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The Hamas “Idea” or Something Else Forward?

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SYNOPSIS

A common criticism of Israel's military campaign in Gaza is that Hamas is an idea, and because an idea cannot be defeated, it is futile to fight Hamas. Yet, it is possible to envisage, with a multi-national approach, an alternative way forward to the two-state solution deemed by fair-minded policy actors as a viable future for the Jewish and Palestinian nations.

COMMENTARY

Writing for *The New York Times* in 2010, Amos Oz, the celebrated Israeli author, made this point forcefully. [He wrote](#): “Hamas is an idea, ...No idea has ever been defeated by force — not by siege, not by bombardment, not by being flattened with tank treads, and not by marine commandos. To defeat an idea, you have to offer a better idea, a more attractive and acceptable one”.

Subsequent commentators largely agreed. Writing in 2023 after the 7 October Hamas attack on Israel, Steven J. Erlanger, a distinguished diplomatic correspondent for *The New York Times* [faulted](#) the Israeli reaction, “because Hamas represents a political and religious idea that cannot be dismantled”. A somewhat different opinion was voiced by Brett Stephens, a New York Times analyst who [noted that](#) “You may not be able to kill an idea but you can defang it, just as you can persuade future generations that some ideas have terrible consequences for those who espouse them”.

The question, however, is how one can persuade people that “some ideas have terrible consequences”, and how an alternative idea can be made to appear better, more attractive, or more acceptable than Hamas' conviction that Israel must be obliterated by force. Even more to the point, the question is whether the Israeli effort to defeat Hamas in Gaza facilitates that persuasion, and helps to banish that, notoriously bad, idea of Israel's obliteration from people's minds – thus freeing them

to consider a better idea. To address these issues, we turn now to the psychology of ideas, that explain when and how they are embraced or abandoned.

Ideas are Functional

A well-kept secret about human beliefs is that they are motivated, not only by our (explicit) desire for the truth but also by hidden, ulterior motives, producing the so-called "[wishful thinking](#)". As psychological research reveals, ideas are functional; they serve as means to the satisfaction of basic human needs. An idea is accepted if seen to serve an important need and is abandoned if no longer seen to serve it; at that point, individuals become open to alternative ideas that appear to better serve the need in question.

For instance, in 1997 a major Egyptian terror organisation, *Jemmah Islamiyah* (the Islamic Group, or IG) abandoned its virulent ideology after its leaders were incarcerated, and its weapon caches confiscated by the Egyptian security services. In that circumstance, its leaders got "persuaded" that Islam actually condemns terrorism, published no fewer than 25 (!) volumes of exhortations to that effect, and conducted a tour of prisons to convince their jailed members to denounce violence. They came to the conclusion that the violent strategy aiming to deliver them glory and significance brings about humiliation instead. This spurred them to [seek alternative means to that same end, of being good, worthy Muslims](#), this time by embracing Islam's message of peace and tolerance.

Persuasion isn't about logic or information. It is about motivation. An entrenched ideology seen to best serve a need is recalcitrant to "logical" attempts to undo it unless refuted by overwhelming evidence that it is, in fact, inimical to that need. Mere words would often not do; actions speak much louder. A decisive military victory over a group makes its ideology less compelling and motivates its supporters to consider alternative beliefs. Nothing fails like failure, and a humiliating defeat undermines the belief that following the group's ideology would deliver glory and make one feel good about oneself.

It might seem that Hamas as an organisation utterly committed to fundamentalist Islam will never be dissuaded from its ideological credo. By implication, therefore, the only way to prevail upon it is through its total annihilation – to the last of its warriors. One must distinguish here, however, between the leadership of Hamas and the several thousands of hard-core combatants utterly committed to its ideology and the millions of Hamas' followers, the inhabitants of Gaza who are much less adamant about it.

Hamas' extremist ideology, like any ideology, is *not* an end for its followers. It is but a means to satisfying [the basic human need of feeling worthy, proud, and significant](#), through serving values and imperatives the ideology represents. Hamas' supreme imperative is the establishment of one state, a Sharia State, in the entire land of Palestine – "from the river to the sea" – which includes all of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. Those who embrace that narrative gain significance by fighting, risking life and limb, and making sacrifices for that cause.

But whereas the human need for significance is universal and immutable, the ideological means that serve it are malleable and substitutable. The military defeat of

Hamas, if sufficiently apparent, will expose its ideology to the people of Gaza as a failed path to significance that brings them nothing but misery. This may set the conditions for their consideration of alternative means to significance, not through Hamas' fanatic ideology of destroying Israel but perhaps through nationhood in the framework of a two-state solution.

Would a compelling Israeli victory over Hamas persuade all of its members and followers to jump ship, and abandon its ideology? Most likely not. Some die-hards, Hamas leadership, and its hardened combatants will remain committed to it come what may. But many Gazans, perhaps a majority, may come to doubt the realism of its vision and the wisdom of its ways. With their significance in shambles, they might look for alternative means to restore it.

Countless historical examples support this analysis, perhaps none more compelling than that of Germany during the Third Reich period (1933-1945) and in the immediate aftermath of WWII. Initially, [most Germans followed Hitler and the Nazis](#) in Germany's conquest of Europe. They were proud of Hitler's quick victories and rejoiced in them.

As historian Richard J. Evans [notes](#), Hitler's early victories (1939-1941) were met with resounding enthusiasm by his countrymen. "In Germany, Hitler's popularity reached an all-time high. There was spontaneous rejoicing in the streets and squares of Germany's towns and cities". After all, the Nazi way appeared to deliver on its promise to make Germans feel "Great Again", erasing the humiliation they suffered in the Treaty of Versailles of 1919.

Yet, after their nation's defeat in 1945, the Germans abandoned National Socialism, which was associated with Hitler and the Nazi Party, and embraced the alternative road to significance offered by liberal democracy. Though pockets of Nazism remained and made efforts to fashion a comeback, [the ideology has lost its appeal](#) for a vast majority of its former supporters.

The recent example of [ISIS' collapse](#) is another case in point. At the peak of ISIS's successes, in 2014, 2,000 recruits were crossing the Turkey-Syria border each month to join it, yet after it lost its edge in 2016, this current was cut down to a trickle of about 50 volunteers a month.

To Think Again...

If successful, Israel's fight against Hamas in Gaza could similarly damage the Hamas brand, make the idea behind it less appealing to actual and potential supporters, and create a cognitive opening in their minds to alternative paths to nationhood and significance – the timeworn, yet seemingly inevitable, two-state solution to the conflict, where Palestine and Israel live in peace side-by-side.

Are the Israelis successful in their Gaza offensive? Only partially at best. On the one hand, as the BBC [tells it](#), "Hamas faces growing public dissent as Gaza war erodes support". Further, there were [repeated rumours](#) that Hamas' leadership is facing pressure to fold their offices in Qatar. On the other hand, notwithstanding nine months of war, Hamas still exists in Gaza, and it appears that, after the expected Israeli

withdrawal, unless a new non-Hamas Palestinian government is successfully installed, Hamas will resurrect and resume its control of Gaza.

A “Marshall Plan” for Gaza?

But to defeat the Hamas idea, or “defang” it, it is not enough to defeat Hamas militarily. An additional, equally important ingredient must be put in place – a plan to rehabilitate Gaza: rebuild the homes, public buildings and infrastructure, restore its roads, electricity and water systems, revitalise Gaza’s economy, and set the conditions for Gazans’ wellbeing significantly above the deplorable levels that prevailed during the Hamas rule.

The Marshall Plan, an American initiative after the end of WWII created the “miracle” of economic recovery of Western Europe, and in particular of the defeated Germany. A similar plan for Gaza may go a long way to changing Palestinians’ hearts and minds away from the Hamas extremist “programme” of annihilating Israel and toward a conciliatory approach to the conflict.

A long way, yet not all the way. History attests that [economic enticements are not enough](#). Only the coupling of a defeat of the Hamas “idea” and a “Marshall Plan” for Gaza, with a clear and visible horizon of ultimate sovereign and independent nationhood, can achieve the objective of demonstrating to Palestinians that there is a “better”, “more attractive”, alternative to Hamas. That is the only way of beating the Hamas idea [for the benefit of all](#).

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