

Palestine/Israel: A Surprise Attack - But nothing surprising about it

For peace, stand with Palestine, but not with Hamas, and work for democracy, justice, and equality

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The new war in the Middle East between Hamas and Israel is a disaster for all of the people of the region, both Israelis and Palestinians, and perhaps many more. For more than 50 years, Israel turned up the fire under the pressure cooker, and finally it exploded. Hamas's shocking attack is the result.

Hamas's attack, launching missiles targeting civilian areas, murdering and kidnapping civilians, men, women and children, is a horrifying violation of international humanitarian law. But Israel's massive bombing of Gaza—claiming to focus on military targets but hitting residential buildings, hospitals, and mosques—is just as terrible. Israel's government says it will impose a complete blockade of Gaza and the two million people who live there, an unconscionable act. Its minister of defense has called Palestinians “human animals”—genocidal language—and announced a plan to carry the war into Gaza, suggesting it will be devastated, which can only be catastrophic.

Although Hamas's guerrilla attack on Israel took everyone by surprise, there is nothing really surprising about it. Since before the founding of Israel, Zionists have attacked Palestinians, taking their land and driving many of them from their homes and their country. Since 1948, Israel has continued the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, seized land and water, and established an apartheid state that makes Arabs within Israel's borders second-class citizens.

Gaza is a territory of about two million people, one of the most densely populated areas on the planet. With no control over its borders, it has been called the world's largest prison. It is an apt description. The Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem—which together make up the State of Palestine—have been under Israeli military occupation since 1967. Though Israel supposedly “disengaged” from Gaza in 2005, the United Nations and human rights groups still consider Israel an occupying power responsible for the well-being of the population and demand that the occupation be brought to an end. The Israeli occupation has led to repeated military conflicts—and now this latest violent attack.

I heard an activist compare the Hamas attack to the Attica rebellion. It is not a bad comparison. If you put prisoners into a cage and torture them, they will rebel.

Although the left's sympathies have been and will quite rightly remain with the Palestinian people, one can have no sympathy with Hamas. Hamas is a right-wing, religious fundamentalist, nationalist organization, in fact not so different in those respects from the current government of Israel. Hamas's politics bring nothing good to the Palestinian people or to the region. Resistance to oppression by legitimate means is of course justified. But the attack just launched on Israel involved horrifying war crimes. In addition, it was a strategic failure, since as could have been foreseen, it will almost surely lead to massive and equally inhumane Israeli slaughter of Palestinian civilians, and

could also set off a wider war in the Middle East.

For decades those on the democratic left have stood for either a one- or a two-state solution based on a democratic secular government (or governments) in Israel/Palestine, in which all people would have equal rights. Although either vision for the region seems incredibly utopian at the moment, only a movement working for a secular, democratic state can provide a path forward. Meanwhile, the left should continue to oppose the Israeli government and to demand that the U.S. government stop providing it with billions for arms.

The left must stand with Palestine. But that does not mean standing with Hamas.

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P.S.

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