

Analysis

Gaza: A Textbook Case of Genocide

Tuesday 17 October 2023, by [SEGAL Raz](#) (Date first published: 13 October 2023).

Israel has been explicit about what it's carrying out in Gaza. Why isn't the world listening?

ON FRIDAY, Israel ordered the besieged population in the northern half of the Gaza Strip to evacuate to the south, warning that it would soon intensify its attack on the Strip's upper half. The order has left more than a million people, half of whom are children, frantically attempting to flee amid [continuing](#) airstrikes, in a walled enclave where no destination is safe. As Palestinian journalist Ruwaida Kamal Amer [wrote](#) today from Gaza, "refugees from the north are already arriving in Khan Younis, where the missiles never stop and we're running out of food, water, and power." The UN has [warned](#) that the flight of people from the northern part of Gaza to the south will create "devastating humanitarian consequences" and will "transform what is already a tragedy into a calamitous situation." Over the last week, Israel's violence against Gaza has killed more than 1,800 Palestinians, injured thousands, and displaced more than 400,000 within the strip. And yet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [promised](#) today that what we have seen is "only the beginning."

Israel's campaign to displace Gazans—and potentially [expel them altogether](#) into Egypt—is yet another chapter in the Nakba, in which an estimated 750,000 Palestinians were driven from their homes during the 1948 war that led to the creation of the State of Israel. But the assault on Gaza can also be understood in other terms: as a textbook case of genocide unfolding in front of our eyes. I say this as a scholar of genocide, who has spent many years writing about Israeli mass violence against Palestinians. I have written about settler colonialism and [Jewish supremacy in Israel](#), the distortion of the Holocaust to boost the [Israeli arms industry](#), the [weaponization](#) of antisemitism accusations to justify Israeli violence against Palestinians, and the racist regime of Israeli [apartheid](#). Now, following Hamas's attack on Saturday and the mass murder of more than 1,000 Israeli civilians, the worst of the worst is happening.

Under international law, the crime of genocide is defined by "the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such," as [noted](#) in the December 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. In its murderous attack on Gaza, Israel has loudly proclaimed this intent. Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant [declared](#) it in no uncertain terms on October 9th: "We are imposing a complete siege on Gaza. No electricity, no food, no water, no fuel. Everything is closed. We are fighting human animals, and we will act accordingly." Leaders in the West reinforced this racist rhetoric by describing Hamas's mass murder of Israeli civilians—a war crime under international law that rightly provoked horror and shock in Israel and around the world—as "[an act of sheer evil](#)," in the words of US President Joe Biden, or as a move that reflected an "[ancient evil](#)," in the terminology of President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen. This dehumanizing language is clearly calculated to justify the wide scale destruction of Palestinian lives; the assertion of "evil," in its absolutism, elides distinctions between Hamas militants and Gazan civilians, and occludes the broader context of colonization and occupation.

The UN Genocide Convention lists [five acts](#) that fall under its definition. Israel is currently perpetrating three of these in Gaza: “1. Killing members of the group. 2. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group. 3. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.” The Israeli Air Force, by its [own account](#), has so far dropped more than 6,000 bombs on Gaza, which is one of the most densely populated areas in the world—almost as many bombs as the US [dropped on all of Afghanistan](#) during record-breaking years of its war there. Human Rights Watch has confirmed that the weapons used included [phosphorous bombs](#), which set fire to bodies and buildings, creating flames that aren’t extinguished on contact with water. This demonstrates clearly what Gallant means by “act accordingly”: not targeting individual Hamas militants, as Israel claims, but unleashing deadly violence against Palestinians in Gaza “as such,” in the language of the UN Genocide Convention. Israel has also intensified its 16-year siege of Gaza—the [longest](#) in modern history, in [clear violation of international humanitarian law](#)—to a “complete siege,” in Gallant’s words. This turn of phrase that explicitly indexes a plan to bring the siege to its final destination of systematic destruction of Palestinians and Palestinian society in Gaza, by killing them, starving them, cutting off their water supplies, and [bombing their hospitals](#).

It’s not only Israel’s leaders who are using such language. An interviewee on the [pro-Netanyahu Channel 14](#) called for Israel to “turn Gaza to Dresden.” Channel 12, Israel’s most-watched news station, published [a report](#) about left-leaning Israelis calling to “dance on what used to be Gaza.” Meanwhile, genocidal verbs—calls to “[erase](#)” and “[flatten](#)” Gaza—have become omnipresent on [Israeli social media](#). In Tel Aviv, a banner reading “[Zero Gazans](#)” was seen hanging from a bridge.

Indeed, Israel’s genocidal assault on Gaza is quite explicit, open, and unashamed. Perpetrators of genocide usually do not express their intentions so clearly, though there are exceptions. In the early 20th century, for example, German colonial occupiers perpetrated a genocide in response to an uprising by the Indigenous Herero and Nama populations in southwest Africa. In 1904, General Lothar von Trotha, the German military commander, issued an “extermination order,” justified by the rationale of a “race war.” By 1908, the German authorities had murdered 10,000 Nama, and had achieved their stated goal of “destroying the Herero,” killing 65,000 Herero, 80% of the population. Gallant’s orders on October 9th were no less explicit. Israel’s goal is to destroy the Palestinians of Gaza. And those of us watching around the world are derelict in our responsibility to prevent them from doing so.

Raz Segal

P.S.

- Jewish Currents Magazine. October 13, 2023:
<https://jewishcurrents.org/a-textbook-case-of-genocide>

Correction: An earlier version of this piece said that Israel dropped more bombs on Gaza this week than the US dropped on Afghanistan in any single year of its war there. In fact, the US dropped more than 7,000 bombs on Afghanistan in both 2018 and 2019; at the time of publication, Israel had dropped an estimated 6,000 bombs on Gaza in less than a week.

- Raz Segal is an associate professor of Holocaust and genocide studies at Stockton University and the endowed professor in the study of modern genocide.