

Chris Hedges: Israel, the Big Lie

Israel is not exercising “the right to defend itself” in the occupied Palestinian territories. It is carrying out mass murder, aided and abetted by the U.S.

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Nearly all the words and phrases used by the Democrats, Republicans and the talking heads on the media to describe the unrest inside Israel and the heaviest Israeli assault against the Palestinians since the 2014 attacks on Gaza, which lasted 51 days and killed more than 2,200 Palestinians, including 551 children, are a lie. Israel, by employing its military machine against an occupied population that does not have mechanized units, an air force, navy, missiles, heavy artillery and command-and-control, not to mention a U.S. commitment to provide a \$38 billion defense aid package for Israel over the next decade, is not exercising “the right to defend itself.” It is carrying out mass murder. It is a war crime.

Israel has made it clear it is ready to destroy and kill as wantonly now as it was in 2014. Israel’s defense minister [Benny Gantz](#), who was the chief of staff during the murderous assault on Gaza in 2014, has vowed that if Hamas “does not stop the violence, the strike of 2021 will be harder and more painful than that of 2014.” The current attacks have already targeted several residential high rises including buildings that housed over a dozen local and international press agencies, government buildings, roads, public facilities, agricultural lands, two schools and a mosque.

I spent seven years in the Middle East as a correspondent, four of them as The New York Times Middle East Bureau Chief. I am an Arabic speaker. I lived for weeks at a time in Gaza, the world’s largest open-air prison where over two million Palestinians exist on the edge of starvation, struggle to find clean water and endure constant Israeli terror. I have been in Gaza when it was pounded with Israeli artillery and air strikes. I have watched mothers and fathers, wailing in grief, cradling the bloodied bodies of their sons and daughters. I know the crimes of the occupation—the food shortages caused by the Israeli blockade, the stifling overcrowding, the contaminated water, the lack of health services, the near constant electrical outages due to the Israeli targeting of power plants, the crippling poverty, the endemic unemployment, the fear and the despair. I have witnessed the carnage.

I also have listened from Gaza to the lies emanating from Jerusalem and Washington. Israel’s indiscriminate use of modern, industrial weapons to kill thousands of innocents,

wound thousands more and make tens of thousands of families homeless is not a war: It is state-sponsored terror. And, while I oppose the indiscriminate firing of rockets by Palestinians into Israel, as I oppose suicide bombings, seeing them also as war crimes, I am acutely aware of a huge disparity between the industrial violence carried out by Israel against innocent Palestinians and the minimal acts of violence capable of being waged by groups such as Hamas.

The false equivalency between Israeli and Palestinian violence was echoed during the war I covered in Bosnia. Those of us in the besieged city of Sarajevo were pounded daily with hundreds of heavy shells and rockets from the surrounding Serbs. We were targeted by sniper fire. The city suffered a few dozen dead and wounded each day. The government forces inside the city fired back with light mortars and small arms fire. Supporters of the Serbs seized on any casualties caused by Bosnian government forces to play the same dirty game, although well over 90 percent of the killings in Bosnia were the fault of the Serbs, as is also true regarding Israel.

The second and perhaps most important parallel is that the Serbs, like the Israelis, were the principal violators of international law. Israel is in breach of more than 30 U.N. Security Council resolutions. It is in breach of Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention that defines collective punishment of a civilian population as a war crime. It is in violation of Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention for settling over half a million Jewish Israelis on occupied Palestinian land and for the ethnic cleansing of at least 750,000 Palestinians when the Israeli state was founded and another 300,000 after Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank were occupied following the 1967 war. Its annexation of East Jerusalem and the Syrian Golan Heights violates international law, as does its building of a security barrier in the West Bank that annexes Palestinian land into Israel. It is in violation of U.N. General Assembly Resolution 194 that states that Palestinian "refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date."

This is the truth. Any other starting point for the discussion of what is taking place between Israel and the Palestinians is a lie.

Israel's once vibrant peace movement and political left, which condemned and protested against the Israeli occupation when I lived in Jerusalem, is moribund. The right-wing Netanyahu government, despite its rhetoric about fighting terrorism, has built an alliance with the repressive regime in Saudi Arabia, which also views Iran as an enemy. Saudi Arabia, a country that produced 15 of the 19 hijackers in the September 11 attacks, is reputed to be the most prolific sponsor of international [Islamist terrorism](#), allegedly supporting Salafist jihadism, the basis of al-Qaeda, and groups such as the Afghanistan [Taliban](#), [Lashkar-e-Taiba](#) (LeT) and the [Al-Nusra Front](#).

Saudi Arabia and Israel worked closely together to back the 2013 military coup in Egypt, led by General Abdul Fattah el Sisi. Sisi overthrew a democratically elected government. He has imprisoned tens of thousands of government critics, including journalists and human rights defenders, on politically motivated charges. The Sisi regime collaborates with Israel by keeping its common border with Gaza closed to Palestinians, trapping them in the Gaza strip, one of the most densely populated places on earth. Israel's cynicism and hypocrisy, especially when it wraps itself in the mantle of protecting democracy and fighting terrorism, is of epic proportions.

Those who are not Jewish in Israel are either second class citizens or live under brutal military occupation. Israel is not, and never has been, the exclusive homeland of the Jewish people. From the 7th century until 1948, when Jewish colonial settlers used violence and ethnic cleansing to create the state of Israel, Palestine was overwhelmingly Muslim. It was never empty land. The Jews in Palestine were traditionally a tiny minority. The United States is not an honest broker for peace but has funded, enabled and defended Israel's crimes against the Palestinian people. Israel is not defending the rule of law. Israel is not a democracy. It is an apartheid state.

That the lie of Israel continues to be embraced by the ruling elites—there is no daylight between statements in defense of Israeli war crimes by Nancy Pelosi and Ted Cruz—and used as a foundation for any discussion of Israel is a testament to the corrupting power of money, in this case that of the Israel lobby, and the bankruptcy of a political system of legalized bribery that has surrendered its autonomy and its principles to its major donors. It is also a stunning example of how colonial settler projects, and this is true in the United States, always carry out cultural genocide so they can exist in a suspended state of myth and historical amnesia to legitimize themselves.

The Israel lobby has shamelessly used its immense political clout to demand that Americans take de facto loyalty oaths to Israel. The passage by 35 state legislatures of [Israel lobby-backed legislation](#) requiring their workers and contractors, under threat of dismissal, to sign a pro-Israel oath and promise not to support the [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions](#) movement is a mockery of our Constitutional right of free speech. Israel has lobbied the U.S. State Department to redefine anti-Semitism under a three-point test known as the Three Ds: the making of statements that “demonize” Israel; statements that apply “double standards” for Israel; statements that “delegitimize” the state of Israel. This definition of anti-Semitism is being pushed by the Israel lobby in state legislatures and on college campuses. The Israel lobby spies in the United States, often at the direction of Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs, on those who speak up for the rights of Palestinians. It wages public smear campaigns and blacklists defenders of Palestinian rights—including the Jewish historian [Norman Finkelstein](#); U.N. Special Rapporteur for the Occupied Territories, Richard Falk, also Jewish; and university students, many of them Jewish, in organizations such as Students for Justice in Palestine.

The Israel lobby has spent hundreds of millions of dollars to manipulate U.S. elections, far beyond anything alleged to have been carried out by Russia, China or any other country. The heavy-handed interference by Israel in the American political system, which includes operatives and donors bundling together hundreds of thousands of dollars in campaign contributions in every U.S. congressional district to bankroll compliant candidates, is documented in the Al-Jazeera four-part series “The Lobby.” Israel [managed to block](#) “The Lobby” from being broadcast. In the film, a pirated copy that is [available on the website Electronic Intifada](#), the leaders of the Israel lobby are repeatedly captured on a reporter's hidden camera explaining how they, backed by the intelligence services within Israel, attack and silence American critics and use massive cash donations to buy politicians. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu secured the [unconstitutional invitation](#) by then-House Speaker John Boehner to address Congress in 2015 to denounce President Barack Obama's Iranian nuclear agreement. Netanyahu's open defiance of Obama and alliance with the Republican Party, however, did not stop Obama in 2014 from authorizing a 10-year \$38 billion military aid package to Israel, a sad commentary on how captive American politics is to Israeli interests.

The investment by Israel and its backers is worth it, especially when you consider that the U.S. has also spent over \$ 6 trillion during the last 20 years fighting futile wars that Israel and its lobby pushed for in the Middle East. These wars are the greatest strategic debacle in American history, accelerating the decline of the American empire, bankrupting the nation at a time of economic stagnation and mounting poverty, and turning huge parts of the globe against us. They serve Israel's interests, not ours.

The longer the mendacious Israeli narrative is embraced, the more empowered become the racists, bigots, conspiracy theorists and far-right hate groups inside and outside Israel. This steady shift to the far right in Israel has fostered an alliance between Israel and the Christian right, many of whom are anti-Semites. The more Israel and the Israel lobby level the charge of anti-Semitism against those who speak up for Palestinian rights, as they did against British Labour Party leader [Jeremy Corbyn](#), the more they embolden the real anti-Semites.

Racism, including anti-Semitism, is dangerous. It is not only bad for the Jews. It is bad for everyone. It empowers the dark forces of ethnic and religious hatred on the extremes. Netanyahu's racist government has built alliances with far-right leaders in Hungary, India, and Brazil, and was closely allied with Donald Trump. Racists and ethnic chauvinists, as I saw in the wars in the former Yugoslavia, feed off of each other. They divide societies into polarized, antagonistic camps that only speak in the language of violence. The radical jihadists need Israel to justify their violence, just as Israel needs the radical jihadists to justify its violence. These extremists are ideological twins.

This polarization fosters a fearful, militarized society. It permits the ruling elites in Israel, as in the United States, to dismantle civil liberties in the name of national security. Israel runs training programs for militarized police, including from the United States. It is a global player in the multibillion-dollar drone industry, competing against China and the United States.

It oversees hundreds of cybersurveillance startups whose espionage innovations, according to the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, have been utilized abroad "to locate and detain human rights activists, persecute members of the LGBT community, silence citizens critical of their governments, and even fabricate cases of blasphemy against Islam in Muslim countries that don't maintain formal relations with Israel."

Israel, like the United States, has been poisoned by the psychosis of permanent war. One million Israelis, many of them among the most enlightened and educated, have left the country. Its most courageous human rights campaigners, intellectuals and journalists—Israeli and Palestinian—endure constant government surveillance, arbitrary arrests and vicious government-run smear campaigns. Mobs and vigilantes, including thugs from right-wing youth groups such as Im Tirtzu, physically assault dissidents, Palestinians, Israeli Arabs and African immigrants in the slums of Tel Aviv. These Jewish extremists have targeted Palestinians in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, demanding their expulsion. They are supported by an array of anti-Arab groups including the Otzma Yehudit Party, the ideological descendant of the outlawed Kach party, the Lehava movement, which calls for all Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories to be expelled to surrounding Arab states, and La Familia, far-right soccer hooligans. Lehava in Hebrew means "flame" and is the acronym for "Prevention of Assimilation in the Holy Land." Mobs of these Jewish fanatics parade through Palestinian neighborhoods, including in occupied East Jerusalem, protected by Israeli police, shouting to the Palestinians who live there "Death to the Arabs," which is

also a popular chant at Israeli soccer matches.

Israel has pushed through a series of discriminatory laws against non-Jews that echo the racist Nuremberg Laws that disenfranchised Jews in Nazi Germany. The Communities Acceptance Law, for example, permits “small, exclusively Jewish towns planted across Israel’s Galilee region to formally reject applicants for residency on the grounds of ‘suitability to the community’s fundamental outlook.’” Israel’s educational system, starting in primary school, uses the Holocaust to portray Jews as eternal victims. This victimhood is an indoctrination machine used to justify racism, Islamophobia, religious chauvinism and the deification of the Israeli military.

There are many parallels between the deformities that grip Israel and the deformities that grip the United States. The two countries are moving at warp speed towards a 21st century fascism, cloaked in religious language, which will revoke what remains of our civil liberties and snuff out our anemic democracies. The failure of the United States to stand up for the rule of law, to demand that the Palestinians, powerless and friendless, even in the Arab world, be granted basic human rights mirrors the abandonment of the vulnerable within our own society. We are headed, I fear, down the road Israel is heading down. It will be devastating for the Palestinians. It will be devastating for us. And all resistance, as the Palestinians courageously show us, will only come from the street.

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