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## Unpacking Tensions and Terrorism in the Middle East

*By Hanan Sahmoud*

### SYNOPSIS

*Following the unexpected offensive by Hamas against Israel on 7 October 2023 and the latter's vehement response, tensions in the Middle East reached peak level. Off the battlefield, the clash of the narratives continues unabated. The frequent usage of the terms "terrorism" and "terrorist" particularly in the context of the Palestinian struggle, necessitates a balanced and thorough examination. This involves understanding the implications on geopolitical dynamics and the perpetuation of discriminatory ideologies.*

### COMMENTARY

In the aftermath of heightened tensions in the Middle East on 7 October, there is a strong emphasis on condemning terrorism by all parties involved. The unexpected assault on Israel poses a significant challenge for the Israeli government, especially given the recent divisive backlash against the far-right government's push for judicial system reforms. Notably, a poll in the Israeli newspaper *Ma'ariv* reveals that nearly 80 per cent of Israelis and top officials blame Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for what they consider the greatest security failure in Israel's history.

The Israeli far-right government's promotion of a narrative drawing parallels between the 7 October attack on Israel and the events of 9/11 in the United States of America (US) is criticised as a dangerous and inaccurate rhetoric. This narrative has the potential to undermine the struggle of the Palestinian people seeking implementation of the relevant United Nations (UN) resolutions for a peaceful solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The UN General Assembly's 2006 definition of terrorism, encompassing acts intended to provoke terror for political purposes, could be applied to Israel's retaliation on

besieged Gaza and the assault mounted by Hamas on 7 October. On the other hand, countries like Turkey and Malaysia emphasise that Hamas is a liberation group, resisting the characterisation of terrorism and framing it as a struggle for land and people's freedom.

### **Political and Historical Context**

The prolonged struggle for freedom and self-determination, coupled with the Israeli military occupation and denial of UN-recognised rights, challenges the classification of Palestinian resistance groups as terrorists. They have framed their actions as forms of violent armed resistance.

The UN General Assembly's 1960 Declaration on the Right of Peoples to Self-determination/Struggle acknowledges the legitimacy of the Palestinian people's struggle for independence and liberation from colonial domination and foreign occupation, including armed struggle. Despite global consensus on the Question of Palestine by members of the UN, the US has faced criticism for consistently siding with Israel, overlooking Palestinian suffering, and designating Palestinian political parties as "Foreign Terrorist Organisations". Notably, this includes designating Hamas and other parties as terrorist organisations.

The unjust labelling of Palestinian resistance as terrorism echoes historical instances, such as South Africa's resistance against apartheid. Like the Palestinian resistance groups, the African National Congress (ANC) faced dehumanisation and accusations of terrorism during their fight for justice and decolonisation. Nelson Mandela, a key figure in South Africa's struggle, was branded a terrorist by leaders like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, illustrating a pattern where resistance movements challenging oppressive regimes are unjustly stigmatised.

### **Double Standards and Consequences**

Thorough research reveals that Western powers have used the term "terrorism" for political gains rather than making genuine efforts to combat the scourge of terrorism. A notable example occurred in 2020 when US President Donald Trump linked the removal of Sudan from the list of state sponsors of terrorism to Khartoum's establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel.

The case of the Taliban in Afghanistan further highlights the deliberate way the terrorism label has been used. Despite initial US support during the Soviet invasion in the late 1970s, the Taliban later became a formidable adversary, prompting the initiation of the US "war on terror". After two decades of conflict, the US withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban took control of the government. Strikingly, the Taliban is currently not on the US State Department's list of terrorist organisations, showcasing political considerations rather than an objective assessment of the Taliban's activities which include deadly suicide bombings and killing of civilians.

The inconsistent labelling of groups as terrorists reveals a lack of clear criteria and exposes double standards. This is evident in contrasting responses to the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Russia-Ukraine war. The 2022 Ukraine war highlighted unprecedented double standards as Ukrainians received global support for their

armed resistance, while Palestinians were labelled as terrorists and subjected to military attacks by Israeli forces.

Despite reports from international organisations citing Israeli violations of international law and the risk of genocide, no actions have been taken against Israel. The discrepancy in acknowledging Palestinians' right to armed struggle, as affirmed by UN General Assembly resolutions, perpetuates a distorted narrative that undermines the complexities of the Palestinian struggle for freedom and self-determination. The framing of Israeli violence as “self-defence” oversimplifies historical context, contributing to the perpetuation of an inaccurate portrayal of the Palestinian struggle.

The deliberate use of the term “terrorism” serves as a strategic tool for Western powers, furthering their agendas and perpetuating a global narrative that marginalises entire communities seeking fair and just resolution of protracted conflicts. This strategy, evident in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, has been characterised by speculative narratives and entrenched biases. President George W. Bush's declaration post-9/11 underscores the dichotomy created, compelling nations to align with Western powers or be regarded as being on the other side.

The misuse of the term “terrorism” is not only seen in military actions but also in the unwavering support for Israel's far-right government, despite its extreme rhetoric and genocidal statements. The failure of the West to criticise such statements reveals a conditioned disregard for Palestinian humanity, shaped by colonialism, a sense of supremacy, and Islamophobia, which continue to dominate Western perspectives on the world.

## **Conclusion**

In the enduring struggle for Palestinian freedom from occupation and Jewish settlement policy, Palestinians confront not only military force but also damaging ideologies that impede their pursuit of autonomy. Descriptions of Palestinians as “terrorists” in Western narratives function as a soft power tactic, complicating their efforts to break free from occupation and enabling Israel to avoid accountability of its actions against the Palestinian population. There is a pressing need for an unbiased application of the term “terrorism” against narratives propagated by Western powers.

The distortion of the term “terrorism” not only undermines the resilience of the Palestinian people but also worsens the daily humanitarian crisis they endure, leaving little room for any form of coexistence. In a global context that ostensibly upholds human rights, justice, and freedom, there is a demand for consistent rules rejecting the acceptance of civilian casualties in the fight against terrorism. The perpetuation of biased narratives that prioritise certain lives over others should not be tolerated. Therefore, in a world influenced by discriminatory ideologies, an approach akin to Nelson Mandela is urged.

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*Hanan Sahmoud serves as an Advocate and Legal Researcher at the General Personnel Council in Palestine. She holds a Bachelor of Law and a Master of International Relations, and her research focuses on Palestine-Israel, Middle East affairs, and human rights.*

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**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: [rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg) | W: [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)