

Researcher: Trauma, histories of victimhood will influence Israeli response

October 11 2023



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Palestinian militants launched an unprecedented attack on Israel, killing nearly 900 Israelis and taking 150 more hostage. The hostages include civilians, children, elderly and soldiers. The attack, which many have

compared to the 9/11 terrorist attack on the United States, took the world and the Israeli military by surprise.

Carly Wayne, an assistant professor of political science in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis, has been studying strategic dynamics of Israeli-Palestinian violence and its effects on political attitudes and [public health](#) for nearly a decade.

Her most recent paper, "The Holocaust, the Socialization of Victimhood and Outgroup Political Attitudes in Israel," published Sept. 2 in [Comparative Political Studies](#) with WashU graduate student Taylor Damann and Israel colleague Shani Fachter, examines how the perceived historical victimization of the Jewish and Israeli people across time is broadly socialized among the Israeli public. Wayne's research demonstrates how these narratives play a role in shaping political views and foment negative intergroup attitudes.

According to Wayne, that narrative already has surfaced in Israeli leaders' messages about the attack and will continue to shape the country's response to Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

"The atrocities of the Holocaust and its political implications are so broadly socialized in Israel. It's ubiquitous across the curriculum in Jewish schools beginning at a young age and commonly invoked in political rhetoric," Wayne said. "This is one way in which this socialization of Jewish victimhood throughout time happens in Israeli society and then gets applied to the current context."

According to Wayne, this narrative shapes how Israeli Jews view present-day conflict: While the Jewish people used to be weak, they are stronger now with Israel and will never allow something like the Holocaust to happen again, according to the narrative.

"I think that's one of the reasons why this attack has been so traumatic," Wayne said. "Israel has put a lot of faith in its army, so this is really a gut punch. There will be a lot of finger-pointing and investigations going forward about what happened but, unequivocally, the army failed. They had no intelligence to suggest this was going to happen and they were not prepared.

"Unfortunately, the lesson that Israel is going to take from this is not that this kind of violence is connected to occupation and the failure to reach a diplomatic solution, but rather that withdrawing from Gaza was a mistake and that Israel essentially needs to keep a tighter grip on Palestinian freedom of movement," Wayne added.

How did we get here?

While the conflict between Israel and Palestine is one of the most nuanced conflicts that exists right now, the roots of the current Gaza-Israel crisis can be clearly traced back to 2005, when Israeli troops unilaterally pulled out of Gaza, Wayne said.

Following their withdrawal, Hamas—a group that the United States categorizes as a foreign terrorist organization—won the Palestinian parliamentary election, which led Israel to institute a blockade of Gaza and restrict Palestinian freedom of movement outside of Gaza.

"It's unclear if the people of Gaza voted for Hamas because of their more militant stance toward Israel or simply because they were frustrated with the more moderate Fatah and ongoing corruption," Wayne explained. "However, the United States and many other international observers universally condemned the election of Hamas, which is seen as a terrorist organization, and Israel and Egypt locked down the borders of Gaza Strip."

"In response to this lockdown, however, Hamas became increasingly frustrated and militant. Over the years, Hamas and other groups in the Gaza Strip have launched thousands of rockets with increasing sophistication at Israeli population centers, but the attacks were limited to air and there were often many more Palestinian than Israeli casualties during violent flare-ups.

"Saturday's attack by Hamas is a stark departure from what has been going on for the past 18 years in that Israel suffered a major border breach and hundreds, if not close to a thousand casualties at this point, which is unprecedented."

How shifting regional politics influenced the attack

Wayne believes fears about being sidelined within the region may have pushed Hamas to plan such a dramatic attack.

"In recent years, neighboring Gulf states including Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain have shown a growing willingness to enter into deals with Israel. In doing so, these countries have bypassed the Palestinian issue, which had long been a sticking point for Israel to have diplomatic relations within the region," Wayne said. "In a way, Hamas is telling the region, 'You can't just ignore us.'"

This renewed violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will create a seismic shift in the region. For starters, there's the question of how involved Iran was in planning the attack. If it comes out that the country was heavily involved beyond providing monetary support, Israel is going to feel that they must respond militarily against Iran, Wayne said.

"If Israel were to attack Iran, that would likely lead to a huge regional escalation. It would be very difficult for these Gulf regimes to continue attempting normalization with Israel," Wayne said.

"We've already seen in the demonstrations this week that these governments will face incredible public pressure to stop normalization with Israel. And so, I think that is motivating Hamas more than anything."

How attack could shift support back to Israel, Netanyahu

For decades, Israel has enjoyed an iron-clad relationship with the United States and other NATO members. Over the last decade, however, cracks have begun to emerge in those relationships. The right-wing Israeli government, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has faced growing criticism for continuing settlement expansion in the West Bank, its mistreatment of Palestinians and being increasingly uninterested in a two-state solution. At the same time, the Palestinian plight was being presented in a more favorable light.

"Clearly, these attacks have swung the pendulum of international public opinion back to Israel, at least in the short term. The attacks have served as a reminder that Hamas may be a governing authority in the Gaza Strip, but they have not abandoned their extreme ideology and tactics. And they still are a religious, fundamentalist organization that is willing to launch deliberate and brutal attacks on civilians, including increasing evidence of torture and murder of women, children and the elderly," Wayne said. "The question is will that international support remain long term as Israel will inevitably strike back very, very hard against the Gaza Strip and kill many Palestinian civilians there?"

Criticism of Netanyahu and his right-wing government also has come from within Israel.

Millions of Israelis have taken to the streets to protest Netanyahu's plan

for judicial reform, which would make it more difficult to try a sitting prime minister on corruption charges. And more moderate centrist parties have refused to work with Netanyahu. Wayne believes Hamas might have tried to take advantage of this disarray in Israel.

But that all changed following the attack, Wayne said.

"On one hand, Netanyahu is probably going to get a lot of blame for not preventing this attack. But cynically, this attack will probably temporarily stop these protests against his government, and perhaps even lead to a unity government that would have never happened otherwise and will, at least temporarily, give Netanyahu more power."

More information: Carly Wayne et al, The Holocaust, the Socialization of Victimhood and Outgroup Political Attitudes in Israel, *Comparative Political Studies* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00104140231194068](https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140231194068)

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

Citation: Researcher: Trauma, histories of victimhood will influence Israeli response (2023, October 11) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-10-trauma-histories-victimhood-israeli-response.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.