

Eyeless in Gaza

Paratexts, contexts, and the weaponization of October 7

[Derek Sayer](#) / February 9, 2024 / 43 min read

MIDDLE EASTWAR ZONESHUMAN RIGHTS



A young woman carries her infant while walking on Rashid Street, west of Gaza City, on January 11, 2024. Photo by Omar Al-Qattaa/UNICEF/[Flickr](#).

“There is almost no kind of outrage ... which does not change its moral colour when it is committed by ‘our’ side ... Whether such deeds were reprehensible, or even whether they happened, was always decided according to political predilection.”

—George Orwell, “[Notes on Nationalism](#)”

October 7 as paratext

On Friday, November 3, 2023, as the Palestinian death toll from Israeli military action in Gaza climbed to 9,257—among them 2,405 women and 3,826 children^[1]—US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [lamented](#) that, “It’s shocking that so many people appear to have forgotten the brutality of the Hamas October 7 attack.” Unless one wished to be denounced as an antisemite and an apologist for terrorism, in the weeks following the attack it became obligatory to preface any statement on the war in Gaza, and in particular any criticism of Operation Swords of Iron (as Israel’s action is officially known), with a condemnation of [Hamas’s brutality](#). Across the Western world a “[McCarthyite backlash](#) against pro-Palestine speech” cost people [literary awards](#), [art exhibitions](#), [government positions](#), [seats on scientific research advisory boards](#), [places in sports teams](#), [film roles](#), [publications](#), and jobs ranging from [Air Canada pilot](#) to [MSNBC news show host](#) to [University of Ottawa medical resident](#) to editor at [Artforum](#) and [eLife](#). Wall Street law firms [rescinded job offers](#) to students who had spoken out in support of Palestine, while doctors were [investigated](#) for “potential professional misconduct” by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario. Indigenous curator Wanda Nanibush abruptly [quit her job](#) at Toronto’s Art Gallery of Ontario after a pro-Israel organization complained about her social media posts. Laurie Anderson was forced to [give up](#) a visiting professorship at Folkwang University of Arts in Essen, Germany, because of her support for a 2021 Palestinian artists’ “Letter against Apartheid.” Exiled Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, whose exhibition at the Lisson Gallery was “[effectively cancelled](#)” for a tweet critical of Israeli influence in US politics, aptly [described](#) this backlash as “a massacre of thoughts.”

In Canada, the Ontario NDP [expelled](#) Hamilton MPP Sarah Jama from caucus for pro-Palestinian statements that had “broken the trust of her colleagues.” British Home Secretary Suella Braverman [characterized](#) protests in London and other UK cities, in which hundreds of thousands of people rallied against the scale and ferocity of Israel’s response, as “hate marches ... chanting for the erasure of Israel from the map,” while the US Senate unanimously [condemned](#) “anti-Israel, pro-Hamas student groups” after demonstrations on university campuses across America. Not to be outdone, the House of Representatives [censured](#) its only Palestinian-American member, Rashida Tlaib, for “promoting false narratives regarding the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel and for calling for the destruction of the state of Israel.” Columbia University—for 40 years the home of world-renowned Palestinian scholar Edward Said—[suspended](#) its Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace societies. Harvard’s President Claudine Gay, who would later be [hounded](#) into resigning over her allegedly

inadequate response to antisemitism on campus, responded to a [letter](#) from 34 student organizations that held “the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence” in Gaza with a statement that began by condemning “the terrorist atrocities perpetrated by Hamas” and totally ignored Israeli reprisals. She continued: “Such inhumanity is abhorrent, whatever one’s individual views of the origins of longstanding conflicts in the region.” What decent person, it was implied, would not want *first and foremost* to repudiate the authors of such barbaric atrocities—even if they supported the Palestinian cause?

The *Times of Israel* [reported](#) the UN General Assembly’s ceasefire resolution of October 27 under the subheading “Jerusalem denounces General Assembly’s approval of ‘despicable’ Jordanian initiative that *makes no mention of Hamas*,” while US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield [complained](#) “It is outrageous that this resolution *fails to name the perpetrators of the October 7th terrorist attacks: Hamas*.” It was [on these grounds](#) that the US and UK abstained in the vote on the Security Council resolution of November 15 calling for “humanitarian pauses” in the fighting. The October 27 resolution aimed to halt *future* fatalities, yet what concerned Israel and the US more was its failure to censure Hamas for its *past* actions. By drawing our attention relentlessly back to October 7, the focus was taken away from the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza—and from Israel’s ongoing part in it. When Justin Trudeau later urged Israel to stop “this killing of women, of children, of babies,” Benjamin Netanyahu angrily [responded](#): “it is not Israel that is deliberately targeting civilians but *Hamas that beheaded, burned and massacred civilians* in the worst horrors perpetrated on Jews since the Holocaust ... the forces of civilization must back Israel in defeating Hamas barbarism.” By this time, Gaza’s death toll had passed 11,100, including 4,609 children—nearly four times as many children alone as the total number of Israelis killed in the October 7 attack—but it was October 7 that continued to dominate discussion and circumscribe the terms of acceptable debate.

These ritualized denunciations of Hamas’s actions on October 7 have functioned as what Gérard Genette calls *paratexts*. Like an abstract for an article, a trailer for a film, or a publisher’s blurb for a book, a paratext provides:

a threshold, or—a word Borges used apropos of a preface—a ‘vestibule’ that offers the world at large the possibility of stepping inside or turning back. A paratext is “an edge,” or as Philippe Lejeune put it, “a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text.”

By positioning October 7 as Israel's Ground Zero, Hamas's assault becomes the self-evident point of origin of the current conflict in Gaza and the obligatory reference point for all critical analysis and moral judgment regarding subsequent events. Whether the issue was Israel's cutting off of water, food, electricity, fuel, and medical supplies to the Gaza strip, its relentless bombardment of residential areas and civilian facilities including schools, hospitals, mosques, bakeries, aid agencies, and physical infrastructure, or its acquiescence in [settler violence](#) against Palestinian villagers in the West Bank—all of which constitute *prima facie* war crimes and/or crimes against humanity—the Israeli government and its Western supporters repeatedly reminded us of the brutality of Hamas's actions on October 7.

Beside such an atrocity, it was intimated, all else paled into insignificance: including Palestinian civilians' human rights and the internationally recognized rules of war. Mark Thompson, CEO and editor-in-chief at CNN, [said the quiet bit out loud](#) in a set of guidelines to CNN staff issued in late October, which were later obtained by the *Guardian* newspaper:

A note at the top of the two-page memo pointed to an instruction “from Mark” to pay attention to a particular paragraph under “coverage guidance.” The paragraph said that, while CNN would report the human consequences of the Israeli assault and the historical context of the story, “we must continue always to remind our audiences of the immediate cause of this current conflict, namely the Hamas attack and mass murder and kidnap of civilians.”

Even after the International Court of Justice (ICJ) [found](#) on January 26, 2024 that there was a “plausible” risk of a genocide occurring in Gaza and imposed several “provisional measures” on Israel “preserving ... the right of the Palestinians in Gaza to be protected from acts of genocide and related prohibited acts,” the events of October 7 continued to frame official and mainstream media western narratives. Responding to the judgment in a statement that *made no mention* of most of the ICJ's measures, the Canadian government [reiterated](#) that “Nothing can justify Hamas' brutal attacks on October 7, including the appalling loss of life, and the heinous acts of violence perpetrated in those attacks, including sexual violence.” The following day was International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Joe Biden—whose White House had previously [dismissed](#) South Africa's genocide charges against Israel as “meritless, counterproductive and completely without

any basis in fact whatsoever”—seized the opportunity to [divert](#) the world’s attention away from the ICJ’s findings:

This year, the charge to remember the Holocaust, the evil of the Nazis, and the scourge of antisemitism is more pressing than ever. On October 7 Hamas terrorists unleashed pure, unadulterated evil on the people of Israel, slaughtering approximately 1,200 innocent people and taking hundreds more hostage—including survivors of the Shoah. It was the worst atrocity committed against the Jewish people in a single day since the Holocaust. ... We cannot remember all that Jewish survivors of the Holocaust experienced and then stand silently by when Jews are attacked and targeted again today. Without equivocation or exception, we must also forcefully push back against attempts to ignore, deny, distort, and revise history. This includes Holocaust denialism and efforts to minimize the horrors that Hamas perpetrated on October 7, especially its appalling and unforgiveable use of rape and sexual violence to terrorize victims.

By then, the number of Palestinians slaughtered in Gaza had reached 26,083, with thousands more missing under the rubble, 64,487 people injured, and 1.7 million permanently displaced. Biden did not once mention them. At the time of writing, Israel has killed at least 11,500 Palestinian children in Gaza—as compared with the 36 children [killed in Israel](#) on October 7. “A child killed every 15 minutes, one out of every 100 children in Gaza,” [writes](#) Israeli journalist Gideon Levy; “No explanation, no justification or excuse could ever cover up this horror ... Horror of this scope has no explanation other than the existence of an army and government lacking any boundaries set by law or morality.”

Yet no matter what Israel does, any criticism of Operation Swords of Iron is forestalled by this eternal return of the ever-same. There is no way out of the vestibule. October 7 has acquired the status of a myth, in [Roland Barthes’ sense of the term](#):

a self-sufficient sign that abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is a world without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.

From occupation to blockade

Myths, wrote the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, are “machines for the suppression of time.” Their defining characteristic is not that they are false— Hamas (or others [who followed](#) them through the fence on October 7) *did* commit war crimes against Israeli civilians, possibly including some horrific crimes of sexual violence. [\[2\]](#) The important point about myths, for present purposes, is that they are ahistorical. They detach actions from any context, transforming them into free-floating signifiers. It is this abstraction that allowed Israel’s UN Ambassador Gilad Erdan to [demand](#) that Secretary-General Antonio Guterres resign “because when you say those terrible words that these heinous attacks *did not happen in a vacuum*, you are tolerating terrorism.” But Guterres was right. Hamas’s attacks did not erupt out of nowhere. Nor did Israel’s response. They are the latest chapters in a conflict that has been going on now for over a century. Hamas’s rampage through southern Israel may have been, as Pakistan’s Ambassador to the UN Munir Akram [put it](#), “the proximate cause” of the war, but the “real cause” lies deeper. Akram is in no doubt that “The Israeli occupation is the original sin, not what happened on 7 October.” While Israel’s defenders would cavil at the word *sin*, I would demur at the word *original*. Origins are in the eye of the beholder.

In seeking to go back beyond what is immediately visible, then, how far back should we go? The [storming](#) of the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem by 832 Jewish settlers two days before Hamas’s assault undoubtedly inflamed Palestinian passions. But Hamas officials [have said](#) that the planning for October 7, which they codenamed “al-Aqsa Flood,” began after Israeli police raids on al-Aqsa in May 2021. Both recent intrusions will have revived memories of Ariel Sharon’s uninvited visit to the same mosque with a heavily armed entourage on September 27, 2000, which sparked the [Second Intifada](#) of 2000-2005, in which there were 138 suicide attacks and 1,038 Israelis and 3,189 Palestinians lost their lives. Sharon, who served as Israel’s prime minister from 2001-2006, is loathed among Palestinians, not least because of his role in facilitating the Christian Phalange militia’s [massacre](#) of between 2,000 and 3,500 Palestinian refugees and Shi’ite Muslims in Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in the Beirut suburbs during the First Israel–Lebanon War of 1982. An official Israeli investigation [concluded that](#) “the Minister of Defense [Sharon] made a grave mistake when he ignored the danger of acts of revenge and bloodshed by the Phalangists against the population in the refugee camps” and found him “personally responsible for ignoring the danger of bloodshed and revenge,” causing him to resign his post. This wasn’t Sharon’s first brush with atrocity: he commanded the forces responsible for the [Qibya massacre](#) in the West Bank of

October 14, 1953, in which more than 69 villagers, two thirds of them women and children, lost their lives in a reprisal for a fedayeen raid from the West Bank that killed three Israelis.

It would be surprising if the latest desecration of Islam's third most holy site played no part in stoking the [vengefulness](#) with which Hamas fighters carried out their killings on October 7 or the jubilation with which news of the breach of Israel's supposedly impregnable defenses was greeted by many Palestinians in Gaza and across the world. Other recent Israeli provocations that might have been simmering in Palestinian minds that Saturday morning include the shooting of Palestinian American *Al Jazeera* journalist Shireen Abu Akleh in May 2022, in which, a UN inquiry "[concluded](#) on reasonable grounds ... Israeli forces used lethal force without justification under international human rights law"; the weekly Great March of Return demonstrations of 2018-19, when Israeli snipers—some of whom later [boasted](#) to the newspaper *Haaretz* of taking sadistic delight in crippling Palestinian protestors by shooting them in the knees—fired at peaceful demonstrators *within* Gaza across the perimeter fence, killing 266 people and injuring 30,000 more in the course of a single year; and Israel's Operation Protective Edge of July-August 2014, which led an appalled veteran Danish Middle East correspondent to tweet an iPhone photograph to the world with the sardonic [caption](#) "Sderot cinema. Israelis bringing chairs 2 hilltop in sderot 2 watch latest from Gaza. Clapping when blasts are heard." Sderot was the scene of fierce fighting on October 7, which left at least 50 Israelis dead.

Operation Protective Edge was the third of four Israeli assaults that marked the peaks in a running conflict that [killed](#) 6,540 Palestinians (5,360 of them in Gaza) as compared with 309 Israelis between January 2008 and October 6, 2023—a fatality ratio of 21:1. The other operations were Operation Cast Lead in December 2008; Operation Pillar of Defense in November 2012; and Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021. Calling these "wars" is contentious insofar as they were not fought between sovereign states. The Israeli military uses the derisive metaphor "mowing the grass," which rather confirms the Palestinian view of these "operations" as periodic collective punishments meted out by an occupying power. The political status of Gaza is a peculiar one. Israel dismantled its settlements and withdrew its troops from Gaza (which it had occupied since 1967) in September 2005, and Hamas has governed within the strip since 2006, when it won Palestinian elections with 44 percent of the vote. Fatah took 41.43 percent. Hamas followed its victory with a *coup d'état* in June 2007 in which it drove out its Fatah rivals (who continued to nominally govern in the West Bank). There have been no more elections in Gaza. Since only a small minority of the

strip's present inhabitants, over half of whom are children, were eligible to vote on the last occasion on which they had any choice in their government, the charge that "the Palestinians elected Hamas" (or, as Israeli President Isaac Herzog has [complained](#), have failed to remove it) and that therefore "It is an entire nation out there that is responsible [for October 7]" is at best a gross oversimplification.

Israel has imposed a land, air, and sea blockade on Gaza since 2007, transforming the strip into what Human Rights Watch has [called](#) an "open-air prison camp." Masha Gessen offers a different (if more inflammatory) [comparison](#):

For the last seventeen years, Gaza has been a hyperdensely populated, impoverished, walled-in compound where only a small fraction of the population had the right to leave for even a short amount of time—in other words, a ghetto. Not like the Jewish ghetto in Venice or an inner city ghetto in America but like a Jewish ghetto in an Eastern European country occupied by Nazi Germany.

For this reason, to Israel's chagrin, the UN still classes Gaza as an occupied territory (which places legal obligations on the occupying power to safeguard the lives and human rights of its population). Gessen's essay led the Heinrich Böll Foundation to withdraw its sponsorship of the Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought that she had been awarded, leading to the [cancellation](#) of the award ceremony. As Samantha Hill [observed](#), "The irony is almost too thick to cut. Hannah Arendt would not qualify for the Hannah Arendt prize. She would be cancelled in Germany today for her political position on Israel and opinions about contemporary Zionism, which she remained critical of from 1942 until her death in 1975."

Hamas's takeover and Israel's blockade of Gaza were the culmination of a longer process of polarization among both Palestinians and Israelis following the [breakdown](#) of the Oslo "peace process." Should we be looking back, then, to the failure of the 2020 Camp David "peace summit" and the Second Intifada? To the sabotaging of the 1993-5 Oslo Accords by opponents on both sides—including Benjamin Netanyahu—after Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's assassination by a right-wing religious extremist, Yigal Amir, in November 1995? To the [First Intifada](#) of 1987-93 and the Muslim Brotherhood's foundation of Hamas in 1987? These were the decades during which the secular nationalism espoused by Fatah and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which accepted Israel's right to exist in peace in 1993, lost ground to Hamas's militant

Islamism. For years, Netanyahu cynically sought to take advantage of this split in the Palestinian resistance, bolstering Hamas's control in Gaza in order to undermine the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority and with it any chance of a two-state solution. On October 7, that strategy spectacularly [backfired](#). This has not stopped Netanyahu [boasting](#) that "I'm proud that I prevented the establishment of a Palestinian state," and describing the Oslo accords as "a fateful mistake."

Or is the "real cause" of the current crisis, as Munir Akram argued, to be found in the occupation of Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank following their capture by Israel in the Six Day War? Fifty-six years have now passed since the UN Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 242, which mandated the "withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict." Does Gilad Erdan *seriously* expect us to ignore the impact on Palestinian minds of the subsequent history of (illegal) Israeli settlements and dispossession of Palestinians—a process that has only accelerated during the present century—or the imposition, within the occupied territories, of what many respected Israeli and international human rights organizations, including [B'tselem](#), [Amnesty International](#), and [Human Rights Watch](#), have described as an apartheid regime? In 1995 there were around 110,000 settlers in the West Bank. [Today](#), more than 700,000 settlers live in 150 settlements and 128 outposts in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The UN has repeatedly [condemned](#) this as a process of creeping annexation and ethnic cleansing.

In October 2022, a UN commission of inquiry called out "the coercive environment intended to force Palestinians to leave their homes and alter the demographic composition of certain areas," [instancing](#) "the demolition of homes and destruction of property, the excessive use of force by security forces, mass incarceration, settler violence, restrictions of movement, and limitations on access to livelihoods, basic necessities, services and humanitarian assistance." According to another recent [UN report](#), Israel has detained around one million Palestinians in the occupied territories since 1967, including tens of thousands of children, in many instances in "administrative detention" without trial: *Confinement in filthy and crowded cells, sleep and food deprivation, medical negligence, severe and prolonged beatings and other forms of ill-treatment, have been extensively documented and torture remains an available method to intimidate and obtain confessions or information.*

From Nakba to occupation

But perhaps to find the “real cause” of October 7 we need to go back still further, to the events that laid the foundations of the Israeli state. Palestine had been an Arab land and an integral part of the Islamic world, containing some of its holiest places, since the Muslim conquest in 635-7 CE. The conquest did not significantly affect the [demographics](#) of the region: a Muslim elite replaced the Byzantine elite with little change in the ethnic makeup of the population as a whole. For centuries before that, Palestine had been part of the Byzantine and Roman empires: its name derives from Syria Palaestina, the Roman province established after the defeat of the Bar Kochba Jewish revolt of 132-136 CE, events that furthered the diaspora that began with the Babylonian conquest of Judea in 597 BCE. While there indeed was a Jewish presence in Palestine over the next two millennia—as there was throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe—Jews were never more than a small minority of Palestine’s population. According to Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, Ottoman records show in 1878 Palestine had 462,465 inhabitants, of whom only 15,011 (three percent) were Jewish.

The stage for Palestine’s makeover into Israel was set by the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 between Britain, France, and Russia on parceling up the Ottoman Empire in the event of Turkey’s defeat in the First World War, and the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, in which Britain [promised](#) Zionists its support for “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.” Britain gained control over Palestine in 1918, which it officially administered under a League of Nations mandate from September 29, 1923. Despite some modest Zionist immigration from Europe beginning in the 1880s, at the end of the First World War Palestine’s population was still 90 percent Arab. Initially encouraged by Britain, 376,845 Jewish settlers, many fleeing from Nazi persecution, arrived in Palestine between 1920 and 1945. The peak years of [immigration](#) were 1925 (33,801), 1933 (30,327), 1934 (42,359), 1935 (61,854), and 1936 (29,727). Hostility to the speed and scale of the Jewish influx led to the Great Arab Revolt of 1936-9.

David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the Jewish community in Palestine who would go on to become Israel’s first prime minister, understood the sources of Palestinian disquiet all too well. Benny Morris [quotes](#) him addressing a meeting of the Mapai Party in 1936:

The Arabs’ fear of our power is intensifying. They see exactly the opposite of what we see. It doesn’t matter whether or not their view is correct ... They see immigration on a giant scale ... they see the Jews fortify themselves

economically ... They see the best lands passing into our hands. They see England identify with Zionism ... [Arabs are] fighting dispossession ... The fear is not of losing land, but of losing the homeland of the Arab people, which others want to turn into the homeland of the Jewish people. There is a fundamental conflict. We and they both want the same thing: We both want Palestine ... By our very presence and progress here, [we] have matured the [Arab] movement.

Since the parties seemed irreconcilable, the Peel Commission of 1937 recommended partition as the only solution. The Second World War put a temporary hold on any further resolution of the problem.

Despite belated British attempts to curtail further immigration, by 1944 Jews made up 30.39 percent of Palestine's population. These numbers were swelled by some 70,000 Holocaust survivors in 1945-7, who arrived as illegal immigrants running the gauntlet of a British naval blockade. By 1948, over 50,000 Jewish refugees were **detained** in internment camps in Cyprus. Under attack from Palestinian nationalists on one side and Zionist militias on the other, in 1947 Britain announced its intention to leave Palestine and turned the future of the territory over to the UN. On November 29, the UN **adopted** a proposal to partition Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states, with Jerusalem being placed under international control. Palestinian leaders rejected the proposal, which would have handed over 56 percent of the land to the Jewish minority, including the fertile central coastal strip. At the time the great **majority** of the land was still owned by Arabs. The Zionist leadership accepted the UN plan, on grounds that Ben-Gurion had **set out** in a letter to his son apropos the Peel Commission report:

But in this proposed partition we will get more than what we already have, though of course much less than we merit and desire. The question is: would we obtain more without partition? ... What we really want is not that the land remain whole and unified. What we want is that the whole and unified land be Jewish. A unified Eretz Israel [Land of Israel] would be no source of satisfaction for me—if it were Arab.

A civil war ensued in which Jewish and Palestinian militias both committed atrocities. Zionist militias Haganah, Irgun, and Lehi played a major part in the fighting, as Irgun (commanded by future Prime Minister Menachem Begin) and Lehi (otherwise known as the Stern Gang, led by future Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir) had done in earlier attacks on the British like the terrorist **bombing** of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, which killed 91 people on July 22, 1946. In one

of the most notorious incidents, the Deir Yasin massacre of April 9, 1948, Irgun and Lehi forces slaughtered over 100 villagers, including women and children. Like almost everything else in this history, both the details of what happened and the numbers of casualties are hotly disputed. Historian Benny Morris [quotes](#) reports written by the head of the Haganah Intelligence Service (HIS) in Jerusalem, Yitzhak Levy, on April 12 and 13: "The conquest of the village was carried out with great brutality, whole families [including] women, old people and children were killed and there are piles and piles of dead. Some of the prisoners taken away ... including women and children were murdered barbarically by their captors." Palestinians retaliated four days later with the Hadassar medical convoy massacre, an ambush that left 78 Jewish medical staff and others dead.

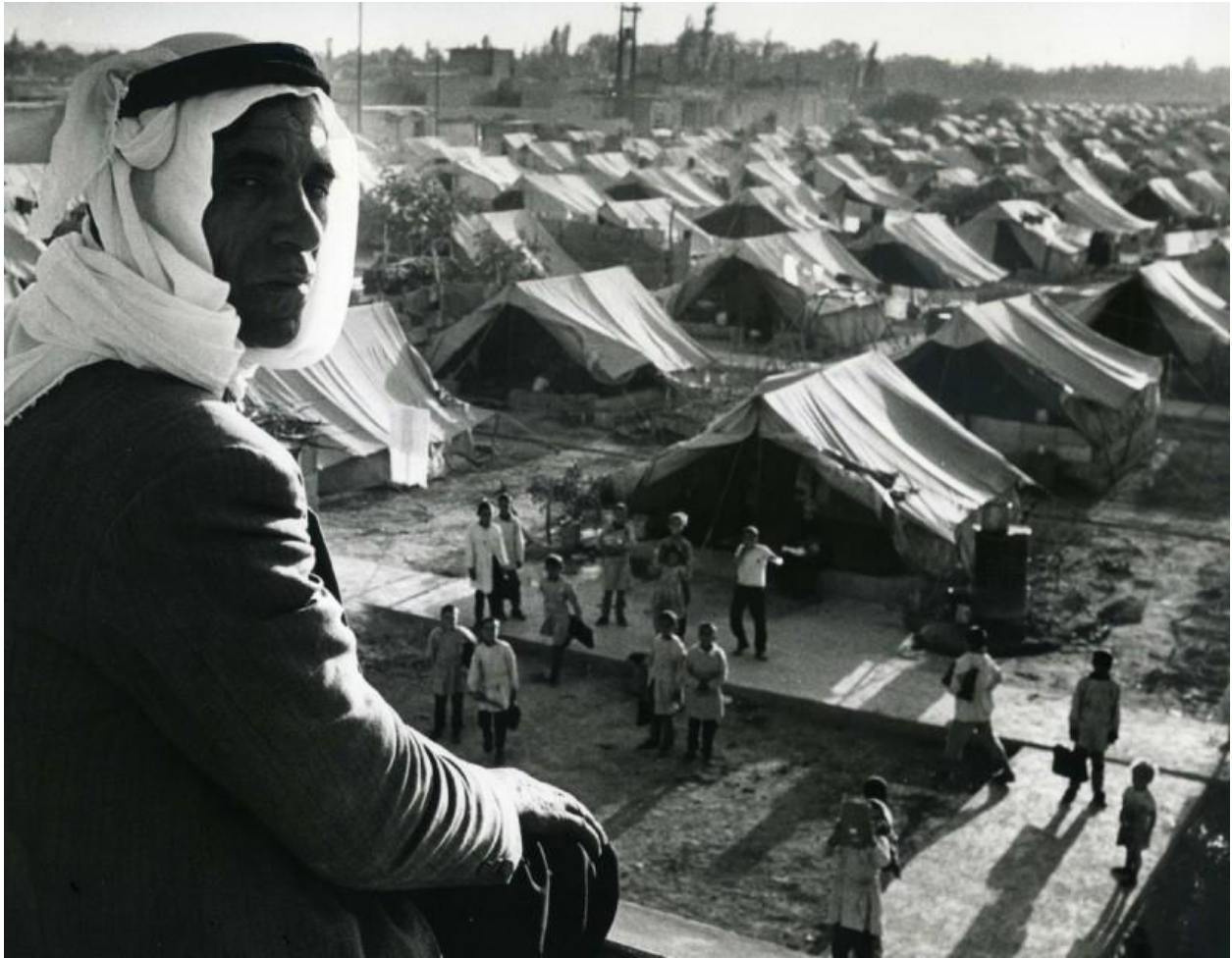
Writing to the *New York Times* on December 4, 1948, and instancing among other atrocities the "shocking example" of Deir Yassin, Hannah Arendt, Albert Einstein, and other prominent members of the American Jewish community [warned](#) that:

Among the most disturbing political phenomena of our times is the emergence in the newly created state of Israel of the 'Freedom Party' [Herut], a political party closely akin in its organization, methods, political philosophy and social appeal to the Nazi and Fascist parties. It was formed out of the membership and following of the former Irgun Zvai Leumi, a terrorist, right-wing, chauvinist organization in Palestine ... Within the Jewish community they have preached an admixture of ultranationalism, religious mysticism, and racial superiority ... During the last years of sporadic anti-British violence the IZL and Stern groups inaugurated a reign of terror in the Palestine Jewish community. Teachers were beaten up for speaking against them, adults were shot for not letting their children join them. By gangster methods, beatings, window-smashing, and wide-spread robberies, the terrorists intimidated the population and exacted a heavy tribute.

Herut's leader was Irgun commander and future founder of Likud, Menachem Begin. There is a straight line of descent here from Vladimir Jabotinsky's Revisionist Zionism, which was established in 1925 on an unquestioned [belief](#) in "the only and single idea of establishing a Jewish state" with "a Jewish majority on both sides of the Jordan." I should perhaps add that were Arendt and Einstein to write their letter today, the *Times* likely wouldn't publish it because it falls foul of the influential but [much-contested](#) International Holocaust Remembrance

Alliance (IHRA) “working definition” of antisemitism, which **forbids** “drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.”

On the day the British mandate ended, May 14, 1948, David Ben-Gurion **declared** “the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Israel” and the Palestinian Civil War turned into the Israeli War of Independence. Despite its promise of “complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex,” the declaration made clear that Israel was to be a *Jewish* ethnostate. Troops from Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, and Iraq poured into Palestine, to be joined by smaller units from Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. The Jewish militias merged into the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). In ten months of fighting Israel gained control not only of all the land allocated to it in the UN plan but around 60 percent of the area earmarked for the Arab state, as well as of West Jerusalem. Transjordan occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank, annexing the latter the following year. Egypt occupied the Gaza strip. Ilan Pappé **records** that “In a matter of seven months, 531 [Palestinian] villages were destroyed and eleven urban neighborhoods emptied. The mass expulsion was accompanied by massacres, rape, and the imprisonment of males over the age of ten in labor camps for periods of over a year.



Palestinian refugees in the Jaramana Refugee Camp, Damascus, Syria, 1948.
Photo from [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Some 750,000 Palestinians were [expelled or fled](#) from the land that became Israel during 1947-8. This is what Palestinians call the Nakba: the Arabic word for catastrophe. In what is perhaps the bitterest pill for the exiles to swallow, Jews from anywhere in the world can [“return”](#) to a land they may never have set foot in with an automatic right to Israeli citizenship, while Palestinians have repeatedly been denied any right of return to the land they had been driven out of and their ancestors had inhabited and cultivated since time out of mind. Israel’s continuing refusal to allow the refugees to return has been a major stumbling-block to any peace agreement ever since. Their place was quickly taken by newly-minted Israelis. The UN has [estimated](#) that “between 15 May 1948 and the end of 1951 more than 684,000 Jewish immigrants settled in Israel ... Of the 370 Jewish settlements established between 1948 and the beginning of 1953, 350 were established on land abandoned by the Palestinians. In 1954 more than one-third of Israel’s Jewish population, plus 250,000 new Jewish

immigrants, settled in whole cities that had been completely deserted by the Palestinians as a result of the military operations of 1948.” Around two-thirds of Gaza’s population are Nakba refugees or their descendants. The memory of what was taken from them in 1947-8 has been passed down from generation to generation.

From a Palestinian point of view, the state of Israel is an artificial and entirely modern creation, which is as much the product of European settler colonialism as Australia, Canada, or the United States. Whatever may have been the case in antiquity, when the Hebrews were among several peoples (including the ancestors of the Palestinians) living in the Levant, Jews did not form a major component of Palestine’s population at any point between the second century CE and the 1920s. Israel’s ideological roots lie in the Zionism developed by Theodor Herzl and other European Jews at the end of the nineteenth century, and its demographic foundations were laid during the British mandate and built upon later. During the 1930s Britain, the US, and other Western states strictly limited the numbers of Jewish refugees from Nazi persecution they would accept, resulting in such tragedies as the turning back to Europe of the [*MS St. Louis*](#), with 937 refugees on board, in June 1939. But after the Second World War, salving its conscience for the Holocaust with Arab land and Arab blood, the West allowed Israel to drive Palestinians out of their homeland to make way for Jewish settlers; and the West—somewhat grotesquely now including Germany, which has sought to atone for its Nazi crimes by [declaring](#) that “Israel’s security is German ‘reason of state [*Staatsräson*]’”—has continued to protect the Zionist state economically, diplomatically, and militarily ever since. Jewish ascendancy in Israel was established by violence and continues to be maintained by violence. Operation Swords of Iron, which [killed](#) more civilians in the first month of combat than died in two years of the Russia-Ukraine War, is but the most recent chapter in Israel’s long history of ethnic cleansing.

Capping this process and forever [enshrining](#) Jewish ethnic privilege in the constitutional law of the land, “The Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People,” which was passed by the Knesset in July 2018 on a vote of 62 to 55, defines Israel as “the historical homeland of the Jewish people” in which “the right to exercise national self-determination ... is *unique to the Jewish people*.” The same law stripped Arabic of its status as an official language, proclaimed a “complete and united Jerusalem” as the national capital, and committed to “the development of Jewish settlement as a national value” which the state “will act to encourage and promote.” Unlike other settler colonies like Canada, which have evolved over time into multicultural democracies in which populations of diverse

ethnic origins and religious faiths enjoy at least formally equal status and rights, Israel has continued to define its identity in restrictive ethno-religious terms, and this has bedeviled all attempts at any solution of the Palestinian question. In a controversial essay in the *New York Review* in 2003, the late historian Tony Judt got to the [heart of the matter](#):

The problem with Israel, in short, is not—as is sometimes suggested—that it is a European enclave in the Arab world; but rather that it arrived too late. It has imported a characteristically late nineteenth-century separatist project into a world that has moved on, a world of individual rights, open frontiers, and international law. The very idea of a ‘Jewish state’—a state in which Jews and the Jewish religion have exclusive privileges from which non-Jewish citizens are permanently excluded—is rooted in another time and place. Israel, in short, is an anachronism.

The Israeli narrative—righteous victims?

Let me now put the clocks back and tell the story from an Israeli perspective—more briefly in this case, because this version is more familiar to most Western readers. Israel differs fundamentally from other settler colonies, its supporters argue, in that unlike the Muslim invaders, who came later, Jews *did* live there in antiquity. There is plentiful evidence, both Biblical and archaeological, for the existence of Jewish kingdoms in present-day Israel, including in the occupied territories of Judea and Samaria (aka the West Bank), during the first millennium BCE. Notwithstanding the long Jewish exile after the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE and the crushing of the Bar Kochba revolt in 136 CE, Zionist settlers were indeed returning to their ancestral homeland, whose memory was enshrined in the religious texts and observances that defined and held together the Jewish people over the next two millennia. Palestinians, by contrast, never formed a distinct people with a comparable bond to the land but were simply Arabs who shared a common language, culture, history, and religion with their brothers and sisters from Morocco to Yemen and happened to live in Palestine rather than in any other Ottoman province.^[3] These arguments have been comprehensively challenged by [Ilan Pappé](#), [Shlomo Sand](#), and other Israeli historians, but their merits are not what matters here. What matters is that they have become an integral part of the Israeli national narrative, shaping perceptions of the country’s history both at home and abroad.

Equally absent from the foregoing account, for Israel’s [defenders](#), is any acknowledgment that the Palestinians and their Arab and Muslim allies have

refused every offer of a peaceful settlement since they turned down the UN partition plan in 1947, while continuing to wage intermittent wars with the aim of wiping the state of Israel from the face of the earth. After being invaded by several Arab armies on the very day of its birth, Israel signed armistices, but not permanent peace treaties, with its defeated enemies in 1949. The war inflamed antisemitic sentiment across the Muslim world and led to a mass exodus of Jews from Arab states of no lesser magnitude or misery than the Palestinian Nakba. Driven out of their centuries-old diasporic communities, some of which dated back millennia to the Babylonian captivity, by fear and violence as much as they were drawn by Zionist dreams of a new national homeland, around 650,000 of these displaced Middle Eastern and North African Jews (Mizrahi) ended up in Israel. Another 200,000 made their way to Europe (mostly settling in France) and the United States.

In addition to facing repeated incursions and border clashes, Israel fought three more full-scale wars with its neighbours over the next quarter-century: the Suez War of October 1956; the Six Day War of June 1967; and the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, which began with a surprise attack by Egypt and Syria launched on the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. It took until 1979 before Egypt became the first Arab state to recognize Israel—a breaking of ranks that resulted in its suspension from the Arab League until 1989. Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1984. Four decades had to pass before the Abraham Accords of 2020-23 normalized diplomatic relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, followed by Sudan, Bahrain, and Morocco. But so long as the Palestinian problem has not been resolved, such agreements remain precarious—Saudi Arabia, for example, suspended normalization talks with Israel on October 14, 2023 (which was likely a [key objective](#) of the Hamas attack). Most Muslim countries still refuse to recognize Israel's existence 75 years after it was admitted to the UN, and some, like Syria and Iran—which funds Hamas and the Lebanon-based militia Hezbollah—remain actively committed to Israel's destruction. Founded in 1982, Hezbollah, with whom Israel fought the Second Lebanon War in July 2006, represents an ongoing threat on Israel's northern border at least as serious as Hamas's in the south. No other state in the world, no matter how odious its regime, has been the object of such a sustained diplomatic boycott. What adds piquancy to this is that according to its supporters, Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East. The claim is not without justification—so long as we forget about the democratic rights of the [three million](#) Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank, not to mention the 2.2 million who are blockaded in Gaza.[\[4\]](#)

After the Six Day War of 1967, a further wave of 280,000-325,000 Palestinian refugees fled from the newly occupied territories to surrounding Arab states. Refugee camps provided fertile recruiting grounds for the Palestinian resistance, whose different factions proved to be major headaches not only for Israel but also for their hosts. Following months of fighting triggered by the Dawson Field hijackings of September 1970, in which Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) militants diverted four passenger airliners to a desert airstrip in Jordan and blew up the (emptied) planes in front of the world's assembled media, the Jordanian military expelled the Palestinian fedayeen to Lebanon, where they established what was in effect a state within a state that served as a base from which to continue their attacks on Israel. Some Palestinian terrorist operations made international headlines, like Tel Aviv's Lod Airport massacre of May 30, 1972, when Japanese Red Army gunmen acting on behalf of the PFLP killed 26 people and injured 80 others, or Black September's hostage-taking and murder of 11 Israeli athletes later that year at the Munich Olympics. Palestinians' cross-border raids and involvement in the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-90 precipitated Israel's invasions of 1978 and 1982 and occupation of the security zone in south Lebanon from 1985-2000.

Over the years there were many Palestinian attacks inside Israel. Among the worst were the Kiryat Shmona massacre of April 11, 1974, when PFLP-General Command militants killed 18 residents of an apartment block, half of them children; the Ma'alot massacre the following month, when Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine guerrillas took over an elementary school and held 115 students and teachers hostage, ending up in 31 deaths, including those of 22 children; and the Coastal Road massacre of March 11, 1978, in which 38 people, 13 of them children, died in a shootout after Fatah militants commandeered a bus near Tel Aviv. All of these were carried out by infiltrations from Lebanon, which declined after the expulsion of the PLO from Beirut in the fall of 1982 during the First Lebanon War. After a relatively peaceful interlude—the First Intifada employed mostly non-lethal forms of protest— Hamas's first suicide bombing, at Mehola Junction in the West Bank on April 16, 1993, prefigured dozens of terrorist attacks during the Second Intifada whose targets included buses and bus stations, cafés and restaurants, bars and clubs, shopping malls, discotheques, crowded markets, and busy city streets. The number of suicide bombings dropped off after Hamas took over the Gaza strip in 2006, but Israel's withdrawal did not bring about peace. Hamas and other Palestinian militias have since launched thousands of rockets against Israeli towns and cities from Gaza. Thanks to Israel's "iron dome" defenses the rockets have caused relatively few fatalities, but they have inflicted a constant psychological barrage. From the

beginning of the Second Intifada at the end of September 2000 through the end of September 2017, Palestinians killed 813 Israeli civilians, including 135 minors.[5]

Hamas's 1988 founding *Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement* left no room for doubt that the group's objective *is* to destroy the state of Israel and replace it with an Islamic republic, though it has considerably softened—or at least clarified—its original position since.[6] “The Islamic Resistance Movement ... strives to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine,” the 1988 covenant proclaims. Insisting that “There is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad [holy war],” the text rules out any trade-off of land for peace or two-state solution like that proposed in the Oslo Accords. “The day that enemies usurp part of Moslem land,” it thunders, “Jihad becomes the individual duty of every Moslem.” The document is full of well-worn antisemitic slurs:

With their money, [our enemies] took control of the world media, news agencies, the press, publishing houses, broadcasting stations, and others. With their money they stirred revolutions in various parts of the world with the purpose of achieving their interests and reaping the fruit therein. They were behind the French Revolution, the Communist revolution and most of the revolutions we heard and hear about, here and there. With their money they formed secret societies, such as Freemasons, Rotary Clubs, the Lions and others in different parts of the world for the purpose of sabotaging societies and achieving Zionist interests. With their money they were able to control imperialistic countries and instigate them to colonize many countries in order to enable them to exploit their resources and spread corruption there ... They were behind World War I, when they were able to destroy the Islamic Caliphate, making financial gains and controlling resources. They obtained the Balfour Declaration, formed the League of Nations through which they could rule the world. They were behind World War II, through which they made huge financial gains by trading in armaments, and paved the way for the establishment of their state. It was they who instigated the replacement of the League of Nations with the United Nations and the Security Council to enable them to rule the world through them. There is no war going on anywhere, without having their finger in it.

“The Zionist plan is limitless,” Hamas warns. “After Palestine, the Zionists aspire to expand from the Nile to the Euphrates. When they will have digested the region they overtook, they will aspire to further expansion, and so on. Their plan

is embodied in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and their present conduct is the best proof of what we are saying.”

Reading such calumnies, it is easy—too easy, perhaps, for the historical contexts were quite different—to see October 7 as simply the latest manifestation of an age-old generic antisemitism that is found in both the Muslim and Christian worlds (though Islam was on balance more tolerant of its Jewish minorities) and long preceded the establishment of the State of Israel. While Jew-hate has varied in its forms and intensity from time to time and place to place, the history of the diaspora has been marked by religious persecution (sometimes resulting in mass expulsions, like those from England in 1290 and the Iberian peninsula in 1492-6), ghettoization (enforced by restrictions on Jewish landowning, residence, marriage, and occupations), and stigmatization (like blood libels and Shylock stereotypes), punctuated by outbreaks of popular violence in which Jewish property was vandalized and Jewish men, women, and children brutally slaughtered, often with the connivance of the authorities. The precursors of October 7 stretch from the massacres of Jews across Europe and the Levant that accompanied the Crusades and the Black Death to the rash of pogroms in Odessa, Kyiv, Warsaw, and elsewhere in the Tsarist Empire at the turn of the twentieth century that contributed to the rise of Zionism. European antisemitism was to find its apotheosis in the Holocaust, a genocide that is without modern parallel in either its scale or its systematicity. When Hitler came to power in 1933 there were approximately 9.5 million Jews living in Europe. The Nazis murdered six million of them. It has not been forgotten in Israel that Haj Amin Al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem from 1921-37 and an ardent Palestinian nationalist, propagandized on behalf of the Axis powers during his Second World War exile in Berlin.

In seeking to understand Israel’s response to October 7, we can no more ignore *this* context than we can ignore the influence of the Nakba or the occupation on Palestinian perceptions. Dov Waxman writes that “for many Jews the specific nature of Hamas’ attack—the mass slaughter and the way in which Hamas gunmen went systematically from house to house murdering families, and, in some cases, brutally butchering people—evokes deep, traumatic memories of the Holocaust.” It is surely possible to acknowledge the reality of intergenerational Jewish trauma independently of whether, as Atalia Omer, Raz Segal, and Norman Finkelstein maintain, Israel “weaponizes the Holocaust.” The global Jewish population (of 15.7 million) has still not recovered to its pre-Holocaust level (c. 16.5 million in 1939). Israel (excluding the occupied territories) has a population of around 9.73 million people, of whom 7.14 million

(73.5 percent) are Jews. This compares with a global Arab population of approximately 464.68 million, and a global Muslim population of around two billion. Most Arab and Muslim states have shown nothing but hostility toward Israel for the last 75 years, while Hamas, Hezbollah, and other radical Islamist groups have made clear their desire to eradicate what they call “the Zionist entity” from Levantine maps and memories. Is it any wonder that the Jewish state should see itself as perpetually under existential threat—or that it should feel compelled to adopt a posture of aggressive self-defense and military deterrence? A self-defense that may in its eyes call for pre-emptive strikes (as in the 1956 Suez and 1967 Six Day Wars) and disproportionate reprisals (the apparent basis of current IDF strategic thinking), in order to ensure that “never again” becomes a reality, rather than just a well-meaning sentiment? No more going gentle into anyone’s gas chambers. When senior Hamas official Ghazi Hamad [promises](#) that “the October 7 attack[s] against Israel were just the beginning” and vows to launch “a second, a third, a fourth” attack until the country is “annihilated,” best listen.

David Ben-Gurion anticipated the hostility the infant Jewish state would face. He was also far more forthright than many of Israel’s present-day defenders in admitting that the “Jewish national homeland” was built on the dispossession and depopulation of Palestinians, rather than seeking to justify the Zionist conquest with reference to Biblical prophecies, descent from the ancient Hebrews, or the Holocaust. In his memoir *The Jewish Paradox*, founder of the World Jewish Congress and longtime president of the World Zionist Organization Nahum Goldmann related a conversation he had with Ben-Gurion in 1953. “Why should the Arabs make peace?” he says Ben-Gurion [asked him](#):

If I was an Arab leader I would never make terms with Israel. That is natural: We have taken their country. Sure, God promised it to us, but what does that matter to them? Our God is not theirs. We come from Israel, it’s true, but two thousand years ago, and what is that to them? There has been antisemitism, the Nazis, Hitler, Auschwitz, but was that their fault? They only see one thing: We have come here and stolen their country. Why should they accept that? They may perhaps forget in one or two generations’ time, but for the moment there is no chance. So it’s simple: we have to stay strong and maintain a powerful army. Our whole policy is there. Otherwise the Arabs will wipe us out ...

“But how can you sleep with that prospect in mind,” I [Goldmann] broke in, “and be Prime Minister of Israel too?”
Who says I sleep? he answered simply.



Photos of Israelis who were kidnapped by Hamas during the October 7 attack. Photo from [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Historical contextualization versus traumatic recall

“Palestinian terrorist groups and their sympathizers” are not the only ones to have claimed the land “from the river to the sea,” which under the sign of October 7 is now unambiguously interpreted as a call for genocide of Jews. The 1977 Likud Party Platform declared that “The right of the Jewish people to the land of Israel is eternal and indisputable ... Judea and Samaria will not be handed to any foreign administration; between the sea and the Jordan there will only be Israeli sovereignty.” This *exactly* mirrors Hamas’s insistence in its 1988 covenant that “the land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf consecrated for future Moslem generations until Judgement Day ... it, or any part of it, should not be given up.” As Ben-Gurion said, they both want Palestine. I have not rehearsed these competing narratives, however, in order to adjudicate between their respective claims. My purpose has instead been to show why we cannot begin to understand

the war in Gaza without an awareness of how both Palestinian and Israeli actions have shaped and been shaped by those narratives. I do not believe we can make sense of Hamas's assault on October 7 without reference to the Nakba, the occupation, or Israel's blockading of Gaza since 2007—any more than we can make sense of Israel's response without reference to the diaspora, the pogroms, and the Holocaust, as well as the more recent history of Arab/Israeli conflicts since 1948.

Unfortunately, the feature of the current fighting that has most appalled outsiders—and that, crucially, allowed October 7 to be weaponized as an emotionally compelling, all-embracing, all-excusing paratext in the first place—is depressingly familiar to historians. Colonial settings tend to create a mutual contempt between the colonizer and the colonized that frequently finds its outlet in extreme violence toward the other—on both sides. Plentiful historical precedents for Hamas's October 7 attack, as well as for Netanyahu's "mighty vengeance," can be found in the brutality of the Haitian Revolution, the 1831 Jamaica Slave Rebellion, the Indian "Mutiny," the massacres at Wounded Knee and Jallianwala Bagh, the Mau Mau Uprising, or the Algerian War. As Israeli human rights activist Michael Sfard sorrowfully recognized apropos the current bloodshed, "The incomprehensible cruelty that we've been exposed to—which proves the degree to which the occupation and the siege corrupt the occupied as well as the occupier—has penetrated our soul. And like nuclear fuel, it has spiraled us on our way to a moral hell."

To contextualize is not to absolve. "To make sense" does not mean to justify, excuse, condone, or legitimate either side's actions, but to attempt to grasp the historical circumstances in which they took place. *Things precisely don't mean something by themselves*. Contrary to Gilad Erdan, to understand human actions, including (and perhaps especially) those we find most repugnant and alien to our own sensibilities, requires us to situate them not only in relation to antecedent events but also in relation to the cultural frameworks that confer meanings on those events: *not for us, but for the actors involved*. In this case, as former B'tselem Director Hagai El-Ad reminds us, "Deir Yassin and Gush Etzion, Sabra and Shatila, Be'eri and Gaza. Atrocities [are] etched into the historical memory of both peoples." Gush Etzion was a massacre of Jews by Palestinians on May 13, 1948. Be'eri is one of the kibbutzim attacked by Hamas on October 7, where at least 130 people were killed. Only a fool—or an unprincipled political apologist—would deny that such historical memories profoundly influence how people act and react.

Passing moral judgment on those actions is a *separate* matter, which should not cloud and cannot substitute for historical analysis. My personal position on the Gaza War, for whatever it is worth, is that while I unreservedly condemn Hamas's actions against civilians on October 7, I can see no *moral* standpoint from which I could do so that would not oblige me equally to condemn Israel's retaliatory violence—and vice versa. Both share the same indifference to human lives and human rights and the same cruelty in collectively punishing a dehumanized other. I would also strongly suggest that proportionality of response should *itself* be seen as a moral issue. By proportionality, to be clear, I mean in proportionality of numbers of victims and extent of damage on each side. This is not the same as the [legal definition](#) used in relevant humanitarian law, which weighs civilian harm against military objectives (thus clearly prioritizing the latter). I would like someday to see Yahya Sinwar and Benjamin Netanyahu sharing the dock in the Hague, and the recent ICJ decision gives me some hope that I might. But these are not the reasons why I have written this article. My concern is with what the translation of October 7 into a paratext as the Ur-atrocity, the singular point of origin, suppresses—and enables. It suppresses understanding. And it *thereby* enables—justifies, excuses, condones, and legitimates—further atrocities.

In a [recent discussion](#) of Germany's crackdown on pro-Palestinian speech in the wake of October 7, British Israeli architect Eyal Weizman argued that "There is a crucial distinction between two relations to the past, one governed by factual excavation, collation and analysis, the other manifesting as a kind of psychological recoil. We can shorthand the former mode as historical contextualization and the latter as traumatic recall. But these two forms of responses have gotten dangerously mixed up in the past weeks":

I can't deny that as the descendant of [a] family of pogrom and Holocaust survivors the close-range killings of families were emotionally triggering. But the trauma I too experience can't replace the responsibility of historical analysis. Israeli society seems stuck in Oct 7th, as if in an endless present. Trauma has disassociated at least some of the events of this day from the history of the seventy-five years of catastrophe that Israel brought on Palestinians, the decades long siege of Gaza, the denial of any political horizon to another people. But after October 7th came October 8th and on—and all the while much of Israeli society is either cheering or is oblivious to the annihilation of Gaza.

The severing of the events of October 7 from the preceding 75 years of

catastrophe has already done untold damage and threatens to do more. I am not only referring to the McCarthyite witch hunts that are poisoning democratic political cultures across the western world. Far worse is the effect on the course of the conflict itself. So long as we remain mired in the endless present of October 7, Israel's continuing pulverization of Gaza remains immune from any intellectual analysis or moral criticism *because these are disallowed a priori*. Instead, the transmutation of October 7 into a free-floating sign, divorced from any meaningful context that might explain it, allows it to be reinscribed in other, time-honored colonialist discourses—those familiar discourses of “civilization” versus “barbarism,” replete with their racist tropes of the irredeemably primitive, lustful native—that usurp the place that responsible historical analysis should have occupied.

Addressing the Knesset on October 16, 2023, Benjamin Netanyahu [told the world](#) that the Gaza War was “a struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness, between humanity and the law of the jungle.” “Many people around the world now understand who stands against Israel,” he went on. “They understand that Hamas is ISIS. They understand that Hamas is the new version of Nazism.” As a matter of historical fact, Hamas has fundamentally [different objectives](#) to ISIS and very little in common with Nazism other than the antisemitism discussed earlier. One might, on the other hand, brave IHRA censure as an antisemite and point to some uneasy parallels between the calculated, rationalized brutality of Israel's annihilation of Gaza and the specifically *modern* features of the Holocaust to which [Adorno and Horkheimer](#), [Hannah Arendt](#), and [Zygmunt Bauman](#) among others have drawn attention. But so what? Stripped of any meaning other than as a self-explanatory signifier of elemental savagery, October 7 becomes a metonym for the Palestinian (or Arab, or Muslim) people and a vehicle for their further dehumanization. If they are less than fully human, why should they have any human rights? Announcing on October 9 that “We are imposing a complete siege on Gaza. There will be no electricity, no food, no water, no fuel,” Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant [explained](#) “We are fighting *human animals* and we are acting accordingly.” Evidently, he has no sense of irony.

Late in November international pressure led Israel to accept a week-long “humanitarian pause,” in which some hostages were exchanged and some food, water, fuel, and medical supplies were allowed into Gaza. Fighting resumed on December 1. While that portion of the world that was not forever stuck in the October 7 vestibule equivocated over whether Israel's actions yet met the legal thresholds for war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, or

genocide, Benjamin Netanyahu went on TV [to assure](#) the Israeli people that “The day before yesterday I directed the IDF, together with the War Cabinet, to resume fighting, *with increasing force* ... The IDF and the security forces are doing this with determination, strength and *while upholding international law*.” South Africa launched its genocide case at the ICJ on December 29. Faced with the ICJ’s unwelcome judgment, Israeli leaders circled the wagons and determined to carry on regardless. Netanyahu [fumed](#) “the very claim that Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians is not just false, it is outrageous, and the court’s willingness to discuss it at all is a mark of disgrace that will not be erased for generations.” He added that Israel would continue the war until it had achieved “absolute victory.” “The ICJ in The Hague went above and beyond, when it granted South Africa’s antisemitic request to discuss the claim of genocide in Gaza, and now refuses to reject the petition outright,” agreed Yoav Gallant. “Hague Schmague,” tweeted national security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir. Once again invoking the specter of October 7, opposition leader Yair Lapid thundered “136 hostages in Hamas tunnels are witness to their voices being silenced in the court in The Hague,” adding: “we do not need lectures or behavior guidelines in order to act like democracies that act according to international law.” Sure. War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.

Let me give the [last word](#) to Theodor Adorno—a German Jew, displaced to America, writing in the wake of the Holocaust, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Geneva Conventions. He was horribly prescient:

Legalities.—What the Nazis did to the Jews was unspeakable: language has no word for it, since even mass murder would have sounded, in face of its planned, systematic totality, like something from the good old days of the serial killer. And yet a term needed to be found if the victims—in any case too many for their names to be recalled—were to be spared the curse of having no thoughts turned unto them. So in English the concept of genocide was coined. But by being codified, as set down in the International Declaration of Human Rights, the unspeakable was made, for the sake of protest, commensurable. By its elevation to a concept, its possibility is virtually recognized: an institution to be forbidden, rejected, discussed. One day negotiations may take place in the forum of the United Nations on whether some new atrocity comes under the heading of genocide, whether nations have a right to intervene that they do not want to exercise in any case, and whether in view of the unforeseen difficulty of applying it in practice the whole concept of genocide should be removed from the statutes. Soon

afterwards there are inside-page headlines in journalese: East Turkestan genocide programme nears completion.

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References

1. Throughout this article Palestinian casualty figures are those supplied by the Gazan Health Ministry unless otherwise indicated.↵
2. If true, the allegations regarding Hamas's use of sexual violence on October 7 are deeply disturbing. See relevant articles in [themedialine.org](#), [Haaretz](#), the [New Yorker](#), and the [New York Times](#). However, there has been considerable doubt cast on the evidential basis for these claims in pro-Palestinian sources. See articles in Mondoweiss ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), [The Intercept](#), and [Electronic Intifada](#) ([here](#) and [here](#)).↵
3. My own view is that while both these contentions can find some empirical support, they are anachronistic. We cannot simply identify modern Israelis with ancient Hebrews while simultaneously dismissing the elements that bind Palestinians into a community and distinguish them from other Arabs. Like every other modern nation, the adversaries confronting each other *today* in Israel/Palestine are "[imagined communities](#)" in Benedict Anderson's sense, and how each imagines itself has been shaped in large part by the modern struggles between them. This is an important issue, but one that it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss any more fully.↵
4. The [Economist Group's Democracy Index 2022](#) ranks Israel as the only democracy (albeit a "flawed democracy") in the region. But the description absolutely *cannot* be applied to the occupied territories, whose inhabitants lack any democratic rights. Moreover, the majority of Arab citizens who remained *within* Israel after the Nakba (who formed around 1/5 of the population) were [subject to military rule](#) until 1966.↵
5. By way of comparison, from 29 September 2000 to 6 October 2023, Israeli forces [killed](#) 10,554 Palestinians.↵
6. Hamas adopted a [new covenant](#) in 2017, which is far less publicized among supporters of Israel. Among other important shifts from the 1988 position are (1) clarification that "Hamas affirms that its conflict is with the Zionist project not with the Jews because of their religion. Hamas does not wage a struggle against the Jews because they are Jewish but wages a struggle against the Zionists who occupy Palestine. Yet, it is the Zionists who constantly identify Judaism and the Jews with their own colonial project and illegal entity"; and (2) acceptance of "the establishment of a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital along the lines of June 4, 1967, with the return of the refugees and the displaced to their homes from which they were expelled, to be a formula of national consensus." The antisemitic slurs of the 1988 covenant, quoted below in my text, are absent from the 2017 document.↵