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Importance of a broader view of the Hamas–Israel war

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See "[Israeli necropolitics and the pursuit of health justice in Palestine](#)", e014942.

See "[Violence in Palestine demands immediate resolution of its settler colonial root causes](#)" in volume 8, e014269.

Summary box.

- An earlier BMJ Global Health editorial about the Hamas-Israel war presented one analysis of the circumstances preceding the war and the actions of both sides during the war.
- This commentary presents an alternative and broader view of the conflict which dates back even before the establishment of the state of Israel.
- Because of the broader context presented, it is important to recognize the alternative way of understanding the Hamas-Israel war and a path toward ending the violence.

We write in response to the editorial by Smith *et al*¹ on ‘violence in Palestine’ and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza that has ensued. This one-sided editorial deserves a response that takes a broader view and highlights critical omissions and alternative interpretations of the situation.

The editorial rightly decries the overall humanitarian and healthcare crisis in Gaza while completely ignoring that these are, in great part, due to Hamas’s treatment of its civilian population over many years, now worsened by the attacks they conducted in Israel that prompted Israel’s response to protect its sovereign state.² The editorial shockingly ignores any mention of the horrific and brutal attacks in Israel by Hamas on 7 October. These were displayed to the world on videos taken by Hamas terrorists even as they perpetrated these horrors face-to-face with civilians. The editorial claims that this is an ‘escalation’ while not indicating that only Hamas caused the ‘escalation’. The Israeli response, along with a declaration of war against Hamas, not the civilians in Gaza, was supported by the governments of the UK, the USA, Germany, France, Italy and other sovereign states around the world.³

The editorial claims that Hamas’s actions are connected to ‘more than 100 years of violence in occupied Palestine’. The authors fail to mention that the violence that occurred between Palestinian Arabs and Jews 100 years ago (specifically, 1929) took place in Hebron, the historic burial place of Abraham and the other patriarchs and matriarchs of Judaism and Islam, when Arabs attacked and killed over 100 Jews living in ‘Palestine’, as the British called it, based on false rumours that Jews planned to attack the Al-Aqsa Mosque.⁴ In a repeat of the 100-year-old fiction, Hamas and its supporters once again falsely claimed that Israel planned to take over Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Following a correction to their initial claim that Israel was responsible for the explosion at the site of the Al-Ahli Hospital on 17 October, Smith *et al* wrote vaguely that ‘a missile strike at Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza City killed at least 471 people’. The reader is still left with the impression that Israel carried out the missile attack. However, even at the time of the initial editorial, authorities were questioning the validity of Hamas’s reports on the cause of the explosion and the number of casualties. On 3 November, the New York Times updated their extensive investigation of the hospital explosion as follows: ‘the available evidence points toward a Palestinian rocket, not an Israeli airstrike, as the more likely cause’. The Times concluded: ‘This evidence, in turn, suggests that the Gaza Ministry of Health, controlled by Hamas, has deliberately told the world a false story’.⁵ More recently, evidence suggests that Hamas has been storing weapons and holding hostages in Al Shifa Hospital,⁶ putting innocent medical staff and patients at risk, as hospitals lose their protected status under international humanitarian law if they are used for military purposes (eg, as a weapons depot).⁷

The issue of the ‘occupation’ is also fallacious, unless one understands that it refers to the existence of any Jew in the land known as Israel today. Specifically, this war was initiated by Hamas from Gaza where there are no ‘occupying Jews’.⁸ After the Israeli government disengaged from Gaza in 2005 to allow Gazans to govern themselves completely, without any Jewish presence, Hamas was elected to

govern Gaza and then violently overthrew the Palestinian Authority's Fatah in 2007. Instead of making peace and creating a livable situation for Palestinians in Gaza, Hamas used money and materials intended for civilian improvements such as schools, hospitals and housing to build its war machine against Israel.² Hamas makes no claim to peace with Israel ever, just the opposite.⁹ Any support for ending the 'occupation' suggests the elimination of Israel and all Jews, as in the battle cry 'from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free'. This interpretation is implied in the lack of support by Hamas for two states living in harmony side by side, an offer that has been made by Israel and rejected multiple times since 1967, and earlier.¹⁰ The 'Nakba' that Smith *et al* refer to would never have occurred if the Palestinian Arabs had accepted the United Nations partition plan in 1947, as Israel did.¹¹ Even Mahmoud Abbas acknowledged that this was a mistake, according to a New York Times interview in 2011.¹²

The issue of who is accountable for the civilian deaths and health needs in Gaza is attributed by Smith *et al* (who reported their pro-Palestinian political affiliations in the editorial) entirely to Israel, and yet, many Western democracies have stated solidarity with Israel in defence of its civilian population while calling Hamas's 7 October actions crimes of war.^{3 13} Hamas massacred and kidnapped innocent Israeli men, women and children and, according to families and Thai eyewitnesses, held the hostages under the most inhumane conditions, including torture (eg, 'branding' children lest they escape).¹⁴ The authors refer to a need for the 'unhindered provision of essential items', such as fuel. As evidence now shows,² Hamas has had enormous amounts of supplies including fuel that should have been used for civilian purposes, but Hamas hoarded them away for years for military purposes rather than for improvement of the lives of its own civilians. While the military response of Israel has killed civilians in Gaza, and we unequivocally denounce the killing and suffering on all sides of this war, it is Hamas that has put their own civilians in harm's way.^{2 13} Israel in fact has done far more to protect civilians in Gaza than has Hamas. As British commander Col Richard Kemp pointed out in 2014, the Israel Defense Force has done 'more to safeguard the rights of civilians in a combat zone than any other army in the history of warfare'.¹⁵

Following the international rules of war, Israel requested that civilians be evacuated and provided multiple advanced warnings, but Hamas blocked the evacuations. Egypt, which also shares a border with Gaza, could have assisted but has largely refused, a point not mentioned by Smith *et al*. Hamas also houses their weaponry and their leadership in hospitals, schools, mosques and other highly populated areas where any effort to root out the perpetrators of the evil acts of 7 October cannot possibly avoid civilian casualties. This fact has been known for years.¹⁶ This is a diabolical measure to ensure that any counterattack by the Israel Defense Forces will cause civilian deaths. The evil of this approach should be obvious to anyone.

Smith *et al* fail to mention that Hamas is considered a terrorist entity by the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, the European Union and other countries. The word 'terrorist' or 'terrorism' does not appear

in their editorial. Even terrorist entities are expected to adhere to the international rules of war, which is what makes the 7 October attacks by Hamas a war crime.^{[17](#)}

In summary, the absence of attribution of the role of Hamas, the claim of occupation when none exists in Gaza, the failure to note that the violence against Jews in ‘Palestine’ nearly 100 years ago was initiated by Palestinian Arabs against Jews are all indicative of the lack of fidelity to the history and recent facts and an attempt to blame Israel exclusively for the civilian disaster in Gaza. Our interpretation of the ‘occupation’ that Hamas refers to is very simply the presence of any Jew in the land now known as the State of Israel.

When it comes to the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbours, there are many starting points that are possible to understand ‘the context’. Smith *et al* presented their concept of the context, but the battles between Jews and Arabs in the land now known as ‘Israel’ go back well before the state was established in 1948. Because of this broader context, it is important to put forward, as we have done in this response, an alternative way of understanding the Hamas–Israel war. We join with Smith *et al* and with our colleagues who reviewed and approved this Commentary in supporting an end to the violence, which can only occur when Hamas ends its war to destroy the state of Israel and the Jewish people.

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Not required.

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Associated Data

This section collects any data citations, data availability statements, or supplementary materials included in this article.

Data Availability Statement

All data relevant to this study are included in the article.

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