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# ‘Israel’s actions can hardly be seen as self-defence’

Usama Antar on the suffering of the people in the Gaza Strip, the escalation in Lebanon and the prospects for peace

**Monday marks the one-year anniversary of the 7 October massacre. Since then, Israel has been waging war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. You and your family had to flee Gaza, but you still have relatives there. What is the situation on the ground?**

I would say that the war is not only directed against Hamas but against the entire Gaza Strip. The situation there is getting worse every day. My close family members and I were able to flee Gaza, but I have siblings, nephews and other relatives who are still there. My wife’s family is also still there. The situation is very dramatic. There is a lack of hygiene products and tents, and now, the winter is coming. Compared to last year, there are hardly any houses left that have not been destroyed. As a result, the need for tents has increased significantly, and more than 70 per cent depend on them.

The worst thing, however, is the uncertainty. People don’t know what will happen the next day. The fact that media coverage as well as attention is shifting from Gaza to Lebanon does not make the situation any easier. More air strikes are being carried out against Gaza every day. However, this is only being reported on in passing. It is a disaster that no serious ceasefire talks are taking place anymore. A few months ago, there were still serious efforts — by the US, the EU, Qatar and Egypt. But at the moment, everything is at a standstill. The uncertainty that the people of Gaza are exposed to is nearly impossible to bear.

**Despite numerous attempts, negotiations on a ceasefire have not been successful. Do the people of Gaza still have hope?**

One must never lose hope. However, people currently have the impression that the Israeli army is more interested in revenge —

against Hamas, but also against the entire population of the Gaza Strip. The fear that Israel could now annex the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank is growing every day. People also fear that, sooner or later, they will be completely driven out to Egypt. A few months ago, they still believed that the war would end at some point and they would be able to start rebuilding. But now, there is a palpable fear that the political climate will turn and that Israel will assert more claims than the country is entitled to under international law. The thought of any reconstruction is a distant one. The people in Gaza are currently preoccupied with securing their livelihoods. The top priority is to ensure that they can continue to live in their homeland. To achieve this, a ceasefire is needed as a precondition. Only then will they be able to start thinking about reconstruction.

**What is the public perception of Hamas?**

Hamas is hated by many in the Gaza Strip. The majority of people never want to see them in power again once the war is over. But one has to take a differentiated view: Hamas is responsible for this disaster because it started the war. However, the enemy in the eyes of the Palestinians remains Israel. Due to Israel's massive air strikes against the Gaza Strip and the daily military actions in the Palestinian cities in the West Bank, Hamas is still supported. In the eyes of many, it is at least fighting back against Israel — in contrast to the Palestinian Authority, which stands by idly.

**Does the population see any way out of the war?**

People are waiting for a solution from outside. They can't do much themselves at the moment. There have been numerous attempts to organise demonstrations against Hamas in Gaza. However, this was unsuccessful and is no longer possible due to the current war. The hopes of stopping Israel now lie with Egypt and the international community.

**How is Germany's role viewed and what other countries stick out?**

The US is considered an ally of Israel. Egypt, while making an effort, is primarily concerned with its own interests. Only Qatar is trying to play the role of mediator. Germany's image in Palestine, whether in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip, has deteriorated considerably. There have been many reports in the media about German arms deliveries, even though these have been stopped in recent months. Germany is seen as an accomplice of the Israelis — not only because of its political position towards Israel, but especially because of its military support in the first few months.

Overall, Germany no longer enjoys a good image in the Arab world, especially in Arab societies and civil society organisations such as the trade unions. There, Germany is held, at least in part, responsible for the disaster in Gaza. Not everyone understands Germany's historical responsibility towards Israel.

**Israel also launched massive attacks inside Lebanon. Hezbollah was struck hard. How do people in Gaza view the developments in Lebanon?**

Many in Gaza see Hezbollah as the only authority that has shown solidarity – and through action – while Arab countries have only stood by and done nothing. The conflict with Hezbollah has at least somewhat eased the pressure on Gaza, as the Israeli army had to spread its capacities across two fronts. The Israelis succeeded in eliminating or destroying important structures as well as the leadership of Hezbollah in just a couple of weeks. Few people saw this coming. After all, the war in Gaza has been going on for almost a year and we still cannot speak of a final victory for Israel. In Lebanon, it took less than two weeks for the most important Hezbollah structures to be destroyed. This comparison is much talked about in Gaza. People are also wondering whether Israel will stop when it reaches the Litani River, which separates the south of the country from the rest of Lebanon. Is it possible that the Israeli military might attack Syria next? Israel could seize the opportunity to change the map of the Middle East once and for all and occupy new territories. Netanyahu is constantly trying to sell the world that his country's security is at stake. But the actions of the Israelis can hardly be seen as self-defence.

*This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.*

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