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A game of all-or-nothing

Israel believes it can crush Hamas by force. Instead, a new wave of terror may be looming

The vote on 27 October was clear. 120 nations in the UN General Assembly voted in favour of a resolution introduced by Jordan for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza. Only 14 countries voted against it, including Israel and the United States. The fact that the Federal Republic of Germany abstained along with 44 others, even though the widely circulated explanation rather suggested a rejection, may have been primarily due to the desire to maintain channels of communication with all those who are critical of Israel's war against the Gaza Strip.

The widespread view in Germany, that Israel be given a free hand to take any action against Hamas, is clearly in the minority on the global level. In view of the inhumane atrocities of 7 October, the political West wanted to frame the response as a fight against terrorism. This can already be regarded as a failure. The Arab world has been in turmoil ever since the gruesome images of the explosion at the al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City. Regardless of the fact that the origins of this disaster, which probably cost hundreds of lives, remain disputed, this was the spark that set the streets ablaze from Algiers to Amman, from Beirut to Baghdad. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets, while social networks exploded with expressions of solidarity for Palestine.

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The Arab heads of state – who until then had been attempting a delicate balancing act between the unloved but now accepted Jewish state on the one hand and the terrorist organisation disguised as a liberation movement on the other – were now forced to show their colours. In an unprecedented diplomatic blow, the Jordanian king slammed the door in the US president's face and cancelled a four-way summit with the Palestinian and Egyptian heads of state. He saw no basis for 'ending war and the massacres', saying that Israel is bringing the

region to ‘the brink of the abyss’.

Above all, it is the Israelis’ warfare, regarded as extremely brutal, that contributed to the sympathy for the victims of 7 October giving way to a wave of indignation. Satellite images suggest that the Israeli Air Force is conducting carpet bombing in Gaza. According to UN figures, 1.4 of the 2.3 million people have become internally displaced, and 45 per cent of the living quarters have been destroyed or damaged. After four weeks of war, the Palestinian authorities, whose information cannot be independently verified but who have provided a list of all victims, count over 8,000 dead, including more than 3,400 children – which is over three times as many minors as have fallen victim to the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine in the past year and a half.

An isolated Israel

In the global discourse, the belligerent statements made by Israeli politicians are also contributing to fuelling the perception that collective punishment is being enacted. Defence Minister Yoav Gallant sees the country in a fight against ‘human animals’. President Isaac Herzog may no longer recognise any ‘innocent civilians in Gaza’ but instead sees ‘an entire nation that is responsible’. And Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu repeatedly even uses biblical references that evoke ideas of a holy war with the will to destroy.

The geopolitical situation in the Middle East has changed at lightning speed. Just over four weeks ago, it looked as if the rapprochement between Israel and Arab hegemon Saudi Arabia was on the verge of a breakthrough. It would have been an unprecedented triumph for Netanyahu and his promise to not only ‘manage’ the conflict with the Palestinians but to also bypass it and broker peace with the Arab potentates. In Washington and some European capitals, several politicians even dreamed of an Israeli-Arab-American alliance against Iran’s ‘Axis of Resistance’. This illusion, too, has vanished into thin air. Instead of Israeli-Arab rapprochement, the Saudi crown prince prefers to confer with the Iranian president. The bitter truth for the West is that it is not the Islamic Republic of Iran that is currently isolated, but Israel.

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Nowhere else is this more evident than in the failed attempt to expose Hamas as a revenant of the so-called Islamic State due to the atrocities it has committed. While the fight against the IS engendered a globally supported anti-terrorism coalition, there is little evidence of anything similar at present. Apart from Israel and the

'battle between the children of light and the children of darkness'.

Western core states of the US and Germany, hardly anyone is buying into Netanyahu's story of the 'struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness'. Instead, UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who has been so harshly attacked in the German media, is the one whose contextualisation has struck a chord with the global majority opinion. The focus is suddenly not on terror but on the whole misery of the unresolved Middle East conflict.

The fact that this unpopular, primal conflict in the Middle East, which was already thought to be marginalised, is now catapulting itself back into the centre of world attention with a huge bang directly threatens the credibility of the West. It sees itself, not least in its defence of an attacked Ukraine, in a global fight for a rules-based, liberal world order. In the eyes of many in the Global South, unconditional solidarity with Israel thwarts this mission. Despite all the differences that exist in those conflicts, the reference to Western double standards is all too present in the Arab world and in large parts of the Global South.

A systematic application of double standards

Everything that applied to Ukraine yesterday no longer seems to apply to the Palestinians today: the right to national self-determination, freedom from foreign occupation, the need to comply with international humanitarian law and the ban on bombing residential areas. The Israeli announcement that it would cut off water, electricity and food to the civilian population did not result in any condemnation from the West, even though EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had castigated Russian attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure a year earlier as 'acts of pure terror'. With many in the Global South, there is one sticking point: that, as the Jordanian king put it, the application of international humanitarian law is optional and that human rights apply to some but not to others.

The accusation of the systematic application of double standards is not due solely to the recent bombing of Gaza. It goes much deeper. For decades, Israel has been operating an occupation regime in the occupied territories, which, according to the UN and official German definitions, also includes the Gaza Strip, that systematically disenfranchises, bullies and humiliates the Palestinian population. While the eyes of the world are focussed on the Gaza Strip, this process is currently continuing

forcefully in the West Bank.

Over the last decade and a half, it has become clear that the occupation is no longer a temporary measure on the way to a two-state solution. Netanyahu is an avowed opponent of any Palestinian statehood. His vision and that of his right-wing radical coalition partners is based on perpetuating this regime for all eternity. In other words: 'from the river to the sea'. As is currently the case, there should only be one state, with (mostly Jewish) citizens who enjoy democratic rights and millions of subjects without rights (i.e. all Palestinian) who are ruled by Israel but have no say whatsoever. Plans for 'ethnic cleansing' are now being openly cultivated – no longer just in the party programmes of the right-wing extremists but even in official government documents.

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The cause of Hamas's terror cannot be attributed to this lack of prospects. Murderous Islamism and anti-Semitism, as we see elsewhere, do not need an occupation to help them get started. However, Hamas gained popularity above all when the moderate forces willing to negotiate were pushed to the wall – a policy that Netanyahu even officially pursued. Israel's right wing and the Islamists have always been united in their rejection of a just peace.

This alone should not be a problem for the political West, as it also cultivates intensive relationships with a number of other states, which have thoroughly intransigent concepts of political participation and minority protection. However, these states are autocracies of various types and are not self-declared democracies like Israel, which, as part of a group that sees itself as a community of values, is measured by correspondingly higher standards when it comes to human rights.

It is precisely the core states of the West – America and Germany – that display a special closeness to Israel: the relationship with the Jewish state is virtually constitutive for their political and state self-images ('*raison d'état*'). Incidentally, these are also the two countries that most loudly claim that their foreign policy is based on values, and, therefore, claim that their policies are based on overarching ideals and by no means merely on trivial interests. The world increasingly judges them by this. The de facto support of Israel's occupation policy, which violates each and every one of its cherished principles, is a festering wound in the argumentative flank of the 'West of values'.

Securing global peace

The war that is now raging is a gift to all those – especially in Beijing and Moscow – who already denounce the rules-based and liberal world order defended by the West as hypocritical. And now they can present themselves as champions of the Palestinian right to self-determination, and thus as leaders of the majority of 138 UN member states that have recognised the state of Palestine. What is possibly emerging in public world opinion is what amounts to a major conflict between the West and the Global South.

With regard to Ukraine, in the emerging countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia, a certain resentment against the morally excessive self-righteousness of the West has been dominant – a form of defiance. The Middle East conflict is different. It is truly a North-South conflict. This is by no means the 'civilised world' against the Tehran axis of terror, but rather a global conflict that touches the foundations of the values proclaimed by the West.

Taking this into consideration, those in power in Washington and the European capitals should think carefully about whether they are to continue to give Israel a *carte blanche* for the illusion of a purely military solution. The months-long war now announced by Israel could end in disaster. This is not only because it might turn out to be a suicide mission, but also because it would push the humanitarian crisis to an extreme. There is no way out for the civilian population of Gaza: hundreds of thousands will be caught between the fronts. Such a war entails images of thousands of people suffering, shared millions of times on social networks and will inevitably bring global resentment against Israel to the boiling point.

It's still not too late to pull the emergency brake – not least to avoid a regional conflagration that threatens the entire region, with possibly uncontrollable effects on world peace.

The upshot would be a storm of indignation against the entire West. The massive mobilisation, not only in the Global South but also in Western capitals, the acrimonious statements by leading heads of state such as Erdoğan and Lula, and the diplomatic upheavals in Latin America are a sign that a rupture is on the horizon between the West and the rest of the world. Moreover, this war could also radicalise an entire generation globally. Israel believes it can crush Hamas by force. Instead, a new wave of terror may be looming.

It's still not too late to pull the emergency brake – not least to avoid a

regional conflagration that threatens the entire region, with possibly uncontrollable effects on world peace. After all, the rationale behind preventing such an escalation through deterrence – and the massive transfer of military equipment to the Middle East by the Americans – could turn out to be a gross miscalculation. How realistic is it to assume that terrorist organisations, whose entire ideological *raison d'être* is the fight against Israel, will sit out the impending carnage in Gaza? That regional allies will resist the escalating popular anger without consequences for their own stability? That Beijing and Moscow will just stand by and watch the whole thing? It is a game of all-or-nothing, with extremely high stakes but modest winnings.

The horror scenario of a conflagration is by no means inevitable. In order to stave it off, however, the US and the Europeans need to recognise that this conflict cannot be resolved militarily. On the contrary, the attempt at a purely military solution would create the breeding ground for even more hatred, even more violence and a rift unprecedented on a global scale. It's time for bitter truths. And one of them is this: the root cause of the Middle East conflict is not Hamas. But it is Hamas that needs the conflict in order to survive; it is Hamas that wants a major war. Another truth is: as long as it has the opportunity to maintain the occupation, Israel will not end it. Because Netanyahu and Israel's right wing want the entire country, and they don't want a Palestinian state.

The failure of Oslo and the demonstrated inability of both parties to the conflict to agree on a just peace within the framework of a two-state solution that has long been formulated in its basic principles should sharpen the focus both in the West and in the Arab world. They now have two options. If they want to risk a regional conflagration, then they will leave the reins of action in the hands of the parties to the conflict. But if they want to keep the peace and make a just and lasting peace possible, they themselves must enforce it – against the murderous Islamists of Hamas as well as against Israel's right-wing radicals. There is still time.

For a different perspective on this subject read here.



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