

Researchers: Hamas' use of sexual violence is an all-too-common part of modern war, but not in all conflicts

December 12 2023, by Dyan Mazurana and Anastasia Marshak



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

The [United Nations](#), women's groups and human rights groups are facing criticism for not quickly condemning Hamas fighters for raping and

sexually violating Israelis [during the Oct. 7, 2023, attack](#).

[Most critics cite rising antisemitism as the reason](#) some experts and advocates did not quickly rally behind Israel's [repeated claims](#) that Hamas fighters committed [sexual violence](#).

There is strong evidence—including [eyewitnesses'](#) and first responders' testimony, [medical assessments](#) of released hostages and [independent investigations](#)—that [Hamas committed sexual violence](#). This includes rape, gang rape, sexual torture and sexual mutilation of Israelis of [diverse genders and ages](#).

Beyond antisemitism, were there other reasons for the hesitation to identify sexual [violence](#) as part of Hamas' attack?

[We are scholars who work directly](#) with victims of war-related sexual violence and other serious crimes.

We believe that some experts may have hesitated because [Hamas hasn't been known in the past to use sexual violence](#) in its attacks against Israeli civilians. We take this factor into consideration as we suggest why Hamas may have made a decision to use sexual violence during the Oct. 7 attack.

Sexual violence in war

Research on sexual violence in armed conflicts has grown rapidly over the [last 15 years](#), as feminist scholars increasingly took women's and girls' [experiences of war seriously](#).

This research helps explain what motivates people, governments and armed groups to [fight wars](#). It also helps illuminate, [among other things](#), why some [armed forces](#) and groups commit sexual violence during wars

and how to prevent and [address such violence](#).

Armed forces and [armed groups](#) sometimes intentionally use sexual violence to carry out attacks and achieve military goals, leading to the term "[rape as a weapon of war](#)."

Rape [can be used to terrorize and brutalize civilians of the opposing side](#) and to destroy the morale and fighting spirit of enemy forces. In a number of recent conflicts, rape has been a potent weapon to [motivate populations to flee](#) instead of fighting back.

Sexual violence has been most recently used against civilians in wars in [Ethiopia](#), [Ukraine](#) and [Darfur](#).

Sexual violence's effects on victims, their families and their communities include serious short- and [long-term physical, psychological, social](#) and economic harm.

When and where it tends to happen

One of the best publicly available datasets on sexual violence in war is the [Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict Data Project](#).

Created by Professor [Dara Kay Cohen and housed at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government](#), this [public data project](#) analyzes rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, sexual torture and other sexual crimes in 189 armed conflicts in 86 countries, from 1989 through 2021.

Our analysis of this data shows that, first, sexual violence does not occur in all conflicts. Sexual violence was reported in approximately half of the 189 [armed conflicts](#).

Second, sexual violence may be [used by some](#), but not all, groups fighting in a conflict. It also does not happen consistently throughout a conflict.

Third, government forces are twice as likely as rebel and insurgent groups to use sexual violence—with government forces committing sexual violence in 28% of the years of conflict, versus rebel groups doing so 14% of years of conflict.

For example, the [armies of Myanmar](#), [Russia](#) and [Syria](#) are notorious for their use of sexual violence against civilians.

Finally, although rebel groups are less likely to use sexual violence, when they do they are significantly more likely to use systematic and [widespread sexual violence](#), as opposed to isolated occurrences.

The case of Israel and Palestinian territories

Previous research overwhelmingly finds that after 1948, the conflict between Israel and Palestinian groups has very low levels of reported sexual violence committed by either the [Israeli military or Hamas](#), which formed in 1987. [Some scholars](#) question these findings.

There are credible reports of Israeli security forces sexually torturing Palestinians in eight of the 31 years between 1989 to 2021, and also [raping Palestinians](#) during this time frame. These acts of sexual torture and rape are found in infrequent [and isolated reports](#), and most occurred when Palestinians were detained.

Hamas' [international law violations](#), including using human shields, taking hostages and killing civilians, are well documented.

Our analysis shows that Hamas does not have a history of using sexual

violence [against Israelis](#).

The intent of Hamas' attack

Given this history, how do we make sense of [the many reports now emerging of Hamas' use of sexual violence](#) in the Oct. 7 attack?

Researchers have determined that much of the sexual violence during armed conflict is men communicating their own masculinity to others, while demonstrating other males' inability to protect women and girls [or defend themselves](#).

Male perpetrators also use sexual violence to [demonstrate their power over women, girls, men and boys, as well as over their victims' families and, symbolically, over the larger community or country they are fighting against](#).

Female and [male victims of sexual violence](#) can experience a range of physical and psychological harms, some of which can last a lifetime. They may experience [stigmatization, discrimination and rejection by their families and communities](#), which can cause long-lasting social and economic harm. Female victims can become pregnant. Some in such cases will terminate their pregnancies, while others [give birth to children](#) as a result of their rape.

Hamas sexually brutalized the women and men they raped, with reports that [murdered women's genitalia and breasts](#) were severely mutilated. Hamas also reportedly [shot and killed women](#) either while or after they raped them on Oct. 7.

These violent acts suggest an intent to utterly destroy their victims, while also terrorizing the Israeli public and humiliating Israeli men, Israel's military and the state of Israel.

We also think that Hamas' use of sexual violence was intended to outrage and provoke Israel [to engage in a permanent state of war with Hamas](#) and attack civilian spaces in Gaza. Hamas hopes in doing so to consolidate power and [keep the Palestinian crisis alive](#).

Was Hamas' use of sexual violence part of a predetermined strategy, or fighters acting opportunistically without orders? At least a year in advance, Hamas mapped and planned the attack with [painstaking detail](#).

They also carried out an intense daylong exercise that mimicked [the actual Oct. 7 attack](#). Given this level of planning and Hamas' previous lack of using sexual violence, it is highly unlikely that Hamas' sexual violence committed against Israelis was the result of some men who went rogue. More likely, sexual violence was part of Hamas' war tactics and strategy.

The [United Nations](#) and the [International Criminal Court](#) are now, rightly, investigating Hamas' use of sexual violence as possible war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Under international law, surviving victims have [a right to justice and a range of assistance to aid in their recovery](#). Families of the victims who were killed have a right to information about what happened to their loved ones. Throughout it all, everyone directly affected by sexual violence has a right to be treated with care and dignity.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Researchers: Hamas' use of sexual violence is an all-too-common part of modern war,

but not in all conflicts (2023, December 12) retrieved 28 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2023-12-hamas-sexual-violence-all-too-common-modern.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.