

Israeli Conscientious Objector Haggai Matar: Hamas Attack Reflects Israeli Violence in Palestine

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Israel has mobilized some 300,000 army reservists as it ramps up its war on Gaza following a devastating surprise attack by Hamas militants on Saturday that killed hundreds inside Israel, including many civilians. Journalist Haggai Matar of *+972 Magazine* says that while the violence shocked Israelis, the unending military occupation and apartheid set the stage for this weekend's events. "There is no military solution. These recurring attacks on Gaza bring nothing but death and destruction, and no hope for any of us," says Matar, a conscientious objector who refused service in the Israel Defense Forces.

Transcript

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AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!*, democracynow.org. I'm Amy Goodman, with Juan González.

Israel is continuing its bombardment of Gaza City, has extended its mobilization of reservists. For more, we're joined by Haggai Matar, an Israeli journalist and activist who serves as the executive director of *+972 Magazine*. That's the area code of Israel and the Occupied Territories. Haggai Matar is a conscientious objector who refused to serve in the Israeli army. His new piece is headlined "Gaza's shock attack has terrified Israelis. It should also unveil the context."

Welcome back to *Democracy Now!*, Haggai. As we speak to you in Tel Aviv, tell us the context that you feel is so important.

HAGGAI MATAR: Thank you, Amy.

I think when I wrote that piece already on Saturday, the shock was just in its initial phases. We had not yet learned the entire scope of the horror of the atrocities in the south of Israel, the hundreds of people who were massacred in their homes and at a music festival, just entire communities decimated. Those stories were just seeping through gradually, and the shock of that tragedy, that atrocity, was just beginning to land.

And what I felt important to say, while also recognizing this collective shock and the dreadfulness of

this attack, was also to understand the history of this, how we, as Israelis, for many years have become — have developed a sense of immunity, that in the context of Gaza wars, for example, Israel could bomb Gaza, as it is doing now, and wipe out entire families, destroy entire neighborhoods, not be held accountable, and when Gazans throw rockets back, almost all of them are intercepted by the Iron Dome. So the casualty rate between Israelis and Palestinians in these past wars over the past decade or so has been one to 100, one to 200 or so. Just now, actually, there were air sirens here in Tel Aviv, and I didn't move from my desk, because I know there's Iron Dome, and I feel pretty safe. That feeling of safety was cracked and went away with one whiff of that attack on Saturday. But it was important for me to remind Israelis and people abroad that that feeling of defenselessness is one that Palestinians have experienced for the past few decades, definitely people in Gaza who have been attacked routinely by Israel.

So, when we think about how we understand the Hamas attack, without justifying it, but also recognizing that it is not unprovoked or unilateral, on the one hand, and also as we think about the next steps, we need to understand there is no military solution. These recurring attacks on Gaza bring nothing but death and destruction, and no hope for any of us.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And, Haggai, about this issue that's been raised that this was an unprovoked or unilateral attack, you've written that, quote, "The Israeli army is routinely raiding into Palestinian cities and refugee camps. The far-right government is giving settlers an entirely free hand to set up new illegal outposts and launch pogroms on Palestinian towns and villages, with soldiers accompanying the settlers and killing or maiming Palestinians trying to defend their homes." Could you talk about how the Palestinians have experienced this new right-wing government, especially this extreme right-wing government in Israel in their daily lives?

HAGGAI MATAR: Sure. So, I think, first of all, for context for that, as well, we need to remember: Nothing about what this government is doing is entirely new — the attacks on Gaza, the settlement expansion, the attacks on Palestinian communities in the West Bank. None of this is unprecedented. This far-right government is only taking things one step further, which, you know, needs to be contextualized, but also we need to recognize the places where these things are getting worse.

And we are definitely seeing, since the election of this government, a much freer hand for settlers to do basically whatever they want in the West Bank. There's absolutely no guard rail, no limitations on what settlers can do. If they want to attack Palestinian communities and set their houses ablaze, they will have soldiers accompanying them and [inaudible]. If they want to set up new outposts on private Palestinian land, they can do that. If they want to go into the middle of Nablus to pray in the middle of one of the biggest Palestinian cities in the West Bank, they can do that, and soldiers will accompany them and protect them.

So, what Palestinians are feeling, very much related to what I was saying before, is being defenseless, because the Palestinian police is not allowed and does not offer them defense, and when they try to defend themselves, soldiers would shoot them to death. So, that is the reality that Palestinians have been feeling for a very long time, and increasingly over the past few months.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And this whole issue of how the United States and other countries, major countries in the world have essentially ignored the unresolved Palestinian-Israeli question now for years, hoping to negotiate just with the governments of the region and not deal with the central issue, what do you — how do you think that this has played a role in the desperate attacks now of Hamas into Israel?

HAGGAI MATAR: I think it is very much connected, as we're talking about the tools Palestinians have for resistance and the bargaining chips they can bring with them to the negotiating table.

Palestinians never had too much to offer. Basically, they're asking Israel, rightly, to leave their territory, to have an independent state. But all they can offer in return is the lack of violence, so peace. And they used to have this other bargaining chip, which is, if you make peace with us, you will get as a bonus the entire Arab world, the entire Muslim world, that was committed, at least outspokenly committed, to supporting Palestinians and not normalizing relations with Israel.

Ever since the Abraham Accords, championed by President Trump, in 2020, 2021, and now with the normalization deal that is being brokered by President Biden with Saudi Arabia, Palestinians are seeing those last bargaining chips just slipping away. Netanyahu has always said, "We can have peace with the Arab world without Palestinians. We can just go over their heads." And Arab nations and countries and governments and the U.S. government, in brokering this, have proved Netanyahu right. So, Palestinians, without those abilities, are seeing fewer and fewer options to claim their just cause against Israeli apartheid.

I don't think that justifies massacring hundreds of people in their homes and destroying entire communities of civilians. But at the same time, I understand the context in which Palestinians are feeling more and more desperate and pushed to the point of doing these things.

AMY GOODMAN: Haggai Matar, you were a conscientious objector in the Israeli military. You refused to serve. Can you talk about overall Israeli reaction right now? And are Israelis concerned about the total siege of and possible ground invasion of Gaza, which the U.N., by the way, the siege, has called illegal?

HAGGAI MATAR: No, not at all. It's actually deeply troubling to see how much rejoicing there is in the siege, in the attacks. We're seeing people, even people associated with the center and with the left, talking. *Haaretz* journalists, for example — not all of them, obviously, but some — have said this is a time to cause great damage to Gaza, this is a time to extract many deaths in Gaza. So, it is very, very troubling and painful to see how, out of a very understandable feeling that I myself also share of shock, of defenselessness, of the tragedy of the massacres in the south, people are taking that and translating that into saying the only answer is revenge. I think it is a very dark mirror to look at when you understand that these same atrocities committed by Hamas came out of that feeling of anger, anguish and dread of Israeli attacks. And now, as a response to those atrocities, Israelis are supporting their own atrocities again against Gaza. And this seems like a dead end, almost literally, for both of us.

AMY GOODMAN: Haggai Matar, Israeli journalist, activist, executive director of *+972 Magazine*, Israeli Jewish conscientious objector. He refused to serve in the Israeli army.

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