

Moral clarity at WHO needs to be clearer

In the Offline entitled *The moral clarity of WHO's Director-General*, Richard Horton highlights Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus' "ethical leadership" and supports his anguished calls for a complete cessation to hostilities in Gaza.¹ More specifically, Tedros has called on Israel to abstain from its attacks on Hamas because of the resulting injury and death of non-combatant civilians and especially children.

We too feel this anguish. Sadly, Hamas' recent invasion of Israel on Oct 3, 2023, follows years in which many of us had hands-on contact caring for Gazan children and families.^{2,3} The injury and death of civilians and especially children—Gazan and Israeli—is indeed the basis for a call to action.

However, unlike Richard Horton, we believe that Tedros' statements fall woefully short. "Moral clarity"¹ would require the acknowledgment of some uncomfortable truths. Vilifying Israel alone, leaving aside Hamas' clear culpability for events since Oct 7, 2023, clearly obfuscates the truth. This war is not about a "solution to the Palestine–Israel situation" and "...Israel's reaction is hardly borne out of either 'rage' or 'anger'",¹ but rather is an expression of the moral duty to protect civilians against the perpetrators of this massacre. Moral clarity must recognise that the *raison d'être* of Hamas has always been and continues to be the obliteration of Israel, as clearly stated in the Hamas Covenant.⁴ When asked specifically if Hamas' plans meant the complete destruction of Israel, Ghazi Hamad, a Hamas leader, replied: "Yes, of course."⁵

Horton lauds Tedros' early and insistent calls for a ceasefire. But, as Hillary Clinton reminded us on US network television, "...there was a ceasefire on October 6, that Hamas broke by their barbaric assault on

peaceful civilians."⁶ More than anyone, we would welcome a solution that is non-violent; but the solution cannot spell destruction of the world's sole Jewish state. Most analysts conclude that the only way to defend both Israelis and Palestinians is to permanently incapacitate Hamas and to complete this process quickly and expeditiously but with the utmost possible effort to minimise injury to non-combatants. Although striving to minimise the death and suffering of civilians (those in Israel and Palestinians in Gaza), Israel cannot risk an imposed quick fix solution that would leave Hamas in place. These arrangements have simply proved to be a formula for the renewal of thousands of Hamas rocket attacks (each a war crime) over the last decade and just 3 months ago punctuated by a premeditated massacre of more than 1000 Israeli civilians—both Jews and Arabs. For those of us who live in Israel, this struggle is existential.

Let us indeed call for moral clarity; but such speech also requires truth. We hope and pray that the termination of this conflict will bring Palestinians and Israelis closer to the peace that has so long eluded both peoples.

We declare no competing interests.

Editorial note: The Lancet Group takes a neutral position with respect to territorial claims in published text and institutional affiliations.

Rafael Beyar, Shraga Blazer,
Edward Breuer, Rivka Carmi,
Aaron Ciechanover,*A Mark Clarfield,
Shimon Glick, Daniella Magen,
Orly Manor, Ora Paltiel, Karl Skorecki
markclar@bgu.ac.il

Rambam Health Care Campus, Haifa, Israel (RB, SB, DM, KS); Technion—Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa, Israel (RB, AC, DM); Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel (EB); Israeli Academy for Science in Medicine, Ramat Gan, Israel (RC); Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva 8410501, Israel (AMC, SG); Hebrew University-Hadassah Medical Center, Jerusalem, Israel (OM, OP); Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel (KS)

- 1 Horton R. Offline: The moral clarity of WHO's Director-General. *Lancet* 2023; **402**: 1953.
- 2 Skorecki K, Horton R. Israel: health and beyond. *Lancet* 2017; **389**: 2551–62.
- 3 Ash S, Zuckerman T, Rowe JM. War and peace: Israeli physicians treating Palestinian patients. *Lancet* 2023; **402**: 2073–74.

- 4 Avalon. The covenant of the Islamic resistance movement. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp (accessed Jan 12, 2024).
- 5 MEMRI. Hamas official Ghazi Hamad: we will repeat the October 7 attack, time and again, until Israel is annihilated; we are victims – everything we do is justified. 2023. <https://www.memri.org/reports/hamas-official-ghazi-hamad-we-will-repeat-october-7-attack-time-and-again-until-israel> (accessed Dec 6, 2023).
- 6 ABC News. Hillary Clinton explains her recent comments on the Israel–Hamas war on 'The View'. 2023. <https://abcnews.go.com/theview/video/hillary-clinton-explains-recent-comments-israel-hamas-war-104730226> (accessed Dec 6, 2023).



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