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# [Commentary] Explaining Hamas Attack of October 7

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## Abstract

This paper explains Hamas attack on the kibbutz Kfar-Aza using William Dray's "how is it possible" approach and develops the approach along with game theoretical thinking. Finally, it evaluates the attack in the context of global politics. According to Jerusalem Post, a female Israeli soldier repeatedly reported Hamas activities in Gaza adjacent to the kibbutz area. There were events like regular Palestinian farmers leaving their fields and newcomers replacing them as well as a significant Hamas leader overseeing military training of Hamas guerillas. However, superior Israeli military commanders took the soldier's reports as imaginary. The soldier was even threatened by facing legal procedures if she continues to report these events. Thus, the explanation boils down to the following argument: in the absence of Israeli negligence the attack could **NOT** have taken place. The explanation gets support from an Israeli confidence on and overestimation of Israeli intelligence system. The explanation implies critical results in the current global political configuration.

The Discipline of international relations (IR) constitutes a science as long as it permits explanations of international events. Hamas attack on the kibbutz Kfar-Aza is an unusual and puzzling event. Every event has a cause; events do not happen out of the blue. They occur under certain conditions. Thus, Hamas' attack on the kibbutz Kfar-Aza needs an explanation. Accordingly, this paper proposes an explanation of the attack by using William Dray's concept of "how-possibly explanation."<sup>1</sup> The explanation adds to our understanding of deadly Hamas attack and makes the attack comprehensible.

The article develops in three sections. The first section exposes types of explanations as discussed in the philosophy of science. The second section argues for one type of explanation of the Hamas attack on 7 October. The third section deals with the impact of the attack upon global strategic relations implying major international powers. The conclusion ends the discussion with possible future extensions of the main ideas of the article.

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## 1.

In general terms, an explanation is a set of statements implying the event to be explained. There exist alternative forms of explanation in sciences.

### 1.1.

The first category is the “covering-law model of explanation” proposed by Hempel and Oppenheim<sup>2</sup> The covering-law explanation necessitates the inclusion of a natural law in a set of premises like Johannes Kepler’s laws of planetary motion together with some initial conditions in a deductive argument. The explanation runs from the law and its companion conditions constituting the set of premises called “explanans” and ends up in the occurrence of the event called the “explanandum”. A correct deduction guarantees the truth of the explicandum given that the explanans is true in conformity with logical implications.

The problem with this type of explanation in international relations is that there exists no such law, an observed regularity, like, for example, “all weak states balance against the strong” or “all states cooperate to prevent global warming.” Had such a law, a regularity of observations like “Hamas attacks kibbutzim contiguous to Southern Israel frequently” been existed, then Hamas attack of October 7 would have been explained together with the law and accompanying conditions like Kfar-Aza being one of those kibbutzim quite close to Northern Gaza and Hamas militants regularly conducting military exercises in this region adjacent to Southern Israel. The explanation would require regular Hamas attacks on the kibbutzim; not only the attack on Kfar-Aza. Hempel and Oppenheim framework then would imply that the law and geographic location of Kfar-Aza together with Hamas militants’ military exercises quite close to Kfar-Aza would constitute the explanans and the attack would be the explanandum. There are no regular Hamas attacks like the one perpetrated on October 7, however. Therefore, there exists no law making the covering-law model compatible with the explanation of the attack.

### 1.2.

Fortunately, Hempel-Oppenheim model is not the only approach to the task of explanation. There exist pragmatic and contextual explanation forms helpful in international relations. Two of these explanation forms are explanation-why and

explanation-what. Explanation-what corresponds to reporting the events describing the attack.

Empiricism, a doctrine of the philosophy of science, claims that scientists must prioritize experiences and senses. It supports the form of explanation-what holding that knowledge stems from observations. Scientists' account of observable processes and entities is equivalent to explanation-what.<sup>3</sup> Unobservable events and entities do not have any explanatory power. The problem with this explanation form is that reporters and analysts can observe events subjectively and differently. Analysts can describe different events as those leading to the attack.

The alternative explanation form is explanation-why which does not require a deduction like the covering-law explanation or reporting events that describe the attack. It simply pinpoints a causal history by clarifying a sequence of the cause coming first and the effect next.<sup>4</sup> It is commonly known as a form of explanation proposing a cause and an ensuing effect corresponding to the depiction of how some explanatory entity triggers a chain of events ultimately generating the effect. The explanation-why has to fulfill three conditions: 1) the separate existence of the cause and the effect, 2) the cause comes first and the effect later in time, so that there exists a temporal sequence, and 3) the effect does not happen in the absence of the cause corresponding to the counterfactual condition.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the Hamas attack can be reconstructed as an explanation-why by proposing that the cause and the attack are separate, the cause precedes the attack, and that the attack could not have happened in the absence of the proposed cause. Explanation-why does not require a natural law and initial conditions like covering-law explanation and not either require reporting facts only unlike explanation-what.

The central problem with the why-explanation is the multiplicity of possible causes of an effect. David Lewis notes the problem of the multiplicity of causes by a simple example of car crash. The causes of the crash include: "icy road, the bald tire, the drunk driver, the blind corner, the approaching car, and more."<sup>6</sup> Thus, cause-effect relations are subject to deep problems of interrelations between causes while they have to be independent of each other. In the example David Lewis offers, for example, the drunkenness of the driver can cause his missing a blind corner or his not seeing the approaching car. Hence, a cause-effect relation explaining the Hamas attack can put forward causes like Israeli miscalculations, eventual approval of the attack by the Hezbollah or Iran or both, or Hamas leadership's assessments of the opportune time for attack, Ukraine-Russia war diverting global attention to eastern Europe instead of Palestine-Israel issue. The list of eventual causes can be longer: it would include:

- Israeli underestimation of capabilities of Hamas,
- Israeli misunderstanding of Hamas' intentions,
- The secrecy of Hamas preventing an efficient Israeli intelligence activity,
- Israeli intelligence missing the signs of a Hamas attack,
- Israeli evaluation of Hamas being no serious threat,
- Israeli belief that Israel deters Hamas successfully, that is, Israeli reliance upon the rationality of Hamas so that Hamas would not attack fearing a dreadful Israeli retaliation to its attack.

The proposed causes can be interrelated, for example, Israeli underestimation of Hamas' capabilities and Israeli

intelligence harboring the idea that Hamas is not a direct threat are related. Israeli miscalculations are interrelated with the Israeli intelligence failure. An Iranian or Hezbollah approval of the attack or Hamas leadership calculating timing of the attack can depend on the intensity of Ukraine-Russia war and so on. Hence, we notice that the existence of more than one cause and interconnections among causes make an explanation-why quite difficult indeed in the context of the attack. The inference of the occurrence of the attack using a cause listed is called an abduction.<sup>7</sup> “Abduction is often portrayed as a kind of ‘backwards’ reasoning, because it starts from the known facts and probes backwards into the reasons or explanations of these facts.”<sup>8</sup>

### 1.3.

William Dray’s concept of how-possible explanation differs from all three explanation categories discussed above.<sup>9</sup> It does not necessitate a law and initial conditions; it does not describe the chain of events, and it does not propose a cause-effect connection. The backbone of how-possible explanation is the necessary condition for the occurrence of events. To recall, “a necessary condition for the occurrence of a specified event is a circumstance in whose absence the event cannot occur.”<sup>10</sup> The form of the question is no longer “how or why did Hamas attack occur?” but rather “how it could be that Hamas attack happened?” For example, instead of asking why NATO accepted Finland as a new member, or why did Finland want to become a NATO member, one asks “how is it was possible that Finland became a NATO member?” Therefore, the explanation-how possible requires a discussion of a necessary condition for the attack.

Dray gives the rationale of “explaining how something could be so” by a baseball game example he takes from *Maclean’s Magazine*, 1 August 1952 (back cover): “An announcer broadcasting a baseball game from Victoria, B.C., said: “It is a long fly ball to to centre field, and it’s going to hit high up on the fence. The centre fielder’s back, he’s under it, he’s caught it, and the batter is out.” Listeners who knew the fence was twenty feet high couldn’t figure out how the fielder caught the ball. Spectators could have given them the unlikely explanation. At the rear of the centre field was a high platform for the scorekeeper. The centre fielder ran up the ladder and caught the ball twenty feet above the ground.”<sup>11</sup> Dray continues by noting that “fielders usually catch long fly balls. But although there is usually nothing to wonder at when catches are made by centre-fielders, there is a real mystery about this case. What puzzles is how the fielder managed to get his hand on the ball in view of the fact that the fence was 20 feet high.”<sup>12</sup> Dray’s discussion implies that the Hamas attack was puzzling: how was it possible that Hamas attack came so abruptly as a devastating surprise given that no other such attack by Hamas has occurred in the past. One should not ask about the motive of the Hamas attack, for example, but ask about how could that attack has occurred.<sup>13</sup> The question is simple: What made the Hamas attack happen? The answer comes from the failure of Israeli intelligence and surveillance system.

## 2.

According to Jerusalem Post, a female Israeli soldier reported Hamas activities in Gaza close to Kfar Aza repeatedly.<sup>14</sup> She has reported repeatedly to her Israeli intelligence superiors about regular Palestinian farmers leaving their fields and newcomers replacing them and significant Hamas leaders overseeing military training of Hamas militants. The superior

officers ignored these reports and threatened the informing soldier that in case she repeats those warnings, she will face military court. Israel's military and intelligence officials were given a highly detailed warning that Hamas was actively training to take over kibbutzim on the Gaza border and overrun military posts with the aim of inflicting substantial fatalities, according to reports in the Israeli media. The Guardian reports that "the claim made by Israel's Channel 12 on Monday evening was based on leaked emails from the Israeli military's 8200 cyber-intelligence unit discussing the warnings. Those emails revealed that a senior officer who reviewed the intelligence considered the danger of a massive surprise attack by Hamas across the Gaza border to be "an imaginary scenario".<sup>15</sup> The New York Times reports that Israeli intelligence has obtained Hamas attack plans more than a year ago and assigned the name "Jericho Wall" to Hamas attack plan.<sup>16</sup> These reports nicely support the how-possibly explanation of the Hamas October 7 attack that is: "in the absence of the condition of Israeli intelligence's underestimation of Hamas capabilities to attack, the attack could not have occurred." The explanation is a shortcut; it does not necessitate remote causes leading to the attack. A full and efficient Israeli system of information and intelligence gathering could have prevented the attack.

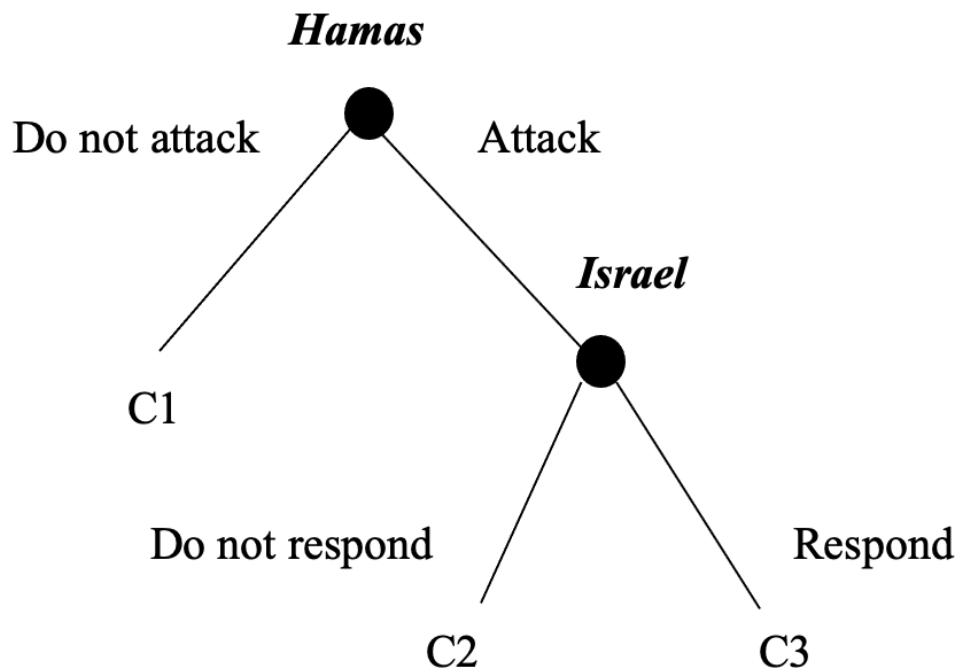
### 3.

One might propose other explanations of the attack like the continuing tension in Israel-Hamas relations, Iranian encouragement of Hamas to attack Kfar-Aza, territorial conflict between Israel and Palestinians, Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Israeli confiscation of lands belonging to Palestinians by force, destruction of Palestinians' houses and assassination of Palestinians. Each of the causes listed in a why-explanation can be evaluated as a necessary condition for the Hamas attack. Nevertheless, none of them functions a fulfilling the condition of making the attack possible.

Take, for example, Israeli occupation of the West Bank as a necessary condition for the Hamas attack. The occupation continues for a long period of time. Compared with Israeli intelligence failure it does not function as a circumstance in whose absence the attack could not have occurred. Otherwise, Hamas attacks similar to that of the October 7 could have occurred previously as well. In fact, none of the causes explanations above proposes constitutes, similar to the Israeli intelligence failure, implies a satisfactory answer to the attack. The blatant Israeli intelligence failure so that Israeli security officers' evaluation of the likelihood of a speedy and deadly Hamas attack to Kfar Aza as an insignificant or impossible event fare much better than all other explanations and therefore it becomes also equivalent to an inference to the best explanation.<sup>17</sup>

Dray's how-possible explanation can be developed by discussing causes of the necessary condition that is the Israeli intelligence failure on purpose or not. Deterrence is the threat of retaliation. In Israel-Hamas relations, deterrence corresponds to the Israeli military intelligence belief that a certain Israeli retaliation to a Hamas attack would constitute as a highly costly prospect for Hamas leaders and hence they would not dare to attack. Punishment is highly costly. Hamas would have been deterred from attacking Kfar-Aza were gains of attack largely offset by the cataclysmic punishment cost. Israeli reaction to an attack is a certain event and is supposed to shape Hamas' future decisions. Thus, in a sense, Israeli deterrence assumes Hamas ability to assess gains and costs of an attack and derive the consequence that an attack is highly costly offsetting gains of the attack, that is, Hamas rationality.

The cost deriving from an Israeli punishment constitutes mostly a burden on Palestinian population of Gaza. Israeli deterrence would have been successful only if Hamas valued life. “Look forward and reason back” principle of game theory perfectly describes the failure of Israeli deterrence: Hamas looking forward and evaluating the cost of its attack it would have reasoned back and would not decide to attack.<sup>18</sup> Yet Hamas attacked. A simple game in extensive form models the Israel-Hamas interaction as given below:



**Figure 1.** Hamas-Israel Game

The game above is solved by the concept of backward induction.<sup>19</sup> The game posits Hamas as the players who moves first by selecting between attack and no attack. If it does **NOT** attack, the game end in the consequence one (C1) that refers to the status quo. If Hamas attacks, then Israel observing the attack moves between responding to the attack and no responding. If Israel does not respond, then the consequence two (C2) is the outcome. Otherwise, if Israel responds, then the outcome becomes the consequence 3 (C3). Backward induction solution requires the specification of the action the player who moves the last, in our case, this is Israel. Israel moves by either responding or not to Hamas attack. It is impossible to imagine that Israel does not respond because C2 is leave Hamas go unpunished. Therefore, Israel responds. Hamas looking forward and foreseeing Israeli military punishment compares C1 and C3. If C3 represents some subjective value higher than the one of C1 for Hamas, then Hamas attacks; otherwise, if C1 represents some subjective value higher than the one of C3 for Hamas, then Hamas does not attack. Consequently, the Hamas attack proves that given a certain Israeli reaction, C3 was more valuable than C1. The current destruction of Gaza and thousands of civilian death represents a higher subjective value compared to the status quo that is C1. Therefore, Hamas did not care about Palestinians’ lives by looking forward and reasoning back.

If Israeli military intelligence cadre was aware of such a subjective evaluation of Hamas, then they should be expecting an attack anytime: Hamas' surprise attack should not be unexpected. Thus, game theory adds additional reasoning about the sequence of actions. Dray's approach explains Hamas attack but not Israeli reaction. The question then becomes how could it be possible that the Israeli intelligence leaders have remained indifferent to Hamas activities over the length of a year? The Israeli reliance on Hamas' rationality constitutes a colossal error. Israeli reliance on the rationality of Hamas corresponding to the Hamas leadership's evaluation of the gain as much smaller compared to the cost of attack is simply wrong. Hamas was in a perfect position to foresee a deeply and a certain destructive Israeli counterattack. Israeli intelligence failure harmed both Kfar-Aza residents and Palestinians living in Gaza. There is a difference between deterrence and compellence.<sup>20</sup> Both deterrence and compellence are forms of the ability to make others do things they would do otherwise. Deterrence is a threat of retaliation to dissuade a future harmful move by the adversary. The harmful move lies in the future. It did not yet take place. Compellence refers to the ability to make the adversary stop a harmful action it already has taken. Israel's current destruction of Gaza has no compelling quality. First, the Hamas attack is executed in the past. Second, Israeli destruction of Gaza would not stop continuing activities of Hamas, Hezbollah. On the contrary, the destruction of Gaza eliminates sources of new attacks against Israel. Hence, Israeli deterrent and compelling activities constitute failures.

In general, people do not have a full information about their environments. If people "are rational they recognize their own ignorance and reflect carefully on what they know and what they do not know, before choosing how to act. Furthermore, when rational agents interact, they think about what others know and do not know, and what the others know about what they know, before choosing to act. Failing to do so can be disastrous."<sup>21</sup> Now the world witnesses the disaster in Gaza indeed. The quotation above implies that Hamas would think about what Israel knows and does not know, before choosing attack on Kfar Aza. Israeli non reaction to Hamas activities prior to the attack might inform Hamas that Israel ignores its attack preparations and there is a further problem of whether Israel knew what Hamas knew about its miscalculations. Such interactive beliefs expose more complexities of interrelated subjective evaluations.

#### 4.

What are the global implications of the current Hamas-Israel conflict? Today's world can no longer be conceived as a unipolar system with the United States being the sole superpower, that is, the unipole. The Abraham Accords initiated by the United States and signed by Israel, Bahrain, Morocco, United Arab Emirates, and Sudan is seriously hit by the Hamas-Israel conflict. A Saudi-Israel cooperative move similar to the Abraham Accords now seems to be in limbo. Therefore, the unipole loses its power position in the Middle East. The United States losing its power invites especially China as a power-vacuum filler. "...international politics abhors unbalanced power. Faced with unbalanced power, some states try to increase their own strength, or they ally with others to bring the international distribution of power into balance."<sup>22</sup>

The United States confronts a multiplicity of conflict fronts: Ukraine-Russia war, Hamas-Israel war, tensions with China over South China Sea and Taiwan. China's rise in power projection capabilities and foreign direct investments abroad

constitute serious defiance moves targeting the United States. The enlargement of NATO and Turkish opposition against Sweden's NATO membership is yet another problematic issue for the United States.

States cannot be involved in equal efficiency in conflicts and issues. States' attention allocations to conflict zones decrease as the number of conflict zones increase.<sup>23</sup> Thus, if the United States is heavily involved in one conflict zone militarily and politically, then the allies of the United States in other conflict zones suffer consequences of lesser attention the United States pays them. As result, there exist repercussions resulting from the American involvement in Hamas-Israel conflict. Hamas attack puts considerable pressures on the United States because the United States cannot deal with Russia, China, and Hamas simultaneously in an equally strong way. A heavier involvement of the United States in the Hamas-Israel war generates a larger freedom for China in its own conflict fronts.

Today's world is no longer unipolar but multipolar with China, India acquiring big power status progressively and Russia still being a major power. The United States is no longer the unipole. China is a serious challenger of the United States. Russia-China relations are friendly. The constellation of the United States, China and Russia presents the United States as the locus of a Sino-Russian alignment of interests. The more United States involved in the Hamas-Israel conflict, the less it can deal with a major conflict pitting itself against a bloc of China and Russia. Therefore, Hamas-Israel war demonstrates how today's multipolar world is unstable and poses risks for the world peace.

## Summary

Explanations come in different varieties. Explanation-what approach implies that it is sufficient to describe the causal process of the attack. The causes of the attack can be described as forming a range going from the readiness and preparations of Hamas forces close by to the kibbutz, Iran's approval of the attack, or to a decision by Hamas leadership. Explanation-why requires a set of premises constituting the explanandum that logically implies the explananda, that is, the attack, as the effect. The explanandum and the explananda must constitute a valid argument. The premises have to specify the cause and the effect as being independent of each other. The explanation have to prove that there is a temporal sequence corresponding to the cause coming first, and the effect following the cause. Lastly the explanation has to establish that in the absence of the cause, the attack could not have happened corresponding to the counterfactual clause. Dray's approach instead is much simpler: it stems from the discussion of a necessary condition amounting to a circumstance in whose absence the event cannot occur. The condition is the failure of Israeli military intelligence system. Thus, Hamas attack could not have occurred in the absence of the Israeli intelligence failure. The failure forcing the United States to help Israel only exacerbates an environment of high conflict risks for the international system.

## About the Author

**Short Bio:** Serdar Ş. Güner is an associate professor of international relations (IR) at Bilkent University, Ankara. He earned his PhD degree from the Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva, Switzerland in 1990. His interests lie



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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> William Dray, 1957. *Laws and Explanation in History*. London: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Carl G. Hempel and Paul Guggenheim, 1948. "Studies in the Logic of Explanation." *Philosophy of Science* 15 (2): 135-175.

<sup>3</sup> David Stump, 1989. "Henri Poincaré's Philosophy of Science." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 20 (3): 335-363, p. 335.

<sup>4</sup> Wesley C. Salmon, 1998. *Causality and Explanation*. New York: Oxford University Press. Wesley C. Salmon, 1984. *Scientific Explanation and the Causal Structure of the World*. New Jersey, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander E. Wendt, 1998. "On Constitution and Causation in International Relations." *Review of International Studies* 24 (4): 101-118, p.105.

<sup>6</sup> David Lewis, 1986. *Philosophical Papers*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.214.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.helsinki.fi/science/commens/tems/abduction.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas N. Walton, 2001. "Abductive, presumptive and plausible arguments." *Informal Logic* 21 (2): 11-169, p. 145.

<sup>9</sup> Dray, 1957.

<sup>10</sup> Irving M. Copi, 1961. *Introduction to Logic (Second Edition)*. New York: Macmillan Company, p.355.

<sup>11</sup> Dray, p.158.

<sup>12</sup> Dray, p.159.

<sup>13</sup> This is the direct translation of Dray's question at p. 160 adapted to the problem of explaining Hamas attack of 7 October.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-773974> accessed December 15, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> [Israeli intelligence leak details extent of warnings over Hamas attack | Israel | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/israel/2023/december/15/israeli-intelligence-leak-details-extent-of-warnings-over-hamas-attack) accessed December 15, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/30/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-attack-intelligence.html>

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- <sup>18</sup> Avinash Dixit and Barry J. Nalebuff, 1991. *Thinking Strategically: The Competitive Edge in Business, Politics, and Everyday Life*. New York and London: W. W. Norton, p. 34.
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- <sup>21</sup> John Geanakoplos, 1992. "Common Knowledge." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 6 (4): 53-82, p. 53.
- <sup>22</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, 2000. "Structural Realism after the Cold War." *International Security* 25 (1): 5-41, p. 28.
- <sup>23</sup> Karl W. Deutsch and J. David Singer, 1964. "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability." *World Politics* 16 (3): 390-406.