



Hamas abducted about 240 hostages on 7 October: billboard in Jerusalem in November.

GAZA WAR

# “Focus on what is happening in the present”

The Hamas terrorism of 7 October was particularly cruel and atrocious. The perpetrators committed terrible crimes. Many Israelis, however, think their own government bears responsibility for the bloodshed that occurred on its watch. Susan Neiman, a Jewish philosopher, shared her views in a D+C/E+Z interview.

Susan Neiman interviewed by Hans Dembowski

### What was unprecedented about the attacks of 7 October 2023?

They were intended to be as cruel as possible – and to be perceived as such too. The terrorists filmed their brutal crimes and posted videos online, following the example of ISIS, the Islamist militia that shared videos of executions on social media. Sad-

ly, we don't really understand how people are capable of such atrocious violence, but we should consider what they wanted to achieve. Hamas leaders are reckless fanatics, but they are not stupid. They knew that Israel would strike back hard with military means. What is happening now is a gift to them. In their eyes, every dead child in Gaza is a propaganda triumph that distracts attention from their own horrendous violence.

### But mustn't Israel protect itself?

Yes, of course, but who says that terrorism can be defeated by military means? The US administration tried to do that in Afghanistan and Iraq after the 9/11 attacks on New York City and Washington DC. The wars did not end terrorism. Hamas is seeking a brutal, extensive and long war with as many

civilian casualties as possible. That would trigger maximum international disapproval of Israel and might drag other parties into the conflict – Hezbollah, for example, or even Iran. Hamas is not a liberation movement. They aren't interested in Palestinians' welfare. They oppress women, silence opponents and deliberately sacrifice their own people's lives. In their view, the number of supposed “martyrs” cannot become too large. Their goal is not to free the people, but to destroy Israel.

**Israel's founders wanted to establish a state where Jews would never be helpless victims of pogroms. Today, Israel is a strong state with its region's most powerful military. Nonetheless, coordinated terror attacks proved feasible, with more than 1200 persons killed and about 240 abducted. What responsibility does Prime Minister Netanyahu's government bear?**

Well, there is a lot I could say. Here are some important points:

- In the weeks and months before the attacks, many reservists of the Israeli Defence Forces refused to show up for drills in protest against the government's judicial reform plans, which are to use its small parliamentary majority to eviscerate the Supreme Court, ending the justices' power to review government action. The protest movement was broad-based and so strong that Israel was close to civil war.
- Hamas attacked on a Saturday morning. Mobilising the security forces was difficult because, thanks to the policy of orthodox coalition members, there isn't supposed to be any traffic on Shabbat. When it became obvious what kind of atrocities were being committed, reservists reappeared for service, but they weren't properly prepared for action and had to improvise without much coordination. In the summer, Netanyahu had actually refused to meet with the military leaders who wanted to warn him that the judicial reform agenda was affecting national security. For a long time, moreover, he had dogmatically been saying that Hamas was too weak to attack Israel.
- Therefore, his government had withdrawn three battalions from the Gaza border in order to provide better protection to Israeli settlements in the West Bank, which are illegal according to international law. The absence of the troops from the border made it easier for Hamas to attack.

• Netanyahu and his camp have been pitting Hamas against the PLO and the Palestinian Authority for a long time. He has said that anyone who wants to prevent the two-state solution needs Hamas. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich has made similar statements. These people turned the word “peace” into a joke in Israeli politics, promised that military dominance would deliver long-term security. They openly supported Hamas while weakening the PLO, which had agreed to a peace process and is running the Palestinian Authority. This approach resembled the US policy of initially funding the Taliban in order to weaken communists in Afghanistan. It failed in Afghanistan, and now has failed in Israel too.

**And that is why Netanyahu's support is dwindling in Israel? Less than 20% currently approve of him in opinion polls.**

Views certainly diverge widely regarding some of the points I just made. However, all Israelis now know that Netanyahu's security promises failed. They also know that he built his coalition with right-wing extremists so his immunity as prime minister will continue to shield him from corruption trials. As befits a democratic nation, Israel's courts have a track record of sentencing former office holders to prison if found guilty of crimes. Former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was in prison because of corruption and former President Moshe Katzav because of rape. One reason Netanyahu wants to strip the legal system of its powers is his fear of a prison sentence. At the same time, right-wing extremists long to disembowel the Supreme Court because, though it did not ensure equal rights for minorities, it protected some of their fundamental rights. For instance, it recently ruled that there must not be any blanket prohibition of anti-war rallies. Moreover, it has sometimes protected Palestinians from dispossession.

**Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, two major international non-governmental organisations, accuse Israel of apartheid. What do you say?**

B'Tselem, an Israeli human-rights organisation, uses this legal term as well. It is a very clear concept which simply means that different laws apply to different national groups – and that is definitely the case in the West Bank. Israeli settlers enjoy full civil rights, are protected by the security forces

and vote in parliamentary elections. Palestinians, by contrast, live under occupation law. Their freedom of movement is sharply restricted. Their lives are not safe, nor is their land. Before the Hamas attacks, 179 of them had been killed this year, supposedly for security reasons, and violence has dramatically escalated since. Many Israeli civil-

crimination and violence that could erupt anytime. Today, about half of Israel's population descends from immigrants from Arab countries where they couldn't stay because of repression and persecution. It is absurd to claim that Jewish Israelis are somehow “white” whereas Palestinians are “persons of colour”. One cannot tell us apart by the



Protest against judicial reforms in Tel Aviv in the summer.

society groups oppose the injustice, which is also evident in abject poverty. To make room for new settlements, Palestinians are displaced from villages, which sometimes only consist of tents improvised from garbage bags. I have seen them. Israeli friends of mine who are peace activists have started to stay there overnight to protect the villages, because the settlers have come there threatening to kill them if they don't leave. There are people in the government who speak happily of a second Nakba, the great displacement of 1948.

**What about the term settler colonialism?**

It is wrong if applied to the early settlement of Israel. Israel's history differs completely from South Africa or Algeria, where white people, with the support of their imperialist countries, established huge land holdings and exploited indigenous people. Jewish migration from Europe to Palestine started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and it did not serve this kind of imperialist purpose. It was driven by experiences of marginalisation, dis-

colour of our skin. I'm afraid, though, that the term “settler colonialism” will apply to the West Bank, which was set aside for a future Palestinian state, if the settler violence continues.

**What is the way forward for Israel/Palestine?**

At this point, nobody knows. This is a moment of extreme crisis, in which people react to other people's actions, and not all of the actors are rational, to put it mildly. I think it is essential to stop seeing things in the terms of a zero-sum game. Israel and Palestine coexist. It makes no sense to keep using terms like “pro-Israel” and “pro-Palestine”, as if it were a football match. We need peace and justice that work for all, but polarisation only serves the extremists on both sides.

**I don't think there can be peace unless masses of Palestinian youngsters see some kind of future for themselves. Will a tiny sovereign state do? It seems that something like an Israeli-Palestinian free trade area**

would be needed right from the start, with people benefitting from existing links and leveraging synergies.

That would be nice, but we are not anywhere close, and it will not happen without serious international pressure and lots of international money. Israel's domestic policies will have to change. It wouldn't suffice to stop building settlements, existing ones will have to be removed in order to make sufficient space for a Palestinian state. That, in turn, means that more affordable housing is needed in Israel. Not everyone who lives in one of the settlements is a fanatic. Some people moved there because the homes are subsidised. With support for settlement expansion and other measures, consecutive Israeli governments over the years did what they could to prevent the two-state solution. They discredited all opponents who expressed an interest in peace and reconciliation as naive dreamers – as if it was wise to believe in permanent military dominance and treat the entire Palestinian population as one big security risk.

**But is the Palestinian Authority a potential partner for negotiations? Its reputation is poor due to its corruption, inefficiency and close cooperation with Israel.**

Well, the good news is that the majority of Palestinians do not support Hamas either, at least up to October 6, the last time there were polls taken. Only 27% supported them, because many fear that Islamist outfit, which hardly takes care of its own citizens. The last election was held in Gaza in 2006. For a peace process to work, there must be two willing partners. Neither Hamas nor the current Israeli government is one. The Netanyahu camp deliberately boosted Hamas and weakened the PLO. It made sure there was no partner – and said so explicitly in public.

**In view of genocidal Nazi history, Germany bears a special responsibility for Israel. Mustn't we bear a special responsibility for the occupied territories as well?**

Yes, of course. The lesson of Nazi history is not simply that Jews must have a special protected space. It is that violations of human rights on the basis of ethnic backgrounds is wrong. I understand that Germany feels a special responsibility for Jews, and that is a good thing, but the Nazis' murderous hate targeted other people too – the traveler com-



munities of the Sinti and Roma, people with disabilities, homosexuals and dissidents. A goal of Hitler's supremacist ideology, moreover, was to enslave the Slavic nations, and his war claimed millions of their lives. But the bigger question is: does unconditional support for Israel's current politics actually make Israel safe? The vast majority of Israelis now say: the security policies that guided Israel since the Oslo Agreement were effectively ended completely failed on October 7. We need something new.

**The German consensus is that the existence of Israel must be guaranteed unconditionally. I always wonder how to explain this to Palestinian youngsters who only ever saw Israel's government preventing a Palestinian state.**

Reconciliation processes are difficult. It is necessary, first of all, to tell as much of the truth as possible. Anyone who emphasises Jewish suffering but ignores what is happening to the Palestinians cannot effectively fight anti-Semitism. The experience of young Palestinians matters. Unbalanced endorsements of Israel reinforce dangerous resentments. That doesn't mean that Israel's right to exist is up to negotiation. It must indeed be guaranteed – but so must Palestinians' human rights.

**Who is in the position to define who or what is anti-Semitic? Some recent news has been bizarre. In Italy, people who are close to the right-wing government have accused Moni Ovadia, a prominent kippah-wearing Jewish actor and director, of anti-Semitism**

because he is a long-standing opponent of the occupation. Like UN secretary-general António Guterres, he recently said that the Hamas attacks did not happen in a vacuum. Ovadia spoke of a "context of oppression". Things like that happen in Germany too. Who decides whether something is anti-Semitic, even if it is said or written by Jews? Last year, performances of the award-winning play "Birds of a kind" were discontinued after two Jewish students complained it was anti-Semitic. Its Lebanese-Canadian author worked in close cooperation with the great Jewish historian Natalie Zemon Davis, who, at the age of 94, wrote an op-ed in response. She insisted that the play was anything but anti-Semitic. It basically is an update of "Nathan the Wise", Lessing's classic play of 1779. Then RIAS, Germany's supposed anti-Semitism watchdog, said that Davis was a supporter of the boycott-divestment-sanctions (BDS) movement even though she never had anything to do with it and was actively opposed to it. She considered going to court, but was already quite ill. Sadly, she passed away recently.

**There was a tendency in Germany to accuse anyone who expresses criticism of Israel of evil anti-Semitism. What is your view?**

In a democratic culture, it must be permitted to criticise a government. The German public understands that criticism of Donald Trump during his presidency did not result from anti-American feelings. It does not presume that anyone who speaks out against India's right-wing Prime Minister Narendra Modi or Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan hates those leaders' respective nation or faith. There is no reason to treat Israel's top leader differently, though he will declare any criticism to be anti-Semitic – that has been Israeli policy for a long time. I wish German policymakers would pay less attention to their guilt for past crimes, focus on what's happening in the present and let scholarship guide their approach to Israel.



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