

Reflecting on International Terrorism after the Hamas Attacks on Israel

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SYLVAIN KELLER, OCT 17 2023

On 7th October, Israel endured a multi-pronged attack conducted by Hamas, causing the killing of more than 1400 civilians and the abductions of approximately 200 people, including children, who were taken as hostages. Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli's prime minister, described those acts as terrorism and Israeli authorities characterized them as "Israeli's 9/11". A major part of the international community, including Western countries such as the United States, provided their support to Israel and also designated this attack as terrorism. Israel then launched an unprecedented counter-offensive, targeting several Hamas positions in Gaza. By October 16th, authorities indicated that at least 2,670 people had been killed by Israel's retaliatory strikes in Gaza.

The extent of the crimes committed by Hamas, in terms of victims and strategy, recalled acts carried out by Islamic State/ISIS or those of al Qaeda on 9/11 2001. Israel's authorities have also tried to establish a direct link between Hamas and ISIS in recent years. Netanyahu stated that 'Hamas bound, burned and executed children. They are savages. Hamas is ISIS. And just as the forces of civilizations united to defeat ISIS, the forces of civilization must support Israel in defeating Hamas'. From this standpoint, the main purpose of this article will be to demonstrate the consideration of Hamas as a terrorist actor and its links with internationally recognized terrorist groups as well as the potential impact of this attack on international terrorism.

According to the most recent analyses, the main purpose of Hamas' multi-pronged attack was to prevent the current soft diplomacy policy between Israel and other Gulf States like Saudi Arabia. The founding charter of Hamas, issued in 1998, aims to the destruction of Israel and the use of jihad (articles 9 to 15), presenting similarities with the strategies of al Qaeda or ISIS. Historically, Hamas used violence against civilians as a strategy of war, conducting several terrorist attacks. For example, the group admitted in 2014 to be responsible for the abduction and killing of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank.

Nonetheless, Hamas managed to reach a certain degree of legitimacy marked by its participation in an electoral process in 2006. While several authorities still did not recognize its legitimacy after those elections, some opposed countries like the US hailed the electoral results as an example of democracy in action. By October 7th 2023, before launching the attack, Hamas was only recognized as a "terrorist group" by a minority of states (such as US, European Union countries, UK, Israel). Other states like China and members of the Arab League do not specifically designate Hamas as terrorists and recognize its legitimacy. For example, in 2015, Egypt rescinded an earlier choice to include the group as a terrorist entity and chose to use Hamas as a partner to prevent the Islamic State (IS) insurgency in Sinai. Hamas forces deployed hundreds of its fighters on its borders to counter this terrorist threat. During the recent elections in 2021, Hamas leaders also tried to display their democratic practices to the world by publishing images for the first time in their usual internal electoral process. By using this strategy, Hamas categorized itself as a political group.

All those facts can explain why, so far, the OHCHR did not consider crimes committed by Hamas as "terrorism" and qualified them as crimes against humanity and war crimes. So far, Hamas is not designated as a terrorist entity by the UN, and in 2018, the UN General Assembly rejected a US proposal condemning Hamas activities in Gaza. By comparison, it would be inconceivable today that any terrorist group recognized as such by the UN like al Qaeda or

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the Islamic State may reach such a degree of legitimacy, not only in the territories under its control but also in the eyes of the international community.

From another point, this consideration is also based on the current absence of links between Hamas and other well-established terrorist entities like ISIS and al Qaeda. Until 2006, al Qaeda supported Hamas militants, encouraging the liberation of Palestine as part of their Jihad strategy. But, in 2007, Al Zawahiri qualified the signature of the Mecca agreement by Hamas as a doctrinal deviation, meaning that the participation of Hamas in the 2007 elections went beyond repair. Just like other affiliated groups promoting jihadist expansion, al Qaeda and ISIS do not consider the tenure of an electoral vote. Al Qaeda also accused Hamas of succumbing to the pressure of the US by stopping violence committed after their election. In 2018, ISIS even declared war on Hamas following the execution of an affiliated Hamas member by ISIS militants in the province of Sinai.

Still, we need to concede the fact that Hamas is currently part of a partially recognized terrorist international network, branded as such by several countries. The degree of support provided by Iran and Hezbollah has been proven over the last few years, just like the links between Houthi militias and Hamas militants. The United States, some Western governments, and others deem Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, and Houthi militias remain considered as such by several countries.

Strategic ties between Hezbollah and Hamas have often been controversial and marked by instability. Factors such as the support of Hamas to Muslim brotherhood authorities and its involvement in the Syrian rebellion forced Hezbollah to distance itself with the Palestinian armed group. Only recently, the two entities started to pursue rapprochement to maintain their positions of power. The current situation may considerably strengthen their links. Just last week, Hezbollah and Palestinian militants have been carrying out several small-scale attacks from Lebanon, targeting Israeli positions. Hezbollah authorities also stated their readiness for action against Israel. The potential role of Iran, considered as a historical supporter of Hamas is also a major concern. Already, Israeli authorities stated about the involvement of Iranian authorities in providing terrorism support to Hamas but, for the moment, US authorities and its allies have not found evidence directly linking Iran to the attack.

The international consideration of the October attacks by other terrorist entities such as al Qaeda or ISIS-affiliated groups may suggest the fact that those groups are direct supporters of the activity of Hamas or could integrate the current situation into their own strategy. For example, al Shabab immediately expressed satisfaction with the attacks committed by Hamas fighters and issued a statement describing this attack as a victory for the Muslim community. In its statement, al Shabab puts the context of the situation in Gaza in the context of global jihad, stating that this “battle is the battle of all Muslims”. Other groups like al Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent also expressed satisfaction with this attack. The spreading of those messages calling for raising arms against Israel will be probably reinforced by the operations of retaliations conducted by Israel and the number of Palestinian victims of war. This series of messages also shows that, while al Qaeda has taken a hardline approach against Hamas, those groups don’t hesitate to celebrate those attacks as a “victory” for their jihad strategy.

Beyond those messages, the current situation in Palestine is tangled up with the potential risks of other terrorist attacks worldwide. Last week, for example, the Kenya Counter-terrorism service warned about the possibility of “solidarity” attacks potentially committed by al Shabab after the reprisal attacks committed by Israel in Gaza. It is also noticeable that only a few days after the attacks, one police officer shot dead two Israeli tourists in Egypt. Also, the extent of the protests reported in several Muslim countries after the massive killing of civilians committed by Israel may affect the ties between Jewish and Muslim communities and reinforce hatred messages. Recently, the FBI alerted about death threats targeting Muslims and Jewish communities in the US with concerns the attack could inspire violence in the United States.

Several terrorist actors worldwide like al Qaeda and ISIS will benefit from any such violence and could exploit the conflict and the situation of Palestinians to call on their supporters to conduct attacks internationally. But, in Israel and Gaza, doubt remains regarding their potential role and their involvement as those external entities, just like the degree of support Palestinians have historically provided to those groups. In 2015 a poll conducted by Pew Research Center estimated that 84 per cent of Palestinians (92 per cent in the Gaza Strip and 79 per cent in the West Bank)

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had a negative view of ISIS.

Historically, despite all efforts, the impact of those terrorist entities in the Palestinian conflict has remained limited. After 9/11 al Qaeda tried to portray itself as a defender of the Palestinian cause and provided regular support (for example a 2003 tape from Al Zawahiri dedicated to the Palestinians). But despite the presence of a political message, terrorist activities never translated into large-scale “anti-Zionist” activities. In 2021, several al Qaeda leaders, including Zawahiri criticized some Gulf states for normalizing relations with Israel. Historically, we can only mention individual attacks committed by al Qaeda targeting the Jewish community like in 2009 in Nouakchott or 2015 in Paris. Recently, al Shabab threatened to target Israel and the United States and committed acts of violence against Jewish populations. Until recently, ISIS entities also had some difficulties in targeting Israel and in including Palestinian militants in their ranks. Amongst some attempts, we can mention the Gazan group Jamaat Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Bait alMaqdis or Islamic State Sinai Province. Both groups took the responsibility of launching rockets against Israel in 2015. The presence of some Palestinians affiliated with ISIS was also reported between 2013 and 2015.

A recent turning point may have been the beginning of the operation “Guardian of the Walls” in 2021 marked by increasing violence and an increasing number of al Qaeda and ISIS statements calling for attacks against Israel. On September 11th 2021, Al Zawahiri reiterated his call for an international jihad against Israel, and speeches were provided as a support of Palestinians. More worryingly, a series of lone-wolf terrorist attacks took place in 2022, some of them committed by ISIS partisans. In March 2022, ISIS claimed responsibility for three attacks committed in Bne Brak and Hadeera. It was the first time that there have been so many ISIS-inspired attacks in Israel in such a quick succession. According to commentators, this “Spring 2022 Terror Wave” had a stronger nexus to global jihadism than prior waves of violence, potentially indicating a trend of escalation and increasing ISIS support among Palestinians.

The October 7th attack will most likely not unify international terrorist actors and help them overcome their current discrepancies. Further, the designation of Hamas as a terrorist entity and its legitimacy will likely be reconsidered internationally. Still, the international community needs to consider the potential use of the conflict in and around Israel by active terrorist groups in the form of a strategy of wider retaliation.

About the author:

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