

Hamas Attacks: A Turning Point for U.S. Policy

A Statement of Washington Institute Experts

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The October 7 terrorist attacks by Hamas against Israel represent a turning point that should bring home oft-overlooked realities about the Middle East and compel U.S. policymakers to rethink preconceptions about the region and America's role and interests in it.

Twenty-two years ago, the devastating attacks of September 11, 2001, served as a seminal moment in America's understanding of the threat posed by radical Islamist terrorism. That day unified our nation and transformed our policies and strategies toward the Middle East.

Last weekend's Hamas terrorist attack against Israel—which left more than 1,200 dead, or nearly thirteen times the toll of 9/11 relative to Israel's population—is another such turning point. It too should bring home oft-overlooked realities about the Middle East and compel U.S. officials to rethink preconceptions about the region and America's role and interests in it.

Here, the rethink is not just because of the scope, audacity, and individualized barbarism of the Hamas assault on civilian communities in southern Israel, or the fact that they constituted the most significant attack against Americans on foreign soil in a quarter-century, or the contrast between the sympathetic, supportive response of Western/democratic governments and the shockingly equivocal response of most Middle Eastern governments. It is because the attacks underscore realities that can no longer be overlooked:

- The fact that America faces urgent strategic challenges around the world does not mean we have the luxury of faltering in the vital work of protecting our interests in the Middle East—not least because the region's resources and geographic centrality affect long-term global competition. **Whether we like it or not, the Middle East demands our consistent attention and focus.**

- **All progress toward Arab-Israeli peace has been based on perceptions of Israeli and American strength and deterrent power**, erosion of which makes peace less likely and invites provocation and adventurism by enemies of peace. Restoring those perceptions of strength and deterrent power is a prerequisite for the eventual—and essential—return to Arab-Israeli peacemaking. This should include efforts on the regional level, where achieving a Saudi-Israeli peace agreement would be an exquisite reply to the nihilist Islamist terrorism on display last weekend, and on the bilateral level, where there is no substitute for Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy, however distant that process seems

today.

- Hamas is not just some political party with a “military wing,” for whom control of Gaza is a great achievement. It came to power through a violent coup and is motivated by a warped jihadist ideology that it has imposed on the people of Gaza, who should not themselves be equated with Hamas. **Hamas is a terrorist organization committed to the destruction of the Jewish state.** Indeed, the horrific attacks of October 7 were a reminder that Israel’s decades-long battle for survival—within any borders—is not over, despite the dramatic progress made toward regional peace.
- In its brutality, Hamas has shown itself to be in the same category as groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State—except that **Hamas is connected to a wider network whose participant groups are influenced or controlled to varying degrees by Iran.** This network includes Lebanese Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Assad regime in Syria, the Houthi movement in Yemen, and most of Iraq’s Shia militias, who collectively pose a multifaceted threat to the United States and its allies in the region.
- Periods of seeming tranquility in the Middle East can be illusory and should not be misinterpreted as enduring stability, which requires deterrence and strength to maintain. These periods can be mere lulls that Iran and its proxies exploit to prepare for the next phase of conflict. Accordingly, **America and its allies should not view calm as a significant achievement in itself** or expend substantial assets just to preserve it.
- **Defeating this Iran-led threat network—while preventing Tehran from achieving a military nuclear capability—requires unwavering commitment.** This cannot just be a rhetorical goal; it deserves no less than the level of effort, attention, and resources given to the campaign to defeat al-Qaeda two decades ago and the subsequent campaign to ensure the Islamic State’s enduring defeat.
- In this effort, cooperation with local partners is critical. Yet the failure of many Arab allies (along with others around the world) to condemn Hamas for its targeting of civilians, butchering of children, or taking of hostages underscores a persistent, deep divide on confronting terrorism—a gap that decades of partnership with the United States has not bridged. **Addressing this frankly and directly on the governmental and civil society levels is an urgent priority.**
- Taken together, **this is a complex mission that will involve all aspects of U.S. national power—diplomatic, military, economic, ideological—over a long period of time.** Success will not come quickly or easily. Along the way, differences over strategy, tactics, and operational decisions are legitimate, welcome, and even essential to avoid repeating errors of the past and to avert new types of errors in the future. But the fundamental objectives are clear, and failure to achieve them will threaten vital American interests, including the security of Israel, the advancement of Arab-Israeli (including Palestinian-Israeli) peace, and the pursuit of regional stability.

As experts, analysts, and policy practitioners, many with the experience of proud service in Democratic and Republican administrations alike, we believe that recognition of these realities should form the basis of America’s approach to the Middle East. There is much work for us to do to build on these ideas and provide U.S. leaders with sound advice for the challenges ahead.

Endorsed by Robert Satloff, Dennis Ross, Michael Singh, and Patrick Clawson

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