

FT Swamp Notes **Israel-Hamas war**

The west's complicity in Gaza

Trump's acknowledgment of starvation could mark a belated turning point in his relationship with Netanyahu



The word 'humanitarian' implies that this dire picture somehow arose naturally, like a flood or a tsunami. Our passive voice reflects broader passivity © Reuters

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Imagine that China, say, or Brazil, South Africa or even India was waging war on a contiguous enclave that caused at least 60,000 mostly civilian deaths, a huge share of them children. Imagine, too, that the power in question had cut off almost all food to the enclave and most of its water thus creating the beginnings of a man-made famine.

Democrats and Republicans alike, governments in the UK, France and elsewhere would be unsparing in their condemnation of suffering on this scale. We would also be insisting on accountability for the respective war crimes of targeting civilians, using access to food as a tool of war and the unveiling of what looks like an endgame

of ethnic cleansing. For sure we would not be supplying weapons to that country while this was happening.

Our media, too, would be giving this continuous headline treatment. And instead of calling what was happening a “humanitarian crisis” — as is too often the case with what is taking place now in Gaza — mainstream outlets would be talking about the deliberate starvation of a population.

That is what Israel’s policy in Gaza amounts to, yet for the most part this is not how we are depicting it. The word “humanitarian” implies that this dire picture somehow arose naturally, like a flood or a tsunami. Our passive voice reflects broader passivity.

What is happening in Gaza is the logical endgame of Israel’s post-October 7 policy of group justice. It is one thing to aim to decapitate Hamas and kill its commanders — a goal that I fully endorse and believe was Israel’s right and duty to pursue (and acknowledging the logistical challenge of the fact that the enemy lives among civilians, or below them).

It is quite another to act as though all Gazans are Hamas. We know full well that Benjamin Netanyahu’s goal at least since May 2024 has been to prolong the life of his coalition government so as to escape his own rendezvous with the rule of law. That meant appeasing the extreme right members of his government, notably Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich.

Other Israelis, including an ex-prime minister, former heads of Shin Bet, Mossad and the Israel Defense Forces, and myriad other figures in Israeli public life have been unsparing in their criticisms of Netanyahu. His predecessor, Ehud Olmert, was recently unequivocal in calling out Netanyahu’s “war crimes”.

But the rest of us are wringing our hands. We are willing the ends (of a conclusion to this war) without willing the means. Recognising a Palestinian state, as France’s Emmanuel Macron says he will do — with Britain’s Keir Starmer promising to follow suit — is symbolic at best. They are giving the appearance of action without much reality.

I know that Hamas is a death cult. But one of my recurring concerns both before and since October 7 has been with Netanyahu's criminal recklessness. Forget for a moment the threats to Israel's own long-term security that will result from the multitudinous ranks of orphans and relatives of dead children that we have created. Our alarm must also be directed at a west that is outsourcing what is left of its moral standing in the world and at home to one of the most selfish and dishonest leaders on the global stage.

Who nowadays bothers to pay heed to Starmer or the EU's Kaja Kallas, for example, when they express outrage on behalf of Ukrainian civilians? To almost everyone I know from the global south, the fact that the west seems only to pay only lip service to the suffering of Gazans, Ethiopians, South Sudanese and others comes across as distinctly racial. Even if you take that supposition with a pinch of salt — amid a campus torrent of overblown rhetoric about new western colonialism — you should ask yourselves whether you identify more with Ukrainians than Gazans. For me the subconscious answer could well be yes — and I like to think that I'm honest and sincere in my hatred of racism.

In almost 30 years of "Troubles", Northern Ireland had 3,500 deaths. At almost 2mn, Northern Ireland's population is comparable to Gaza's. In 36 years of conflict, Jammu and Kashmir, which has a population of 12mn, has claimed 41,000 lives. In less than two years, Gaza has lost 60,000. Do the maths. What is happening to Gaza is off the charts.

I am turning this week to my esteemed colleague Andrew England, the FT's Middle East editor. Andrew, does Donald Trump's recent contradiction of Netanyahu's claim that there was "no starvation" in Gaza mark a potential turning point? Domestically, is Netanyahu feeling the squeeze?

Recommended reading

On the subject of Israel do read [this by David Rothkopf](#) in

Haaretz calling for an end to the US-Israeli special relationship, which he argues is harming both countries. Do also read Robert Reich's Substack that includes an [essay](#) by Orit Kamir, an Israeli legal scholar and policymaker, who says Israel is betraying its deepest values and the memory of the Holocaust. I should underline that I could have filled this entire note with links to similarly clear-eyed articles by Israeli figures and filled another note with equally clear-sighted Jewish-American authors.

My [column](#) this week highlighted the weaknesses and fecklessness of the west's anti-populist parties — a western liberalism that is still on the retreat. "It's all very well pointing out the dangers of Trump, Farage, Le Pen and others," I write. "It would be negligent not to. But the negative case isn't enough. 'I might not be beautiful but have you seen the ugly person next to me?' said no winner of a beauty contest ever."

As an antidote to my pessimism about the Democratic party in particular, do consult Jonathan Martin's always must-read Politico column, [this one](#) on why there is a lot more cause for hope from Democratic governors than from their colleagues in Congress.

Andrew England replies

Thanks, Ed. Let's hope it is a turning point, but I'm not holding my breath.

There's been a shift, with Netanyahu abruptly reversing his aid policy since Trump finally, belatedly, acknowledged what was already clear to the rest of the world: there is "real starvation" in Gaza. Since then Israel has allowed UN agencies to resume humanitarian deliveries into the besieged strip, and is no longer insisting that all aid

be tunnelled through a disastrous US- and Israel-backed system run by the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation. Under that scheme, pitifully small amounts of food were delivered, and Israeli troops have shot and killed hundreds of Palestinians as they made the perilous journey to the few distribution centres.

But it is still a trickle. And if it really is to be a turning point, Trump needs to do far more as the one world leader who has significant leverage over Netanyahu. We shouldn't forget this is a population of 2.1mn people who have repeatedly been forced from their homes for nearly two years and driven into narrow wastelands bereft of basic resources. Their immune systems are severely depleted, their lives shattered. Israeli bombs and bulldozers have rendered much of the strip uninhabitable. The health system is in a state of a collapse.

A surge of aid is desperately needed, but that alone won't end the horrific suffering you describe, or reduce the imminent risk of a man-made famine. That will only happen if the war ends, which begs the question: will Trump now put sufficient pressure on Netanyahu to halt his offensive?

So far, Trump's rhetoric and policies on Gaza have emboldened Netanyahu. In February, he unveiled his outrageous plan to "empty" Gaza of Palestinians and turn it into the "Riviera of the Middle East". The following month, he joined Israel in blaming Hamas when it was Netanyahu who broke a US-brokered ceasefire that was to lead to the permanent end to the war and the release of all hostages. He was mute when Netanyahu then imposed a full siege on Gaza and expanded Israel's offensive.

When the latest ceasefire talks stalled, Trump again joined Israel in blaming Hamas. But that ignores the fact that while Hamas needs to make concessions and release the hostages, it is Netanyahu's refusal to accept a permanent ceasefire and withdraw Israeli troops from Gaza that has long been the main barrier to a deal.

That brings me to your second question about whether Netanyahu is under pressure domestically. The answer is yes and no. For months, polling in Israel has shown that the majority of Israelis want Netanyahu to agree a deal to end the war and free the remaining hostages. Traumatized and outraged by Hamas's October 7 2023 attack

remaining hostages. Traumatized and outraged by Hamas's October / 2023 attack, the vast majority of Israelis have staunchly backed the war. But as a gradual awakening has taken place among Israelis about the costs of the conflict to their nation, there are also mounting concerns about Israel becoming a pariah.

Netanyahu, meanwhile, presides over a fragile coalition. But with the Knesset in recess until mid to late October it looks set to hold together for the time being. He is a master at manipulating his adversaries and allies, as well as using international criticism to rally his base. He could use the Knesset recess to move to end the war, but it has been a losing proposition to bet on Bibi doing the responsible thing.

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