

The Historical Roots of Israel's Ethnic Cleansing in Gaza

Israel is not “defending itself” against an external aggressor, but an imprisoned internal population. Israel has always chosen occupation and supremacy over peace and security

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“In a few days,” [writes Amira Hass](#), the veteran Israeli correspondent who has reported for decades from the Occupied Territories, “Israelis went through what Palestinians have experienced as a matter of routine for decades, and are still experiencing,” including “military incursions, death, cruelty, slain children, bodies piled up in the road, siege, fear, anxiety over loved ones, captivity... and searing humiliation.”

The Hamas-led operation against Israeli military bases and civilian neighborhoods killed more than 1,300 Israelis, along with at least 120 taken hostage. While enduring that type of violence may be routine for Palestinians, Gaza is now facing the most calamitous Israeli military assault to date.

In less than one week, as of this writing, Israel has killed more than 2,300 people, including 724 children.

Israeli strikes have hit residential buildings, mosques, schools, hospitals, universities, and fleeing civilians. Israel has intensified its already crippling blockade by cutting off all food, water, and electricity. It has ordered the expulsion of 1.1 million residents of northern Gaza, “a death sentence for the sick and injured,” the World Health Organization warns.

If Israel does not restore Gaza's water supply, the United Nations Palestinian refugee agency says, “people will start dying of severe dehydration.”

With a ground invasion looming, Israel is threatening atrocities on an even larger scale, all while espousing rhetoric that calls for ethnic cleansing or even genocide.

Justifying what he called the “complete siege” of Gaza, Israeli defense minister **Yoav Gallant** declared that his government is “fighting against human animals.” According to former Israeli Deputy Foreign minister Danny Ayalon, the Israeli plan is to force Palestinians into the “almost endless space in the Sinai desert, just on the other side of Gaza,” where they can live in “tent cities.”

Israeli president **Isaac Herzog** effectively declared that there are no innocent civilians in Gaza, home to “an entire nation... that is responsible.” Invoking the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians before and after Israel’s founding in May 1948, known as the Nakba (“catastrophe”), **Ariel Kallner**, an Israeli parliamentarian, said that Israel has “one goal”: a “Nakba that will overshadow the Nakba of ‘48.”

Even as the [threat of regional escalation](#) grows, the **Biden** administration fully endorses Israel’s blood lust. Calls for a ceasefire, the White House press secretary declared, are “repugnant.” State Department employees have even been [instructed to avoid mentioning](#) the terms “de-escalation/ceasefire,” “end to violence/bloodshed” and “restoring calm.”

Biden’s stance is shared across both political parties, with only a handful of lawmakers demanding a ceasefire. As the US backs Israel’s assault, “we may be about to see massive ethnic cleansing” in Gaza, one European Union official [has warned](#).

As in previous cases, the Western media and political establishment justifies the prevailing support for attacking Gaza by asserting that Israel has “the right to defend itself”, and has no other option against Palestinian militants who refuse to accept its existence.

As a legal matter, the former assertion is false: while Israel has an internationally recognized right to defend itself from an attack, it does not have the right to commit war crimes against a besieged civilian population.

Moreover, Israel is not “defending itself” against an external aggressor, but an imprisoned internal population that also has a recognized right to resist military occupation (but not, as is evident, to kill and kidnap Israeli civilians).

To adopt the Israeli-US narrative, therefore, requires “ignoring Israel’s structural violence and cruelty,” Amira Hass writes, “and the context of the Palestinian people’s ongoing dispossession from their land.”

That Israel is “defending itself” from a people that it has colonized has long been acknowledged at the highest levels. At a 1956 funeral for an Israeli soldier killed by Palestinians in Gaza, Gen. **Moshe Dayan**, one of Israel’s most famed military leaders, advised the following:

Let us not cast the blame on the murderers today. Why should we deplore their burning hatred for us? For eight years they have been sitting in the refugee camps in Gaza, and before their eyes we have been transforming the lands and villages, where they and their fathers dwelt, into our estate.

Dayan, having led Israeli forces in the military campaign during Israel’s founding in 1948, recognized that his country originated with the dispossession of Palestinians and theft of their homes.

Yet his acknowledgment was not an act of remorse. Rather than attempt to reverse or

redress the forced expulsion of Palestinians, Dayan went on to decree that Israel should maintain the colonization with even more aggression:

We are a generation that settles the land and without the steel helmet and the cannon's maw, we will not be able to plant a tree and build a home... Let us not fear to look squarely at the hatred that consumes and fills the lives of hundreds of Arabs who live around us.

Let us not drop our gaze, lest our arms weaken. That is the fate of our generation. That is our choice - to be ready and armed, tough and hard - or else the sword shall fall from our hands and our lives will be cut short.



Gen. Moshe Dayan delivers a eulogy for slain Israeli soldier Roi Rutenberg — April 19, 1956.

In the nearly 70 years since Dayan spoke those words, Israel has heeded them by expanding its theft of Palestinian land and creating new generations of refugees.

As B'Tselem, the leading Israeli human rights group, acknowledged in 2021, this has turned Israel into “an apartheid regime” that “promotes and perpetuates Jewish supremacy between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.”

A foundational moment for Israel's apartheid regime was its 1967 conquest of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which brought millions of Palestinians under Israeli military occupation. As he did in 1956, Dayan candidly articulated what became the guiding policy:

“You Palestinians, as a nation, don't want us today, but we'll change your attitude by forcing our presence on you.” Under Israeli rule, the Israeli general said, occupied Palestinians will “live like dogs, and whoever will leave, will leave.”

For Gaza, one of the world's most densely populated areas, this forced Israeli occupation has confined a population of 2.3 million, more than half of them children, to what former UK **Prime Minister David Cameron** has described as “an open-air prison,” or what Hebrew

University Professor **Baruch Kimmerling** called “the largest concentration camp ever to exist.”

Israel’s famed 2005 “disengagement” has been falsely described as an end to the occupation of Gaza when, in fact, it only deepened the torment. After years of defacto blockades, Israel imposed a full siege in 2007. This was Israel and Washington’s response to Hamas’ surprise victory in Palestinian legislative elections the previous year, when voters shunned the corrupt and inept Western-backed Palestinian Authority.

Hamas then took full control of Gaza in a preemptive operation against a [US-backed coup plot](#) that sought to undermine its electoral gains. **Hillary Clinton** later lamented that the US failed to rig the Palestinian vote. “If we were going to push for an election, then we should have made sure that we did something to determine who was going to win,” [she said](#).

Because it failed to thwart Palestinian democracy, Israel, again with US backing, turned to punishing Gazan civilians for voting the wrong way.

Controlling the flow of goods and energy to Gaza, Israel restricted food imports based on a calculation of the precise number of calories that would be needed to ravage them without triggering a full-blown malnutrition crisis. “The idea,” Israeli advisor **Dov Weisglass** explained, “is to put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger.”

Under Israeli control, over 90% of Gaza’s water [became unfit for human consumption](#). In 2018, the United Nations declared conditions to be so dire that the territory could become “uninhabitable” within years. The Israeli siege has been accompanied by periodic military assaults that killed, wounded, and displaced tens of thousands of Palestinians.

Israel’s commitment to enforcing the dispossession and occupation of Palestinians has also led it to undermine any prospect of the two-state solution that it claimed to support.

The 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) were “founded on a neo-colonialist basis,” in the words of former Israeli Foreign Minister **Shlomo Ben-Ami**.

“One of the meanings of Oslo,” Ben Ami explained, “was that the PLO was eventually Israel’s collaborator in the task of stifling the intifada,” – a grassroots and largely non-violent uprising against Israeli occupation – thereby “cutting short what was clearly an authentically democratic struggle for Palestinian independence.”

Oslo’s Israeli architects, including Prime Minister **Yitzhak Rabin**, never “wanted the autonomy to usher in a Palestinian state.”

As a neo-colonial endeavor disguised as a “peace process,” the Oslo era saw a doubling of the Israeli settlement population in its first eight years. Israel’s so-called “[generous peace offer](#)” at Camp David in July 2000 – widely cited by Israeli officials and Western pundits as proof of an Israeli willingness to “compromise,” and a Palestinian refusal to “co-exist” – was in fact a perpetuation of Oslo’s neocolonial ruse.

As Ben-Ami, who took part in the summit as a top Israeli negotiator, [himself acknowledged](#) years later: “If I were a Palestinian I would have rejected Camp David, as well.”

In 2002, the [Arab League offered Israel](#) full normalization in return for a withdrawal from all

Arab territories (Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian) that it occupied in 1967; the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital; and a “just resolution” to the refugee issue.

The initiative was subsequently endorsed by Iran, which [signed on](#) to a [December 2017 declaration](#) calling for a “two-state solution with east Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Palestine.”

The proposal would require Israel to end its occupation of the West Bank and abandon the illegal settlement blocs, which carve up Palestinian land and disproportionately consume precious water reserves. Later on, the [Arab League signaled](#) that it would accept mutually agreed land swaps, as the Palestinian Authority [had already done](#), that could keep some settlement areas under Israeli control.

But even the most far-reaching Israeli offer, presented by lame-duck Prime Minister **Ehud Olmert** in 2008, rejected parity in any territorial exchange. As veteran Israeli negotiator **Michael Herzog** [wrote in 2011](#): “No Israeli government to date has accepted the Palestinian stipulation that land swaps be fully equal in size and ‘quality.’”

Israel has repeatedly [rejected](#) the Arab League’s diplomatic initiative and [even refused to accept it as a basis](#) for further negotiations. In shunning the two-state solution based on the 1967 borders, Israel has shown a less accommodating position than even what Hamas, at one point, claimed to support.

In a March 2008 interview, **Khalid Mishal**, head of Hamas’s political bureau, stated that “most Palestinian forces, including Hamas, accept a state on the 1967 borders.” In 2013, **Ghazi Hamad**, Hamas’ deputy foreign minister, [reaffirmed this stance](#): “We agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, within the 1967 borders, and that this would include a solution to the refugee problem.”

While Hamas explicitly rejected any recognition of Israel, its acceptance of a Palestinian state within the boundaries the Occupied Territories – about 22% of historic Palestine – constituted a tacit recognition of Israel’s internationally recognized borders on the other side.

This contrasted with Israel’s position, which nominally accepted the notion of a Palestinian state, but remained committed to keeping the large West Bank settlement blocs that would make such a state non-contiguous and therefore untenable.

Having thwarted the prospect of a two-state solution, Israel has also violently crushed any hope of non-violent Palestinian resistance. In March 2018, tens of thousands of Palestinians launched the Great March of Return, a campaign to break the Gaza siege. “Gaza is a ghetto and what’s happening... is a ghetto uprising,” veteran Israeli journalist **Gideon Levy** [wrote](#).

Israel responded to the ghetto uprising by gunning down at least 214 Palestinians, including 46 children, and wounding over 36,000. Western pundits who had loudly implored Palestinians to take up Gandhian non-violence fell resoundingly silent.

The **Netanyahu** government, meanwhile, returned to a longtime policy of [propping up Hamas’ rule](#), recognizing that the group’s global isolation and internal divisions could be exploited to undermine the possibility of the Palestinian state that some Hamas leaders had claimed to accept.

“Anyone who wants to thwart the establishment of a Palestinian state has to support bolstering Hamas and transferring money to Hamas,” Netanyahu [explained to Likud Party members](#) in March 2019. “This is part of our strategy – to isolate the Palestinians in Gaza from the Palestinians in the West Bank.”

Having successfully deepened Palestinian isolation, Netanyahu’s government has intensified the oppression. The guiding Israeli policy, Netanyahu’s government [declared in December 2022](#), is that “the Jewish people have an exclusive and inalienable right to all parts of the Land of Israel.”

This included Gaza, Cabinet Minister **Orit Strock** [explained](#) in March of this year. “I believe that, at the end of the day, the sin of the [Gaza] disengagement will be reversed,” Strock said. “Sadly, a return to the Gaza Strip will involve many casualties... But ultimately it is part of the Land of Israel, and a day will come when we will return to it.”

Tareq Bacouni, a former senior analyst for the International Crisis Group, [summarizes](#) how Netanyahu’s supremacist rule has recently trampled the inalienable rights of Palestinians:

Under the most right-wing government in its history, Israel has carried out large-scale invasions of Palestinian refugee camps and towns in the West Bank, killing and wounding scores of people.

Armed Israeli fighters have burst into Palestinian streets and homes on an almost nightly basis, often picking children out of their beds in the middle of the night to be taken into administrative detention—acts of terror that have gone largely unreported in the Western press.

The state has accelerated its expulsions of Palestinians from their homes in Jerusalem and the West Bank and expanded the construction of illegal settlements.

Settlers have waged [weekly assaults](#) on Palestinian villages, attacking and in some cases killing Palestinians, setting fire to their homes, and destroying their property, often under the protection of Israeli soldiers. The domestic secret police has facilitated and fomented violence against Palestinian citizens.

Senior members of Israel’s government and messianic Jewish extremists have been increasingly aggressive in their provocations in and around the Noble Sanctuary Mosque complex in occupied East Jerusalem. In the weeks leading to Hamas’s offensive, the state tightened the blockade on Gaza by still further restricting movement in and out.

Having always chosen occupation and supremacy over peace and security, Israel has now opted to further devastate, displace, and murder occupied Palestinians in retaliation against those who have fought back.

Zaha Hassan and **Daniel Levy**, former advisers for their respective Palestinian and Israeli governments, [offer three points of agreement](#) that could help end the current crisis:

First, the militant attack on Israeli civilians was unconscionable, inhumane and in violation of international law. Second, Israel’s collective punishment against Palestinian civilians and its actions in Gaza are unconscionable, inhumane and a violation of international law.

And, third, one must address the context of occupation and apartheid in which this is unfolding if one is to maintain integrity and be able to plot a strategy going forward in which both Palestinians and Israelis can live in freedom and security.

If we can hold these three truths, then it will be possible to prevent further casualties, secure the release of prisoners and step back from the precipice.

Hassan and Levy condition their guidance on the principle that “one accepts the humanity and equality of all people without discrimination or distinction.” Israel has explicitly rejected this principle since its founding. And with Washington’s support, Israel’s determination to enforce the dispossession and subjugation of Palestinians is yielding a new ethnic cleansing campaign before our eyes.

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