

GUEST ESSAY

The President of Israel: This Is Not a Battle Just Between Israel and Hamas

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By Isaac Herzog

Mr. Herzog is the president of Israel.

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I write these lines from Jerusalem, after spending time with the families of some of the 240 people kidnapped by Hamas terrorists on Oct. 7. The hostages now held in Gaza include Jewish Israelis, Muslim Israelis and foreign citizens of different ethnicities.

In all my years of public life, the meetings with these families were the most difficult and fraught I've ever held. I've also spoken with families of some of the more than 1,400 of my people who were killed that day, many of them murdered in their living rooms and kitchens or dancing at a music festival. When I returned from one kibbutz devastated in the attack, I had to wash the blood off my shoes.

Tragedy is part of Israeli life, and I knew it would be part of my time as president. But none of us imagined a tragedy like this.

Against our will, we in Israel find ourselves at a tipping point for the Middle East and for the world and at the center of what is nothing less than an existential struggle. This is not a battle between Jews and Muslims. And it is not just between Israel and Hamas. It is between those who adhere to norms of humanity and those practicing a barbarism that has no place in the modern world.

Just like ISIS and Al Qaeda, the Hamas terrorists who attacked Israeli homes and families had no qualms about burning babies. They tortured children, raped women and destroyed peace-loving communities. They were so proud of their deeds that they made sure to capture them on video and even broadcast them live. These videos will forever remain a stain on those Palestinians and their supporters who celebrated that day and a testament to the depravity of the terrorists and of the ideas that inspired them.

But almost as disturbing for me is the realization that many in the world, including in the West, are willing to rationalize these actions or even support them outright. In the capitals of Europe we've seen rallies supporting the total destruction of Israel "from the river to the sea." Professors and students at American colleges make speeches and sign statements justifying terrorism, even glorifying it.

We've heard certain governments fail to denounce Hamas, instead condemning Israel's response and even seeking to offer justification for Hamas's atrocities. It would have been unthinkable to hear such moral confusion uttered after the Sept. 11 attacks or after bombings in London, Barcelona and Baghdad. When I spoke to a joint meeting of Congress this year, I said terrorism "contradicts humanity's most basic principles of peace." It turns out that not everyone agrees.

All of this shows that this collision of values is happening not just here in Israel but everywhere and that the terrorist ideology threatens all decent people, not only Jews. History has taught us that foul ideologies often find the Jewish people first — but tend not to stop there. We find ourselves on the front lines of this battle, but all nations face this threat, and they must understand that they could be next.

Since Hamas forced this war on us, our military has been acting to permanently eliminate this unbearable threat and to enable the return of our hostages. This means fighting in the battlefield that Hamas has created in Gaza over many years — one in which terrorists hide behind and within the civilian population. This is a battlefield with terrorist tunnels under civilian streets, one in which civilian casualties are not avoided at all costs but rather encouraged by Hamas in order to draw global sympathy and blunt Israel's response. Not only does Hamas store rockets under schools and homes; our intelligence and the confessions of captured terrorists show that the Hamas command center is hidden under Gaza's central hospital.

The result of these sickening tactics is the civilian suffering we are all watching unfold. Many reports of the humanitarian difficulties in parts of Gaza are unverifiable, but there is real suffering, and it concerns us, too. These are our neighbors, and our full withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 was meant to give them free lives and open the door for peace. To our dismay, Hamas and its many Palestinian supporters chose otherwise.

Even as Hamas fires hundreds of rockets at our cities and as our soldiers fall in battle, we're making an effort to give early warning to civilians with leaflets and phone calls, to move them out of the main battle zones and to enable humanitarian aid through Gaza's border with Egypt. Hundreds of aid trucks are now arriving, with more expected each day.

But anyone who thinks the cynical exploitation of civilian suffering will tie our hands and save Hamas this time is wrong. For us and for the Palestinians, the suffering will end only with the removal of Hamas. Anyone trying to tie our hands is, intentionally or not, undermining not only Israel's defense but also any hope for a world where these atrocities cannot happen.

In the months and years before the Hamas massacre, we began to see signs of the emergence of a better Middle East, from the Persian Gulf to North Africa — one inspired by progress and partnership, one in which Israel could finally feel at home among our neighbors. Will this be the world that emerges from this crisis? Or will it be the world desired by the murderous fundamentalists of Hamas?

These questions will be key among the strategic issues on the agenda in our discussions with Secretary of State Antony Blinken during his visit to the region beginning Friday — as they were during the visit to Israel of President Biden a few weeks ago.

Much is at stake at this moment, not just the future of Israel. On Oct. 7 we were all jolted awake and presented with a shocking challenge to our hopes and morals. How we meet this challenge will shape our future.

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