

COMMENTARIES ON CURRENT AFFAIRS**Endurance and self-sacrifice: Religion and People's power in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict****VASSILIS XIDIAS¹****Abstract**

In this short opinion article, I propose two somewhat heretical ideas: (a) I argue that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be resolved through military or geopolitical power alone. Its outcome largely depends on the endurance of the populations involved. While Gaza suffers the most, the war also affects the State of Israel. If the total extermination of the Palestinians proves impossible, their spirit of self-sacrifice, rooted in the ideal of martyrdom, will eventually lead to a prolonged war of attrition, ultimately resulting in the defeat of the Zionist regime. (b) In this context, contrary to what is widely believed, religion could play a profoundly positive, even crucial, role in fostering a democratic resolution to the conflict. I contend that a shared vision of justice, based on mutual religious understanding among Palestine's native peoples—Islamic, Jewish, and Christian—could pave the way for lasting peace and democracy in the region.

Keywords

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Endurance, Martyrdom, Religion, War of Attrition

Introduction*'But the one who endures to the end will be saved'*

(Matthew 24:13)

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I believe this brief passage from the Christian *New Testament* captures the very essence of the ongoing confrontation in the Middle East. Initially centred on Palestine, later extending into Lebanon, and now unfolding in Syria, this multifaceted conflict stands as a pivotal moment in a broader global struggle. Our focus in this paper is on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the war in Gaza. The primary aim is to suggest that this struggle will not be determined solely by the so-called ‘power dynamics’ or ‘correlation of forces’ between geopolitical entities, such as state actors and military powers. It seeks to emphasise the crucial role of the populations involved, and the potential for their religious beliefs to contribute positively in achieving a peaceful and democratic resolution.²

It is important to underline that the war in Gaza is not a conventional conflict fought solely by military forces. On at least one side (namely, the Palestinians), the entire population is engaged in the struggle—not through the military annihilation of their opponent, but through their sacrifice and resilience in enduring the immense suffering inflicted upon them.³ This reality transforms the nature of the conflict, placing it within a different moral and political framework. This framework will not only determine the eventual victor but will also shape the character—the very essence—of the ultimate outcome of this historical confrontation.

1. Israel Entrapped in a Logic of Power

A. *Is there a Winner Up to Now?*

There are two moments in recent months when events appeared to move in the opposite direction to the argument I am making here. The first was Israel’s success in eliminating the senior leadership and much of the organisational structure of Hamas and Hezbollah. The second was the fall of Assad and the successful regime change in Syria, which seemed to sever the Axis of Resistance from Iran. These two moments

² A preliminary draft of this paper was presented at the 2024 International Conference, ‘*Discussing Stability and Peace in Turbulent Times: Local, Regional, and International Ramifications of the War on Gaza*’, co-organised by BSEMR and the *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*, held on 27-28 November 2024 in Thessaloniki. The unforeseen regime change in Syria, which occurred two weeks after the conference, undoubtedly altered the geopolitical landscape of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, making the central ideas of the article appear even more paradoxical than they had seemed two weeks earlier. Consequently, some additional clarifications and minor revisions were required. However, the overall structure and core argument of the presentation remain unchanged.

³ Someone might question whether this claim here is compatible with Hamas’ attack on October 7, 2023, but we will address this point later. See section 3B.

appear to suggest that Israel's military power—its strategic and technological intelligence, its superiority in weaponry, its relentless determination, and so forth—is indeed the means by which it may achieve its strategic objectives. But is that truly the case? Is Israel close to achieving its military and political objectives?

Israel claims the aim of its invasion of Gaza is the elimination of Hamas. But it is evident that its true strategic goal amounts to what is often referred to as the 'final solution': namely, the definitive eradication of the Palestinian community in Gaza, whether through genocide or systematic ethnic cleansing. However, despite the immense violence and destruction that Israeli forces have already inflicted—and continue to inflict—on Gaza, it is becoming increasingly clear that it is ultimately impossible for Israel to eliminate the entire Palestinian population of Gaza. It is unable to expel them entirely from their lands, or to establish a sustainable occupation in the areas it has seized militarily. The war of attrition waged by Hamas, combined with the enduring spirit of resistance among the broader Palestinian population, has proven effective enough to prevent Israel from achieving a total and decisive victory.

Even more challenging for Israel is the situation on its northern front, where it appears unable to carry out its planned invasion of southern Lebanon. The ceasefire agreement between Israel and Lebanon indicates that, despite the organisational setbacks Hezbollah has suffered and the loss of its senior leaders, its forces remain combat-ready. Increasingly, international analysts are recognising that while Israel may have superior military power compared to its local adversaries, this might not be sufficient to achieve its strategic objectives within the necessary time-frames or to the required extent. This is particularly evident given the minimal pretences Israel must maintain to secure the continued support of its Western allies.

We should also consider the regional dimensions of the conflict: the confrontation with Iran, the role of the Houthis, and so on. However, I have the impression that this does not fundamentally change the picture. On one hand it is clear that Israel would strongly prefer to resolve the situation by provoking the maximum possible escalation, as swiftly as possible, across all fronts—both local and regional. But on the other hand, all indications are that the Iranians are resisting Israel's desperate provocations for an uncontrollable regional explosion. If, nevertheless, the clash does take place—even

with US involvement— it will not be resolved in a single blow or two. It will take the form of a war of attrition, which will in the end turn against Israel.

Does the regime change in Syria alter this picture? I think not. While the fall of Assad may have been a long-standing goal for Israel—shared by the United States—the manner in which this objective was achieved, with Turkey playing the leading role, complicates the situation in Israel's periphery rather than simplifying it. It potentially brings Israel into direct confrontation with yet another strategic adversary: Turkey.

All these pending military issues present Israel with the dilemma of either accepting a ceasefire, which would allow its opponents to regroup, or continuing the military operations indefinitely, with no real hope of achieving its strategic objectives. And this leaves Israel exposed to the internal problems caused by the continuation of the war.

B. Can Israel endure the continuation and escalation of the war?

While Israeli society remains largely aligned with the policies of Netanyahu's government, cracks in this unity are becoming increasingly evident over time. Notably, there have been reports of psychological breakdowns among soldiers, some even resulting in suicides.⁴ Additionally, some soldiers have publicly revealed war crimes that have been committed, in which they either participated or witnessed. Most striking is the noticeable segment of the population that has begun to leave the country, with some reports suggesting that more than half a million people had left by the end of 2023.⁵

This exodus could be attributed to the denial by some Israelis of the increasing militarisation and ideological polarisation within society, or to growing insecurity, or perhaps to the sharp rise in the cost of living. Because alongside the war, Israel is also facing a severe economic crisis. The State's finances are buckling under the cost of the

⁴ Shiri Epstein, 'IDF soldiers are battling mental health outside the army' *The Jerusalem Post* (12 August 2023), available at <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-754378>; Emanuel Fabian, 'Defense Ministry rehabilitation department says over 10,000 soldiers treated since Oct. 7' *The Times of Israel* (14 August 2024), available at https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/defense-ministry-rehabilitation-department-says-over-10000-soldiers-treated-since-oct-7/; Ebrahim, Nadeen, and Mike Schwartz, "'He got out of Gaza, but Gaza did not get out of him': Israeli soldiers returning from war struggle with trauma and suicide' *CNN* (21 October 2024), available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/10/21/middleeast/gaza-war-israeli-soldiers-ptsd-suicide-intl/index.html>.

⁵ MEMo' Staff, 'Report: Nearly 0.5m Israelis left Israel after 7 October' *Middle East Monitor* (07 December 2023), available at <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231207-report-nearly-0-5m-israelis-left-israel-after-7-october/>.

war. The broader economy is also struggling: inflation is surging, businesses are shutting down, investments are dwindling—particularly in agriculture, construction, and tourism—unemployment is climbing, and labour shortages are becoming increasingly apparent.⁶ All of this has already caused significant problems in the country's stability and long-term viability.

In 2024 International Conference on the War on Gaza, first session, Mr. Amritansh referred to the '*Ouroboros Dragon*', a mythical serpent from ancient Egyptian and Greek mythologies, eating its own tail.⁷ I found it to be a very apt metaphor for describing Israel's current self-destructing situation. And this is even more true when considering the repeated diplomatic setbacks, such as the positions expressed by the UN Secretary-General and the decisions of the International Criminal Court. Israel has lost what was once its moral advantage. From now on, it will remain stigmatised in the minds of people in the Global South, as well as in large sections of Western public opinion—particularly among the youth—as synonymous with apartheid and genocide. Not to mention its ability to confront the millions of Muslim populations surrounding it.⁸

3. A Strategy of Resistance based on Endurance and Self-sacrifice

A. The Decisive Factor

So, let us now ask ourselves: what, in this case, is the critical factor in reversing and rebalancing the 'correlation of forces'? Is it the fact that Israeli brutality is unfolding online, before our very eyes on our television screens? This is undoubtedly significant.

⁶ Julien Bouissou, 'Israel's economy has plunged into uncertainty' *Le Monde* (08 October 2024), available at https://www.lemonde.fr/en/economy/article/2024/10/08/israel-hamas-israeli-economy-plunged-into-uncertainty_6728558_19.html; Wikipedia, *Economic impact of the Israel– Hamas war*, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic_impact_of_the_Israel%E2%80%93Hamas_war (last accessed 12 January 2025); Wikipedia, *Impacts of the Israel–Hamas war*, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impacts_of_the_Israel%E2%80%93Hamas_war (last accessed 12 January 2025).

⁷ Amritansh, 'Collective memory, biopolitics, and reconstruction of Gaza: navigating life and loss in a fragmented landscape', Presentation in 2024 International Conference '*Discussing Stability and Peace in Turbulent Times: Local, Regional, and International Ramifications of the War on Gaza*', co-organised by BSEMR and the Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, Thessaloniki, 27-28 November 2024 (YouTube, *Aljazeera Centre for Studies*, 27.11.2024) Video 31:43-48:11, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZapO2rAi8> (last accessed 12.01.2025).

⁸ See, for example: Constantinos Alexiou, 'Resisting the "new World Order" through the Lens of the Zionist-Palestinian Conflict' (2024) *The Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean Review*, Vol. 1 (2), 176-194..

However, if the Israeli army were able to subdue the Palestinians of Gaza in a short time, it is quite likely that all this global outrage would have already dissipated. What sustains and continues to amplify the global anger against Israel is what I emphasised at the very outset: It is the endurance of the Palestinians in Gaza; it is their ability to withstand and absorb the terrible human losses and immense destruction inflicted upon them, while persisting in their resistance without surrendering—this, I believe, is the decisive factor.⁹

B. October 7: Act of Terrorism or Armed Resistance?

If we re-examine what happened on October 7, 2023, from this perspective, we can understand that the Hamas attack was not merely an act of violence by emotionally charged terrorists or religious extremists. Instead, it can be seen as the opening move in a brilliant resistance strategy rooted in self-sacrifice.¹⁰ We Greeks have a long history of similar morally ambiguous guerrilla tactics, particularly during the 1821 Revolution against the Ottomans. One notable example is the burning of the Ottoman flagship in June 1822, while Turkish sailors were celebrating Bayram.¹¹

As in many such historical cases, it is unlikely that the Palestinian fighters who organised the attack meticulously planned the entire strategy in advance. However, they clearly understood that the violence they initiated would primarily be directed against themselves, against their own people. But they seemed to have an instinctive grasp that this self-sacrificial approach could align with and amplify the broader spirit of resistance among the Palestinian population. And they were undeniably correct.

⁹ Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas who was killed in October 2024 by Israeli forces, expressed this idea clearly in his so-called ‘testament’: ‘In prison—he says—I learned that patience is not just a virtue, but a weapon’. See: Yahya Sinwar, *The Testament and Last Will of Yahya Sinwar, History is a Weapon* (Nov. 2024), available at <https://historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/sinwarlastwillandtestament.html>.

¹⁰ Judith Butler, the Jewish-American feminist philosopher and gender studies scholar, has made a very interesting statement on this. While she is clearly opposed to the violence of Hamas, she refrains from labelling the attack of 7th October 2023 as an act of terrorism. Instead, she describes it as an ‘uprising’ and characterises it as ‘an act of armed resistance.’ See: Judith Butler, ‘Le 7 octobre était un acte de résistance armée, Judith Butler chez @ParolesDHonneur’ (YouTube, À gauche, 05 March 2024) Video 2:20, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIZ-YO2_f7w.

¹¹ Wikipedia, ‘Burning of the Ottoman flagship off Chios’, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burning_of_the_Ottoman_flagship_off_Chios (last accessed 12 January 2025).

It is remarkable how, with this single move, they completely upended the geopolitical chessboard as it had been arranged up to that point. They put an immediate end to the ‘Abraham Accords’, the strategic agreement between Israel and Arab States that sought to address the Palestinian issue while side-lining the Palestinians themselves. Beyond this, the move revealed even greater strategic foresight, forcing the opponent into a disproportionately amplified reaction—one that has now revealed itself to be a trap, steering them toward a self-destructive trajectory.

C. A variation of the War of Attrition

Although this tactic is entirely outside the modern Western mindset, it is by no means historically unprecedented. In this case, while it comes at a significant human cost, it is essentially just a variation of the classic ‘war of attrition’. This strategy is most effective when the stronger opponent is forced to operate in hostile terrain with limited capacity to replenish resources, while the weaker side can draw on a much deeper reserve of resilience and resources. It has been used repeatedly throughout history: This is how the Romans defeated the Carthaginians in the late 3rd century BC and how George Washington defeated the British during the American Revolution. Similarly, it was employed by the Russians to repel both Napoleon and Hitler, and by Vietnamese forces against the French at Dien Bien Phu and later against the Americans. It was also the strategy that led to the defeat of the Americans in Afghanistan.

Returning to the recent Gaza confrontation, let me emphasise once again, that the key factor behind the effective implementation of this strategy is the resilience and self-sacrificial spirit demonstrated by the Palestinians as a whole.

4. Religion for Justice and Democracy

I believe it is evident that, in addition to their patriotic moral ethos, the resilience of the Palestinians has strong religious roots in the values of ‘*martyrdom*’ and ‘*resistance against injustice*’, which are inherent in Islam. This is particularly true of modern radical Islam, but its roots lie at the very heart of the ancient Islamic tradition, and even more so in the practices of the Prophet Muhammad himself.¹²

¹² Unfortunately we cannot delve into this issue in depth here. So, I refer you to the classical and concise studies of Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (Modern Library, 2000), and of Alastair Crooke, *Resistance: the Essence of the Islamist Revolution* (Pluto Press, 2009).

What we cannot overlook here is that this type of Political Eschatology, which connects modern Islam to its roots—and is more or less common to Sunni Hamas and Shia Hezbollah—it is, on the other hand, quite different from other forms of contemporary Islamic radicalism, such as that of ISIS or the Syrian Al-Nusra Front. In the latter case, there is a demand for the global and exclusive dominance of Islam as both a religion and a political-legal system. By contrast, in the case of the former (i.e., Hamas and Hezbollah), the *Ummah*, the universal community of Allah's faithful, does not aim to impose itself forcibly on everyone. It is regarded as the core and guarantor of justice for all people, believers or not, especially for the other followers of the Bible—Jews and Christians—provided, of course, that they also accept justice as the basis for coexistence.

This is, after all, why the Christian populations of the wider region view the Islamic radicalism of Hamas and Hezbollah not as a threat, but rather as protectors against the Zionist extremism of the State of Israel, as well as against the threatening extremism of the other Islamic groups I mentioned. A characteristic example is the case of the convent (the women's monastery) of St. Thecla in Maaloula (on the Syria-Lebanon border), which was occupied by Al-Nusra between 2013 and 2015. It was Hezbollah that liberated the monastery and returned it to the Christian nuns.¹³ Another notable example is the reaction following the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah: the Christian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch honoured him by referring to him as a 'martyr'.¹⁴ This reflects a growing tendency among the Christians of the region to adopt the concept of 'martyrdom' and refer to deceased Muslim fighters, or even civilian casualties, with this term.

We see here that the religious radicalism inspiring the Palestinians of Gaza in their struggle against Zionist Israel, as long as it is grounded in the principle of justice, it is open and inclusive towards followers of other religions. This, of course, also applies to

¹³ Valery Sharifulin, TAAS, *Nuns return to ancient Orthodox monastery in Syria's Maaloula* (18 January 2019), available at <https://tass.com/world/1040587>; and, Fr. Dave Smith, World Anglican, *Beyond Tolerance – Lessons from the war on sectarianism* (03 March 2017), available at <https://www.worldanglican.com/articles/beyond-tolerance-lessons-from-the-war-on-sectarianism-36>.

¹⁴ Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, Orthodoxia News Agency, *Statement of the Holy Synod of Antioch*, (08 October 2024), available at <https://www.orthodoxianewsagency.gr/foreignnews/statement-of-the-holy-synod-of-antioch-2/>.

Jews, provided they do not share the Zionist demand for dominance over all other inhabitants of the state.

This brings us to the second point I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Paradoxically, perhaps for those of us who think in Western terms, the religious radicalism of Palestinian and Lebanese militant Islam can serve as the foundation for the peaceful and equal coexistence of all the national and religious communities in the region.¹⁵ Of course, the precondition for this is the defeat of extreme Zionism, and therefore the military and political defeat of the current Israeli regime.¹⁶

Is it unlikely? In what I have written above, I tried to explain that this possibility is not at all unlikely. On the contrary, it is probably the most likely scenario. However, nothing can be stated with certainty. I attempted to describe probabilities and identify possibilities, perhaps highlighting them with my own wishes. But there are two things certain for me: (a) that the Palestinians will continue to resist as long as they exist, and (b) if the Zionist state does not find a way to quickly achieve perfect and absolute genocide – under the watchful eyes of all of humanity – then, in tragic irony, it is precisely through its own actions that it is hastening its own end. I hope that *Phronesis* and *Justice* will prevail.

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¹⁵ See also Menahem Blondheim, and Andreas Stergiou, 'Three counter-intuitions resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,' *The Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean Review*, Vol. 1 (1), 145-167.

¹⁶ This argument was also made by renowned Jewish historian Ilan Pappé during his speech at the Global Peace and Unity Conference, held on 19-20 October 2024 at ExCeL London. He expressed his vision for 'a new political model, rooted in genuine coexistence, where Jews, Muslims, and Christians once again live in peace, celebrating each other's joys and sharing in each other's struggles'. This vision, he said, aligns with 'the region's own rich heritage' before the establishment of the Zionist Israeli state. See: 'Thought-Provoking Insights from Ilan Pappé' (*YouTube, Islam Channel*, 30.10.2024) Video 9:05, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vg-lUJNo8Kg>.

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