

Palestinian and Israeli lives must be valued equally in global response to crisis, Elders warn

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Elders' Statement

The Elders condemn the horrendous terror attacks launched by Hamas on 7 October 2023, the killing of innocent civilians, the holding of hostages and the continued indiscriminate missile attacks on Israel. These are mass atrocities for which the perpetrators must be brought to justice, preferably in a court of law.

We also condemn the Israeli government's unacceptable collective punishment of the population of Gaza through siege, the scale of the military assault and its death toll, and the forcible transfer of civilians within the territory, as well as the continuing land and home incursions and demolitions in the West Bank and settler violence against Palestinian communities. These are not legitimate acts of self-defence: they are clear violations of international humanitarian law, and some amount to atrocities for which there needs to be criminal accountability.

The Palestinian and Israeli peoples are intertwined by history, geography and legacies of sacrifice and suffering. The current crisis has sparked unimaginable pain and trauma on both sides which demands the world's compassion and respect. Israeli and Palestinian lives are of equal worth.

History, morality and political experience compel us to send this clear message: one set of crimes must not be responded to with more crimes.

As President Biden has warned, Israel must not repeat the mistakes made by the United States after the Al Qaeda terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the worst of which was the invasion of Iraq. Trying to defeat terrorism only through military action is more often than not a terrible mistake that leads to more terrorism, extremism and violence. A ground incursion by Israeli troops into Gaza could cause massive civilian casualties on top of the thousands of lives already lost, and risks inflaming a wider regional escalation of the conflict.

The cycles of violence and impunity must be broken, and the international community must be clear that all those accused of atrocity crimes on both sides should be held criminally accountable.

Leaders have for too long abdicated their responsibilities towards this conflict. All parties share the blame for extinguishing hope. Thirty years after the Oslo accords, there is now an absence of any political horizon towards a two-state solution that can end Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories and guarantee Israel's security.

Leaders cannot continue to view this conflict primarily through the prism of geopolitical divisions rather than the values of the UN Charter. That the UN Security Council has so far been unable to agree on a resolution, and call for a ceasefire as thousands of lives are being lost, is a failure to fulfil its fundamental duty. As Elders, we call for an immediate ceasefire, the restoration of essential water, food, medical and fuel supplies into Gaza, and the release of all hostages held by Hamas.

The normalisation of relations between Israel and some Arab states cannot succeed unless Palestinian self-determination and statehood are central. In this regard, reviving the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, and implementing the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions, offers a viable path towards regional stability and reconciliation.

Today's dark hour must be a catalyst for change.

As Elders, we stand with those who embrace political dialogue and justice through law, and hold firm to the values of human rights and peaceful co-existence.

ENDS

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