

Hamas attacks in Israel

We have seen in the last few days the most significant attack on Israel since the October 1973 'Yom Kippur' war when Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack in the Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights. The Hamas assault this weekend occurs 50 years and a day after the start of the 1973 war which eventually caused Israel to give up its occupation of the Sinai. Undoubtedly there is symbolism in the timing.

The Government of Israel appears to have been taken by surprise on Saturday although it is clear that the operation has been planned by Hamas for months. Israel flies drones over Gaza on a daily basis and yet preparations for this invasion seem not to have been picked up. The onslaught was reportedly well coordinated by sea, land and air (through the use of motorised hand gliders) and appear to have involved thousands of Hamas fighters who killed over 1,200 people. The accounts of the full and awful horror of the killings are beginning to emerge and no doubt more will be revealed over the coming days. Others were abducted from their homes and taken to Gaza as hostages. Hamas are holding over 100 Israeli men, women and children in Gaza at this time. The anguish of hostages and that of their families is clearly intense beyond imagining. These horrific actions could hardly be a starker violation of fundamental principles in international law, which require the protection of civilians.

It would seem that over the past year Israel's security focus has not been on Gaza but on the West Bank, as the deepening occupation impacts on the lives of more and more Palestinians there. A delegation of the Methodist Church in Britain, United Methodist Church and World Methodist Council visited the region in October 2022 and have described their shock at the increase in violence, the growth in the number of illegal settlements, and the number of young Palestinians who are being forced to leave their homes.¹ August 2022 saw the advent of the Lion's Den, a particularly capable Palestinian militia group. Well organised and equipped, they have been targeting Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and military posts. Meanwhile militant Israeli settlers have become more violent.² In February this year, 200 settlers attacked the Palestinian town of Huwara, setting vehicles alight and torching 30 Palestinian homes. IDF forces have also increased their actions in Palestinian towns in the West Bank. At a UN Security Council meeting this year, the UK's Political Coordinator to the UN, Fergus Eckersley, responded to a report³ on the settler violence and other developments. He acknowledged that the report demonstrates the damaging effect of what it calls the "relentless expansion" of settlements on the prospects for peace.⁴

The focus on the West Bank appears to have caused the IDF to divert attention from Gaza. Their reaction to the Hamas attack has already been devastating. The response, says Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, "will change the Middle East". An overwhelming and crushing response from Israel is already underway but in other respects the path that lies before us is not easy to foresee. On past occasions Israel has made it clear that attacks by Hamas would be met by a "disproportionate response" in order to deter such attacks in the future. So why has Hamas not been deterred and what are they hoping to achieve?

¹ [On the Situation of the Palestinians \(methodist.org.uk\)](https://www.methodist.org.uk/news/2022/10/22/on-the-situation-of-the-palestinians)

² [Trend of violence against Palestinian communities means "we are living in constant fear" | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](https://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/2022/10/22/trend-of-violence-against-palestinian-communities-means-we-are-living-in-constant-fear)

³ Dr James Zogby reports on his briefing to a special United Nations Security Council Session on Palestine, here: [At the UN Special Session on Palestine | Jordan Times](https://www.jordan-times.com/2022/10/22/at-the-un-special-session-on-palestine/)

⁴ [The security situation in the West Bank and Occupied Palestinian Territories continues to deteriorate: UK statement at the Security Council - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-security-situation-in-the-west-bank-and-occupied-palestinian-territories-continues-to-deteriorate-uk-statement-at-the-security-council)

Years of blockade and conflict have left 80% of the population of Gaza dependent on humanitarian aid.⁵ Gaza is one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters but, unlike most others, its causes are entirely human induced. Electricity has been available only 4 to 8 hours a day.⁶ The water and sewage system has been damaged by Israeli shelling and suffers from a lack of materials and funds for repair. Consequently 95% of the population do not have access to clean water.⁷ Livelihoods are severely impacted by restrictions on the movement of people and goods. While the situation has deteriorated in Gaza, the Government of Israel has sought to normalise relations with Saudi Arabia and other states in the Middle East. Hamas has probably calculated that intensification of hostilities would prevent such normalisation of political relations with Israel. Most Palestinians would not be in favour of normalisation while occupation deepens and conditions in Gaza become unliveable. The calculation of Hamas in this respect is proving valid.⁸ The politics behind the ongoing competition between Hamas and their political rivals Fatah, who dominate the Palestinian Authority, also has a bearing on the decisions of Hamas leaders.⁹

The failure of the international community to act with respect to a resolution in Israel and Palestine has facilitated the downward spiral. When Donald Trump was President he proposed a plan that sought to legitimise the annexation of a large part of the West Bank by Israel. Our own government has negotiated a new trade agreement even while Israel unilaterally imposes a de facto annexation on most of the West Bank.¹⁰ The UK Government has been at pains to separate its condemnation of the expansion of settlements from its effort to continually strengthen partnership and trade relations with Israel (including defence relations). Many former Foreign Ministers and seasoned diplomats have long been critical of approaches that place national interests above respect for International Law.¹¹ Where in the past the US took the lead, now governments in the Middle East could be crucial in brokering peace, and they are more likely to gain the respect of both sides. With a two-State solution further away than ever, our governments must determine whether they are able to be more pragmatically engaged by demonstrating that international law is universal and applies to all parties. Israelis and Palestinians desperately need peace, and need our prayers at this time.

⁵ [The grave reality of life in Gaza - occupied Palestinian territory | ReliefWeb](#)

⁶ [Life in Gaza. The worlds largest open air prison | by The Palestine Project | Medium](#)

⁷ [The grave reality of life in Gaza - occupied Palestinian territory | ReliefWeb](#)

⁸ All parts of the Palestinian political leadership consider it vital to build support for their claims under international law among allies in the international community.

⁹ [Opinion: \(2021\) The role of Hamas and Fatah rivalry in latest violence in the Israel-Palestine conflict | UCL News - UCL – University College London](#)

¹⁰ [Ireland condemns 'de facto annexation' of Palestinian land by Israel | Ireland | The Guardian](#)

See also 2023 Methodist Conference Memorial M4 and Reply [Conference 2023 Agenda Volume 3 \(methodist.org.uk\)](#)

¹¹ "We therefore strongly believe that the EU must make absolutely clear that enhancement or upgrading of the EU-Israel Association Agreement and other bilateral agreements and programs will not occur unless settlements are frozen." European Former Leaders Group (EFLG) letter to the President of the European Council 2010, [Letter to the President of the European Council by the European Former Leaders Group - Foundation for Middle East Peace \(fmep.org\)](#)

Sir Vincent Fean, former UK Consul General in Jerusalem, [From Balfour to Biden: universal values and international law versus national interests | Balfour Project](#)
[127 British politicians demand UK impose sanctions on Israel in the event of annexation of occupied Palestinian territory | Council for Arab-British Understanding \(caabu.org\)](#)

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