistan a “kingdom” with himself as king. The name change marked a shift to a more modernizing, Western-influenced style of governance.

The Taliban strongly reject both a kingdom and a republic as incompatible with their Islamic ideology. They view an emirate as the sole licit, authentic political system for Afghanistan. This stance is further bolstered by their adoption of the original emirate's name, flag and symbols. They see themselves as its rightful successors, inheriting its legacy and its responsibility to safeguard Afghanistan's sovereignty against foreign influence.

In their narrative, the British, Soviets and Americans stand as historical invaders and enemies, while their own resistance is a sacred jihad — a struggle for moral correctness. The internationally recognized government and its security forces were illegitimate collaborators in their eyes, puppets of foreign powers. The Taliban strive to establish a pure Islamic state governed by their understanding of Sharia law, with the emirate's revival serving as a cornerstone of their legitimacy claim.

The horrific obsession of the Deobandi school

Building upon their historical connection to the emirate, the Taliban further bolster their legitimacy with their strict adherence to the Deobandi school of Islam. Born in 19th-century India, Deobandism emerged as a reformist movement that emphasized strict adherence to the Quran and Sunnah, traditional Islamic practices, and social reform. While not entirely rejecting the four conventional Sunni schools of jurisprudence, Deobandis prioritize the direct interpretation of religious texts. They advocate for a literal, conservative understanding of Islam.

This ideology found fertile ground in Afghanistan, particularly among rural Pashtun communities. Deobandi madrasas — colleges dedicated to Islamic study — flourished, educating generations of scholars and religious leaders, including many future Taliban members. The Taliban embraced Deobandi principles as their official creed, shaping their vision for an Islamic state governed by an unwavering understanding of Sharia law.

The Taliban's specific interpretation of Deobandi principles led them to impose an austere version of Islam in Afghanistan. They banned music, art, entertainment and education for women, viewing these things as incompatible with their morality. Religious minorities, deemed heretical or infidel, faced persecution. While these actions are justified by the Taliban as upholding Deobandi doctrine and defending Islam, they are broadly condemned by Deobandis and the international community.

Crucially, this Deobandi foundation imbues the Taliban's claim to legitimacy with a unique character. Their fight is cast as a divinely ordained crusade, drawing authority directly from God. This renders modern concepts like democracy and nation-states obsolete in their eyes. They see

themselves as instruments of God's will, liberated from the need for earthly validation through elections or global recognition. This divine mandate, they argue, justifies their actions and grants them unyielding support from their devout followers.

Assimilation, xenophobia and Pashtun identity

The Taliban also draw their legitimacy from their ethnic identity. They are predominantly Pashtuns, members of the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. Primarily located in eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan, Pashtuns constitute approximately 42% of the population. For centuries, Pashtuns have not simply inhabited Afghanistan, but have played a role in shaping its destiny, leaving a legacy that the Taliban now weaponize as their birthright to leadership.

Prior to the ascendancy of the Pashtuns, Mongol and Turkic dynasties ruled Afghanistan. The 18th and 19th centuries witnessed the rise of Pashtun dynasties like Hotak, Durrani and Bārakzai. Their empires stand as testaments to Pashtun political prowess and influence. The Hotakis challenged the Mughal Empire's dominance by capturing Kandahār Province from them. The Durrani established an empire stretching from Mashhad in Persia to Kashmir and Delhi in India. The Bārakzais shaped the framework of modern Afghanistan and founded the emirate.

This legacy forms the bedrock of the Taliban's narrative. The Pashtun identity they claim suggests an inherent right to rule stemming from ancestral ties and past achievements. They argue that Pashtuns are not merely Afghanistan's largest minority but the core of its national identity. For the Taliban, the term "Afghan" itself serves as a synonym of "Pashtun." (The name, "Afghanistan," meaning, "Land of Afghans," first appeared in the 1879 Treaty of Gandamak following the Second Anglo-Afghan War.)

Beyond their historical narrative, the Taliban draw heavily on Pashtunwali, a deeply ingrained ethical and social code that governs Pashtun life. This intricate tapestry of values, encompassing *melmastyā* (hospitality), *nənwāte* (asylum), *nang* (justice), *badāl* (revenge) and *túra* (bravery), serves as a cornerstone of their legitimacy claim. They portray themselves as not only rulers, but caretakers of this moral code.

The Taliban argue that Pashtunwali forms the bedrock of Afghan identity. They propose that other ethnic groups in Afghanistan either share Pashtun ancestry, having assimilated into their cultural sphere over centuries, or have embraced Pashtunwali as their own moral compass. This assertion of cultural hegemony is another vital argument in their narrative, suggesting that their leadership is not merely a political choice, but an imperative for maintaining moral and cultural unity. The Taliban's ideology is a hybrid and synthesis of the Pashtunwali and Deobandi schools of thought, which complement and reinforce each other.

The Taliban's emphasis on Pashtun identity breeds xenophobia. Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks face suspicion, marginalization and even demonization. The Taliban ignore their legal and cultural systems in favor of a rigid interpretation of Pashtunwali and Sharia law. The Pashtuns' language, Pashto, flourishes in education and government while other languages wither. Representation in these spheres is deeply imbalanced, stoking resentment among excluded groups. The most brutal manifestation of this xenophobia is the Taliban's use of violence and intimidation, creating a climate of fear that silences dissent. This exclusionary approach sows deep societal fissures, jeopardizing Afghanistan's fragile unity.

The Taliban's rule remains at odds with the desires of the Afghan people and the principles of

the international community. As long as this fundamental dissonance persists, the question of legitimacy will continue to cast a long shadow over Afghanistan's future, with profound consequences for its stability and prosperity.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



Ali Omar Forozish is currently a student of economics at Anadolu University. With a degree in modern politics, his work focuses

significantly on liberal democracy, the end of history, feminism and political ideologies. As a political analyst and human rights activist, from 2017 to 2019, he worked exclusively with several socio-cultural associations in Afghanistan.

The Lebanese Phalanges in the Interwar Era

Amir Darwish
February 13, 2024

The Phalanges, a Lebanese Christian paramilitary movement, took inspiration from Europe's fascist movements between World War I and World War II. They modeled themselves after the Nazi and Italian Fascist movements, and they emulated the Catholic nationalism and imperialist nostalgia of the Spanish Falange.

Like in Europe, the years between World War I and World War II were a time of major political shifts in the Arab world. In Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and Lebanon, movements appeared that resembled fascist regimes in Europe such as the Nazis, the National Socialist German Workers' Party, in Germany.

Yet, to date, these fascist movements in the Arab world have not been compared to fascist movements in Europe. Some were heavily influenced by Europe's fascism. In the case of the Lebanese and Spanish Phalangism, for instance, they both strongly emphasized Catholic religious identity to push their fascist agendas.

Addressing this gap in the literature, this article explores the Lebanese "Phalanges," known as al-Katā'ib in Arabic, a paramilitary group which presented itself as apolitical but actually concerned itself with the national interests of Lebanon.

How the Phalanges drew inspiration from European Fascism

While some researchers have focused on the Lebanese Phalanges in the past, no research has compared them to fascism in Europe. This is striking because they were inspired by the German Nazi regime, the Sokol in Czechoslovakia and, as the name implies, the Spanish Falange. Modeling them after these movements, Pierre Gemayel created the Lebanese Phalanges in 1936.

The Lebanese Phalanges shared several characteristics with European fascist movements at the time, such as upholding the importance of family and home and identifying an "other" to blame while picturing a glorious imaginary past.

Gemayel visited Berlin during the 1936 Olympic Games. He was greatly attracted to Nazism and envisaged a Lebanon that would take after the Nazi footprint:

I was the captain of the Lebanese football team and the president of the Lebanese Football Federation. We went to the Olympic Games of 1936 in Berlin. And I saw then this discipline and order. And I said to myself: “Why can't we do the same thing in Lebanon?” So when we came back to Lebanon, we created this youth movement. When I was in Berlin then, Nazism did not have the reputation which it has now. Nazism? In every system in the world, you can find something good. But Nazism was not Nazism at all. The word came afterwards. In their system, I saw discipline. And we in the Middle East, we need discipline more than anything else.

During his trip, Gemayel also visited several other European countries. In each of these countries, he made connections with their radical youth movements, studying their structure and observing them closely.

The Lebanese Phalanges

The Lebanese “Phalanges” were founded as a Christian “democratic” political organization in the 1930s that aimed to create a Westernized militant Lebanon. The organization’s leaders were young, middle-class Christians with connections to France, which at the time ran the League of Nations Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon. In spite of the movement being officially secular, it was supported mainly by the Maronite Catholics, who often saw the Phalanges as the political expression of their Christian faith. The Maronites trace their origins to St. Maron (Arabic: Mārūn), a Syrian hermit of the late 4th and early 5th centuries.

In line with fascist ideology, the movement upholds the importance of family and home with the motto “God, country, and family.” Their flag, which is also their logo, shows the cedar tree,

which is often a trademark of Lebanon and “Lebaneseness.”

It is important to point out here that the Maronites, unlike some European fascists, did not see the Phalanges as a substitute for their religion. The Phalanges connected fascist aspirations with religion.

The Lebanese Phalanges were also founded as a reaction to Muslim irredentist demands and to the growing strength of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, which advocated for the absorption of Lebanon into a Greater Syria. The latter was a secret society that grew from a few students to about 1,000 members by 1935. In the 1930s the party expanded into Syria, Transjordan, and Palestine.

For Lebanon, this era, 1936–1946, falls within the French mandate of the country. Lebanon gained its independence in 1943, and the French left the country in 1946. Also, 1945 was the end of WWII; in that same year, the Lebanese Phalanges put members forward for election but failed to win any seats until 1958.

The Spanish connection

The founders of the Phalanges chose the name, meaning “phalanx,” because they wanted it to be a semi-military group to instill discipline and organization in the Lebanese youth. Spanish political leader José Antonio Primo de Rivera had named his party the Falange Española for similar reasons. This kind of concentration on youth was common in European fascism, particularly Nazism and Italian Fascism. Thus, most Lebanese Phalanges supporters at the time were the youth, particularly students and recent graduates. They stormed the streets of Beirut, chanting for Lebanese independence while asserting the country’s unique non-Arab identity.

Similar to their Spanish Falange, the Lebanese Phalanges adopted a nostalgic rhetoric about “the return to empire.” For these Lebanese, this meant a future where the Phoenician legacy in Lebanon would once again take its place among the world's nations while placing Christianity at its center.

In Spain, Falangism also placed a strong emphasis on Catholic religious identity, though it held some secular views on the Church's direct influence in society, such as believing that the state should have supreme authority over the nation.

The Spanish movement gained importance from 1936 onwards, with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War between right-wing nationalist rebels and supporters of the left-wing Second Spanish Republic. The Falange enjoyed an enormous influx of membership from frightened and disillusioned middle-class people to anti-republican militants.

By the beginning of 1937, it had several hundred thousand affiliates. General Francisco Franco, leader of the nationalist cause, weakened the movement's original national-syndicalist ideology and made the Falange the official state party with a nominal membership of 900,000 in a country of 25 million. They provided the largest organized political following fully committed to the regime, and Franco found them indispensable. Franco was a Spanish military general who led the nationalist forces in overthrowing the Second Spanish Republic during the Spanish Civil War and thereafter ruled over Spain from 1939 to 1975 as a dictator.

Spanish Falangism promoted the revival and development of the Spanish Empire. The Spanish Falange and its affiliates in Hispanic states across the world promoted a form of pan-Hispanism which they described with the term *Hispanidad*. This advocated both a cultural and economic union of Hispanic societies around the world.

In fact, the Falange even produced maps that included Portugal as a province of Spain, especially during its early years of existence. After the Spanish Civil War, some radical members of the Spanish Falange called for reunification with Portugal and the annexation of former Spanish territories in the French Pyrenees. It has sought to unite ethnically Hispanic peoples, with proposals to create a commonwealth or federation of Spanish-speaking states headed by Spain.

Similarly, the Lebanese Phalanges believe the Phoenicians were the original residents of the Mediterranean coast. The Lebanese Phalanges imagined a glorious past, combining stories of a mythical golden age with ancestral legends and national rebirth.

The Phalanges' leaders often used Phoenician phraseology to express the non-Arab identity of Lebanon, for instance, “Lebanon is not Phoenician [...] it is Phoenician, however, in culture and ethos, bequeathed to the modern Lebanese by their forefathers in ancient times.” In this way, the Phalanges saw themselves as protectors of the Lebanese nation and carriers of Western influence against Arabs.

Although more work is needed on both movements' ideological placement, this preliminary treatment should make clear how the Phalanges of Lebanon drew from the nationalist ideologies of their European counterparts.

[[Erica Beinlich](#) edited this piece.]



Amir Darwish is a British-Syrian poet and writer of Kurdish origin who lives in London. Born in Aleppo, Syria, he came to Britain as an asylum seeker in 2003. He has a BA in history from Teesside University, UK, an MA in

International Relations of the Middle East from Durham University, UK, and an MA in creative and life writing from Goldsmiths University, UK.

The Truth About Allied Air Operations in World War II

Leonard Weinberg
February 14, 2024

World War II was rife with tactical air raids and the indiscriminate destruction of civilian lives. It took years for the Allied Powers and their supporters to have second thoughts about their vicious tactics. The Israel– Hamas war is in many ways comparable to this saga, as a hatred of Jews is linked to both. What lessons do these conflicts have to teach?

During the course of World War II in Europe, the Allied powers' strategic bombing campaign killed between 300,000 and 600,000 civilians in German cities.

In the air war against the Nazi regime, the British Royal Air Force (RAF)'s Bomber Command initially sought to attack specific German military and industrial targets. This effort proved too costly and relatively ineffective. Then under its new leader, Arthur "Bomber" Harris, Bomber Command turned to a new tactic: "area bombing." In effect, area bombing meant largely indiscriminate attacks on German cities in an attempt to "de-house" the civilian population and break its morale. In 1943, an estimated 40,000 civilians were killed in the two-day Bombing of

Hamburg, known by the code name "Operation Gomorrah."

Initially, US decision-makers had other ideas. Equipped with new, more accurate bombsights, the Eighth Air Force's commanders were determined to crush Germany's industrial infrastructure. These attacks were more successful, especially those that targeted the country's oil refineries and synthetic rubber facilities. Yet by the war's final years (1944–1945), the Eighth Air Force was carrying out almost daily raids on Berlin, a target with limited economic value. By the time of Germany's surrender in May 1945, Berlin and other German cities looked like the surface of the moon.

There is also the case of Dresden. A city with very limited economic value, both the RAF's Bomber Command and the US Eighth Air Force targeted it. Between February 13 and 15, 1945, they launched a series of ruinous attacks that killed approximately 35,000 civilians. Winston Churchill supposedly decided he wanted Dresden bombed to show Joseph Stalin the power of his arsenal.

Historical devastation unleashed on Japan

The strategic bombing campaign launched against Japan during the war was almost exclusively a US operation. It began in April 1942 with the famous Doolittle Raid on Tokyo. Physically, it did little overall damage. Psychologically, however, it was a spectacular success for the US. They saw it as payback for the December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. It also showed the Japanese public how vulnerable their home islands were to aerial assaults.

Serious air operations against Japan only began in the middle of June 1944, following the US capture of the Mariana Islands, notably Guam, Tinian and Saipan. The Marianas were close enough to Japan to permit the US Air Force to launch strategic bombing raids on Japanese cities.

These attacks were also made possible by the deployment of the new Boeing B-29 Superfortress bomber.

After some experimentation with its use, this craft was employed by General Curtis LeMay's 509th Composite Group to stage firebombing raids on Japanese cities. The most lethal of these was the bombing of Tokyo, otherwise known by the code name "Operation Meetinghouse," from March 9–10, 1945. One estimate is that approximately 100,000 Japanese civilians were killed during this one offensive. From March–August 1945, the US Air Force was also employed in mine-laying operations, under the code name "Operation Starvation," with the goal to prevent fishing in the seas surrounding Japan.

The weapons used against Tokyo and the other cities were conventional weapons: incendiaries. The attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (August 6, 1945 and August 9, 1945, respectively) were something different. They were the first and so far only use of atomic weaponry in wartime. Not only this, but against a helpless civilian population.

These nuclear attacks and the radiation they left behind killed an estimated 214,000 people. They contributed to the Japanese government's decision to surrender unconditionally to the Allies, bringing an end to the war.

Allies approved civilian slaughter

Seen in retrospect, one of the most striking things about indiscriminate British and US air attacks on civilian populations was the virtual absence of public criticism. It is true a handful of US nuclear scientists, led by Leo Szilard, circulated a letter to some of their peers objecting to the impending use of the atomic bomb. In Britain, the question was raised retrospectively about the need for the attack on Dresden. But at the time, there were no widespread public demonstrations about the Allied

air attacks on civilians, nor any US or British radio commentators objecting to the carnage. If anything, Allied journalists tended to regard the bombing operations as significant achievements.

Why was there no public opposition or objections from Anglo-American newspaper or radio journalists and their attentive publics? Certainly, part of the answer was the widespread desire to retaliate. British civilians wanted revenge for the Nazi firebombing of major cities, especially London, during the Blitz. The US demanded payback for Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, followed by the "fight to the death" response of the Japanese military as it struggled to prevent the Allied conquest of its occupied islands.

German and Japanese propaganda efforts to weaken British and US morale were unsuccessful. In Nazi Germany and Italy, British Fascist William Joyce and US turncoats Mildred Gillars and Rita Zucca — using the nicknames, "Lord Haw-Haw" and "Axis Sally," respectively — made regular radio broadcasts stating the invincibility of the Axis Powers. In the Pacific, Iva Toguri D'Aquino, using the nickname, "Tokyo Rose," made similar and equally unsuccessful attempts to undermine US morale — especially that of GIs fighting there.

To a significant extent, British and US journalists tended to define themselves as part of the war effort. There were exceptions here and there, however: In 1943, the isolationist Chicago Tribune published the fact that US codebreakers had deciphered Japan's Naval Code. That same year, journalist Drew Pearson made headlines when he published a story that General George S. Patton had slapped a soldier convalescing at a Sicilian hospital.

Substantial opposition to the Allied bombing of civilian targets developed well after World War II. The 1957 Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament marked a shift among Western intellectuals against

strategic bombing. This retrospective opposition appeared in the context of the Cold War conflict between NATO and the Soviet Bloc countries.

The Israel– Hamas war: How does history compare?

To what degree does the current Israel– Hamas war resemble the exponentially larger struggle of World War II? At first glance, the answer would be little. The battle between the two sides is restricted to a small corner of the Middle East, while the scope of World War II was practically global. The same applies to the number of soldiers directly involved in the fighting: thousands, not millions.

The drones, missiles and other weapons being used by the Israelis and Hamas fighters are far more sophisticated than those available to either side in World War II. And the Israeli Iron Dome air defense system would have been the envy of the soldiers of yesteryear. And, although the Israelis do not advertise this fact, they possess nuclear weapons and the means to launch them.

There are no Hamas equivalents of “Lord Haw-Haw,” “Axis Sally” or “Tokyo Rose” employed to weaken Israeli morale. This is not because Hamas lacks the means, such as social media, to convey such messages. Rather, it is because the organization leaders regard their members as engaged in a holy war not only with Israelis, but with Jews altogether. So, there is no point in surrendering. Hamas does not recognize any distinction between combatants and non-combatants. Israeli civilians, following the October 7, 2023 attacks, are not susceptible to such an appeal.

Aside from the scale and scope of the conflict, a crucial distinction between the two wars is the reactions of their audiences. With the possible exceptions of pacifist Mahatma Gandhi, his Indian

followers and a few Axis wartime collaborators, Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan enjoyed little popular support around the world.

The opposite is true for Hamas. Almost the entire ummah — the worldwide community of Muslim believers — and their religious and political leaders have expressed support for Hamas and its holy war with Israel. Strengthening their support is the fact that Israel controls Jerusalem, the location of many Muslim holy sites.

During World War II, most print journalists and radio reporters behaved as cheerleaders for the Allies’ cause. In the current conflict, with the technologies of mass communication being more varied and vastly superior, many journalists and influential people active in the West are now cheerleaders for Hamas. After briefly expressing sympathy for the Israelis murdered or kidnapped by Hamas fighters on October 7, major news outlets in Britain, the US and elsewhere reacted with thinly disguised hostility once the Israeli Air Force began bombarding Gaza. This malice was not confined to the civilian casualties involved, but to the existence of Israel itself. Antisemitism loomed large in both conflicts.

Antisemitism persists

One similarity between then and now, sadly, is antisemitism.

Hatred of Jews had no meaning in the war on Japan, but in the European conflict, it certainly did. In addition to the destruction of around two-thirds of the European Jewish community by the Nazis and their collaborators across Europe, the Western Allies were hardly immune to Jew-hatred. In Britain, foreign office officials repeatedly complained how tired they were of listening to the “wailing Jews” that sought their assistance.

Throughout World War II, the Royal Navy enforced His Majesty's Government's White Paper of 1939. This seriously restricted Jewish emigration to Palestine. In other words, just as many European Jews were fleeing the Nazis, the British blocked the ports and sealed the exits.

The situation in the US was different. Figures in the Roosevelt Administration voiced sympathy for the ordeal of European Jews. But for the most part, their hands were tied. Surveys of US public opinion reflected widespread antisemitism. In view of this outlook, Congress was unwilling to modify immigration laws to permit more European refugees to enter the country. State Department officers controlling entry also did their best to deny visas to European Jews.

In the current Israel– Hamas war, the Jewish state has few friends aside from political leaders in the US and Britain. Even in these two countries, the present conflict has unleashed a wave of widespread antisemitism among professors, university students and Internet users that has not been seen in decades.

Animosity towards Jews appears to be a latent phenomenon throughout the Western world , needing only a stimulus to set it off, e.g., the Israeli response to October 7. Among Muslims, on the other hand, antisemitism appears to be something visible and constant, reflected by the fact that Mein Kampf and The Protocols of the Elders of Zion continue to be best-sellers throughout the Middle East.

What lessons should Israeli Jews and Westerners learn from these two wars? The obvious answers that come to mind are these: When the chips are down, you are on your own. And if you wish to survive, you had better learn to fight.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



Leonard Weinberg is foundation professor emeritus at the University of Nevada. Over the course of his career he has served as a visiting

professor at King's College, University of London, the University of Haifa (Israel), and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). He is the author of many books on terrorism and right-wing politics.

It's Simplistic to Assume Trump's Devoted Voters are Irrational.

Scott Bennett
February 15, 2024

The narrative surrounding Donald Trump's supporters often characterizes them as ignorant and unquestioningly loyal. However, their support stems from a deep distrust in the American political system and a desire for change. Trump's appeal lies in his portrayal as an outsider willing to challenge the status quo, reflecting a rational response to a dysfunctional political landscape.

The mainstream narrative about Donald Trump's supporters, otherwise known as the MAGA nation, is that they are generally ignorant, racist, reactionary, utterly blind to Donald Trump's faults and possibly unable to make decisions in their self-interest.

These perceptions arise from a fundamental misunderstanding about why Trump's base

supports him. People wonder: Why does this group continue to passionately support a man facing 91 criminal charges in four felony cases? Why would someone back a candidate the constitution could potentially disqualify from the ballot due to an insurrection clause? Why rally behind someone who openly flirts with totalitarianism and jokes about imposing a dictatorship on day one of his administration?

We may be approaching these questions from the wrong angle.

This point of view assumes that Trump supporters are making an irrational choice because, to some, it seems illogical to support a flawed candidate like Trump.

What if we instead reframe this question slightly? What if we assumed that Trump supporters are rational actors making a sensible choice that conforms with their point of view? What can we see and understand about the 2024 election that eludes and confuses mainstream commentators?

Let's start with this:

We are watching the disintegration of the American political system happen in real-time. The governor of Texas is openly challenging federal authority. President Joe Biden and the Democratic party are employing judicial warfare, or "lawfare," to block both Donald Trump and Democratic primary challengers from electoral ballots. A decades-long strategy to pack American courts with hard right, pro-business judges is paying dividends all the way to the Supreme Court, which is actively searching for more cases to upend the status quo. And let's not forget that an angry mob ransacked the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.

People are discarding long-held norms. The glue that once held together what was already a rickety Rube Goldberg-like contraption of a nation-state has dried out. Our system is falling apart.

Americans' trust in government institutions

Trust in government is disintegrating. Recent polling numbers by the Pew Research Center have cratered to all-time lows. At this point, fewer than 2 out of 10 Americans are likely to say they trust our political class to do what's right, the lowest measure seen in more than 70 years of polling. People were less cynical about our government even in the years after Watergate than they are now.

There is also a broad loss of faith in American institutions. Only one in four Americans has confidence in the Supreme Court. Trust in public health officials, businesses and even religious leaders has declined. Pollsters registered surprise in 2022 when, for the first time, more Americans (38%) said they had "no trust at all" in the media than the group that said they had a great deal or even a "fair amount" of trust in our fourth estate (34%).

At the risk of being dismissed for engaging in "both sides-ism," I will say that both major parties have played their roles in getting us here. Both are the handmaidens of business. No one is fooled just because one party is out and proud about this and one pretends otherwise. Both parties have played a role in hollowing out the American economy. They have welcomed deindustrialization in favor of financialization, choosing Wall Street profits under the misguided assumption that helping businesses helps everyone.

Many Americans have concluded that the fix is in. It's understandable why Americans are losing faith in a system that barely even tries to maintain

the pretense that government should represent the public interest over private profit.

Here is the context in which the 2024 presidential election is happening: On one side Team Status Quo. Biden speaks to those who somehow believe things are functioning basically as they should despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Biden asks the electorate to keep its blinders on and pretend that the American system can keep staggering along this way for another four years or more.

On the other side is Team Wrecking Ball. (There is no third side because there can only ever be two sides in a system that employs winner-take-all elections and actively takes steps to outlaw alternatives like ranked choice voting or proportional representation, which would give us fewer hopeless options than just the Democrats or Republicans.)

Donald Trump has long "joked" about his desire to become president for life. To use just one example: When discussing Chinese President Xi Jinping, Trump said in 2018, "He's now president for life. President for life. No, he's great. And look, he was able to do that. I think it's great. Maybe we'll have to give that a shot someday."

Trump's response to an anxious Sean Hannity about any incipient dictatorship prompted not a denial but more "jokes." In Trump's retelling of the incident, "He says, 'You're not going to be a dictator, are you?' I said: 'No, no, no, other than day one. We're closing the border, and we're drilling, drilling, drilling. After that, I'm not a dictator.'" How reassuring.

According to The Washington Post, there is even talk that Trump might invoke the Insurrection Act as soon as he takes office, allowing him to deploy the US military against American

protestors, part of a larger scheme to punish or silence his political opponents.

Donald Trump is the candidate for those who want to blow this system right up. His answer to our dysfunctional government is to entrust it to him. And Trump's supporters are buying it. The American system limits the public's means of political expression severely. We have but two options. When a dissatisfied population has the choice between keeping our broken, unrepresentative system and the option to self-destruct, some have decided it is time to mash that self-destruct button as hard as possible.

In the American two-party system, there are just two seats at the table and money occupies both. Americans don't trust our institutions, and they don't trust one another. What might one expect to happen when there are only two options and neither will consider the needs of the mass population? Some will conclude that the answer is to blow this system up and roll the dice on whatever replaces it.

Trump's Art of the Deal

There is nothing inherent about Trump that makes the Republican base blindly follow him. If we take a brief trip down the memory hole, we can see that Trump was not always so beloved by Republicans. In May 2015, before the formal announcement of his candidacy, an ABC/The Washington Post poll showed only 16% of Republicans had a favorable view of Trump, while 65% saw him unfavorably. By his coronation at the Republican convention in 2016, the trend had been reversed, with 65% of Republicans seeing him favorably. After Trump became president, his favorability ratings shot past 80% amongst Republicans.

Trump has long positioned himself as a conduit for the frustrations of his supporters. He is the one, he tells them, who gives voice to the voiceless.

This is not a new strategy. It's possible to draw a direct line from Trump's pitch back to Richard Nixon's Silent Majority rhetoric. Trump says that he is called to serve. He tells us that he doesn't need politics, politics needs him. Ultimately, it's a very traditional sales pitch.

The January 6 Capitol riot did little to dent his support. If anything, the full-scale attack by the establishment that followed has made Trump seem more authentic to his base. As former Wisconsin governor Scott Walker told the Associated Press, "One of the key things that President Trump has done well on is kind of position this as, 'They're going after me because I dared to take on the machine, I dared to take on the swamp, I dared to take on the establishment.'"

Some Trump supporters take this idea further. One supporter told MSNBC, "When Jesus died, he died for us... so when Trump is facing all these things, he's doing it for us in our place."

Trump has successfully judo-flipped the perception of his legal onslaught into a net positive with supporters. MSNBC statistician Steve Kornacki showed how the first indictments against Trump turned a potentially competitive GOP primary into a Trump blowout. He said, "It almost seems to have triggered a rally around Trump effect among Republicans."

The fact that there is a clear partisan divide on whether the US government is trustworthy should not come as a huge surprise. Historically, this trend line has swapped back and forth. Whenever "your guy" is in power, the home team tends to say they trust the government more. As expected, those who identify as "liberal" or Democratic have much higher levels of trust, according to the Pew Research Center (23%, still not great). But now, only 4% of those who identify as conservative Republicans say they trust the government to do

the right thing. Clearly, in their view, the legal attacks on Trump are illegitimate.

The Dysfunctional Two-party System

Trump supporters are most disenchanted with American politics and stand ready to push the TNT plunger down to blow things up. It's silly to pretend that support for Trump does not include a faction of people who have had it and want to hit the reset button. They see an opportunity to begin dismantling the current system. They hope that doing so will benefit them because Trump tells them he is the avatar of their will. Like it or not, this represents a rational response to a dysfunctional political system that severely restricts political expression.

But just because it is a rational response does not make the immolation of the American system desirable or guarantee any improvement for the mass population, least of all for Trump's base. Should a Trump dictatorship emerge, it would doubtlessly be a nightmare. His propensity for deal-making would almost certainly mean good things for corporate power and bad things for anyone drawing a paycheck. (Please see Trump's 2017 tax cut for the rich if you doubt this.) Authoritarian regimes all tend to go that way. Even Trump's most devoted supporters would probably miss freedom of expression and the ability to disagree with government policies.

It is easier to destroy than it is to build. The Republican Party has spent most of the modern era since Reagan trying to dismantle the existing system in favor of one that is more pro-business. Trump supporters are ready to finish the job. And waiting in the wings is the fanatically right-wing Heritage Foundation, prepared with a step-by-step instruction manual on how to crown the next Republican president a dictator perpetuus.

I am reminded of a passage from Thomas Frank's book *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (An excellent example for understanding how the GOP has stoked and leveraged the anger of the American population for decades in service of its core business agenda.) Frank writes:

The angry workers, mighty in their numbers, are marching irresistibly against the arrogant. They are shaking their fists at the sons of privilege. They are laughing at the dainty affectations of the Leawood toffs. They are massing at the gates of Mission Hills, hoisting the black flag, and while the millionaires tremble in their mansions, they are bellowing out their terrifying demands. "We are here," they scream, "to cut your taxes."— Frank, Thomas. *What's the Matter with Kansas?* Picador, NY. 2004 p. 109

The prospect of a Trump reset does not offer anything hopeful. His supporters might get their wish. But whatever will happen should Trump manage to obliterate the American system is nightmarishly unpredictable.

Trump supporters aren't wrong for being angry and frustrated. They aren't wrong for wanting something better. They aren't wrong for feeling powerless, at the end of their rope. Plenty of conservatives' sworn enemies feel the same way. It might not seem like it, but there is enormous potential for finding common ground.

What's needed is empowerment. What's needed is hope. What's needed is a vision of the future that prioritizes the public interest over money power. Neither major party is offering that.

Sadly, it is not irrational to vote for Team Wrecking Ball.

[[Liam Roman](#) edited this article]



Scott Bennett is a writer living in Chicago. His decent (but not hoity-toity) university education never prepared him for this moment. It did,

however, prepare him for a career in major market media. He has been working on a book for 10 years with few ideas on how to publish it, so he turned to TikTok. There he has amassed a sizable following and hopes this is the beginning of something big. He is an optimist at heart.

Why It Is Important to Humanize “Terrorists”

Benjamin Canyon Gass
February 17, 2024

If we want to prevent another 75 years of violence between Israelis and Palestinians, we must begin to see our shared humanity — even the humanity of so-called terrorists. We neither honor the dead nor prevent future atrocities by branding Hamas and its supporters as “human animals” or even “terrorists.” Our words and beliefs hold tremendous power that can perpetuate conflict, or clear a path toward peace.

I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.

— Michelangelo

In a world with so much hate and brutality, it can be hard to see the good in people—especially in those who commit horrible acts of violence. Yet behavioral science tells us we also live in a world shaped in part by our actions and expectations. We reap what we sow.

This can work for us, or against us. Take the Golem effect, for example, named after the mythical creature whose actions often led to unintended consequences. This well-researched psychological phenomenon shows that low expectations of someone lead to a measurable decrease in their performance. But fortunately, the inverse is also true: higher expectations lead to an increase in performance.

This latter phenomenon, known as the Pygmalion effect, is named after a Greek myth about a sculptor who falls in love with a statue he carved. Pygmalion, through his love and affection for the statue, inspires the goddess Aphrodite to bring it to life. The story highlights the role of positive perception in realizing potential. If we too are sculptors with this power to positively influence people and the world simply by elevating our expectations, what ideal statue of humanity would we carve? What world do we want to live in?

I believe there's good reason to choose a world where we see our shared humanity, even the humanity of so-called terrorists. Why? Because it's essential to ending conflict.

The dangers of dehumanization in conflict

From the Holocaust to Rwanda to Cambodia, dehumanization has been an unmistakable precursor to genocide and ethnic cleansing. In every case, we find examples of perpetrators weaponizing language to rob victims of any positive human qualities. Whether overt or subtle,

the impact is the same: Dehumanization fuels conflict like oxygen feeds fire.

When word came of Hamas' attack in Israel on October 7, 2023, I was horrified — especially by the killing of so many innocent people at the Kibbutz and Nova Music Festival, where friends of my friends lost their lives. In the face of unspeakable violence, we often find ourselves looking for an explanation that will ease our pain. Israelis and many Jews around the world were asking: “How could they do this to us?”

The Israeli government supplied a quick but deeply-flawed answer: they are “bloodthirsty monsters” and “human animals.”

Western media has tended to reinforce a narrative that humanizes Israelis while dehumanizing, othering and delegitimizing Palestinians. Israel has soldiers; Hamas has gunmen. Israel arrests people and holds prisoners; Hamas kidnaps and holds hostages. Israeli families are burned alive while embracing each other; Palestinian families are nameless numbers killed in airstrikes. This framing sanitizes the killing done by Israel while sensationalizing the killing done by Hamas, priming people to accept the massively disproportionate civilian casualties we've seen in Gaza over the past four months.

Dehumanizing rhetoric isn't new in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but it's as dangerous as ever. The stories and narratives told about October 7 have fueled the continued collective punishment of Palestinians in Gaza. Now, with a death toll that has topped 28,800 people, including at least 10,000 children, South Africa has filed charges of genocide against Israel at the International Court of Justice in The Hague. The court has already ruled in favor of emergency measures calling on Israel to “protect and punish” incitement to commit genocide. Israel maintains that it's acting in self-defense against armed terrorists.

This brings us to two important questions: who gets to decide if someone is a terrorist, and what might their motivations be for using this label?

Following US President George W. Bush's exploitation of the 9/11 attacks to launch a global "War on Terror," some degree of skepticism is warranted. By all accounts, this senseless war was an unmitigated disaster — taking nearly 1 million lives, costing the US \$8 trillion, leading to a crackdown on civil liberties and feeding Islamophobia in the US and Europe. We are still dealing with the fallout more than 20 years later.

The term "terrorist" is certainly less dehumanizing than "animal," but it's frequently used with the same intention: as a rhetorical weapon to delegitimize an important actor. Labels like "terrorist" or "extremists" make groups appear irrational, precluding the kind of nuanced understanding that's necessary to solve conflicts.

The dominant theories in the field of international relations hold that the geopolitical world is composed of rational actors. Individual leaders may do irrational things, but states and governing bodies tend to act in rational self-interest, at least according to their understanding of the geopolitical framework in which they're operating.

These rational actors often have a perceived incentive to make other rational actors appear irrational or extreme. They do this precisely because it dehumanizes, creating us vs. them dynamics that can stoke nationalism or bolster political support, say for a war. We just want to live in peace; they want to kill all Jews. We're acting in self-defense; they're terrorists. We follow the rules of war; they behead babies and use human shields. Narratives, like expectations, shape our perception of reality. Language can either escalate conflict or open a pathway to understanding. We reap what we sow.

Israel, the US and several other nations label Hamas a terrorist organization. And if Hamas committed war crimes during its October 7 attacks, they should indeed be prosecuted under international law. Still, if we want to suck the oxygen out of this conflict, we should treat Hamas as a rational actor. While elections haven't been held since 2006, Hamas won a massive mandate in those elections that we should not invalidate. Labeling Hamas a "terrorist organization" obscures the context in which it governs and works to achieve its political objectives while delegitimizing them as an actor in a situation in which they have a fair amount of legitimacy, at least in the eyes of many Palestinians who elected them. Further, implying that some 50,000–70,000 public sector employees in Gaza are all terrorists is not only inaccurate but dehumanizing.

Even if you disagree with their political objectives, a more nuanced understanding of Hamas and why Gazans largely support their military efforts can only help.

But first, let's explore why understanding is so important.

Understanding invites change

We've seen cycles of fear and hate fuel the Israeli–Palestinian conflict generation after generation. It's human nature to fear the things we don't understand. So the best antidote to fear is understanding, or "knowledge," as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote.

Critically, understanding doesn't mean condoning. We can object to someone's actions even as we work to understand their motivations.

Better understanding is strategic in ending conflict for two reasons.

First, it fosters empathy and humanizes others in ways that make it difficult to sway public opinion in support of war or genocide while helping surface the drivers of conflict. By dismissing violent actions or resistance movements as “terrorism” rather than understanding them as expressions of deeper needs — like a cry for freedom or justice — we miss the underlying causes that must be addressed for peace to prevail.

Second, when we don’t understand others, we are more likely to reject and isolate them in ways that paradoxically encourage the very behaviors we wish they’d change. An axiom commonly attributed to the psychologist Carl Jung explains this neatly — “what you resist persists.” But it also relates to the idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy and the aforementioned Golem effect.

Still, cultivating understanding and positive expectations is sometimes easier said than done. How can we see humanity or potential for goodness in people who do things we find so despicable? The French philosopher Jacques Derrida believed that forgiveness is such a powerful thing that it should be reserved only for unforgivable crimes. Forgivable things don't need forgiveness, right? It's the same with empathy. Why should we only extend empathy to the people with whom it's easy to empathize?

What is Hamas?

Hamas, beyond the Western media portrayal, is fundamentally a political organization. Founded in 1987 during the First Intifada and originally part of the Muslim Brotherhood, its charter advocated for an Islamic state in historic Palestine and resistance against Israel’s occupation.

In 2006, the Palestinian Authority held elections in the Occupied Territories, including the West Bank and Gaza, supported by the US and 900 credentialed international monitors. Surprising the

US and Israel, Hamas won the election in a landslide, securing a majority of legislative seats. This reflected the organization's dual role as both a resistance group and a provider of essential services like education and healthcare in Gaza. They were also seen at the time to be less corrupt than the opposing Fatah party.

As soon as Hamas won, Israel, with support from the US, employed a strategy of isolation by cutting off tax payments to the new government, making it difficult for Hamas to govern effectively. At the same time, Fatah, backed by Israel and the US, planned a coup to overthrow Hamas, which Hamas thwarted, leading them to remove Fatah from Gaza.

Israel has since enforced a military embargo on Gaza, controlling everything that comes in and out of the country via land or sea, with frequent bombing campaigns and incursions that have killed thousands of civilians over the years. Gaza has been referred to by international observers as the world’s largest open-air prison. Only, in a normal prison, the jailers are responsible for the health and well-being of the prisoners, whereas, in Gaza, the Israeli government has thrown away the key and denies responsibility. I have students there who, despite being accepted to university in Europe, have been denied travel permits by Israel. They can’t go anywhere.

In 2017, a new charter clarified some important things about Hamas’s objectives. It’s wise to take all government communications with a grain of salt. Often, there’s a gap between what they say and do. How many campaign promises actually become policy once a president or prime minister takes office? Still, considering Israel’s attempts to delegitimize Hamas and brand them “the new Nazis,” it’s worth examining Hamas’ views and goals in its own words:

1. Hamas claims that it doesn't want to kill Jews for being Jewish: "Hamas affirms that its conflict is with the Zionist project not with the Jews because of their religion. Hamas does not wage a struggle against the Jews because they are Jewish but wages a struggle against the Zionists who occupy Palestine." This is important because the Israeli government often conflates anti-Zionism and antisemitism. Hamas' charter attempts to separate the two. Rabbi Elhanan Beck eloquently affirms that the conflict is not fundamentally about religion but about occupation.
2. Hamas wants to recover the land from which they were violently ejected in 1948: "There is no alternative to a fully sovereign Palestinian State on the entire national Palestinian soil, with Jerusalem as its capital." This is Hamas positioning itself in favor of a one-state solution.
3. But they claim to want a pluralistic Palestine in which Muslims, Jews and people of other faiths and races can live together: "Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance. It provides an umbrella for the followers of other creeds and religions who can practice their beliefs in security and safety ... Hamas believes that the message of Islam upholds the values of truth, justice, freedom and dignity and prohibits all forms of injustice and incriminates oppressors irrespective of their religion, race, gender or nationality. Islam is against all forms of religious, ethnic or sectarian extremism and bigotry."
4. And they claim to be open to a two-state solution: "Hamas considers the

establishment of a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital along the lines of the 4th of June 1967, with the return of the refugees and the displaced to their homes from which they were expelled, to be a formula of national consensus." This appears to be a possible concession, likely designed to open the door to negotiations with Israel. But in a document that otherwise clearly advocates for a one-state solution, it should be read circumspectly.

That is what Hamas wants, according to their own words. But not all Palestinians are members of the party. We must ask the broader question in order to understand people who are so often dehumanized: what do Palestinians want, and why do they support Hamas?

Why do Palestinians support Hamas?

A major reason Palestinians support Hamas is because, in the face of occupation and indignity, Hamas is committed to fighting back. A recent poll found that 76% of Palestinians supported Hamas' military operation on October 7.

Despite Israel's claims that Hamas is to blame for the more than 28,000 civilians the Israeli military has killed over the past four months, Palestinians know who is actually dropping bombs on them. A majority of Gazans were born into occupation, with roughly half the population being under the age of 18. They know who controls their borders — humiliating, abducting, torturing and killing them without justification. Is it really that hard to imagine why someone living in these conditions would support violent resistance? We reap what we sow.

Like all governments with a responsibility to protect their people, Hamas invests a percentage of its budget — an estimated 20% — in its military. The use of funds to support armed resistance in Palestine appears to be broadly supported. One poll from December 2022 showed 72% of Palestinians support forming more armed groups in the West Bank, where continued Israeli settler colonialism and violence against Palestinians have gone unchecked and even been encouraged by elements of the Israeli government for at least the past decade.

Palestinians, in their quest for self-determination and freedom, view organizations like Hamas as resistance against occupation. They don't support Hamas because it's a fantastic government or because they hate Jews. Rather, they want to be free from who they see as their oppressor and occupier: the state of Israel.

For the past four years, I've volunteered as a writing mentor with a nonprofit that helps Palestinian students share their stories with the world. For this article, I asked three of my students, all young Gazan women, to share their thoughts on Hamas. The most important thing you'll see is that none of them support Hamas as a government, but all support its fight against Israel:

- “I don't believe that the Palestinian case is a religious one. Hamas's ideology is based on this. However, I do support the fighting back method they do. I believe, if we Palestinians will ever get our homes again, we will have to fight back. If we ever want our simple rights, they won't come by peace. We have too little power.”
- “Most people living in Gaza don't support the Hamas government and they want it to stop as soon as possible. But at the same time, people do support the military wing of

it as it is the prominent military resistance group against Israeli occupation.”

- “We don't support the government. Hamas leaders don't care — they're in Qatar. But the people who are getting killed, whose houses are being bombed, are fighting for their freedom. We fully support them. We support armed resistance. In the West Bank, they don't have any protection. But at least in Gaza, we're armed. With or without Hamas, we need to fight the occupation.”

Indeed, support for armed resistance is significant, with 63% of Palestinians thinking it's the “best way to end occupation and establish an independent state.”

Another reason many Palestinians support Hamas—and other groups who choose violent resistance against Israel — is the fact that other strategies, such as nonviolence, haven't worked. There is a significant nonviolent movement in the West Bank with regular demonstrations against illegal Israeli settlements where demonstrators are frequently shot, killed and arrested by Israeli soldiers. In 2018, during Gaza's nonviolent March of Return, a UN commission reported that Israeli snipers shot over 6,000 unarmed Palestinian demonstrators, killing hundreds.

There is also a Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign which seeks to apply international economic pressure to force Israel to end the occupation. So far, these nonviolent methods have failed to end the occupation.

Even in South Africa, where international boycotts helped bring down Apartheid, many argue the largely peaceful transition to majority rule wouldn't have happened without a history of armed resistance by the African National Congress (ANC) and the threat of more violence.

(Interestingly, both the ANC and its military arm were at the time considered “terrorist organizations” by the governments of South Africa and the United States). Nelson Mandela himself spent 27 years in prison in part for refusing to renounce violence as a legitimate tool in the fight to end Apartheid.

A common pro-Israel talking point is that there is no Palestinian partner for peace and they can’t be expected to negotiate with Hamas. I believe the only way to end the status quo involves talking with Hamas. But if Israel wants an alternative, there’s a leader who has been referred to as the Palestinian Nelson Mandela: Marwan Barghouti. Unfortunately, he’s been sitting in an Israeli military prison for over 20 years for murder, having refused even to present a defense to the charges, calling them illegal.

In addition to Hamas, Fatah, the nonviolent movement, and the BDS campaign, there are a multitude of political parties, organizations and campaigns fighting for freedom, equality and statehood for Palestinians. They employ a variety of strategies and there are different pictures of what success looks like. But it’s important to humanize all people who are fighting for their freedom, even and especially if we disagree with them. As we’ve seen with Israel’s strategy vis-à-vis Hamas, discrediting, dehumanizing and isolating are ineffective in reducing or ending violence. This is why Israel’s current genocidal attempt to eradicate Hamas will not only fail, but is actively feeding the fire for another 75 years of conflict.

The power of believing in shared humanity

What underlies the idea of humanizing “terrorists” is fundamentally a question of belief: Do we believe in humanity? Given the world that we live in — a world full of violence, suffering, hate, and hunger — “yes” isn’t an easy answer to arrive at.

How can we see all the horrific things humans are capable of and still believe in our own humanity or a fundamental capacity for goodness?

For me the answer is simply that we must.

Our expectations of humanity ultimately play a significant role in shaping who we are, and therefore the world we live in. Our beliefs, whether true or false, affect outcomes and behavior in a way that makes those beliefs true. We reap what we sow.

Inspired by Pygmalion, what statue of humanity could we sculpt that would allow us to love who we are? How can we liberate the better angels of our nature, just as Michelangelo freed the angel from his marble?

While we can’t choose what world we’re born into, we can choose the world we want to create. We can live in a world where our enemies are evil monster terrorists. Or we can live in a world where we are all human, each of us with fears and desires that, if we try, can be understood and addressed.

One path leads to violence. The other to peace. The choice is ours.

[Fair Observer’s [interns](#), working as a team, edited this piece.]



[Benjamin Canyon Gass](#) is a musician, poet, and serial entrepreneur. Raised in a Jewish family, he has worked on the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict for nearly two decades. A trained mediator, he began his career at the leading international conflict resolution nonprofit, Search for Common Ground, where he supported civil

society exchanges, back-channel talks, and shuttle diplomacy between conflicting countries.

South Africa v. Israel: Killer Administration Gets Off Easy

Nafees Ahmad
February 18, 2024

The International Court of Justice made its preliminary ruling in the case of South Africa v. Israel last month. The judgment holds the Israeli military accountable for genocidal crimes but disturbingly spares the Netanyahu administration that commanded them. Palestine has suffered over 28,000 casualties since the Hamas rebels' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. The only way to spare more lives is through an immediate ceasefire — something the court did not demand.

On January 26, 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued a preliminary ruling in the case of South Africa v. Israel. The ICJ's rejected Israel's attempt to discount South Africa's claims. Despite this, the contradictory judgment ended up supporting the Israeli administration. Furthermore, the ICJ failed to proclaim a truce to save lives.

The well-documented crimes against the Palestinian people since October 7, 2023 are indescribable. Approximately 28,000 people have been killed so far, with at least 10,000 of them being children. To put it another way, that's one Palestinian child dead every 15 minutes. Under the

debris, many more people remain missing; the majority are thought to have perished.

According to the ICJ judgment, the Israeli military, not Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's administration, should be held accountable for crimes under Article II of the Genocide Convention. This implies that Netanyahu's hands are clean. Yet substantial proof shows that his cabinet meticulously planned the Palestinian holocaust long before October 7. The Israeli military is organized into a command organization; Israeli troops and pilots carried out the illegal orders given by the Netanyahu administration.

The commission of genocidal crimes

South Africa argued that the Israel's crimes "are genocidal in character because they are intended to bring about the destruction of a substantial part of the Palestinian national, racial and ethnic group," citing Article II of the Genocide Convention. The alleged crimes include the murder of Palestinians in Gaza, severe physical and psychological abuse and living circumstances designed to endanger their physical survival.

The nature and conduct of Israel's military operation in Gaza also suggest this intent. Israel's failure to guarantee or supply the besieged and blockaded Palestinian people with food, water, medicine, fuel, shelter or other humanitarian aid drove them to the verge of starvation. All of the activities may be attributed to Israel, which is committing genocide in clear violation of the 1948 UN Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and has failed to stop it from happening.

Individuals who perpetrate acts of genocide or any other crimes listed in Article III will face consequences, regardless of their status as legally appointed authorities, public servants or private

citizens. The Constitutionally Responsible Rulers (CRRs), or civilian politicians, are the principal perpetrators of the genocide against Palestine. In the ruling, which refers to Article IV, the ICJ urges the Netanyahu administration to act on behalf of the State of Israel and to stop and punish those who are accused of committing crimes of genocide: “The State of Israel shall take all measures within its power to prevent and punish the direct and public incitement to commit genocide in relation to members of the Palestinian group in the Gaza Strip.”

South Africa urges the ICJ to take action on Israel’s proposed Rafah attack. On February 12, 2024 — the day that South Africa made their request — Israeli soldiers struck 14 homes and three mosques in the heavily populated city of Rafah. Several people were killed and hundreds of displaced families were forced to evacuate. The next day, on February 13, South Africa requested the ICJ examine if more emergency measures are necessary to safeguard Palestinians. This came in light of Israel’s intention to expand its attack in the Gaza Strip towards Rafah.

Over one million Palestinians have sought Rafah as a sanctuary from the onslaught that has transpired since Hamas rebels assaulted Israel on October 7. The Genocide Convention and the ICJ’s January 26 order would be gravely and irrevocably broken by an Israeli assault on the city. The central question in South Africa’s case — whether or not there has been genocide in Gaza — has not yet been decided by the court. However, it acknowledged that Gaza’s Palestinian population had a right to be shielded from acts of genocide. South Africa is requesting that the court impose more sanctions on Israel, claiming that the country has already disregarded the ruling that was issued a few weeks ago. In the end, South Africa is requesting a proclamation that would save Palestinian lives.

The criminality of the international legal system

The ICJ ruling suggests that Netanyahu’s cabinet and other CRRs listed in Article IV are innocent. Netanyahu, Yoav Gallant, Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israel Katz, Bezalel Smotrich and other CRRs are the architects of the genocide. Yet the ICJ has given them the task to prevent and punish. The ICJ has appointed the CRRs in Netanyahu’s cabinet to take all measures within their power to prevent and punish public officials, private individuals and military personnel who are engaging in direct and public incitement to commit genocide. (These same rulers are working on behalf of the State of Israel and meticulously planned a genocide against Palestinians before October 7.) It is not thought that Israel’s Netanyahu coterie of CRRs “who have blood on their hands” will be subject to prevention or punishment.

Although the ICJ had many verbal criticisms of Israel, the peace movement ignores that the court did not create any legal barriers or obstacles to stop the ongoing crimes against Palestinians. One such crime is Israel’s plan to generate starvation in the Gaza Strip. There has never been widespread famine as it is happening in Gaza right now. Although food security was unstable before the conflict that started on October 7, less than 1% of children experienced severe acute malnutrition. Nearly every Gazan regardless of age is in danger right now, wherever they are in the region.

Additionally, the criminality of the international legal system is at issue. Israel now has the de facto green light from the ICJ to carry out the genocide, and the country began escalating its slaughter one week after the ruling. There are currently more Israel Defence Forces (IDF) personnel being deployed in the occupied West Bank, and crimes are being perpetrated there as well. IDF commanders in Gaza have ordered soldiers to set fire to non-combatants’ homes for the sole purpose of collective punishment. Plans to create a

coherent network of Jewish colonies in Gaza were proposed within a few days following the ICJ ruling.

In response to Netanyahu, US President Joe Biden's administration has decided to freeze financing for the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). The UNRWA provides food, shelter, healthcare, education and other necessities. As a result, this move is expected to lead to a collapse in social services, rising death, destruction, displacement and famine for the 5.9 million Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

The Netanyahu-led Israeli Government has been accused of plausibly genocidal acts against Palestine by the Republic of South Africa, and the ICJ's provisional measures order has given it a mandate to take all measures within its power to prevent and punish those who have committed genocidal acts. Does this seem incongruous? From a perverse legal perspective, the ICJ ruling suggests that Netanyahu's cabinet, which was "appointed" to carry out the "prevent and punish" mission, cannot be held accountable for any "genocidal acts." Essentially, this conflicting mandate — which was meant to save the Gaza population — gives the administration a reason to "prevent and punish" Palestinians for allegedly carrying out crimes of genocide against Israelis.

The Likud coalition administration, which was primarily in charge of organizing a comprehensive genocide strategy with the US's collaboration before October 7, is not challenged politically in the ICJ judgment. It was anticipated that this vote would help spark a fresh round of illegal actions by the Netanyahu administration. Netanyahu had previously said that the slaughter was still happening on January 26: "We will not compromise on anything less than total victory ... We are continuing until we eliminate Hamas..."

Pertinent questions in a grim future

The bogus celebration of a phony victory at The Hague has temporarily calmed the world's fury. Israel's genocide will persist as long as the US and its top justice at the ICJ continue to use fresh, deceptive rhetoric and postpone measures to keep the rest of the world away.

The ICJ concedes that the State of Israel may have committed war crimes. Still, it vehemently rejects South Africa's interim proposals, such as a ceasefire, which would have served to temporarily halt the continuous atrocities against the Palestinian people. Does the ICJ not consider this a criminal act that would undoubtedly cause many Palestinian civilian deaths? This means that while there are hollow and vacuous accusations made against the State of Israel, Netanyahu's genocide remains essentially unaffected.

War crimes and conflicts have always been started by civilian politicians throughout history. The government that is determined to carry out genocide against the people of Palestine is the source of the illegal orders that the Israeli military has been obeying. And now that the ICJ ruling has been made, Israel's CRRs can assign responsibility to the Israeli army.

Ironically, the Netanyahu coterie will be able to tighten its grip on the Israeli protest movement and single out Israelis who have firmly opposed the massacre thanks to the ICJ's prevent and punish mandate. The judgment made on January 26 is temporary, and it may take years before the entirety of South Africa's case is taken into consideration. That includes a definitive determination of whether or not Israel is engaging in genocide.

The only realistic way to put an end to this humanitarian crisis is through an immediate ceasefire. That should also clear the path for

diplomatic negotiations to recognize and establish the state of Palestine. Considering Israel's unwavering resolve and its influential supporters, this scenario sounds unlikely. But again, some weeks feel like decades. Even if the past 16 weeks have brought about unspeakable pain, loss and damage, they have also witnessed a significant change in support for the Palestinian cause.

Over 25% of Palestine's population is in danger of starving as a result of a humanitarian crisis that has forced over 80% of the people into displacement. The ICJ's verdict indicates this change in momentum. South Africa's act of moral commitment, the isolation of Israel and its supporters — including the US and the UK — in international fora and the ongoing peace protests taking place across the world are hopeful signs for the future.

South Africa's latest request for emergency measures must be granted at once. It is about time Israel's supporters heeded the call of the times and instilled some common sense in Israel, both for the country's sake and the benefit of all humanity.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



Nafees Ahmad is an associate professor at the Faculty of Legal Studies, South Asian University, New Delhi, where he teaches

comparative constitutional law. He holds a doctorate in international refugee law and human rights. His research focuses on refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, stateless persons, global forced displacement and climate refugees.

Outside the Box: All I Wanted Was a Goddam Link!

Peter Isackson
February 19, 2024

In “Outside the Box,” I toss impertinent questions at ChatGPT to better understand how AI “reasons.” I treat the conversation as if I was exchanging with an intelligent friend, sharing ideas but also challenging some of the explanations. In this curious episode, I tried to get some simple practical information, failed and found myself in a misunderstanding that ended up resembling conflict with our AI friend.

This time instead of trying to be philosophical, I got right to the point in the most pragmatic way possible. I asked ChatGPT4 this simple question: “Where can I see the Carlson Putin interview?”

“You can watch the two-hour interview between Tucker Carlson and Russian President Vladimir Putin on the topic of the war in Ukraine. This interview represents the first time that the Russian leader has been interviewed by a Western journalist since the conflict began nearly two years ago. During the interview, they discuss the justifications for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The video is available on Tucker Carlson's website and is not behind a paywall¹².

In this candid conversation, Putin shares his perspective on Russia's historic claim to parts of western Ukraine. Whether you agree with it or not, it's a sincere expression of what he believes¹. The interview also touches on the imprisonment of

Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, who has been charged with espionage. Putin's response sheds light on the complexities of international relations and the actions of special services¹.

Feel free to visit Tucker Carlson's website to watch the full interview and gain insights into this significant geopolitical moment."

The two links the chatbot provided were to articles in Variety and another in Newsweek. They appeared to be commentaries on the interview rather than links to the document. Their appearance was deceptive. And so, I failed to notice that in scrolling down to the bottom of the Variety article I would have discovered an effective link to the interview. In contrast, despite the heading "When and Where To Watch Tucker Carlson's Putin Interview," the Newsweek article contained no visible link to the interview. Instead, it contained a series of negative comments about both Carlson and the interview.

In my frustration with not getting the simple information I had requested I wondered whether I hadn't been sufficiently precise in my initial formulation. I therefore followed on with this question: "Can you give me a link to the interview?"

"Certainly! You can watch the full interview between Tucker Carlson and Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tucker Carlson's website. The interview covers topics related to the war in Ukraine and provides insights into Putin's perspective on Russia's actions. It's a significant geopolitical moment, and you can find the video here. Enjoy!"

Growing frustration and an abrupt ending

That was reassuring but didn't answer my question, which I was beginning to think should

have been formulated as a command: "Give me the goddamn link." After some consideration, I thought it might be helpful when speaking to a friend whose intelligence I've been invited to admire, simply to explain my frustration and appeal to the chatbot's artificial empathy. "It's interesting," I noted, "that I asked you for a link and you failed to provide it, while at the same time responding 'certainly' to my question. Is that an example of bad faith? Or should I assume that, for whatever reason, you may not be authorized to provide the link?"

"I apologize if my previous response caused any inconvenience. I appreciate your feedback, and I'll strive to improve. Thank you for engaging with me, and have a great day!"

Now I couldn't help but blurt out, "Why don't you start improving now and provide me with the link?"

To this I received the following message, which appears to be a standard copout gadget designed to conceal ChatGPT's strategies.

And so our conversation ended. I wondered what the logic could be behind ChatGPT's apparent stonewalling. That's when I took the trouble to examine in detail both of the links provided. And that was when I discovered that at the bottom of the Variety article the link was actually provided.

Now this raises a question about the status of both an AI's knowledge and its factitious personality and set of attitudes. Did ChatGPT know that the link actually existed in the first article but not in the second? If it was "aware" of the link's existence in the Variety article, why was it incapable of doing what any decent human friend might do for me and respond: "Look at the bottom of the page, you dolt! I told you it was there." Or it could have prompted me with less

precision to do a bit of searching and I would find it in the page.

As for the Newsweek article, it appears that ChatGPT was taken in by the false promise of Newsweek with its deceptive heading, “When and Where To Watch Tucker Carlson's Putin Interview.”

Can incompatible intelligences find grounds for understanding?

In other words, AI registers formulations of knowledge and recognizes ideas, but it possesses no actual knowledge. In response to my question, its knowledge was real but it stopped at the superficial literal level once it had identified the existence of the link in the Variety article. It remained helplessly “unaware” of the nature of that knowledge and its physical position, where it was located.

That is not what people do. In similar circumstances a person I was addressing, whether a friend or a stranger, would say something like, “you’ll find it somewhere in the Variety article, have a look.” And I would happily do my due diligence and end up getting an answer to my initial request.

In the case of the Newsweek article, ChatGPT was taken in by what I would term a deceitful statement or at least false promise in the article’s title. Humans can also be taken in. But they also know how to respond, once the deceit is pointed out. ChatGPT trusts Newsweek but seems incapable of checking when a problem or even just a misunderstanding arises.

Now, I’m the first to recognize that after the first generation of users endures this kind of frustration, AI will be improved, with new and permanently evolving algorithms that require it to take into account the motivation of the user and seek to

understand unforeseen factors that may explain the affects the user’s exasperation. It’s fair to say that the entire AI project has built into the Beatles’ philosophy (in “Sergeant Pepper”): “It’s getting better all the time.”

But this dialogue with AI revealed not just a failure, but a multidimensional problem. The first concerns the knowledge question I’ve already mentioned. AI’s “knowledge” is, by definition, literal and will not spontaneously seek to include other levels of understanding. Humans, on the contrary, are always sensitive to multiple parameters in the communication situation. Like a chess player, they see various possible scenarios developing. The hints as to what they may be exist on many levels: notably tone of voice, facial expression, rhetorical emphasis and everything that falls into what we might call the conversational ambience. This includes awareness of material, psychological, social and cultural factors that may or may not be visible in the immediate context. Some belong to other contexts that belong to the interlocutors’ experience and memory.

All the chatter about AI’s one day surpassing human intelligence makes sense only if we restrict our concept of intelligence to the process of accessing coded information and employing reasoning procedures to account for things that can be formulated linguistically. That falls way short of the way human intelligence works both in everyday life and in challenging situations.

A confession and a few recommendations

I love to talk to AI and long for the day when it will take better account of my needs and expression of feeling. But any intelligence it produces, now or in some much brighter future, will be the cumulative result of the interplay between us. The conversation about Carlson’s interview was truly frustrating. I was eager to access an interview so many people had been

talking about. How else might I form my opinion about what it achieved or failed to achieve?

The conversation with ChatGPT nevertheless reminded me that there are three fundamental techniques to make such conversations productive.

Pretend it's human just to see where it takes the conversation, and then compare it to what humans do to see where it does better and where it does worse;

Find a way of laughing with it about the weird situations it produces;

And use the occasion to laugh at the machine itself, but even more deeply at those who, like ChatGPT itself, tell you it will always be improving.

*[Artificial Intelligence is rapidly becoming a feature of everyone's daily life. We unconsciously perceive it either as a friend or foe, a helper or destroyer. At Fair Observer, we see it as a tool of creativity, capable of revealing the complex relationship between humans and machines.]



Peter is Fair Observer's chief strategy officer. He is an author and media producer who has worked on ground-breaking projects focused on

innovative learning technology. For more than 30 years, Peter has dedicated himself to innovative publishing, coaching, consulting and learning management. As a publisher, he has developed collaborative methods and revolutionary software tools based on non-linear logic for soft skills training.

Two Economic Issues Challenge Soft-Landing Optimism in the US

Anna Rdzok
February 19, 2024

Optimists hope for an easy ending to the US's recent economic turbulence. They point to easing inflation and an improving labor market. A closer look at the numbers, however, suggests that these positive indicators may be misleading.

Still dealing with the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, the US economy is suffering from inflation and other economic headwinds. Buoyed by recent statements from Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, however many in the financial and policy space are optimistic that the US economy is heading for a "soft landing." They expect the turbulence to amount to a contained, brief economic retraction, rather than a full-blown recession. While these optimists think the economic facts speak for themselves, I'd like to present three points of consideration that indicate a less rosy forecast for the US economy.

Inflation increases despite previous declines

January prices indicate a 0.3% uptick in inflation, a potential sign that steady inflation declines are ending. The annual inflation report nearly mirrored January's report, with most inflation declines being energy-related (fuel, natural gas, etc.), and the largest increases being vehicle insurance, housing, and medical costs. This data suggests that Americans' buying power continues to be eroded by the cost of bare necessities. Without long-term price stability for shelter, food and medical expenses (especially hospital and emergency

services), easing of inflation is at the whim of energy prices, which have started to creep up in January (most notably utilities, up 1.4%).

The good news for optimists is that December–January is typically the peak for energy consumption, which sharply declines as North America enters warmer weather beginning in February. This may assist in easing temporarily as demand slows. Unfortunately, the effect is short-lived, as consumption increases again in May and reaches a second peak in the hotter months of summer. If energy remains the largest factor behind decreases in inflation, the US may not reach its target of an enviable 2% inflation anytime soon.

In any case, energy prices are affected by more than consumption alone. Energy is a highly volatile market, and its prices are sensitive to political developments globally. Global supply chains are already fragile. The recent instability in the Middle East, particularly the Houthi attacks on shipping and the subsequent US responses in Yemen, will mean price increases on imported oil.

Accelerated tensions between Taiwan and China indicate trouble for other sectors of the economy as well. Taiwan makes up more than 60% of the global computer chip market. Many technology, automotive and medical device companies therefore rely on Taiwan's chip manufacturing industry. A disruption in the supply of chips would create economic chaos for many of the highest-performing US stocks, because most of these stocks are in the tech sector. This would be particularly painful for investors, as technology companies such as Apple, Nvidia, and Microsoft made a staggering 70% of the S&P 500 returns in 2023.

Wage gains are deceiving at first glance

Another of the few key metrics that has led to optimism about a soft landing is labor. However, a few indicators point to this metric reversing. Bonuses for 2023 declined across all industries, suggesting that fiscal tightening is occurring across all economic sectors. This could signal the end of the wage hikes and bonus incentives that we've observed over the past few years.

While layoffs have been unevenly distributed across industries, the tech sector has continued laying off workers throughout 2023 and into the new year. With tech accounting for the bulk of aforementioned stock market returns, continued layoffs signal trouble for the broader US labor force. If the companies that returned record profits are laying off workers en masse, it's only a matter of time before companies with lower earnings follow suit.

Optimists like to point to wage gains as a sure sign of economic recovery. However, observing these numbers at face value is misleading. While nominal wages have increased substantially in the past few years, inflation has increased even faster. When wage gains peaked mid-2022 at a 6.1% high, Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation was as high as 9%, effectively erasing those 6% gains. Instead of catching up, Americans have fallen further behind.

In short, much-discussed incremental improvements in economic indicators for prices and labor fall short of capturing the everyday experience of American consumers and workers. Many continue to feel the long-term effects of inflation and economic instability. With the present conditions of the economy and world, it is likely to remain that way in the foreseeable future.

[Yasmine VanDyke edited this piece]



Anna Rdzok is an award-winning researcher and Fundraising Data Analyst at an international nonprofit. A current MS candidate in Data

Science, she specializes in predictive modeling and forecasting for fundraising initiatives. She enjoys applying her professional and academic background to a variety of interests including economics, philosophy, technology and AI.

China's Exit Bans Are the New Normal: Executives Must Prepare

Dale Buckner
February 21, 2024

China's wrongful detainment of foreign citizens, particularly corporate executives, in the last 18 months is part of their global dominance efforts. The expanded espionage law gives the Chinese government significant authority over individuals and their belongings. Companies must adopt a comprehensive strategy that provides thorough risk assessment, cybersecurity measures and strategic planning for the short, medium, and long term to ensure employee safety and corporate stability.

For years, China has been vying for global leadership in several sectors, including finance, technology and its military, directly competing with the US. While China hasn't succeeded in its ascent to international

superstardom, in the last 18 months, it has become the worldwide leader of one less-laudable metric: the wrongful detainment of foreign citizens.

Corporate executives traveling to China on business have been pulled out of line in airports or confronted in their hotels by government officials and held for undetermined periods. These unannounced exit bans on travelers are a byproduct of China's expanded espionage law, which gives the Chinese government an incredible amount of authority over business executives and the information, technology and other personal items they bring. The law's passage and enforcement are the latest in many threatening Chinese government actions.

Overlooking these threats is not an option. Corporations are responsible for protecting their employees and must respond strategically to China's actions. Failing to prepare for the uncertainties thoroughly and ignoring the risks of travel to and from China is an inexcusable oversight that threatens the security of essential personnel.

Businesses must face the threat that the Chinese Communist Party presents with a three-pronged approach that addresses the short-, medium- and long-term contingencies of doing business in China. This strategy is the only way to mitigate Chinese interference with foreign travel and protect our national economy now and in the future.

The first step in risk mitigation is working with vendors to conduct a risk assessment of every employee considering travel to China. The Chinese government's sophisticated surveillance system includes reviewing travelers' professional and personal pasts. A job with the US government or a social media post that references Taiwan as a country is enough to flag a business executive as a

threat to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and could lead to detainment and questioning.

Companies should partner with vendors that specialize in deep-dive background checks, open source and dark web capabilities to comb through traveling executives' previous jobs and past comments on topics related to China, looking for anything that the CCP might flag, whether a career in intelligence or a comment about the Uyghurs. The Chinese government will do the same when US executives enter its borders.

Cyber threats and the importance of mitigation technology

Even for executives deemed low-risk, there is still an inherent threat that they must be aware of when traveling to China. Professionals traveling with sensitive information should be aware of cyber threats that may compromise their data. Leaders must guide their subordinates on keeping information safe.

China's vast cyber capabilities can significantly endanger proprietary information, even for those not detained. Hostile actors wield various tools — such as inspections, insecure networks and even public USB charging ports — to gain access to mobile devices and private documents. Business leaders should invest in cyber crime mitigation technology such as burner devices, dedicated email accounts for travel, encrypted messaging and portable USBs with hardware-based encryption for their workforce.

These short-term safety measures alone don't solve the medium- and long-term realities of doing business in China. They merely provide some breathing room while leaders reassess what is best for their employees and their business in the long term. In tandem with these immediate steps, corporations and their leaders must consider the

medium- and long-term realities of doing business in China.

Building out avenues of extraction today is the only way to guarantee corporate security, employee safety and financial longevity in the years to come. Businesses must prepare for the possibility of losing the entire supply chain or being shut out of the Chinese market. Otherwise, they may find themselves forced to make sudden shifts and lose billions in the process, as BP did when it pulled out of Russia after the invasion of Ukraine.

The door to business in China is closing, and executives must begin minimizing their profile before it slams. Exit bans are the most recent example of geopolitical tensions bleeding into the corporate world, but there is no indication that it will be the last. We owe it to our employees, stakeholders and nation to be prepared for further escalation and greater instability.

Leaders must develop robust plans that minimize risk in the short term and Chinese dependence in the months and years to come. Those who don't will run to catch up when tensions finally come to a head.

[[Liam Roman](#) edited this article]



Dale is the CEO of Global Guardian, a McClean, Virginia, global security firm that provides clients access to a comprehensive suite of duty-of-care services. Dale is a 24-year US Army veteran and retired colonel with extensive intelligence, counter-terrorism and special operations experience.

The Myth of Economic Armageddon: The Truth About Western Sanctions on Russia

Valery Engel
February 26, 2024

Contrary to expectations, the West's "sanctions from hell" on Russia haven't crippled its economy. Instead, they've triggered unintended consequences, harming Western businesses and people while boosting some sectors in Russia.

At the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the West promised that Russia would receive sanctions from hell. The question is: Is it so?. So far, results show that sanctions against several hundred Russian companies, businessmen and politicians as well as sanctions against those companies in Europe and Asia that help Russia avoid the economic impact of sanctions, haven't had any tangible effect. While Russia's GDP contracted in 2022 by 1.2%, in 2023 it grew 3.6%. Growth is also expected in 2024. It is possible that the impact of the sanctions could be felt later. However, it is unlikely that Ukraine will be able to wait another couple of years.

On February 23, 2024, the European Commission (EC) adopted the 13th package of sanctions against Russia. No surprises are expected as the latest round of sanctions deals with preventing the circumvention of EU sanctions through third countries. Deutsche Welle, citing its own sources, writes that about 200 individuals and legal entities will be added to the sanctions list. Restrictions will be imposed, in particular, against several firms from China and Turkey, which help Russian companies and state held corporations

bypass sanctions. Bloomberg also reported that the EU plans to impose restrictions on about twenty companies from China, India, Hong Kong, Serbia, Kazakhstan, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Turkey which allegedly help Russia evade previously imposed sanctions.

Instead of cracking down on Moscow's multibillion-dollar oil and gas sales, including bypassing sanctions, or ensuring that banned technology does not reach its military, the European Union (EU), as Politico reports, is scaling back its ambitions in favor of sanctioning a small number of rule-breaking companies. Given the lack of consensus among the countries and fierce opposition from Hungary, which continues to seek closer ties with Russia and China, it is clear that the EU may find it difficult to agree on new yet significant sanction measures against Russia. In the meantime, the decline in foreign trade turnover allows Russia to increase its GDP by utilizing the opportunities present within its own market, something that sanctions have enabled.

The impact of sanctions on the Russian Ruble

The question of the effectiveness of sanctions has been raised more than once over the past two years of war. The most obvious indicator is the ruble exchange rate. In Russia, the dollar exchange rate depends much more on the volume of oil exports than on other factors, especially those not related to exports. In addition, for the Russian population, the dollar exchange rate is much more than just an exchange rate. Russians pin their hopes on it for protection from inflation and depreciation of their cash savings. Before the war in Ukraine started, it was 77.4 rubles to 1 dollar. Immediately after the introduction of the first sanctions package, the ruble fell sharply to 104 rubles per dollar. However, by June it had increased to 57.2 rubles per dollar.

The change took place because in anticipation of the introduction of the announced restrictions, Western buyers sought to speed up their purchases of cheap Russian energy sources as much as possible. Due to the purchase, Russian exports exceeded imports. Moreover, the Central Bank of the Russian Federation introduced a mandatory sale of 80% of foreign currency earnings for domestic exporters. These measures led to the supply of U.S. Dollar exceeding the demand for it in the Russian market in 2022.

However, the developments created problems for the Russian budget, which was not prepared to handle a circumstance under which the ruble would become more expensive. Therefore, the norm of mandatory currency sales for Russian exporters was reduced to 50% in May 2022, and in June 2022, it was completely abolished.

In 2023, the situation began to change. Firstly, restrictions on Russian energy exports began to work. Secondly, the Nord Stream 1 pipeline, which had been exporting gas directly to Germany, bypassing Ukraine, was blown up in September 2022. Thirdly, it became clear that India's massive purchases of crude oil could not be paid for in U.S. currency because of the sanctions and revenue received in Indian rupees could not be counted as foreign exchange earnings because India's national currency is not convertible. Due to this Russian shipments to India began to resemble barter transactions more than classic trade. Fourth and finally, Western importers did their best to switch from cheap but politically toxic Russian energy to more expensive supplies from other countries, primarily from the United States.

As a result of all of the above points there was a sharp decline in Russian exports (energy exports fell by 33.6% in 2023 and total exports by 28.3%) and, as a consequence it led to an equally sharp fall in the ruble from 69.2 rubles per dollar in January 2023 to 90.8 rubles per 1 dollar in December 2023.

While revenues from oil and gas exports grew by 43% in 2022 to \$383.7 billion, they fell by 24% in 2023. Almost 90% of all oil and petroleum product supplies were redirected to India and China. This seriously impacted the Russian economy, although there were other consequences as well.

Energy prices and the cost of living

In Europe, sanctions led to an almost two-fold increase in energy prices between January 2021 and January 2023. Consequently, the cost of household utilities in the EU countries increased in addition to other utilities such as motor fuel. The consequence of the increase in energy prices was inflation in Europe. In October 2022 overall inflation amounted to 11.5% and for energy inflation amounted to 40.2% in March 2022. However, the EU economies quickly adapted and by December 2023 inflation had fallen to 3.4%.

But this did not solve the problem of rising utility prices for households. This was due to the continued rise in electricity prices. In 22 EU countries, residential electricity prices increased in the first half of 2023 compared to the same period last year. The largest increase was observed in the Netherlands, where electricity bills increased by 953%, helped by national tax policies. However, Lithuania, Romania and Latvia also saw significant jumps in electricity prices by 88%, 77% and 74% respectively. In Germany and the Czech Republic it was 25 and 35% respectively.

The situation is even worse with gas prices. They rose in 20 of the 24 EU member states that report gas prices to Eurostat. Gas prices (in national currencies) increased the most in Latvia (+139%) followed by Romania (+134%), Austria (+103%), the Netherlands (+99%) and Ireland (+73%).

The increase in gas prices led to food inflation, which unlike general inflation in the EU remains

high. According to Euronews Business, real food inflation stood at 4.6% in the euro area (4% in the EU) in October 2023, putting enormous pressure on low-income households. In October 2023, annual food and non-alcoholic beverage inflation exceeded headline inflation in 33 of 37 European countries. Moreover, if in Belgium it was 10.9%, then in the Czech Republic it was 5.7%. Food inflation led by rising energy prices, affected the entire agri-food chain: from farmers to processing enterprises and transport.

In Russia, the average price for electricity has remained virtually unchanged. Russian consumers faced an 8.5% hike in the regulated tariff at the end of 2022 when natural gas exports to Europe fell by 75% on an year on year basis. The increase in gasoline prices in rubles was 5% from February 2022 to September 2023. Gasoline costs approximately 0.56 euros per liter. However, in 2022, the general inflation was recorded at 11.9%, which is slightly higher than European inflation of the same year and 3.55% higher than what was recorded in Russia in 2021. At the end of 2023, inflation in the Russian Federation was at 7.42%.

The discrepancy between the collapse of the ruble and declining inflation in 2023 suggests that Russia has overcome its dependence on imports, at least for the main groups of goods. The cost of food items in Russia increased 8.10 percent between January 2023 and January of 2024.

Moreover, the Russian leadership did not put up much resistance to the sharp depreciation of the ruble, as in October 2023 when Putin signed a decree obliging 43 exporting companies (out of several hundred) to sell foreign exchange exposure. The remaining companies were not affected. This stopped the collapse of the Russian currency, but did not bring it back to its previous high values of mid-2022. In the context of a mass exodus of foreign suppliers, the state benefits from a weak ruble, as it stimulates domestic industry.

The steps taken by the Russian government demonstrated the ineffectiveness of sanctions. Far from severely impacting the Russian economy, the sanctions brought Russia to a point that it was able to stimulate its domestic industry and led to it overcoming its dependence on imports.

Effects of sanctions on the Russian domestic market

The weakening of the ruble exchange rate and decreased export revenues are probably the only serious results of the sanctions. A close look at the developments within the Russian domestic market suggests that McDonald's restaurants changed their signage to the Russian "Tasty and That's it!" (the author did not notice any difference in the menu and in the quality of dishes), the Zara brand of clothing stores was replaced by the Maag brand of Fashion And More Management DMCC from the UAE, the Australian 2XU replaced Adidas, and the South Korean firm Inni replaced H&M.

The Commonwealth Partnership (CMWP) estimates that of the 85 brands that wanted to shut down their business in Russia, only 25% have actually closed. According to the NF Group, since March 2022, 23 foreign companies have announced their departure from Russia, while another 34 have rebranded and transferred (or announced plans to transfer) Russian business to other market players. At the same time, 16 new brands entered the country in 2023. Among them, the largest number of chain stores were from Turkey (5), two big companies from China, one each from the USA, Italy, Australia, South Korea, Estonia and Kyrgyzstan, and three from Belarus.

Hotels operating under the Radisson Blu, Park Inn by Radisson, and Olympia Garden brands, which were owned by the international company Wenaas Hotel Russia until March 2023, started operating under the Cosmos brand. In March, the Russian Cosmos Hotel Group bought 10 hotels in

Moscow, St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, and Murmansk from this company for \$200 million.

Moreover, the Russian population which had never been spoiled with high wages, survived the impact of European sanctions quite calmly, as energy prices remained virtually unchanged since the end of 2021. It is also the case that Russian manufacturers have very quickly replaced imported products with their own, especially in the consumer sectors.

Western companies that stopped business operations on the Russian market did so because they did not want to pay taxes to the aggressor country were replaced by other companies, mainly from Asian countries and by Russian companies themselves. Today, chain stores in Russia lack only well-known brands of expensive spirits.

From the developments it is clear that Russia was prepared to deal with the economic consequences of the sanctions and there were countries that were willing to have economic relations with Russia in spite of the sanctions. This could clearly be seen in the developments that took place in the Russian market after the imposition of sanctions by Western Europe.

The only place where the changes are noticeable is the car market - Western brands are no longer supplied to the Russian market. Their place has been taken by Chinese brands. Instead of new BMW, Opel, Volvo or Volkswagen, those Russians who could afford to buy new cars are opting for Chinese car brands such as Chery, Exeed, Omoda among others.

According to the Associated Press (AP), citing a Yale University database, by June 2023, 151 foreign companies are reducing business in Russia, 175 firms are trying to buy time, and another 230 are undecided over how to exit the Russian market.

Among the latter, Chinese companies are particularly numerous.

As for production, the final data for 2023 allow us to draw conclusions about the industrial production growth rate in Russia. At the end of the year, growth amounted to 3.6%. The positive dynamics were provided by manufacturing industries, which grew by 7.5%. On the contrary, the extraction of minerals decreased by 1.3%, primarily due to reduced exports to Europe.

The main problem with the Russian industry last year was in the large raw material regions, mainly located beyond the Urals. Growth was mainly driven by the defense industry and import-substituting machine building in a country where economic activity is driven by raw material extraction. The growth of the military industry pulled along a number of related industries, primarily metallurgy, as well as those companies that took advantage of the withdrawal of certain sanctioned goods from Russia. These include food products, industrial production and machine building.

While the defense industry is losing money, it has the potential to increase employment and wages, allowing the population greater purchasing power for individuals employed in the defense and manufacturing industries. During war time a larger than usual number of people will be employed in the defense and manufacturing industries due to which the war results in impact across the chain of the military industrial complex ranging from demand for metallurgical materials which produces metal for tanks to the textile industry which sews uniforms for soldiers. While the impact stemming from war and increase in employment prospects and the resultant purchasing power in the hands of the civilians is purely temporary in nature, money in the hands of ordinary people results in them having disposable income to buy civilian products.

From the developments in the Russian domestic market it is clear that the sanctions have led to the revival of Russian manufacturing which is driven by war. If the sanctions intended to hurt the Russian economy that did not take place.

Effects on the flow of capital

The situation with capital outflow from Russia best illustrates this process. In 2022, it reached a record high of \$243 billion or 13.5% of GDP. This was certainly one more serious challenge for the Russian economy. It was related to several factors. First was that Russian companies were forced to repay their loans to Western banks in one go. Second was the withdrawal of Western companies and the purchase of assets from them by Russian companies. Third was the refusal of Western suppliers to work with Russian importers on pre-supplies (Reference in this context is only about advance financing of all imports) and the fourth was the withdrawal of western investments from the Russian economy.

However, in 2023 the capital outflow decreased 6 times, according to the estimates of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation. This outflow was largely compensated by the inflow of capital from Russian citizens, who have or had their accounts closed by Western banks and did not want to risk their assets previously based in Western countries.

Many of the most significant decisions of the West are restrictions related to money transfers from Russia and the entry of Russian citizens into Western countries, which I wrote about here. Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia has been unable to solve the two important problems concerning its economy - stopping the flight of money and brain drain of individuals from Russia. Sanctions on Russian banks, refusal to accept money from Russia and seizures of Russian bank accounts in the West resulted in Russians abroad transferring

their money home. As of September 2023, \$50 billion worth of money has returned to Russia.

By closing its borders in the spring of 2022, the West did everything possible to ensure that Russian individuals, especially skilled individuals remained within Russia. The visa restrictions by countries in the West have helped the Putin regime reduce brain drain. One important example of this has been the reduction in the number of Russian scientists leaving the country. According to the Higher School of Economics of Russia in 2021 before the start of the war, 6,000 scientists had left the country. The total number of scientists who left Russia after the start of the war till 2024 is 2,500 people. However, the reduction is not limited to just scientists leaving Russia.

Approximately 261 thousand people left Russia after the announcement of mobilization to other countries primarily Turkey, Georgia, Armenia and other countries in Central Asia. The question that arises is why did the people who wanted to avoid mobilization chose to go to these countries in specific?. The answer quite simply was that at the beginning of the mobilization these countries did not prevent the entry of citizens who were leaving Russia in large numbers. The individuals are mostly educated people working in different sectors of the economy. Many of them have returned since these countries began to deny them the right to stay. It is notable that Western countries did nothing to help these individuals.

The West promised, "sanctions from hell" at the beginning of the conflict in February 2022. The question is, who are the sinners who have felt them in full? These sanctions did not stop the war in Ukraine nor did it destroy the Russian economy. In fact in some cases the sanctions contributed to Russia's development. The sanctions led to financial losses for millions of people in the West, losses of Western companies and their loss of access to the Russian market. Moreover, by

imposing all sanctions almost simultaneously, the West lost its final opportunities to influence Putin. If this was done in the name of victory in Ukraine, then clearly, ineffective, means were chosen.

While the sanctions may work in a few years time say 3 to 5 years we may not have this time. The fate of Ukraine, and with it the future world order, will be definitely decided in 2024. Immediate and fundamental steps will need to take effect here and now in matters connected to the Ukraine conflict and in turn the international world order.

[[Aniruddh Rajendran](#), [Cheyenne Torres](#) and [Gwyneth Campbell](#) edited the piece]

[[Ali Omar Forozish](#) fact-checked this piece.]



Valery Engel is an expert on radical right movements in the former Soviet Union. He has a special interest in the comparative and

motivational analysis of European xenophobia and radicalism. Dr. Engel is the senior fellow at the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, president of the European Center for Democracy Development (ECDD) in Latvia and member of the expert group of the Global Research Network of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate.

Aaron Bushnell and the Psychology Behind Radicalization and Self-Harm

Tara Yarwais
February 29, 2024

On February 25, US airman Aaron Bushnell set himself on fire before the Israeli embassy in Washington, DC, shouting, “Free Palestine.” He died of his injuries the next day. Bushnell thus joined a long history of protestors who have used self-immolation for political means. What drives someone to such an extreme act of self-destruction?

Depending on who you ask, US Air Force Senior Airman Aaron James Bushnell performed an act of heroism or stupidity when he set himself on fire in front of the Israeli embassy in Washington, DC on February 25. He was protesting the Israeli bombardment of Gaza, a densely populated exclave of Palestine. Israel has laid siege to the territory since October, killing over 30,000 people. Bushnell had previously made his pro-Palestinian ideals known online, and he died shouting his belief in a “free Palestine.”

Bushnell spent that Sunday morning posting on Facebook. “Many of us like to ask ourselves, ‘What would I do if I was alive during slavery? Or the Jim Crow South? Or apartheid? What would I do if my country was committing genocide?’ The answer is, you're doing it. Right now.” Then, as a form of protest, Bushnell doused and set himself aflame.

While it might be easy to dismiss Bushnell as a nutjob who wasn't thinking straight, we are talking about an active-duty member of the Air Force with a focus on software information technology and development operations. What does it say about the armed forces if we disregard Bushnell as one of the crazies?

What drives someone to self-immolation?

This form of protest, while not new, is undeniably effective in getting attention, due to its gruesome nature and self-infliction. For the same reasons, it is quite rare. So, how does someone come to the conclusion that self-mutilation is the only option? Additionally, what does it mean when an active duty service member does it in full uniform?

Suicide as a modern protest tactic started in 1963 in South Vietnam. Originally a Buddhist act, it no longer seems to carry any religious significance. Those who partake in such an act “see themselves as part of a larger tradition of non-violent resistance, but that said, these are intensely violent acts they are perpetrating on their own bodies.”

While there isn’t a real connection in causes, religion or race in those who have chosen to take on this form of protest, their stories all end the same. Thus, it would not be that hard to believe there is a common thread through all of them. That leaves us simply with the question: How can someone do that to themselves?

The simple answer is that they feel like there is nothing left to try. Essentially, a self-immolator feels utterly helpless in the face of injustice. The injustice is not necessarily one of great magnitude: In 2011, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire because the Tunisian government took away his vegetable cart and refused to give it back. They had thus taken away all that he believed he had in life. Other cases are like that of university student Jan Palach, who set himself on fire in Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1969. Palach believed it to be the only form of protest left after a Soviet invasion crushed the 1968 Prague Spring.

While these two causes are vastly different, the outcomes were strikingly similar. In Tunisia, Bouazizi’s act led to a consensus among citizens

that contributed to the government's downfall. Some even credit Bouazizi for the 2011 Arab Spring. Likewise, Palach continues to be held as a martyr by Czechs and Slovaks today.

The common factor is a feeling of helplessness that leads to radicalization. Radicalization is the process by which an individual comes to adopt extreme views. A common misconception is that radicalized individuals become terrorists. They may, but they may also never act out violently. Or, they may harm themselves, as suicide protestors do. Radicalization is not currently well-understood. However, the process that takes an average Joe to a suicide protester displays a clear pattern in all of these cases.

There are many ways to look at radicalization, but since each of these cases involves a single person, it is best to look at this from a psychological perspective. A 2014 article published in *Political Psychology* proposed a radicalization/deradicalization model with the following three categories: motivation, ideology and the social process. **Motivation** is the initial personal catalyst that attracts a person to radical ideas. This leads to the **ideology**, which is a narrative that describes the grievance felt by a person/group, the culprit who supposedly inflicted the grievance, and the proposed method of removing the culprit of the grievance. This narrative about the grievance and the culprit justifies the method. Finally, the **social process** provides a network and a group dynamic to individuals that share in the violence-justifying ideology.

How radicalization is at play in the context of the Gaza war

Bushnell’s motivation was his belief in his inability to do anything about Palestine as a US service member. The ideology was a radical form of Palestinian liberation, in which the culprit was

both the Israeli government and the US government. The social process was largely an online community. Since the bombardment of Gaza has been so public and easy to witness on social media, netizens easily create echo chambers where they repeat messages about injustice.

It is important to note that the perceived grievance may very well be real. Social movements fighting for Palestinian liberation or other causes should not be conflated with radicalized groups. Yet, over time, prolonged exposure to stories and images of injustice can have a radicalizing effect on some people.

This is not the first case of self-harm in protest of Israel's actions in Gaza, either. On December 1, 2023, a still-unidentified woman carrying a Palestinian flag was hospitalized in critical condition after setting herself on fire at the Israeli consulate in Atlanta, Georgia. We still do not know what became of her.

At the present time, there is no telling what the lasting effects of these self-immolations will be. According to Oxford sociologist Michael Biggs,

Suicide protests are the most costly: the most extreme action often used as a kind of last resort. So of course most cases of suicide protests don't generate a response and are quickly forgotten ... However, we should never underestimate the ability of someone to use their own pain and their own suffering as a way of demonstrating the sincerity of their cause and demonstrating the extent to which they are experiencing injustice.

For now, there have been vastly different reactions to these suicides. Bushnell's commander, Colonel Celina Noyes, stated simply, "When a tragedy like this occurs, every member of the Air Force feels it, We extend our deepest sympathies to the family and friends of Senior Airman Bushnell." The pro-Palestinian crowd has labeled

Bushnell as a martyr and mourns him as one. Atlanta police called self-immolation an "act of extreme political protest." Israeli Consul General in Atlanta Anat Sultan-Dadon called it an act of "hate and incitement toward Israel." Veterans for Peace, an organization of US veterans, took another approach, asserting that "we could call our policymakers 'madmen arsonists.'" How Americans and the world will look back on these events in the long term is yet to be seen.

Describing his own action beforehand, Bushnell wrote on social media, "I will no longer be complicit in genocide, I am about to engage in an extreme act of protest, but compared to what people have been experiencing in Palestine at the hands of their colonizers, it's not extreme at all."

Aaron Bushnell died Monday, Feb. 26. His final words were, "Free Palestine."

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]



Tara Yarwais is a Kurdish American. Born in Baghdad, she immigrated to the US in 2007. She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology at Belmont University, Nashville, Tennessee, and a master's in terrorism, security, and far-right extremism at Richmond University, London, England. It was during her graduate studies that Tara discovered her love of writing.

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