

Gaza Is the First Humanitarian-Crisis War

Hamas knew that after Oct. 7 the narrative would shift to the isolation of Israel.

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Every war is a humanitarian crisis. But Gaza is the first humanitarian-crisis war, presented to the world almost entirely in terms of the suffering of civilians. That is no accident.

Before the Israel Defense Forces entered the Al Shifa Hospital compound Wednesday, the media had reported extensively how its medical personnel and patients, including infants, were at mortal risk. President Biden on Monday said the hospital “must be protected.” His national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, said, “We do not want to see firefights in hospitals.” Some 500 Biden administration employees signed an open letter insisting on a cease-fire.

Where the logic of this leads is obvious: The overwhelming responsibility falls on Israel to make the suffering end.

So let us return to what happened in southern Israel six weeks ago, an eternity in the attention span of the media cycle. Those events remain inseparable from what is going on in Gaza now.

On Oct. 7, about 3,000 well-trained Hamas soldiers invaded southern Israel. They had no significant military target. Their intention was to target civilians. One Hamas notebook read, “Kill as many people and take as many hostages as possible.” They did that, methodically. They tortured Israeli families in their homes and then killed them. They violated pregnant women. They stood calmly with Kalashnikov rifles and shot attendees at a music festival. They killed some 1,200 people.

In addition to the planned civilian murders, they took more than 200 hostages back into Gaza, such as the elderly woman strapped horizontally across the back of a speeding motorcycle.

In the hours after the attack, the main question was: What did Hamas hope to achieve? The answer today is clear. Its first intention was to commit acts so barbaric that Israel would retaliate. Second, take hostages that Israel would insist on rescuing no matter how difficult it would be, as with its 1976 commando raid at Uganda’s Entebbe airport. Both to retaliate and to free the hostages Israel would have to go into Gaza. Assuming Hamas fought back, there would be firefights among Gaza’s population.

The wholly predictable sequence of events since Oct. 7 has produced what Hamas wanted—a global event defined as Israel causing a humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Reporting about the Al Shifa hospital complex has noted that medical personnel said they couldn’t move between buildings because of gunfire. We may assume the gunfire isn’t coming from just one direction, but that Hamas soldiers are shooting back at the IDF. The Biden

administration on Tuesday confirmed Hamas was using the hospital as a “[command-and-control node](#).”

Trigger warning: People who self-identify as U.S. progressives, such as those demonstrating in the streets for Gaza and/or against Israel, won’t much like what follows. Which is a strong suggestion that Hamas’s political strategy—to create a humanitarian-crisis war—is lifted from the pages of the American left’s playbook.

The human tragedy in Israel and Gaza has touched the world because so much of it falls outside the boundaries of civilized life. But the *political* reality is that Hamas now has a situation familiar to anyone who understands the importance of what the modern left calls “framing” an issue. Or more commonly, building a political narrative.

Years ago, the word “narrative” didn’t exist in politics. Now you see it all the time. The idea of depicting experience as narratives originated in literary theories of the 1960s. A narrative is basically a story line. It is “framing” events in a way that causes people to think about an issue from a single point of view.

A goal of narrative framing is to stoke public concern about a “problem.” A repeated narrative in recent years is that incarceration rates for young black males are the result of systemic racism in the criminal-justice system. The most famous narrative of our era is the climate crisis, which at least since Al Gore’s “An Inconvenient Truth” has been framed as an imminent apocalypse. The purpose of dire narratives is to push the public to “do something.”

The strategy can work—until it doesn’t. The left elevates problems, but then has no clue about a feasible solution. Incarceration narratives got progressive prosecutors elected but they have produced nothing other than anarchy in urban neighborhoods. The climate apocalypse has produced an emerging catastrophe of unaffordable costs.

Hamas knew that the humanitarian-crisis narrative after the IDF chased them into Gaza’s teeming neighborhoods would isolate Israel politically. In that crude sense, the day of slaughter was a success. But even more cynical than their naive Western counterparts, Hamas always knew their isolate-Israel narrative had no practical solution. It was zero-sum from day one.

Rubbing the public’s face in unsolvable problems over time causes a coarsening of that same public’s sensibilities. Eventually people just want someone to clean up the mess, like the drug-addicted homeless or wandering migrants. And it’s never pretty.

Hamas wanted a humanitarian crisis. It got that. But it also got something more familiar—an ugly war.