

Opinion

Israel must stop weaponising the Holocaust

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Scholars of genocide are criticizing the dangerous use of the Holocaust to justify Israeli mass violence against Palestinians

President Joe Biden began his remarks in Israel with [this](#): “ Hamas committed atrocities that recall the worst ravages of Isis, unleashing pure unadulterated evil upon the world. There is no rationalizing it, no excusing it. Period. The brutality we saw would have cut deep anywhere in the world, but it cuts deeper here in Israel. October 7, which was a ... sacred Jewish holiday, became the deadliest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust.

“It has brought to the surface painful memories and scars left by millennia of antisemitism and the genocide of the Jewish people. The world watched then, it knew, and the world did nothing.

“We will not stand by and do nothing again. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever.”

With this, Biden reinforced the rhetorical framework that the former Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett [expressed](#), in typically unashamed terms, in an interview on Sky News on 12 October: “We’re fighting Nazis.”

A powerful state, with powerful allies and a powerful army, engaged in a retaliatory attack against stateless Palestinians under Israeli-settler colonial rule, military occupation and siege, is thus portrayed as powerless Jews in a struggle against Nazis. This historical context in no way justifies or excuses the mass murder of 1,500 Israelis on 7 October, which constitutes a war crime and crimes against humanity. This was the single largest massacre of Jews since the [Holocaust](#), which deeply shocked Jews and many others around the world. The context of the Hamas attack on Israelis, however, is completely different from the context of the attack on Jews during the Holocaust. And without the historical context of Israeli settler colonialism since the 1948 Nakba, we cannot explain how we got here, nor imagine different futures; Biden offered us, instead, the decontextualized image of “pure, unadulterated evil.”

This weaponization of Holocaust memory by Israeli politicians runs deep. In 1982, for instance, in the context of Israel’s attack on Lebanon, the Israeli PM, Menachem Begin, [compared](#) the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in Beirut to Adolf Hitler in his bunker in Berlin at the end of the war. Three decades later, in October 2015, Benjamin Netanyahu took this weaponization to new levels when he [asserted](#) in a speech to the World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem that the Palestinian grand mufti Haj Amin al-Husseini planted the idea to murder Jews in Hitler’s mind. And last Tuesday, Netanyahu [described](#) Hamas in a press conference, together with the German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, as the “new Nazis”.

The Israeli defense minister, Yoav Gallant said: “Gaza will not return to what it was before. We will eliminate everything.” Nissim Vaturi, a member of the Israeli parliament for the ruling Likud party, to take another example, [called](#) for “erasing the Gaza Strip from the face of the earth”. There are

many other such expressions by Israeli politicians and senior army officers in the last few weeks. The fantasy of “fighting Nazis” drives such explicit language, because the image of Nazis is one of “pure, unadulterated evil”, which removes all laws and restrictions in the fight against it. Perpetrators of genocide always see their victims as evil and themselves as righteous. This is, indeed, how Nazis saw Jews.

Biden’s words constitute therefore a textbook use of the Holocaust not in order to stand with powerless people facing the prospect of genocidal violence, but to support and justify an extremely violent attack by a powerful state and, at the same time, distort this reality. But we see the reality in front of our eyes: since the start of Israeli mass violence on 7 October, the number of Palestinians killed in Gaza has surpassed 4,650, a third of them children, with more than 15,000 injured and over a million people displaced.

Israel has also escalated the violence against Palestinians under occupation in the West Bank, [including](#) the killing of more than 95 people and an intensification of expulsions, including the destruction of whole communities. Hamas wields no power in the West Bank, but the reality that we can all see means little for Israelis fighting, in their minds, Nazis.

We have seen this sort of use of Holocaust memory in another case of mass violence not too long ago. On 24 January 2020, the Russian president Vladimir Putin was invited to speak at the fifth World Holocaust Forum at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, to mark 75 years to the liberation of Auschwitz by Soviet forces. In his speech, Putin [presented](#) a distorted history of the second world war and the Holocaust, including distorted maps, to fit a Russian narrative that erased the Nazi-Soviet alliance in the destruction of Poland in 1939 and presented Ukrainians, Latvians and Lithuanians primarily as Nazi collaborators.

Putin used precisely this weaponization of Holocaust history when he launched his assault on Ukraine in February last year, [explaining](#) it as a campaign of “denazification”. Explicit and unashamed, just like Bennett. Putin thus used the Holocaust to create a world turned upside down: Ukrainians facing a brutal and unprovoked Russian attack became Nazis.

The history of the Holocaust, however, does offer lessons for the current bloodshed.

For one, it reminds us to center the voices and perspectives of those facing state violence and genocide. And the most urgent thing that Palestinians in Gaza now need is a ceasefire and an end to the Israeli bombing campaign. That is also what at least some of the Israeli survivors of the Hamas attack and family members of Israeli civilians killed or in captivity in Gaza [want](#). A top priority now should be stopping the unfolding violence, saving lives, and the release of Israeli hostages together with hundreds of Palestinian civilians, including 160 children, [detained](#) by Israel unlawfully, without charges or trial.

The history of the Holocaust also points to the importance of accountability, even as post-Holocaust accountability remained limited. In the case of Israel’s assault on [Gaza](#), accountability needs to begin from what is very clear: incitement to genocide, which is punishable under article 3 of the UN genocide convention, even when genocide does not follow. While the debate about genocide in Israel’s current assault on Gaza will undoubtedly continue for years, perhaps also in international courts, Israeli war crimes and violations of international humanitarian law are beyond dispute.

It will also be important then that Israeli perpetrators of war crimes and those responsible for violations of international humanitarian law in the many years of the siege on Gaza, including during this current assault, will stand trial. Palestinian leaders and Palestinians who perpetrated the mass atrocities on 7 October should also be held accountable. International courts and legal processes are

important because they hold potential to become spaces, however limited, for survivors to tell their stories, assert their humanity, and demand truth and justice.

Indeed, no value related to the study of the Holocaust and its memory occupies a more central place perhaps than truth. No justice is possible, not in the short term and certainly not in the long term, without a truthful reckoning of how we got here. This means recognizing fully the long history of Israeli settler-colonial violence against Palestinians since the 1948 Nakba.

The world is indeed watching, as Biden said, and it knows, despite Biden's use of the Holocaust to distort what is clearly in front of our eyes, as more than 800 scholars of international law, conflict studies, and Holocaust and Genocide Studies declared in a [statement](#) on 15 October: "We are compelled to sound the alarm about the possibility of the crime of genocide being perpetrated by Israeli forces against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. We do not do so lightly, recognizing the weight of this crime, but the gravity of the current situation demands it." Scholars whose work has shaped the field of Holocaust and genocide studies, such as Omer Bartov and Marion Kaplan, signed the statement.

This is significant. More and more Holocaust and genocide studies scholars are refusing to allow the continuation of the dangerous use of the Holocaust to distort the historical reality of the Holocaust and Israeli mass violence against Palestinians. This provides some hope in these dark days, as it supports the struggle for a different future, beyond the Israeli settler state, a future that should be based on equality, justice, freedom and dignity for all the people who live between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

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P.S.

- The Guardian. Tue 24 Oct 2023 20.26 CEST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/24/israel-gaza-palestinians-holocaust>
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