



## **Harvard Prof. Stephen Walt Dissects the Israel-Gaza War**

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**Glenn Greenwald (GG):** So there's obviously a lot going on. We picked a week to talk to you where the news is pretty active, to put that mildly. Obviously, the event that is dominating discussion is the latest outbreak of this war between Israel and Gaza. And I have a lot of specific questions about this war for you and its implications; what's driving it? But before we get into those specific ones let me just give you an opportunity to tell me your impressions generally about the events of the last six days.

**Stephen Walt (SW):** Well, they're deeply depressing on multiple levels. And this is one of these issues. I think all of us who are concerned about it have to try and handle it with as much care and sensitivity, recognising that there are people suffering and fearful on both sides. It's also a reminder of this sort of tragic paradox that it is moments when it is probably most important to be calm and try to think carefully about what the right course of action is. That also tends to be what it's hardest to do and people will naturally react emotionally. My overall view of this is, you know, obviously it's tragic and the actions being taken are clearly reprehensible. What Hamas did was wrong, a horrific violation of international law, a commission of obvious war crimes deserves widespread condemnation. I believe Israel's response now is also violating international law, threatening a mass slaughter there. And it seems to me both these responses have to be condemned by those of us who are hoping eventually that we can move towards a more peaceful situation.

**GG:** There is the tendency in situations like this for people to opine a little bit more aggressively than the actual knowledge permits and I think is something we probably all have to struggle against a little bit. But I want to ask you about the issue of the motives of the people who perpetrated the attack inside Israel on Saturday, which is Hamas and its very allied groups. Is it possible to know what Hamas motives are beyond just a kind of

opportunistic desire to bring violence to Israel for its own sake? Is there something geostrategic or geopolitical or involving the domestic politics of Israel that you think might have caused them to spend a lot of time, obviously planning and coordinating and then carrying out such an incredibly audacious and horrific attack inside Israel?

**SW:** Yeah. Well, I appreciate what you said at the beginning of it, that we all need to be somewhat humble about our ability to know exactly what the motivations were and exactly why they acted as they did, why the atrocities that occurred took place as well. I think that one can discern, I call it strategic logic, and that was that the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia and others, you could argue almost the entire international community had been marginalising the Palestinian issue and trying to treat this as something that maybe would get addressed at some point down the road. And possibly the prospect of normalisation between Israel and Saudi Arabia was seen as something that had to be headed off to as a way of further marginalising the Palestinian cause. And that by staging this audacious and horrific attack, the strategic motive would have been simply a reminder that this issue was not going to go away, that it was eventually going to require a political solution and it could not be forgotten. Again, that is not a justification for what Hamas did. But if you're looking for a strategic logic to it, it seems to me that's probably the best one can do.

**GG:** About the attack was that, not only the attack itself in terms of being very coordinated and professionalised, more so than I think prior attacks of Hamas have been, but also the propaganda campaign, the videos that we saw, some of the most disturbing ones, some of the ones that have provoked a lot of the most intense indignation among any decent person who was looking at what Hamas did. And Israel is going to feel rage and disgust. A lot of those videos were videos that were produced by Hamas that were very highly produced with a lot of music and graphics. It seems as though they weren't trying to show themselves in their best light, but were almost intending on some level to terrorise the Israeli population, to remind the Israelis that they're perhaps not as safe as they think they are. And it didn't seem as though they cared very much about perceptions in the West. What do you think was the motive in Hamas doing those sorts of things?

**SW:** Yeah, that's, I think, much harder, I think, for most of us to understand. In my view, this is completely counterproductive from the perspective of the broader Palestinian cause and for the reasons you laid out that this horrifies the rest of us. It diminishes, I think, some sympathy for the Palestinian cause. It empowers the most extreme elements in Israeli society in various ways. To me, it's completely counterproductive. Now, one can then start trying to develop possible explanations for it that they thought this was maybe going to rally support elsewhere, that this was going to be just vengeance for what they perceive as many years of oppression and the losses suffered on their side. I have a colleague who, you know, obviously compared this, as others have, to some of the horrific videos that ISIS used to propose. And my comment to them was, yes, and look what happened to the supposed caliphate that, you know, the world, by and large rallied to suppress that as well. So I think from Hamas's

perspective, this was an enormous blunder in addition to being horrific, just as on a basic human rights level.

**GG:** Let me ask you a similar question about the Israeli perspective in terms of what now is motivating them and their response could just be a by-product of my own subjective trajectory as an American who decided really to focus on politics and journalism in the wake of 9/11. And what I kind of thought was a lot of the excesses of our reaction, both militarily, but also in terms of civil liberties. Seems like obviously a country that suffers an attack like this is not going to tolerate, a population would never tolerate the government being inactive and not responding in a very aggressive way. I remember in the days and weeks and even months after 9/11, there was very much this kind of thirst for vengeance, this righteous rage. You know, we have to go and kill the people who did this, and the people who are near them who are innocent while so be it. That's just how it has to be. I think I thought at least that one of the lessons we learned from 9/11 was that when you respond with that kind of primal desire just to destroy for its own sake, you end up making a lot of mistakes, being counterproductive. So we are now kind of seeing this counter-reaction, certainly throughout the Arab world, but even in other places that aren't part of the West, in Latin America, in Asia, are kind of now counter disgust at the incredibly aggressive and seemingly indiscriminate response of the Israelis when it comes to bombing Gaza, ordering half the population to move to the south within 24 hours. Is Israel now functioning the way the US did in the wake of 9/11, just kind of like the primal rage? Or is there some geostrategic objective that you think they are attempting to accomplish with this massive bombing campaign in Gaza?

**SW:** Well, those two things are not completely incompatible in the sense that, yes, I think they're reacting very much the way the United States did after 9/11. And they may feel like they have a larger strategic objective that they can achieve through this operation. But I think there's no question that Israel is going to respond to this, but as we said at the very outset of the program, these are the moments when it is hardest for leaders and populations to think sort of calmly and rationally. You know, protracted violence does tend to bring out the worst on both sides. There are rare exceptions to that. But I think that's a pretty common dynamic and it is often self-defeating. That is to say, if one overreacts, if one abandons international law, just lashes out, reacts just disproportionately, ignores the laws of war, etc. this often rebounds ultimately to one's own detriment. And I think there's a danger here that the Israeli reaction will be an overreaction, and will eventually cost them international sympathy and support. I think we ought to recognise also that Israel is in a serious policy dilemma here. I mean, I think the last 50 years, if not more, have demonstrated that the Palestinian question is not one that can be solved through violence. It's not one that can be solved through military power. Even if they are successful in eliminating Hamas, and one can certainly understand why they want to do that now, that's not going to end Palestinian resistance. One still has to consider what the endgame ultimately is here, and that's, I think, a very difficult challenge for Israel and indeed for the rest of us. But yes, I'm deeply worried about the fact that the Israeli

response is going to be excessive. And, of course, many innocent people who had nothing to do with these attacks are going to die as a consequence.

**GG:** You have an article in Foreign Policy in the journal Foreign Policy this week. The headline of it is Israel Could Win This Gaza Battle And Lose The War. And the subheadline is: An all-out effort is again underway to maintain an unsustainable regional status quo. Now, part of the argument you advance there is the one that you just got done explaining that you can try and obliterate Gaza, obliterate Hamas, and it's unlikely to solve the problem. But when you write about what you call an unsustainable regional status quo, what do you mean by that? What is the status quo and in what way is it unsustainable?

**SW:** Well, it's the one I referred to previously. It's the belief that you could have a peaceful, tranquil, prosperous, productive Middle East and leave the Palestinian question off to one side. The fate of, you know, roughly 7 million people or so, and that that could simply be ignored forever, that they would remain quiescent and quiet, either in the open air prison that has been Gaza or in essentially the apartheid conditions of the West Bank. And this, of course, was what the Trump administration was trying to do with the Abraham Accords. It's what the Biden administration was trying to do with the normalisation process and for the most part, ignoring any possibility of a peace process involving the Palestinians, mostly devoting a blind eye to what the Netanyahu government was now doing on the West Bank. So a lot of different parties here, not just the United States, not just Israel, we're trying to leave this one off to one side, and that's the element of the status quo here. It seems to me that's now been shown to be unsustainable if that problem is not addressed. Tragic events like this are likely to keep recurring. And, you know, that's something that should concern all of us.

**GG:** Yeah, it's always interesting, you know, the extent to which people in Israel can express critiques of the Israeli government that are often not heard in the West, including the fact that just last month the former head of the Mossad said that we are now in a situation where Israel has become essentially an apartheid government in the sense that it's ruling over a majority that don't have political rights, when you count the people in the West Bank and Gaza; Ehud Barak has been long warning that. So let me ask you about the domestic politics of Israel and how this might be affected. Prior to this Hamas attack Netanyahu was in huge trouble, he had corruption scandals, there was in particular an extremely vitriolic conflict in Israel about this attempt to remove judicial independence that the Israeli right has long wanted. And you saw things you never saw before in Israel, like reservists saying they wouldn't fulfil their duties and intelligence professionals going on strike. Obviously when you have an attack like this, you have the rally around the flag effect. We had that after 9/11 when suddenly George Bush became very popular. But at the same time, the reality is whatever else is true, this was a huge intelligence failure on Netanyahu's watch, the failure to detect that Hamas was planning an attack of this kind. Right now, there is a lot of unity in Israel the way there was with 9/11; you have this unity government even that formed. I'm just wondering, though, what you think

the effect of this war is likely to be on Netanyahu. Will this enable him to postpone, maybe even permanently, the political danger that he was in or at some point is this going to turn back on him?

**SW:** I think that, I mean, first of all, this is another one of these places where we ought to be humble about our ability to forecast because lots of things could go in different ways. But my own view is this is very bad news in the long term for Netanyahu. There are some polls coming out of Israel now suggesting that, you know, sort of 80%, 60 to 80% of Israelis think he should step down. So, yes, there has been a rally around the flag effect, but it has not escaped the Israeli notice that he is the prime minister and a number of the policies that he's adopted probably made this attack more likely and made it more likely to succeed by undermining Israeli readiness near Gaza. I mean, I think the appropriate comparison here, by the way, is back to the October war in 1973, where there was a similar intelligence failure with very serious consequences for Israel. Golda Meir was prime minister at the time. She remained in office for some months after that. But there was eventually a fact finding investigative commission obviously found that the government had been derelict in a variety of ways. It was the end of her political career and ultimately actually paved the way for the sort of ending that monopoly the Labour Party had on political power in Israel. So the domestic political consequences then were quite significant, and I believe they'll be quite significant in this case. But it's not entirely clear what's going to happen. There's going to be a lot of finger pointing. Moderates who have opposed Netanyahu will blame him, of course. Some of his more right wing supporters are going to blame the moderates for undermining unity. They all accuse the reservists who were protesting Netanyahu of weakening Israel. So I think you're going to see a very serious, you know, a highly partisan, highly charged bunch of finger pointing in Israel in the months once this immediate crisis is over.

**GG:** It's interesting they contrast it to American politics where there were similar claims about the Bush administration's failure to detect 9/11 or even the Clinton administration prior to it. There was this kind of transition as the attack was being planned. In reality, no one really paid a price for that. Bush got re-elected in 2004, and there wasn't really any major government leaders who ended up being fired for that intelligence failure. It's just an interesting contrast. Let me ask you this. One of the things that always makes any war involving Israel different from an American perspective is that our government plays such a central role in supporting Israel, in arming it, in funding it, in helping it in all ways. You have the Biden administration paying visits already at the highest levels to the Israeli government, expressing support, mobilising aircraft carriers and the like in the region, showing that we're not just going to support Israel rhetorically, but also, if necessary, militarily. What do you think, though, is the actual posture of the Biden administration in private? From what you can tell, and I realise, again, we may be talking about limited information here, but do you think the Biden administration is doing what they're saying in public, namely telling the Israelis, look, whatever you need to do, whatever you feel like you need to do, go do, we're behind

you, or do you think they're putting or attempting to place some kind of limit from a humanitarian perspective on what the Israelis do in Gaza?

**SW:** First of all, nobody in the Biden administration has called me to tell me what they're thinking.

**GG:** It's no surprise...

**SW:** This is purely speculative on my part. But I think that, you know, the Biden administration, both, is instinctively, deeply sympathetic to Israel. Joe Biden has throughout his political career, prided himself on the support he's given Israel. Anthony Blinken is, you know, very strongly pro-Israel in his overall orientation. So this is not, you know, rallying to Israel is not something that they do with any difficulty whatsoever. I think they also recognise that the domestic political incentives here are entirely for, you know, sort of unconditional support for Israel. Now, they have said in, I think rather pro-forma fashion, that they would like Israel to act differently to respect international law. But there's no indication that they're going to put any real pressure on Israel to do so, at least not at this stage. So I'm sure they would like this to be as constrained a response as possible. But you're not going to see the United States leading the charge, it seems to me, to try and bring this to an end, which is unfortunate, given the role that we have there. The best, I think, for both sides now would be to try and bring the current violence to an end as rapidly as possible. But I don't see a mechanism for doing that in the cards right at the moment.

**GG:** So on that topic, you wrote a book back in 2007, it's a little scary to remember the date, but I guess we have to, called the Israel Lobby, with which you co-authored with Professor John Mearsheimer. And it's a long book and I've written about it, a lot of people have. I don't want to try and summarise it, but one of the things you did discuss was the number of lobbying groups inside Washington that wield a large amount of power like the NRA or Planned Parenthood or obviously Wall Street lobbies, big tech lobbies, and one of them is the Israel lobby, which ensures more or less rock solid bipartisan support for Israel, something that has pretty much remained very constant, no matter how many elections we have, no matter how many times the White House changes hands, you probably, I think, have to go back to maybe Bush 41 to find any actual real pressure on Israel when they threatened to withhold loan guarantees if they didn't stop settlement expansion. So pro-Israel sentiment is a bipartisan policy and long has been in Washington. Given that it's now been 15 years since that book was published, I'd like to ask you whether you think anything has changed in terms of either the lobby getting weaker or stronger or in some way operating differently or are things more or less the same as the way that you described them back then?

**SW:** Yeah, I think there have been changes, but not substantial changes in terms of policy. You know, so the core argument, you summarised it reasonably well, we characterise the Israel lobby as an interest group like lots of other interest groups in America. It's not a

conspiracy, it's not a cabal. It's right out there in the open, like the farm lobby and Big Pharma and other interest groups as well. NRA would come to mind as well. An argument was that this group worked very successfully to maintain unconditional American support for Israel, and we further argued that this was stifling our ability to manage the peace process and that ultimately it was bad for the United States but also bad for Israel as well. And I take no pleasure in saying that. I think the events of the past week support that argument, that the failure to achieve a just peace in the Middle East and including peace for the Palestinians has been very, very bad for Israel as well as not good for the United States. Now, American policy hasn't really changed. One might even argue it's gotten somewhat, somewhat worse. What I think has changed is two things. One is the popular discussion of this. The popular discourse about it is much more wide ranging. You do get opinions now. You can actually talk about the influence of groups like AfPak and others without being pilloried. And I think that our book and a number of other things helped open that up. You've also, I think, seen a shift in attitudes more generally in the body politic, recognising the unfairness, the injustice of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians in ways that was not true of 15 or 20 years. Recognition that the two state solution that we have long supported and that we called for in that book, the two state solution is probably not an option any longer, and largely because of the continued expansion of settlements and the rightward shift in Israeli politics. So on the one hand, I am disappointed that US policy didn't move in a more constructive direction. But I do think we have had at least a more open discussion of this, and that may lead to more farsighted policies in the future.

**GG:** So we can't really have a full discussion about Israel, the war in Israel, US support for it without talking about Iran, in large part because barely 24 hours went by before we had very prominent, mostly Republican politicians, though not only, people like Lindsey Graham, Nikki Haley, Marco Rubio in various ways calling for the US to go and bomb Iran. At first it was if we can demonstrate that they directly planned this attack, but now that caveat has even kind of disappeared in some expressions of this view that we ought to go bomb Iranian refineries in response to what happened. You had an article in the Wall Street Journal and now in The New York Times trying to link Iran to this attack, although even the Israeli and American governments are saying they haven't seen definitive evidence that that was true. What would be the implications if the United States and or Israel did something like bomb the refineries or other infrastructure in Iran?

**SW:** Well, then you're talking about a regional war in the Middle East and one that would be, you know, devastating for some countries in the region. And Iran is much weaker, but it is not incapable of defending itself in various ways. It has large missile forces. Some of those missiles can reach our friends in the region. And there's no reason to believe that they wouldn't use them. So you're talking immediately about countries, including Israel, who would suffer if an act of war like that broke out. At that point, Hezbollah, an Iranian ally in Lebanon, would probably get involved, and they have tens of thousands of rockets that they can fire into Israel as well. So I think, you know, anyone who cares about Israel or cares

about countries in the region does not want to see this war expand territorially. And I think actually the Israeli government and the American government do not in some respects want to discover that there's evidence linking Iran to this in any kind of direct or active way. I mean, I think the interest of almost everyone now is to try and bring this to an end as quickly as possible and not allow it to get bigger. And if there are American politicians trying to make political hay out of this, I think that's irresponsible at a minimum and reprehensible at worst.

**GG:** Thanks for watching this clip from System Update, our live show that airs every Monday through Friday at 7 p.m. Eastern, exclusively on Rumble. You can catch the full nightly shows live or view the backlog of episodes for free on our Rumble page. You can also find full episodes the morning after they air across all major podcasting platforms, including Spotify and Apple. All the information you need is linked below. We hope to see you there.

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