

Israel-Hamas war

Defiant Israel seeks to tough out intensifying international criticism



Tide of censure strengthens Israeli resolve to see Gaza war out to bitter end

Guy Chazan in Jerusalem 7 HOURS AGO

Israel has rarely been so isolated. But rather than moderate its war aims, it is toughing out the intensifying international criticism of its conduct and hunkering down in defiance.

The six-month Gaza conflict has strained Israel's alliance with the US and brought its efforts to normalise relations with Muslim nations such as Saudi Arabia to a juddering halt.

But most Israelis have shrugged off the tide of censure. Indeed in many cases, the criticism is strengthening their resolve to see the [war](#) out to the bitter end.

“It reinforces this narrative that once more we're on our own,” said Yonatan Freeman, an expert in international relations at Hebrew University. “Israelis are rallying around a flag that everywhere around the world is being taken down.”

Tamar Hermann, senior research fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), said the global reaction to the war reinforced a perception, common among Israeli Jews, that the “whole world is against us”.

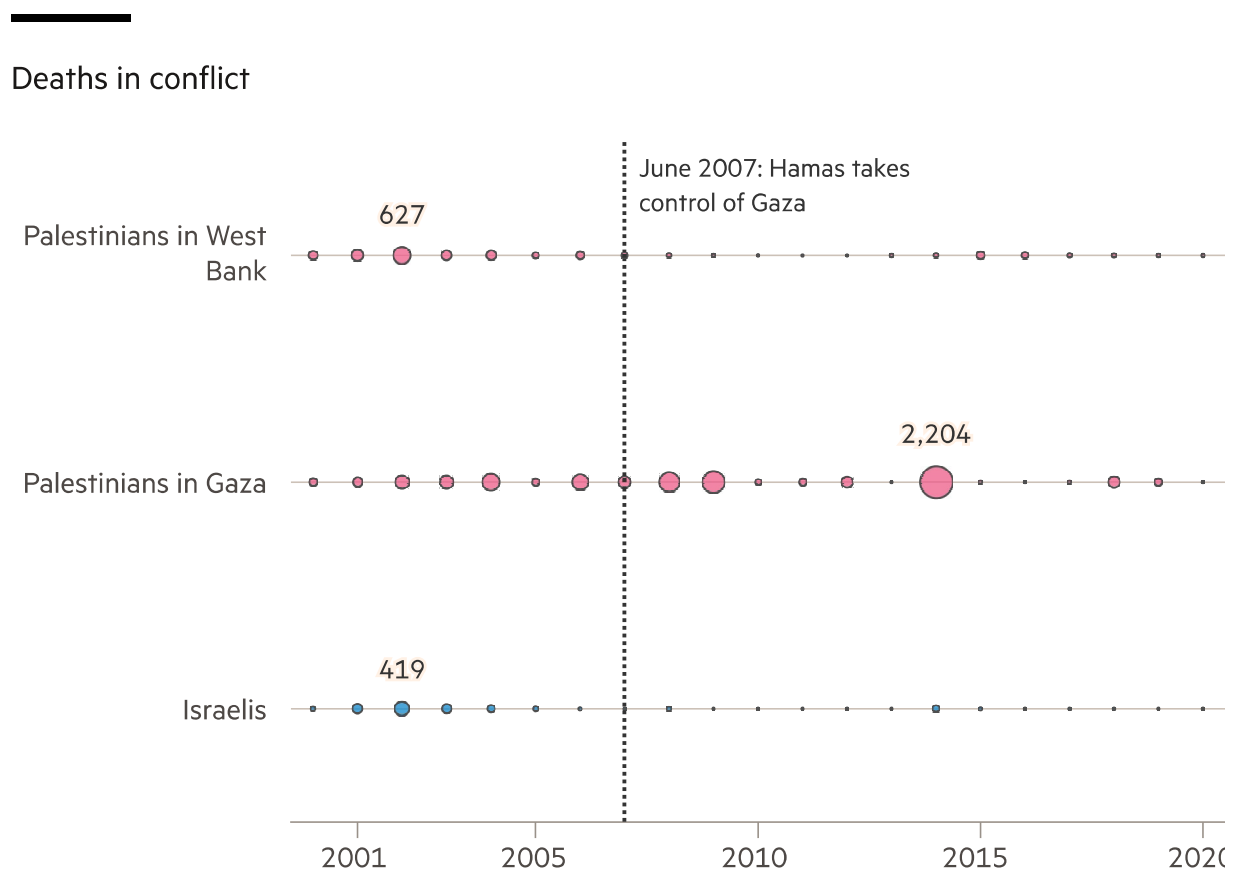
“The [Israeli] public doesn't see this isolation as a consequence of what Israel's doing in Gaza,” she said. “They see the hostility as more deep-seated . . . as part of our destiny.”

Israel's defiance was symbolised by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's insistence on Monday night that its [army would enter Rafah](#), Hamas's last remaining stronghold, despite US opposition to a major ground assault on a city that is sheltering more than 1mn Gazans displaced by the fighting. “This will happen: there is a date,” he posted on X.

That announcement came with condemnation of Israel already reaching new heights following the [killing last week of seven employees](#) of the aid group World Central Kitchen in an Israeli air strike — an incident Israel blamed on a series of “grave errors” by officers.

The deaths led to renewed scrutiny of Israel's conduct of the war, which has so far claimed more than 33,000 lives, according to Palestinian health authorities, as well as displacing 1.7mn of Gaza's inhabitants and reducing huge swaths of the enclave to

displacing 1.7 million of Gaza's inhabitants and reducing huge swaths of the enclave to rubble.



Sources: B'Tselem, OCHA • As at Mar 12 2024. *Since Oct 7. Palestinian figures exclude 1,500 Hamas fighters reported killed by IDF in Israel

US anger at the incident was palpable. President Joe Biden said he was “outraged and heartbroken” by the killings, adding that [Israel](#) had not done enough to protect aid workers trying to deliver help to civilians.

Relations with the Biden administration were already suffering. In late March, the US abstained from a UN Security Council vote calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, shocking many in Israel who had expected its decades-long ally to veto the move.

When Netanyahu was asked by reporters late last month what he thought of the chorus of criticism, he blamed anti-Jewish prejudice. That was the only plausible reason, he said, why people paid so much attention to the human toll in Gaza but so little to the “[massacres](#)” of civilians in [Syria](#)’s and Yemen’s civil wars.

It was also the reason, he said, why the world had “so quickly forgotten” the trigger for the war in Gaza — the events of October 7 when Hamas militants crossed into southern Israel, killed 1,200 people, according to Israeli officials, and took more than

southern Israel, killed 1,200 people, according to Israeli officials, and took more than 240 hostage.

“This is a virus that has accompanied us for thousands of years, the virus of antisemitism,” he said. At least, he added, Jews now had their own state “so we have the physical capability to fight those who want to destroy us”.

PLAY | 00:42

Benjamin Netanyahu criticises the UN Security Council vote during a meeting with US senator Rick Scott © Reuters

But for his critics, the main cause of Israel’s isolation is not antisemitism but Netanyahu himself. “The longer he remains in power, the greater the damage” to Israel’s relations with the rest of the world, said Yossi Beilin, a former senior diplomat and one of the architects of the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinians.

He said Israel could assuage US frustration by agreeing to discuss a postwar settlement for Gaza that involved the Palestinian Authority, an option Biden has been pushing and which Netanyahu has ruled out.

“As long as he is there and doesn’t change his policy, which I doubt will happen, then there will be a deterioration [in Israel’s international standing],” Beilin said.

Public anger with Netanyahu is increasing with each passing day. Huge anti-government demonstrations have been held, with many demanding early elections.

But the protesters’ beef with Netanyahu is less his generals’ conduct of the war than his failure to secure the release of the 130 hostages still in Hamas’s hands. Surveys show many Israelis approve of the prime minister’s war aims, with an IDI poll last

month finding that 75 per cent of Jewish Israelis supported the move into Rafah.

Yet to some, talk of international isolation is in any case exaggerated. The US is continuing to supply advanced weapons to Israel. No major country has severed diplomatic relations and no big-name multinational corporation has pulled out of the country.

Experts also note that the underlying US policy towards Israel has not changed despite the more reproachful rhetoric. “People think it’s a lot to do with electioneering,” said Freeman, in reference to the US presidential election later this year.

One area where the opprobrium heaped on Israel is beginning to have a direct impact, though, is in academia, where researchers worry they will no longer be invited to conferences and have their articles published in scientific journals as a consequence of the war.

US demographer Philip Cohen announced last month he had refused to review a grant proposal sent to him for evaluation by the non-profit Israel Science Foundation in protest against Israel’s actions in Gaza.

Gad Yair, a sociology professor at Hebrew University, found that alarming. “The entire machinery of Israeli academia is based on collaboration with the international community,” he said. “We could be approaching a South Africa-style situation with an all-round boycott.”

Some commentators are, however, philosophical about the international criticism and say much of it is justified.

“World opinion is always biased towards the side that suffers more, and so now they’re on the side of the Palestinians,” said Tom Segev, an Israeli writer and historian. “And rightly so.”

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2024. All rights reserved.
