

## From Einsatzgruppen to Hamas: A Historical Continuum of Mobile Mass Murder

### Description

Even as the latest war between Israel and Hamas approaches its one-month anniversary, the full scale of the [atrocities](#) suffered by Israelis living close to the border with the Gaza Strip is still becoming clear: entire families executed in their homes and safe rooms, babies and children slain, women raped, and men killed, with the survivors dragged into captivity. The 1,400 Israelis slain in the Oct. 7 attack have been [widely compared to the 3,000 people who perished on 9/11](#). Proportionately, the Hamas attack is worse: per capita, it would be as if 40,000 people lost their lives when the World Trade Center towers fell. More Jews in fact were killed Oct. 7, 2023 than on any other day since the end of the Holocaust.

This not coincidental. Hamas's deliberate attack on Israeli civilians was designed to maximize death and destruction, intending not just to terrorize the population but ethnically cleanse the land of Jews, as dictated by the group's founding covenant. The savagery of the assaults is perhaps matched only by the professional determination of the perpetrators to systematically murder their way through the towns, villages, and collective farms bordering Gaza. A particularly gruesome method seems to have been repeated in each community: teams of fast-moving terrorists arrive at dawn and kill en masse, taunting, torturing, and abusing their victims.

The original attack began early on Oct. 7, with an assault force of an estimated 1,500 members of either Hamas or Palestine Islamic Jihad attacking the kibbutzes of southwest Israel. Describing the bloodshed at kibbutz Kfar Azza, an Israeli major general [related](#) how "They burned the apartments, then they shoot the babies, they cut their heads." More than 100 died in just this community alone, around a quarter of the kibbutz's population. At the Supernova music festival near kibbutz Re'im, the carnage was even worse. Concertgoers were hunted down even as they fled the campgrounds; terrorist teams blocked the roads surrounding the site and laid in wait to murder all those who futilely fled in their direction.

Other terrorists used paragliders to fly across the border into Israel, with killing teams descending far beyond the frontier. The carnage was then [shamelessly shared on social media](#) by Hamas thereby allowing viewers from around the world to both witness the bloodshed in real-time and thus experience the horror felt by the victims.

In the carnage that ensued that day, Hamas had adopted some of the same heinous tactics and mass murder methods that the Nazis had used to slaughter Jews. From 1941 onward, some 3,000 members of the elite *Waffen-SS Einsatzgruppen* (Special Action Groups) swept through Eastern Europe, [executing an estimated 1.5 million Jews](#). Although mass slaughter of civilians has been a fixture of warfare since biblical times, technological advances in weaponry, communications, and more precise intelligence facilitated a rapidity of lethality that was without precedent. Indeed, the *Einsatzgruppen* provided the first modern example of organized, nomadic, ethnic killing squads systematically eliminating their victims. These mobile extermination units were highly mechanized, lightly outfitted, and designed to operate independently from traditional supply lines. They were dispersed across considerable distances, traversing regions far from the frontlines: with the sole objective of identifying and eliminating all the Jews encountered on their path. This process always began with adult men, who were most likely to attempt resistance, thus leaving more vulnerable and therefore compliant groups consisting primarily of women and girls, [who provided opportunities for sexual abuse](#) before they were cast aside and cruelly executed.

From this procedure, a blueprint for mechanized ethnic cleansing emerged. It can be summarized as entailing [five basic steps](#). First, small, specialized units of lightly equipped and highly autonomous fighters are dispatched into a given territory with the express objective of exterminating local populations of the targeted ethnicity. Upon arrival, these units work with indigenous sympathizers as necessary, to identify victims. These victims are then herded by selection teams, are separated by gender, and then have all property appropriated. Next, a location is prepared or adapted for mass execution, which is then carried out. Finally, the victims' bodies are buried—usually in an effort to obfuscate the act of killing. The cycle then begins anew. Indeed, its success was predicated on the roving mass murders being kept secret—so that the hapless Jewish residents of these areas were unaware of the fate awaiting them. Hamas' approach Oct. 7 was completely different in this key respect. Hamas wanted the world to see their depredations—in fact in real time—and demonstrably reveled in their slaughter. The murderous *Einsatzgruppen* killing teams, by comparison, took less evident pleasure in their grim task than their modern-day Palestinian counterparts did.

Seven decades later after World War II, these tactics dramatically [resurfaced](#) with the emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Embracing the same methods used by the Germans during World War II, ISIS was nearly unique among terrorist groups in its often gleeful brutality and interest in enslaving civilians generally, and religious minorities, deemed heretics, specifically. While exact numbers remain elusive, tens of thousands of Yezidis, Chaldeans, Kurds, Shi'a, and Christians, among others, were systematically targeted for execution or enslavement by rapid, mechanized units of highly mobile, lightly equipped ISIS terrorists.

Like the *Einsatzgruppen*, these units mostly operated [autonomously](#) and deliberately avoided combat with enemy forces so they could concentrate on their mission of mass murder. Just as the *Einsatzgruppen* relied on locals to identify their targets, ISIS used this knowledge to compile detailed logs of potential victims within hours of arrival. In Mosul, then a city of around 1.5 million, this was accomplished in 72 hours based on information gleaned from local informants. Having been identified and their places of residences raided, ISIS's victims were then herded at gunpoint into large buildings like wedding halls or high schools, separated by gender, and deprived of food or water to break their resistance. Meanwhile, other ISIS fighters scouted suitable areas with existing gorges or trenches that could be expanded or prepared to bury the bodies. Victims were subsequently transported to the site, where [summary mass execution](#), almost always with small arms fire, commenced. Unlike the *Einsatzgruppen*, these killings were not conducted with cold efficiency, but with a deep religious fervor—rendering the killing a [sacramental, almost transcendent act](#). The ISIS fighters would then move on to the next town. As of 2018, more than 200 of such mass burial sites [have been identified](#), though this number is likely to grow as investigation continues. Again, although mass murder of civilians by terrorists or other irregular forces is hardly unique in history, the speed and efficiency with which determined killers can accomplish their tasks in the 20th and 21st centuries is a distinctly modern phenomenon.

A lesson of the serial depredations of ISIS was that terrorist organizations with genocidal intentions understand that small, mobile, and independent groups of executioners can inflict unimaginable harm to communities simply using small arms. In addition, by maintaining both their mobility and operational independence, these teams could kill more people more efficiently. The *Einsatzgruppen* killing methodology has thus been resurrected as a blueprint for genocide in the modern age. No longer reliant on concentration camps, swiftly moving groups of autonomous fighters can instead themselves effectively carry out campaigns of mass murder. Indeed, *Einsatzgruppen* tactics have been adopted in Ukraine, where Russian forces committed a massacre in the town of Bucha, murdering up to 458 civilians, including children and hostages killed with their hands tied, both in plain view and in specially-designated [execution chambers](#).

Hamas adopted *Einsatzgruppen* tactics when it struck Israel Oct. 7. This should not have been surprising, since their [genocidal intentions](#) were spelled out long ago in the 1988 Hamas covenant, Article 7 declaring that “The Day of Judgement will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Moslems, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him.” The language is eerily similar to that issued by one of the German Nazis charged with cleansing Poland of Jews, Hans Frank. “The more that die the better; hitting them represents a victory for our Reich. The Jews should feel that we’ve arrived. [!] We will crush these Jews wherever we can,” Frank [proclaimed](#) in 1939.

The Hamas attacks differed from these prior examples in four key respects. First, identification of the victims was not an issue, since any Israelis, or indeed other foreigners, the terrorists encountered were a target. Second, Hamas did not completely control the territory when the massacre took place. Accordingly, elements of previous genocides—*including separation of men and women and preparation of burial grounds*—were not possible. Time was not on the terrorists' side and they therefore set about their work with a macabre alacrity. Hamas' environment, however, was target-rich, allowing them to kill at will. Third, Hamas broadcast their brutal attacks on social media, clearly wishing to involve the world in their atrocities. At least one fighter even [called his parents on WhatsApp](#) to brag about his having killed ten Jews. "Look how many I killed with my own hands!" he exclaimed. "Your son killed Jews!" Fourth, Hamas's strategic goal appears to be [provocation](#)—an attempt to [goad Israel](#) into an overwhelming military reaction that in turn would lead to mass casualties among Palestinians living in Gaza and thus lead to condemnation and vituperation of the killing that would consolidate Israel's further isolation by the world.

*Einsatzgruppen*-style killings are mercifully relatively rare. The sheer barbarity and scale of the murder they inspire require a complete erosion of moral sensibilities, achieved only by those blinded totally by genocidal hate or divinely driven by religious fervor. But given Hamas's spectacular tactical success and ability to evade Israeli intelligence, they may now become more common, a reality that carries grave counterterrorism implications for government and intelligence agencies charged with protecting their citizens. Israel, for instance, will likely forever change, militarizing its communities and seriously strengthening its borders against future such incursions.

The global community cannot ignore the savagery and professionalism of the mass murders that took place Oct. 7. Even within the complex geopolitical context that dictates relationships between Israelis and Palestinians, the world should stand united against the genocidal terrorism that was visited on Israel that day. A failure to call out violence and atrocities deliberately targeted at civilians—in contravention of any international laws of war or indeed moral and ethical standards—will have devastating consequences for future conflicts around the world. In addition, terrorism in recent years had been relegated by the United States and other Western countries to a less pressing priority. This had been implemented in [2018 by the new National Defense Strategy](#). Competition between great powers took precedence to [the effect that threats from groups like Hamas](#), which did not directly affect the United States, were ignored. But just as ISIS nearly a decade changed the nature of contemporary terrorism, through its sheer barbarity and savagery, the Oct. 7 attacks provide fresh evidence of a changing terrorist calculus concerning the wanton targeting of civilians that threatens to gain validation by a moral equivalency that celebrates terrorism and mass murder as "resistance" and a necessary corrective to the West's colonial legacy. Throughout history, terrorism has reflected the ethos and mores of the audience to whom the violence is meant to appeal. The attacks thus mark a

dangerous watershed in the potential acceptance of terrorism and mass killing as legitimate political discourse.

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*Bruce Hoffman is senior fellow for counterterrorism and homeland security at the Council of Foreign Relations and a professor at Georgetown University. He is the author of Anonymous Soldiers: The Struggle for Israel, 1917-1947. Jacob Ware is a research fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations and an adjunct professor at Georgetown University and DeSales University. Together, they are the authors of the forthcoming God, Guns, and Sediton: Far-Right Terrorism in America. C. William Vardy is a graduate of Georgetown University's Security Studies Program and an independent terrorism researcher. He is, most recently, the author of Concrete Inferno: Terror and Torture under Brazil's Military Regime, 1964-1985.*

*Lead image: Soviet POWs covering a mass grave after the Babi Yar massacre, October 1, 1941. (Johannes H  hle, Public Domain)*

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