

The Day UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres Became Relevant. Israel Calls for His Resignation

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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The relevance given to a UN Secretary-General is often judged by the degree of controversy caused. In history, the most relevant are usually targeted. Dag Hammarskjöld, refusing to remain a mere bauble of international office, was almost certainly murdered over his intervention in the Congo civil war in 1961. The least relevant (who was that sweet little fella, Ban Ki-Moon?) have barely registered a note of dissent. The big powers like to know they can render such figures impotent, if not insignificant.

It was, for that reason, refreshing to see the current occupant of that post [make the less than startling remark](#) that the atrocious attacks of October 7 staged by Hamas and Islamic Jihad on Israeli soil could not be seen as standalone acts of individual, unprovoked outrage. António Guterres was careful to also note that there was "nothing" that could "justify the deliberate killing, injuring and kidnapping of civilians, or the launching of rockets against civilian targets".

Guterres also noted that it was "important to also recognise the attacks by Hamas did not happen in a vacuum." The Palestinians had "been subjected to 56 years of suffocating occupation. They have seen their land steadily devoured by settlements and plagued by violence; their economy stifled; their people displaced and their homes demolished."

While the attacks by Hamas could not be justified to address such grievances, they also could not be used as a pretext to "justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people." Even war, he explained to his colleagues, had rules.

The Secretary-General also reiterated the principle of protecting civilians during armed conflict. This precluded using them as human shields and ordering "more than one million people to evacuate the south, where there is no shelter, no food, no water, no medicine, and no fuel, and then continuing to bomb the south itself."

Such comments did not go down well with the Israeli Foreign Minister. Bullies of international relations are always easily slighted. And so it was that Eli Cohen would gasp and wonder which world the secretary-general was living in. “Definitely, this is not our world.”

The foreign minister [made it fairly clear](#) what sort of world that was. “I will not meet the UN Secretary-General. After the October 7th massacre, there is no place for a balanced approach. Hamas must be erased off the face of the planet.”

Gilad Erdan, the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, spoke in the voice of complacency outraged, going so far as [to demand the resignation](#) of Guterres.

It is a disgrace to the [@UN](#) that the Secretary-General did not retract his words and is not even able to apologize for what he said yesterday□□

The Secretary-General, once again, distorts and twists reality. He clearly said yesterday that the massacre by Hamas ‘did not happen...

— Ambassador Gilad Erdan גלעד ארדן (@giladerdan1) [October 25, 2023](#)

“A Secretary-General who does not understand that the murder of innocents can never be understood by any ‘background’ cannot be Secretary-General.”

With a callow splutter, he suggested that the UN chief had “expressed an understanding for terrorism and murder.”

On army radio, Erdan [also announced](#) that Israel would be refusing “to issue visas to UN representatives. We have already refused a visa for the undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs, Martin Griffiths. The time has come to teach them a lesson.”

As ever, Erdan’s reasoning confused explication with justification, but in that world, the nuanced explanation huffs and puffs in tired resignation, leaving the murderous justification to take the front position.

The comments from Guterres also come in light of the perilous operational state of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA). The humanitarian agency has been starved of resources and will be forced to cease the provision of hospital care, largely occasioned by Israel’s blockade on fuel. “Current stocks are almost completely exhausted,” the agency [states](#) in its October 26 situation report, “forcing life-saving services to come to a halt. This includes the supply of piped water as well as fuel for the health sector, bakeries, and generators.” Staff have also suffered a horrendous: 39 have been killed since October 7.

As for the attacks on his own integrity, Guterres [has been combative](#).

“I am shocked by the misrepresentations by some of my statement ... as if I was justifying acts of terror by Hamas. This is false. It was the opposite.”

The brainstorming session in the Netanyahu-IDF meetings must have been straightforward: de-historicise conflict, first and foremost; relegate Hamas to some equivalent monstrous

organisation, in this case, ISIS; and then, just to make sure, use Nazism and the Holocaust as recyclable motifs.

Along the way, massive Palestinian casualties, many children (2,360 deaths over three weeks), can be excused by pointing the finger at Hamas, because it is not Israeli jets and weapons doing the killing but the policy of a terrorist organisation. And besides, Israel is, as Cohen [insists](#), doing it for “the civilised world”.

!The west is next
היום זה אצלנו מחר זה אצלכם.
pic.twitter.com/SKriEzRsnR חמאס=דאעש

— אלי כהן | Eli Cohen (@elico1) [October 26, 2023](#)

The Israeli strategy here is to excuse the inexcusable: the collective, mass laceration of a people. In this, they simply perpetuate the tragic crimes that have been visited, not only upon the Jews, but upon any ethnicity or group in history. The Whig statesman Edmund Burke [spoke](#) about not knowing “the method of drawing up an indictment against a whole people.” Unfortunately, in this conflict, that indictment was drawn up some time ago, and is being prosecuted with relentless ruthlessness.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a regular contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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