

Emergency briefing: Preventing mass atrocity crimes in Israel and in Gaza

- As experts in mass atrocity violence, Protection Approaches is acutely concerned that the actions of and public statements by the Israeli government and Israel Defence Forces indicate intent to commit an unprecedented assault of Gaza that will likely constitute crimes against humanity and bring an untold scale of civilian suffering.
- The attack committed last week by Hamas likely constitutes crimes against humanity but that cannot justify the perpetration of further atrocities by the Israeli government and armed forces.
- His Majesty's Government and the UK parliament must roundly condemn *all* violations, confront intent to commit violations, and leverage all efforts towards immediate de-escalation of violence against civilians, an end to the siege, the upholding of International Humanitarian Law, and the provision humanitarian aid.
- The UK is committed to upholding its treaty and ethical obligations to help prevent mass atrocity crimes (genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes), to protect civilians, and to support the international rules-based system but is so far failing to do so with respects to the acute risks of mass atrocity in Gaza.
- The international community created these rules and principles in the interest of civilians in *all* countries; they are meant to prevent a race to the bottom where our shared principles are discarded in favour of perpetual cycles of violence and reprisal. These rules are our collective safety net for peace and stability.
- Inconsistency in the face of mass atrocity crimes undermines the safety of everyone in Israel in Palestine, it also undermines the safety of us all. Never does the targeting of one group lead to the greater security of others. Failure to stand resolutely against crimes against humanity wherever they occur undermines efforts to secure peace everywhere they occur, whether that is Ukraine, Sudan, Syria, or Xinjiang.
- Recent and welcome new leadership from the UK in prioritising commitments to better help prevent, respond to, and prosecute mass atrocity crimes is being rapidly undone as the government and other leaders refuse to stand unreservedly against mass atrocity crimes, violations of IHL, and civilian targeting. Unless immediately reversed, the consequences of this political failure will be detrimental not only for the people of Israel and Palestine but for all who still believe in an international community and in Britain's potential as a force for good in the world.

The well-planned campaign of violence Hamas unleashed last week, which saw civilians being deliberately targeted for kidnap, torture, and murder took the lives of an estimated 1300 people, including children. While these actions can be appropriately described as terrorism, it is likely the attack by Hamas constitutes crimes against humanity. These crimes must be condemned in the strongest manner.

Response by the Israeli government and its armed forces to the attack has begun. Air strikes have already killed an estimated 2,300, there are troops amassing at the border, and a total siege of the Gaza strip has been ordered. There are over two million people in Gaza who will now be without water, food, medicine, electricity, or the internet. Fifty percent of Gaza's population are under eighteen meaning that children are already being disproportionately impacted; at least 700 are thought to have been killed in the past week. In its indiscriminate and discriminate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, the imposition of siege tactics, and other widespread or systematic violations of human rights we consider it likely that Israel's armed forces are committing crimes against humanity. These crimes must be condemned in the strongest manner.

While all states have the right to defend themselves, this defence can never include violations of International Humanitarian Law or the commission of mass atrocity crimes. The violations by Hamas last week and historically do not and cannot justify violations by Israel's armed forces, just as recent and historic violations by the Israeli government or armed forces do not and cannot justify the Hamas attack.

Announcement from the Israel Defence Forces that more than 1.1 million people leave northern Gaza within 24 hours is an unprecedented demand that points to a rapid and forced evacuation ahead of a massive ground invasion. The historical Palestinian experience of forced displacement means there are serious and credible concerns that any such exodus would become the permanent removal of Gazans from their homes. This historical experience also means that many Gazans will be reluctant to leave, fearing they will never be able to return. Others will be unable to flee, whether because they are too old, too young, pregnant, disabled, or sick. The scale of approaching human suffering cannot be overstated.

Siege tactics, the use of collective punishment, forced deportations, the targeting of civilians, hospitals, schools, and housing blocks, are serious violations of International Humanitarian Law and international human rights law. Such violations must always be condemned. Wherever these crimes occur, efforts must always be prioritised to slow down and halt the trajectory of violence, and ultimately investigated and punished. Failure to do so consistently allows impunity to flourish everywhere – and always leaves civilians to pay the price.

His Majesty's Government has made strides in its approach and policy on mass atrocity crimes, recognising atrocity prevention as a priority in its 2030 framework and in creating a dedicated team in the heart of Whitehall tasked with coordinating UK contributions to a world free from such crimes.

Just last week, the UK:

- led the way in New York in the Sixth Committee discussions towards a new and needed Treaty on Crimes Against Humanity.
- led efforts in Geneva to successfully secure an international investigative mechanism into the human rights violations and atrocity crimes being committed in Sudan.
- was rightly 'appalled' by and roundly condemned a junta air strike on an internally displaced persons camp near Munglai Hkyet in Kachin state, Myanmar, which killed 28 civilians.

These same political and ethical commitments, expertise, and international levers must be activated with equal conviction towards the protection of civilians and the prevention of mass atrocities in Israel and Palestine. Likewise, the UK's support for accountability for mass atrocity crimes, from Syria to Ukraine, must include justice for Israel and Palestine.

Inconsistency in the face of mass atrocity crimes undermines the safety of everyone in Israel in Palestine, it also undermines the safety of us all. Never does the targeting of one group lead to the greater security of others. Failure to stand resolutely against crimes against humanity wherever they occur undermines efforts to secure peace everywhere they occur, whether that is Ukraine, Sudan, Syria, or Xinjiang.

Identity-based violence has devastated the lives of people in Israel and Palestine for generations as cycles of persecution, terrorism, blockade, and widespread or systematic violations of human rights have eroded the path towards peace and a two-state solution. Over the past year, as tensions in Gaza, at the border, and within Israel have grown, there have been repeated warning of an increasingly febrile and explosive situation. Why those warnings were ignored by so many will need to be interrogated. More immediately, deep understanding of the recent and longer histories of identity-based violence, exclusion and atrocity crimes that have taken and damaged so many lives must inform all efforts towards equity, dignity and peace for all in Palestine and Israel.

The responsibility to protect is a collective one that must be dually pursued at home and in our participation in the world; it is an endeavour we all can and must contribute to. It is a responsibility that can only be upheld through consistency. Mass atrocity crimes are never justified. The UK, our parliament, and our government must always – universally and unreservedly – stand against them.

Our recommendations

All Members activated by a desire help protect people from mass atrocity crimes must urge the government to utilise all levers to help slow this trajectory of escalation, to underline that the perpetration of systematic or widespread violations will always be condemned, and then investigated and punished.

We ask Members to urge His Majesty's Government to:

- Immediately seek the cessation of violence by all parties
- Be resolute in reminding all parties of their obligations to abide by International Humanitarian Law and to actively endeavour to prevent violations and protect civilians
- Prioritise the unfettered access of and make increased contribution to humanitarian aid
- Integrate a framework of atrocity prevention into the UK's strategy to ensure that UK officials are able to properly centre its treaty and ethical obligations across its responses to the crisis, and resource UK country teams and relevant officials with urgent atrocity prevention and response training, expertise, guidance and leadership
- Unreservedly support the open investigation by the International Criminal Court into crimes within the jurisdiction of the Court that are alleged to have been committed in the Situation of Palestine since 13 June 2014. All violations committed by Hamas, the Israeli military, and any other actor, must be investigated and brought to trial. The UK's global leadership in its support for accountability for mass atrocity crimes, from Syria to Ukraine, must include justice for Israel and Palestine.
- Activate urgent dialogue via existing forums for atrocity prevention, including by but not limited to International Atrocity Prevention Working Group, the Group of Friends of the Responsibility to Protect, in its bilateral relations with the US and others
- Prepare for worse to come by consistently seeking to slow the trajectory of escalation, halt the violence, and save lives

As an organisation that works to confront and prevent identity-based violence in the UK as well as internationally we know that when violence escalates in Israel and Palestine, hate crime and hate incidents, including but not limited to islamophobia and antisemitism rise in our own towns and cities. We ask all members to acknowledge and respond responsibly to the increase in domestic identity-based violence, hate crime and hate incidents, including but not limited to islamophobia and antisemitism. If these tensions are deliberately stoked, risks of identity-based violence including violent extremism rise further.

About.

Protection Approaches is a registered human rights charity that works to prevent identity-based violence in the UK and internationally. For nearly a decade we have worked towards the strengthening of UK contributions to the prevention of mass atrocity crimes.

Our full statement on preventing mass atrocity crimes in Israel and Palestine can be accessed [here](#).

For more information about our work see www.protectionapproaches.org

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