By Jan Kapusnak

In parts of Western discourse – especially on the progressive left, where activism and commentary can blur into moral performance – one assumption has hardened into dogma: Palestinians lack agency. They are cast as victims and hostages of history; politics is something done to them; violence becomes “desperation”. Responsibility is always external. Palestinians are spoken for rather than heard. Rarely explicit or malicious, it is sold as empathy. The truth is: This is infantilization.

It distorts the Israeli – Palestinian conflict by weakening Palestinian political standing, rewarding radicalism, and loading disproportionate international pressure onto Israel. It assumes Palestinians cannot be held to ordinary standards because their circumstances are “too extreme.” Palestinians are not expected to act, only to be rescued. It is a form of soft bigotry.

One of the oldest – and most institutionalized – forms of “care without adulthood” is UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees), created in 1949. Established to provide relief, schooling, health care, and basic services, it has also entrenched a policy of permanent dependency. Unlike the global refugee system run by UNHCR, UNRWA operates a separate, effectively hereditary regime in which “Palestine refugee” status is extended to descendants – turning what is usually a transitional category into an inherited political identity.

The structure does more than alleviate hardship: it sustains maximalist expectations, above all an expansive “right of return” framed as the return of millions of descendants to Israel within its pre-1967 borders – an outcome that would make a negotiated two-state settlement impossible. It also shifts the burden of rebuilding ordinary civic life onto international caretakers – schools, salaries, welfare, and “refugeehood” itself – rather than encouraging a horizon of self-reliance, accountable governance, and political compromise.

The most damning contradiction is that the same Gaza, framed by much of the world as a helpless humanitarian ward, has proved intensely capable. Over decades, aid flows into the Strip have been immense – on a scale sometimes compared to historic postwar European reconstruction efforts like the Marshall Plan. Yet instead of building “another Singapore,” even in a modest sense, resources and talent were diverted into creating one of the most sophisticated tunnel-and-command systems built by a non-state actor in the history of modern warfare. That capability was also demonstrated in the planning of October 7 – the largest mass

murder of Jews since the Holocaust – an unprecedentedly brutal operation that took years of planning and coordination, including direct UNRWA involvement. The missing ingredient is accountability – and the refusal to treat Palestinian leadership choices as choices.

Wrong narrative: “Hamas does not represent the Palestinian people”

After major attacks by Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups, Western leaders reach for a familiar reassurance: “*Hamas does not represent the Palestinian people*.” Josep Borrell, then the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs, used precisely this language after visiting the October 7 massacre sites in southern Israel, making the humane point that civilians should not be conflated with terrorists. But repeated mechanically, the formula becomes a solvent of responsibility. Hamas is treated as an alien force that merely “hijacked” Gaza, while Gazans are recast as spectators of their own politics. That framing is hard to reconcile with the documented record of civilian participation on October 7 and when it is acknowledged at all, it is often neutralized by a second move: Palestinian violence is re-described as an automatic reflex of “occupation,” rather than as actions chosen.

Hamas itself rejects the language of impulse. In its December 2025 text *Our Narrative: Al-Aqsa Flood—Two Years of Steadfastness and Aspiration for Liberation*, it frames October 7 as strategy: “This was not an adventurous or emotional act, but a calculated move that enjoyed broad support.”

Palestinians are routinely described as unrelated to their dominant faction, even though Hamas insists on its deep social rooting. In its 2025 text, Hamas calls itself “an inseparable part of the Palestinian people,” with “deep roots” in society and a “natural component” of the national mosaic, claiming that “armed resistance” is central to sustaining the people’s spirit. It also traces its lineage to Gaza’s Muslim Brotherhood milieu – an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (founded in 1928) whose local networks in Gaza long predate Hamas’ 1987 creation. Western discourse often brackets this self-description as mere propaganda – and in doing so misreads key realities of Gaza; in the “Free Gaza” activist scene, the same societal grounding is affirmed and celebrated. The consequence is perverse: a regime that governs, recruits, and coerces is rhetorically treated as if it owes civilians no duties – and shielded from accountability for how it rules.

The majority of Palestinians still approve the October 7 massacre

Independent polling complicates the comforting Western story of estrangement. In an October 2025 survey by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) – a Ramallah-based institute that regularly polls opinion in Gaza and the West Bank – 53% of respondents said Hamas's decision to launch the October 7 attack was "correct." In PCPSR's own series, that share has fallen from earlier highs of 71% (March 2024) and 67% (June 2024), but the decline itself is instructive: even after two years of war, approval remains above 50% rather than collapsing. The same release reported overwhelming opposition – around 70% – to disarming Hamas, a reality many "day after" scenarios treat as a technical detail rather than a binding serious constraint.

When polls register Palestinian support for terrorism against Israeli civilians, the results in the West are rarely confronted as political belief. The answers are rarely allowed to stand on their own: Palestinians are cast as incapable of sincerely holding disturbing views, so their position is "translated" into something more acceptable – attributed to fear, frustration, trauma, manipulation, misunderstanding, or being "radicalized by despair" – or ignored outright.

Gaza is not a "natural disaster zone"; it is a polity shaped by nearly two decades of Hamas's ruthless rule. After winning the 2006 elections and consolidating power through a violent coup in 2007, Hamas built a governing apparatus: security services, patronage systems, and a dense social infrastructure threaded through charities, mosques, religious schools, and media, designed to distribute benefits, enforce loyalty, and sustain permanent mobilization. In parallel, it turned the territory into an integrated war system – system of tunnels, rockets, command nodes, and launch sites embedded in civilian space – geared less to civilian governance than to sustained conflict with Israel.

Two years of war with Israel degraded Hamas militarily and politically, but it did not uproot it as the decisive power on the ground. Since the October 2025 ceasefire, it has been rebuilding both capability and authority, continuing to shape how civilian space is used—and how civilian suffering is messaged and leveraged. Gaza's devastation is, above all, a consequence of Hamas's governing choices. This is not "tragic fate" but an intentional model of power that treats civilian life as expendable political capital. Senior Hamas figure Khaled Mashal has been explicit about the moral calculus; in a 2024 speech broadcast on Al Jazeera, he said: "No people is liberated without sacrifices. Gaza is paying the price of dignity."

Jan Kapusnak is a political analyst and author. He lives in Tel Aviv. Part 2 of “When the West treats Palestinians as Minors” will be published next week