

There Are No Rules

States and quasi-states are using extreme, uninhibited violence against civilian populations.

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The “rules-based world order” is a system of norms and values that describe how the world ought to work, not how it actually works. This aspirational order is rooted in the idealistic aftermath of the Second World War, when it was transcribed into a series of documents: the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Genocide Convention, and the Geneva Conventions on the laws of war, among others. In the more than seven decades since they were written, these documents have frequently been ignored. The UN Genocide Convention did not prevent genocide in Rwanda. The Geneva Conventions did not stop the Vietnamese from torturing American prisoners of war, did not prevent Americans at Abu Ghraib from torturing Iraqi prisoners of war, and do not prevent Russians from torturing Ukrainian prisoners of war today. Signatories of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights include known violators of human rights, among them China, Cuba, Iran, and Venezuela. The UN Commission on Human Rights deteriorated into parody long ago.

Nevertheless, these documents have influenced real behavior in the real world. Soviet dissidents used to embarrass their government by pointing to human-rights language in treaties the Kremlin had signed and did not respect. Even when fighting brutal or colonial wars, countries that had signed treaties on the laws of war either tried to abide by them—avoiding civilian casualties, for example—or at least felt remorseful when they failed to do so. Americans who mistreated Iraqi prisoners of war were court-martialed, convicted, and sentenced to time in military prisons. The British still agonize over the past behavior of their soldiers in Northern Ireland, and the French over theirs in Algeria.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and Hamas’s surprise attack on Israeli civilians are both blatant rejections of that rules-based world order, and they herald

something new. Both aggressors have deployed a sophisticated, militarized, modern form of terrorism, and they do not feel apologetic or embarrassed about this at all. Terrorists, by definition, are not fighting conventional wars and do not obey the laws of war. Instead, they deliberately create fear and chaos among civilian populations. Although terrorist tactics are usually associated with small revolutionary movements or clandestine groups, terrorism is now simply part of the way Russia fights wars. Although a sovereign state and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia first began deliberately hitting civilian targets in Syria in 2015, including power stations, water plants, and above all hospitals and medical facilities, 25 of which were hit in a single month in 2019. These attacks were unquestionably war crimes, and those who chose the targets knew they were war crimes. Some of the hospitals had shared their coordinates with the UN to avoid being hit. Instead, Russian and Syrian government forces [may have used that information to find them](#).

In Ukraine, Russia has once again used artillery, cruise missiles, and drones, including Iranian drones, to hit an even wider range of civilian targets: houses, apartment buildings, churches, restaurants, ports, grain silos. Just last week, Russian missiles hit a shop and café in the small village of Hroza, killing more than 50 people. This kind of strike had no conventional military justification. The point is to create pain, cause civilian deaths, and sow disruption—nothing else. Russian propagandists praise [the destruction](#) and call for more: “We should wait for the right moment and cause a migration crisis for Europe with a new influx of Ukrainians,” one of them told a television talk show.

Hamas is not a sovereign state, but it has the full backing of Iran, a sovereign state, and funding from Qatar, a sovereign state. Since 2006, Hamas has also been the de facto ruling party in Gaza, a self-governing territory since the Israeli withdrawal in 2005. Nevertheless Hamas does not see itself as part of any kind of order. On Saturday, Hamas launched what appears to have been a well-planned, well-organized attack, designed to spread civilian terror and create chaos. Hamas deployed missiles and drones, including kamikaze drones of the kind used now in Russia and Ukraine, as well as teams of men with guns. Although they hit a few military outposts, they also murdered more than 200 people at a music festival, chased down children and the elderly, and in some towns went from house to house looking for people to murder. They abducted young women, beat them unconscious, and dragged them across the border, a war crime that is as old as Homer’s *Iliad*.

The Hamas terrorists paid no attention to any modern laws of war, or any norms of any kind: Like the Russians, Hamas and its Iranian backers (who are also Russian allies) run nihilistic regimes whose goal is to undo whatever remains of the rules-based world order, and to put anarchy in its place. They did not hide their war crimes. Instead, they filmed them and circulated the videos online. Their goal was not to gain territory or engage an army, but rather to create misery and anger. Which they have—and not only in Israel. Hamas had to have anticipated a massive retaliation in Gaza, and indeed that retaliation has begun. As a result, hundreds if not thousands of Palestinian civilians will now be victims too.

To explain why one permanent member of the UN Security Council and one quasi-state have adopted this kind of behavior, it is best to start with the nature of their own totalitarian regimes. But there is plenty more blame to go around, because the rules-based order, always pretty tenuous, has actually been dying for a long time. Autocracies, [led by China](#), have been seeking to undermine or remove language about human rights and the rule of law from international forums for years, replacing it with the language of “sovereignty.” Not that this is just a matter of language: The Chinese have carried out atrocities against their Uyghur minority for years, so far with impunity, and openly conducted a successful assault on the rights of the population of Hong Kong. They, and others, have also indulged in deliberately provocative behavior, designed to mock the rule of law outside their own borders. Belarus got away with forcing an Irish-owned airplane to land in Minsk and then kidnapping one of its citizens who was onboard. Russia has organized murders of its citizens in London, Washington, and Berlin.

Democracies, led by the United States, bear a lot of the blame too, either for refusing to enforce anything resembling order when they could, or for violating the rules themselves. George W. Bush condoned interrogation black sites and torture during the War on Terror. Barack Obama accused the Syrians of using chemical weapons, then failed to do anything to stop them. Donald Trump went out of his way to pardon American war criminals and continues to advocate extrajudicial murders, among other things implying that the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff deserves to be executed. The Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has notably indulged the most extreme voices in Israeli politics, including political figures who explicitly seek to undermine Israel’s independent judiciary and Israeli rule of law, and parties whose members openly advocate for the mass expulsion of Arabs from the country. One member of his own party, Likud, [repeated that same call on Sunday](#).

By pointing this out, or by noting that the Israelis have also killed Palestinian civilians with impunity and will now do so again, I am not excusing what happened on Saturday, just describing Israel's contribution to the deterioration of whatever norms remain. Add to that a United Nations that now seems preprogrammed to appoint weak leaders and a European Union that still doesn't have a clear security policy, and you begin to see the bigger picture: We are heading into an era when there is no order, rules-based or otherwise, at all.

During its lifetime, the aspirational rules-based world order and the international community that supported it were frequently mocked, and rightly so. The crocodile tears of the statesmen who expressed "profound concern" when their unenforced rules were broken were often unbearable. Their hypocrisy, as they opined on distant conflicts, was intolerable. On Saturday, [Russia's deputy defense minister parodied this kind of talk](#) when he called for "peace" between Israel and Hamas based on "recognized agreements," as if Russia accepted any "recognized agreements" as a basis for "peace" in Ukraine.

But like the equally outdated Pax Americana that accompanied the rules-based world order—the expectation that the U.S. plays some role in the resolution of every conflict—we might miss the Geneva Conventions when they are gone. Open brutality has again become celebrated in international conflicts, and a long time may pass before anything else replaces it.