

Opinion **Israel-Hamas war**

## There is a crisis of confidence in Israel and Zionism

The murderous attacks by Hamas threw into question the idea that a Jewish state would be the safest home for Jews

**MARK MAZOWER**



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**Mark Mazower** YESTERDAY

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In the aftermath of the October 7 massacres by Hamas, few responses were more eye-catching than the yellow star worn by Israeli UN ambassador Gilad Erdan. Protesting at the Security Council's passivity in the face of atrocity, he explicitly evoked the memory of an earlier generation of European Jews under Nazism. What made the gesture so thought-provoking was what it said about the state of mind in Israel today, at a time when international [public opinion](#) seems to be turning against it.

The palpable shock that greeted the [Hamas](#) assault in part reflected the scale, speed and brutal character of the killing: this was almost certainly Israel's largest loss of civilian life in one day since independence. Yet the intensity of the country's response cannot be explained by numbers alone, nor even by the immediate and graphic impact of images of the carnage. Erdan's gesture conveyed an unprecedented sense of vulnerability that can only be understood in historical terms.

As a political creed, Zionism dates back only to the late 19th century, and it took time to become dominant. Many Jews preferred the idea of assimilation, and a staunchly anti-Zionist current flowed through the Jewish socialist movement in particular. For a long time even those Jews who opted for emigration did not generally go to Palestine.

The rise of the interwar right in Europe made the idea of Zionism more compelling, but the real turning point came only surprisingly late with the Biltmore programme of 1942 when American Jewry backed the call for unrestricted migration to Palestine. After the second world war, the gradual closing up of other potential destinations helped the Zionist cause. So did independence itself and the Jewish population of the new state quickly doubled thanks to immigrants from Arab countries and from eastern Europe. Postwar, Zionism's claim that the answer to antisemitism was Jewish independence appeared to have been vindicated by events.

None of Israel's security crises in the following decades fundamentally challenged the Zionist credo that the safest place for Jews was to be in their own state. Thanks to its Arab neighbours' refusal to recognise it, the country existed in what amounted to a permanent state of war. Yet the events of 1967 demonstrated Israel's military superiority in a conventional conflict. Its chief (and never solved) problem was rather how to turn battlefield territorial gains into a lasting peace.

The 1973 war was more closely fought but the outcome was the same and the geopolitical consequences even more favourable: Soviet influence was weakened, US hegemony was extended across the Middle East and Israel enjoyed an increasingly close special relationship with Washington.

All these conflicts were military ones in which Israeli civilian casualties were light. The latter increased especially during the second intifada of 2000-05, but Israeli policing and repression kept them within politically acceptable bounds. (Palestinian casualties were higher but internationally inconsequential.) In the past few years, the prospects for a peaceful normalisation of Israel's diplomatic position seemed closer than ever.

Nothing, in short, prepared Israelis for an attack in which their country turned out to be incapable of preventing the killing and abduction of ordinary civilians on the scale that it witnessed on October 7. For perhaps the first time since independence, it faced an assault which threw into question the basic premise of the Zionist dream: that a Jewish state would be the safest home for Jews.

Erdoğan's action testifies to the vertiginous prospect that has thereby opened up. As originally worn by defenceless Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, the yellow star was imposed upon them by a regime dedicated to their annihilation. The man who chose to wear it in New York last month, on the other hand, represented the very state that was supposed to be the answer to their predicament: his gesture seemed to question

whether it really was.

What made his gesture even more striking was that it rested upon an implicit comparison between the mighty Third Reich, continental hegemon and the most industrially and militarily advanced state in Europe at the time, and Hamas, a militant organisation running a tiny, overcrowded territory where two-thirds of the population lives in poverty and most are dependent on international aid to survive. That such a relatively small and weak adversary can provoke this kind of response tells us how deep the crisis of confidence inside Israel goes. Time will show whether it is warranted.

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