



Reframing Hamas

written by Maura Finkelstein
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On November 24th, 2023, a temporary ceasefire paused Israeli bombardment^[1] and Hamas-led retaliation in Gaza. The pause was intended to bring humanitarian aid into Gaza, as thousands of civilians were without food, water, medical care, and shelter. Additionally, Israel and Hamas traded hostages - releasing approximately [100 Israeli and foreign captives to the Red Cross and 240 Palestinians from Israeli prisons](#). After renewing the truce twice, Israel resumed its bombardment on December 1st, within minutes of the ceasefire ending. The already-devastated population of Gaza is once again subjected to Israel's genocidal campaign. [Since October 7th](#), more than half of all homes in Gaza have been completely destroyed and an estimated 250,000 housing units have been



partially destroyed. At least 50,000 families and their extended families are now homeless and close to 16,000 people in Gaza, including at least 6,150 children, have been killed. These numbers continue to climb, as Israel [uses AI technology for their assault](#), targeting civilians with chilling precision. While framed as a “war on Hamas,” there is no version of this reality that justifies the destruction of civilian life, land, and infrastructure. Instead, Hamas is Israel’s excuse for genocidal violence, ongoing for 75 years.

Given this stark reality, are we finally ready to have real conversations about who Hamas is, what the organization wants, and how its members go about fulfilling their political goals? In his essential contextualization of the organization, *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance*, Tareq Baconi argues that “...instead of...engaging with Hamas’s political drivers, Israel has adopted a military approach that defines Hamas solely as a terrorist organization. This depoliticizes and decontextualizes the movement, giving credence to the persistent ‘politicide’ of Palestinian nationalism, Israel’s process of erasing the political ideology animating the Palestinian struggle for self-determination” (2018: 227-228). It has been almost impossible to change the direction of this conversation. Because of this “terrorist” categorization,[\[2\]](#) Hamas and its members can easily be written off as monstrous savages, intent only on destroying Israel, all Jews,[\[3\]](#) and everyone caught in their wake. Because of this categorization, it’s easy to avoid confronting the deep racist Islamophobia central to this framing. Because of this framing, thousands of innocent civilians have been brutally murdered in Gaza and then written off as collateral damage, the inevitable result of a necessary war on terror.

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The problem with discussions around terrorism and terrorist organizations is that there is no clear and widely accepted definition of what a terrorist or a terrorist organization is. The International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism, signed on December 9th, 1999, defines terrorism in its



[Article 2.1.b](#) as “any . . . act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to a civilian, or to any other person not taking an active part in the hostilities in a situation of armed conflict, when the purpose of such act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population,[\[4\]](#) or to compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act.” While assumptions about the categorization of “terrorist organization” usually exclude states from this definition, political scientists studying authoritarianism include “[state terrorism](#)” under this categorization. However, in addressing “authoritarian regimes,” such an analysis of state terrorism often excludes those claiming to be democratic (ie: Israel and the United States).[\[5\]](#) And yet, this shield of democracy doesn’t erase the tactics of what would otherwise be categorized as state terrorism, such as the [policing of communities of color in the United States](#), India’s violence in [Kashmir](#) and the [Northeast](#), and [Israel’s treatment of Palestinians](#) to name just a few examples.

Utilizing the category of state terror, the original terrorist organization at play in Palestine is the State of Israel and the Israeli Occupation Force (IOF).[\[6\]](#) There is historical precedent for this claim. Beginning in [1917](#) and intensifying in 1948 during the Nakba (or the catastrophe), Israelis took control of 774 towns and villages, destroyed 531 Palestinian towns and villages, and committed atrocities resulting in more than 70 massacres against Palestinians. By 1949, around 15,000 Palestinians had been murdered and 711,000 Palestinian were dispossessed and turned into refugees, according to the United Nations.[\[7\]](#) By 1953, there were 870,000 registered refugees, over 34% of them living in refugee camps in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt.[\[8\]](#) These acts of terror were utilized by the State of Israel decades before Hamas was founded in 1987.

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Before the events of October 7th, [an estimated 5,200 Palestinians were held in Israeli prisons](#). Many of these detainees [were children at the time of their arrest](#)



[and many were never charged with any crime](#), aside from being Palestinian. In [resolution 1566](#) (October 2004), the United Nations Security Council defines terrorist acts as “criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or *taking of hostages*, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act” (emphasis mine). There has been extensive coverage of Hamas’s hostages but little framing of Palestinians detained and held without charge in Israeli prisons. Most detained Palestinians are [political prisoners](#). Their detention is used as a form of intimidation against other Palestinians living in The Occupied Territories. With this in mind, and according to the UN’s definition, Israel’s practice of detaining Palestinian civilians and holding them ([as well as torturing them](#)) without cause is a clear act of terrorism. The UN General Assembly further articulated this definition almost two years later, in [Resolution 60/43](#) (January 2006), defining terrorist acts as “criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes.” Israel does this to Palestinians on a daily basis.

Palestinians living under occupation experience the IOF as a terrorist organization – in the West Bank, this is the chronic terror of tanks tearing through their towns; homes searched, unprovoked, [in the middle of the night](#); and civilians [disappeared and imprisoned without reason](#). For Palestinians in both the West Bank and Gaza, this terror is the reality that civilians, particularly children, are murdered by settlers and the Israeli army on a regular basis, with no repercussions (chillingly echoed here in the US, as the police – [often militarized with the aid of Israel](#), murder Black people [without consequence](#), resulting not just in individual death, but also [terrorized](#) and [traumatized](#) communities). As context, two weeks prior to the October 7th attacks, Save the Children estimated that [at least 38 Palestinian children had been killed by Israeli forces in the occupied West Bank since the beginning of 2023](#). At the time, that was more than one Palestinian child killed per week in 2023 and this is likely an under-



estimation. As the temporary ceasefire came to a close on the morning of December 1st, 2023, an estimated [6,000 children have been killed in Gaza](#) and [at least 63 children have been killed in the West Bank since October 7th](#). These numbers continue to grow.

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When Palestinians resist occupation – both violently and peacefully – these are not unprovoked actions. Still, any form of resistance is evacuated of historical context and framed by Israel and the US as terrorist attacks that are fueled by an ahistorical and irrational hatred of Israel. Because Hamas is categorized as a terrorist organization (by the Israeli and US government and around the world), necessary contextualization and challenges to this narrative is almost impossible.[\[9\]](#)

It's worth noting that, in the wake of October 7th, Israel falsely claimed that Hamas [beheaded babies](#), [raped women](#), and [used hospitals as military bases](#). In particular, on October 11th, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed: "We saw boys and girls bound, who were shot in the head. Men and women burned alive. Young women who were raped and slaughtered. Soldiers who were beheaded." All of these claims have been [debunked](#), even as Zionists continue to circulate such rumors. While Israel and the US continue to blame Hamas for an estimated 1200-1400 civilian deaths, eyewitness accounts from Israeli survivors show that, instead, Israel's indiscriminate attacks were likely responsible for a majority of these casualties. Yasmin Porat, a survivor from the Kibbutz Be'eri, has testified that [Israeli security forces "undoubtedly" killed a large number of their own civilians](#) following the Hamas assault. She went on to explain that Hamas treated her and the other Israeli civilians "humanely" – they intended to "kidnap us to Gaza. Not to murder us." Additionally, Israel's *Haaretz* newspaper [published an interview](#) with Tuval, a man who lived in Kibbutz Be'eri. *Haaretz* reports:



“According to him [Tuval], only on Monday night and only after the commanders in the field made difficult decisions – including shelling houses with all their occupants inside in order to eliminate the terrorists along with the hostages – did the IDF [Israeli army] complete the takeover of the kibbutz. The price was terrible: at least 112 Be’eri people were killed. Others were kidnapped. Yesterday, 11 days after the massacre, the bodies of a mother and her son were discovered in one of the destroyed houses. It is believed that more bodies are still lying in the rubble.” (translated and published by [Mondoweiss](#)).

Given these testimonies, it’s unclear how much of the violence on October 7th and in its aftermath was actually carried out by Hamas. However, we know that the Israeli army uses violence regardless of whether Palestinian resistance is peaceful or violent. For example, on March 30th, 2018, peaceful Gazan civilians began protesting every Friday at the border fence between Gaza and Israel. Their demand was basic: an end to the 12-year-long Israeli blockade of the territory (a form of collective punishment on civilians after Hamas took political control of the region), as well as the right to return to their ancestors’ homes, from which they were expelled during the Nakba in 1948. Israeli snipers regularly opened fire at protesters during the demonstrations. In 2019, [the Israeli army killed 266 peaceful protesters and injured almost 30,000 others](#).

Israel and the US have crushed other forms of nonviolent resistance. In 2020, [Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions \(BDS\) was “a cancer,” and promised the US would stop funding groups linked to it](#). Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in response, [called the move “wonderful.”](#) While BDS is a nonviolent form of economic resistance inspired by the South African anti-Apartheid struggle, both the US and Israel have reframed the movement as anti-Semitic, a move that – similar to calling Hamas a terrorist organization – forecloses any conversations about the legitimacy of resistance, whether peaceful or otherwise. The recent [House Resolution](#) equating anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism is another example of this silencing.

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Despite the fact that Zionists have been terrorizing Palestinians for over a century, Hamas did not emerge until the 1970s.[\[10\]](#) Similar to the [goals of the Black Panther Party](#), it was initially composed of activists who established charities, schools, and medical centers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a response to Israel occupying both territories in 1967.[\[11\]](#) The group was officially established as a liberation organization in 1987, alongside the First Intifada (uprising). Hamas, which favors armed resistance, didn't enter politics until 2005, in opposition to the Fatah party, which favored negotiations with Israel. In 2006, an armed conflict left Hamas in charge of Gaza and Fatah in charge of the West Bank. Unlike Fatah's approach to compromise, Hamas's goal has always been Palestinian liberation.[\[12\]](#)

While Hamas is not a sovereign government and Palestine (or Gaza) is not a sovereign nation, these uneven power dynamics between Palestine/Gaza/Hamas and the State of Israel are flattened in order to continue [the Israel-US propaganda machine](#), which frames the occupation through the language of [“rounds of fighting” or “cycle of violence.”](#) This erases the fact that Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank have been living under daily terror and apartheid for decades. Before Israel launched its genocidal campaign against Gaza in early October 2023, the territory was already known as the [“largest open-air prison in the world”](#) but it was more accurately the largest open-air *concentration camp* in the world (and now the largest open grave in the world). [The Israeli blockade of the occupied Gaza Strip, prior to October, had been in place since June 2007, when Israel imposed a land, sea and air blockade on the area.](#) Closed borders to Israel and Egypt produced a [devastating economic and humanitarian crisis in Gaza](#) even before October 2023. But Israel restricted the movement of Palestinians in and out of Gaza for much longer than the past 17 years.

Mobility has been an ongoing crisis in Gaza. Beginning in the late 1980s (with the first Intifada), Israel began to impose restrictions on movement by [introducing a](#)



[permit system](#), similar to Apartheid [pass laws](#) in South African, requiring Palestinians in Gaza to get permits in order to work or travel through Israel or access the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. These permits were almost impossible to obtain. In 1993, Israel began used [“closure” tactics](#) on the Palestinian territories on a regular basis, at times barring any and all Palestinians in certain areas from leaving, sometimes for months at a time, severing people from their livelihoods and families.[13] In 1995, [Israel built an electronic fence and concrete wall around the Gaza Strip](#), entirely isolating Gaza from the West Bank. This infrastructural technology has since been used as a model for [the US’s wall along its Southern border](#). [14] In 2000, when the Second Intifada began, Israel canceled many of the existing travel and work permits previously issued in Gaza, and even further reduced the number of new permits issued. Israel’s [blockade](#) has cut off Palestinians from Jerusalem, where Gazan’s previously traveled for specialized medical care, foreign consulates, banks and other vital services. Importantly, this violates [the terms of the 1993 Oslo Accords](#), which stated that Israel must treat the Palestinian territories as one political entity and that they cannot be divided.[15] This blockade also violates [Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention](#), which prohibits collective punishment.

Given this history of enclosure, the last two months have resulted in an intensification of [life-threatening shortages of food, water, medicine, and fuel](#) (to name a few basic needs), which had already been part of [Israel’s ongoing assault on Gaza](#). Prior to this year’s brutal assault on Gaza, Israel had already launched four separate military assaults in [2008](#), [2012](#), [2014](#) and [2021](#). Each of these attacks exacerbated Gaza’s already dire situation. Thousands of Palestinians were killed, many of whom were children, and tens of thousands of homes, schools and office buildings were destroyed. We cannot understand Hamas’s actions or the past two months of Israeli bombardment against Gaza without understanding this violent history of siege and military violence. Similarly, context helps us understand the devastating situation Gazan’s having been living under for decades.

Israel will get exactly what they’ve wanted all along – a land without a people –



a pristine colonial fantasy space of extraction and capital.

Most Gazans (like most Palestinians, like most people) want peace, attained through a peaceful solution.[17] This was even true for Hamas. [The party attempted peaceful negotiations with Israel](#), which could have once led to a two-state solution along 1967 borders. But [Israel refused](#) and continues to refuse a political solution to their settler colonial problem, framing the question of Palestine as an irrational project of terror, resolved only through a military solution. For those of us paying attention to Israel's ongoing destruction of Palestinian life, begun in 1948, it is not hard to imagine how this State-sanctioned violence would lead to a violent response. Israel has never had any intention of changing their forced reality in Gaza - [they've never wanted peace and they've been very clear about why](#). [Gaza is rich in natural gas](#), resources Israel is intent on exclusively claiming and extracting. The coast line is a stunning gold mine for tourist-driven capital. [There is talk of building an amusement park](#) on the mass graves of dead Gazans. Israel does not want peace with Gaza, Israel wants Gaza's land. As long as Hamas is written off as a terrorist organization, the State of Israel and Zionists across the globe will continue to justify the ongoing genocide in Gaza as self-defense against a zombie mob of blood thirsty terrorists. The collateral damage of murdered civilians will be justified in the name of Israeli security,[18] just as they were justified after the [US-led invasion of Iraq](#) in 2002. Israel will get exactly what they've wanted all along - [a land without a people](#) - a pristine colonial fantasy space of extraction and capital. Once they clear this land of the dead and decomposing bodies of the thousands of innocent civilians, mostly women and children, that they slaughtered along the way.

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Footnotes:

[1] Still, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Israeli forces fired into Gaza on November 29th, during the pause, [killing two people](#).

[2] For more on this, please see Noura Erakat's discussion of Israeli categorization in *Justice for Some: Law and the Question of Palestine* (2019: 200-205)

[3] While their original charter did state: "Our struggle against the Jews is very great and very serious," this was [revised in 2017](#) clarified that their struggle was



with Israel and the Zionist project, not the Jews. In fact, they make the critical distinction still so obfuscated in the US and Israel: “ 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. Yet, it is the Zionists who constantly identify Judaism and the Jews with their own colonial project and illegal entity.” (16)

[4] By this definition, the United States Police Force (often trained by the Israeli army) is a terrorist organization and police shootings of unarmed Black people are acts of terrorism. The US government, it should be noted, has categorized every Black and Native liberation/freedom movement/group as a terrorist organization, and has then proceeded to terrorize and often kill members of those organizations. We cannot trust these definitions, nor can we trust powerful entities who use such categories to silence and stifle liberation struggles.

[5] See: Stohl M and Lopez GA (eds) (1984);Poe SC and Tate CN (1994); Barros R (2016); Hill Jr. DW (2016); Sluka JA (2000); Cingranelli D, Mark S, Garvey JB, Hutt J and Lee Y (2022); José A. Alemán (2023)

[6] While they officially call themselves the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) I – like many others – reject that name, as they are not a defense force, but an occupying force.

[7] Morris, Benny, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001*, Vintage Books, New York: 2001 (1999), pp 297-298

[8] Morris, Benny, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: (2004).

[9] As an example, I will be accused of being a terrorist sympathizer just for writing these words – such accusations have been thrown at me for years, but particularly in the wake of October 7th.



[10] For more on this history, please see Abu-Amr, Ziad. “ Hamas: A Historical and Political Background.” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1993, pp. 5-19.

[11] It is important to note that Hamas has never desired a free Palestine “from the river to the sea,” but instead they [advocate for a return to 1967 borders](#), which once might have allowed for a two-state solution.

[12] For excellent scholarship on this history, please see: *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance* by Tareq Baconi (2018, SUP), *The Making of a Human Bomb: An Ethnography of Palestinian Resistance* by Nasser Abufarha (2009), and *Governing Gaza: Bureaucracy, Authority, and the Work of Rule, 1917-1967* by Ilana Feldman (2008)

[13] All of these tactics echo South African Apartheid

[14] For for example US Border Control and an Israeli military contractor use similar technology to terrorize and surveille people on the Tohono O’odham reservation, which was sliced in two by the US-Mexico border. For more on the similarities between Israel’s fences and walls and those on the Southern US border, see [Will Parrish’s 2019](#) reporting for *The Intercept*.

[15] For more on this, please see Rashid Khalidi’s *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017* (Picador: 2020) and Gideon Levy’s *The Punishment of Gaza* (2010: Verso Books)

[16] White slave owners made such an argument against emancipation, white South Africans made this argument against dismantling apartheid, etc.

[17] For more on this, please see *Popular Resistance in Palestine: A History of Hope and Empowerment* by Mazin B. Qumsiyeh (2011)

[18] 175 Gazans were murdered on December 1st alone, in the hours following the end of the ceasefire, according to [Al Jazeera](#)