

Catastrophe in Palestine and Israel

Wednesday 1 November 2023, by [FINKEL David](#) (Date first published: 30 October 2023).

NOTE: Given events of the last month — specifically the UAW strike against the Detroit Three that began in mid-September and the Hamas attack on Israeli military and civilians on October 7 with the subsequent Israeli invasion of Gaza — ATC editors have been involved in organizing and demonstrating. This has delayed both digital and print editions of our NOVEMBER/DECEMBER ATC. We appreciate your patience! Below is an article that will appear in the issue.

-The Editors

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ON THE MORNING of October 7, the nemesis that the Israeli state did much to create smashed over, under and through the border wall separating Gaza’s “open air prison” from southern Israel. The brutal events that followed have opened the gates of hell — even wider than usual — in the Middle East.

Any number of illusions lie shattered, *beginning with the biggest* — the United States’ government’s view that a brokered “normalization” of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, plus other Arab Gulf monarchies, would make Palestine essentially disappear from view. It’s essential to state up front the fundamental lesson that U.S. policy, enabling Israel’s continual destruction of Palestine and its people’s hopes, have made the 100-year Palestine-Zionist conflict into a *permanent crisis* with little hope of resolution.

At this writing the odds of an even bigger regional war, which no state actor wants, are unknown — “God forbid,” in the words of professor Rashid Khalidi. But every day’s events are more than horrific enough. They cannot be chronicled here, but where they’re all too clearly leading has brought literally millions of people into the streets of the world demanding that the slaughter of Gaza end.

The editors have discussed the U.S. government’s pretense of caring about Palestine in our previous editorial, “Palestine and Empire” (ATC 226). Although outdated by the current catastrophe, it may help provide a bit of background.

Also gone was Israel’s “security” illusion of impenetrable walls, world-class surveillance technology, all-pervasive intelligence and the certainty of massive retaliation assuring that Hamas was “deterred,” as a high-ranking Israeli officials repeatedly boasted. It’s replaced by even deadlier delusions that the promised “complete destruction” of Hamas, which can’t be accomplished without *tens and probably hundreds of thousands of deaths in Gaza*, will bring safety.

An illusion among some pro-Palestinian activists — that the Hamas attack represented an advance

for the resistance and liberation struggle — also needs to be analyzed. Briefly put, the deaths of 1400 Israelis, mostly civilians, is catastrophic for the Israeli *population* but doesn't threaten the *state*. That will be discussed below.

Mapping the Catastrophe

Israel's government of Benjamin "Mr. Security" Netanyahu is the *most* viciously racist, anti-democratic and incompetent, and *one* of the most corrupt — although there is competition for that distinction — in the country's history. It is now probably also the most widely reviled for its catastrophic failures.

In fact, Israel's mass bombing and invasion of Gaza has one overriding priority beyond all other considerations — keeping Netanyahu's coalition in power and himself out of prison on multiple corruption charges. Neither Palestinian, nor Israeli, nor hostages' lives can get in the way of that supreme goal.

Because the coalition depends on the support of the fascistic, open ethnic-cleansing Jewish Power and Religious Zionism Ministers Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, the dimensions of the war are literally genocidal. That potential has been present in Israeli politics all along, but Netanyahu's need to hold political office for protection from prosecution (sound familiar?) overrides certain restraints on all-out destruction that global politics and U.S. interests usually impose.

Mustafa Barghouti, a physician in Ramallah and president of the Palestinian National Initiative, has repeatedly warned (for example on "Democracy Now," October 19) of a scenario where Israel depopulates and annexes northern Gaza, then turns to ethnically cleansing and annexing the West Bank.

"I never thought I would see Israel carrying out ethnic cleansing in the 21st century," says Dr. Barghouti, "but I admit I was wrong." For a similar warning, see ["Gaza: between a second Nakba and the revival of the Oslo fiction."](#)

In the immediate shock of October 7, with reports from southern Israel exploding in much of the world and especially in the United States, years of accumulating support for the Palestinian people's suffering under occupation began dissolving. The scale and brutality of the Hamas killings generated instantaneous sympathy for Israel. Within a week, in turn, Israel's massive bombing, "total siege" and pending invasion of Gaza was converting much of that sympathy to revulsion.

Since then, we are frequently instructed that Israel's "right to defend itself" overrides consideration of the underlying conditions and history that produced the present situation. All that should wait till "Hamas terror is finished once and for all."

With all due disrespect, I must insist that the opposite is true. As Israeli apartheid embarks on the road toward genocide that many observers have warned as a potential outcome, you can't know where that road is going without some understanding of where it's coming from.

Birthing the Fundamentalist Nemesis

Back in spring 1982 I was on a delegation of leftwing journalists to the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel, when we visited Bir Zeit University in the occupied West Bank. In addition to Israeli blockades and continual harassment of the school, the nationalist students, supporters of the

Palestine Liberation Organization, also told us how Israeli authorities were allowing free passage to rightwing Islamists from Gaza to disrupt their campus activities.

That was an ominous foretaste of Israel's preference then for Islamic fundamentalism over Palestinian nationalism. This cynical enemy-of-my-enemy ploy was not dissimilar to what the United States was carrying out in the same period — supporting Osama bin Laden's Islamic fundamentalist force in Afghanistan against the Soviets, which became al-Qaeda and would ultimately perpetrate the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Our discussion at Bir Zeit, as it happened, was only months before Israel's invasion of Lebanon, culminating in the September Sabra and Shatila refugee camp massacres and the expulsion of the PLO from Beirut.

It was a massive defeat for Palestinian nationalism, and also produced the rise in Lebanon (with Iranian sponsorship) of the Shia fundamentalist movement Hezbollah, which became and remains Israel's most significant military adversary.

Hamas (an Arabic acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement) formed in 1987, a Gaza wing of the Egyptian-based Muslim Brotherhood. By the mid-2000s, Hamas was gaining strength to fill the vacuum of effective resistance with the decline of the Palestinian left and the Israeli-U.S. success in turning the Palestinian National Authority (PA, created following the 1993 Oslo Accords) into a client of the Occupation.

Even while Israeli settlements spread like an uncontrolled cancer in the West Bank, in 2006 a remarkable breakthrough took place in Palestinian life. An election in the West Bank and Gaza for leadership of the PA was declared free and fair by the Carter Center, and widely viewed as a democratic example for the Middle East.

To the surprise of everyone — including Hamas — the Islamist movement won, defeating the dominant PLO faction (Fatah). A horrified U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton bewailed the failure of the United States to ensure the election result would come out differently.

Yasser Arafat, longtime leader of the PLO and the symbol of Palestinian nationalism, had died in 2004 (quite likely poisoned by Israeli agents although the assassination was never acknowledged). With the PLO's popular support dramatically declining, both parties recognized the reality of their fragile voting bases — most people had not voted for Islamic fundamentalist ideology, but rather in protest against the PA's and PLO's incompetence and corruption.

Accordingly, Fatah and Hamas initiated a process of forming a Palestinian unity government. That exercise in Palestinian democratic politics was absolutely unacceptable to the United States and Israel. What happened next was told by journalist David Rose in an investigative report "The Gaza Bombshell" (*Vanity Fair*, April 2008). As the article's introduction summarizes:

"After failing to anticipate Hamas's victory over Fatah in the 2006 Palestinian election, the White House cooked up yet another scandalously covert and self-defeating Middle East debacle: part Iran-contra, part Bay of Pigs. With confidential documents, corroborated by outraged former and current U.S. officials, the author reveals how President Bush, Condoleezza Rice, and Deputy National-Security Adviser Elliott Abrams backed an armed force under Fatah strongman Muhammad Dahlan, touching off a bloody civil war in Gaza and leaving Hamas stronger than ever."

The coup failed, leaving the remnant of the PLO administering the Palestinian Authority in the scraps of territory left to it in the West Bank. Hamas consolidated its control of Gaza.

The strip of land has remained ever since under tightening Israeli siege, periodic operations that Israeli officials call “mowing the grass” with targeted assassinations and bombing civilian infrastructure, food supplies restricted to subsistence levels, electricity supplied for a few hours daily, water increasingly undrinkable, and the matrix of horrors chronicled in unbearable but essential detail in Norman Finkelstein’s book *Gaza. An Inquest into its Martyrdom* (University of California Press, 2018).

The caged-in population of Gaza, the great majority of whom are refugees and their descendants from the 1948 mass dispossession and expulsion of Palestinians from Israel, has grown to two and a half million in a strip of land roughly the size of Detroit. After each previous round of pulverization, partial reconstruction is financed from sources in the Arab world, notably Qatar, and some international agencies.

Hamas itself attempted to reconcile its ideological opposition to Israel’s existence with the hard facts of its governmental responsibilities. Its political wing in particular signaled willingness to live with some kind of two-state solution, if that was the will of the Palestinian people. Israel’s leadership, of any political bloc, showed no interest. Crumbs of aid and opening a handful of jobs in Israel for desperate Gaza workers would assure what Israel cynically called “quiet for quiet.”

So pleased were Israeli authorities with the stability of the status quo that they confidently moved military units to serve and protect fanatical West Bank settlers while they raid and pillage Palestinian villages, burn fields and uproot priceless olive trees. Towns in southern Israel were left barely guarded. But before October 7, what could go wrong?

Facing Brutal Facts

It is necessary to face hard facts of October 7 and the aftermath. The extraordinary organization, secret preparation, complexity and sheer power of the Hamas attack truly shocked the world.

So did the extreme brutality of the mass murders that it committed. Unless there was a breakdown of command and control, it would appear that the raid’s principal purpose was to kill people — even more than taking captives to exchange for more than six thousand Palestinian prisoners (including 360 children) held in Israel, many under “administrative detention” orders without charges or trial.

Claims that some Israeli citizens may have been killed in the army’s assaults to regain control, for example, [“A growing number of reports indicate Israeli forces responsible for Israeli civilian and military deaths following October 7 attack”](#) are unverified, but wouldn’t be unprecedented in Israel’s history of dealing with hostage crises.

Nonetheless, large-scale murders on October 7 by Hamas militants are extensively documented in body-cam and cell phone footage as well as survivors’ accounts. It included indiscriminate butchery of families in their homes — and of many civilians who could have been captured but instead were gunned down.

The extent of the killing beyond any evident strategic goal marks this as a hideous action, nothing to do with advancing Palestinian resistance or any progressive purpose.

It displays even more appalling indifference to the incineration it would bring down on the civilian Gaza population. In what way would this “advance” the struggle?

The moral and political crimes of Hamas include its failure to carry out construction of civilian bomb

shelters and emergency supplies in the face of repeated rounds of Israeli air and ground assault.

Supporters of Palestinian freedom need to face what this says about the real nature of Hamas, as well as the way it has ruled in Gaza. Recognizing the absolutely essential right of oppressed peoples to resist, including with arms, does not absolve us of the responsibility to analyze the methods and politics of the forces acting in their name.

The criminality is all the greater if, as some analysts suggest, a purpose of the Hamas attack was deliberately to draw Israel into a ground invasion. Could the organization's military or political leadership have imagined that regional state powers would come to its rescue?

Inevitably, as always the enormous power of Israel's military machine with full U.S. support rapidly dwarfed the 1400 Israeli deaths on October 7. These were *easily doubled by Palestinian lives lost in just the first few days* of Israel's retaliatory bombing and the "total siege" that Netanyahu promised would "wipe out" Hamas, "change Gaza forever" and "reverberate for generations." At this writing, Gaza's Health Ministry estimates that the death toll among Palestinians numbers over 8,000.

This was *before* a ground invasion of Gaza, *before* hospitals lost the last of their generator fuel, and *before* Israel bombed people who followed its orders to flee south — and for what purpose on the Israeli side?

After Israel's enabling the rise of the forces that became Hamas, can it now be "eliminated" without a mass slaughter of at least tens of thousands of Gaza civilians and the forced removal of probably hundreds of thousands more? Where would they supposedly go?

Who if anyone would rebuild Gaza this time? Will a "smaller Gaza with fewer people," as an Israeli government minister promises, re-create Israeli delusions of security? Does Israel intend to reoccupy the place or turn it over to a totally discredited PA, a pathetic client of the Occupation?

There are press pundits promoting all these obscene scenarios and more, all based on perpetuating Israel's apartheid-colonial control.

The Responses

Amidst worldwide outcry for an immediate ceasefire, the State Department prohibited its officers from the very mention of the term. Beyond "standing with Israel" and rushing more weaponry that it doesn't even need to destroy Gaza many times over, the U.S. plan seems to consist of pursuing Israeli-Saudi "normalization" over the smoking ruins of Israel's war on Palestine.

Joe Biden stated the truism that "Hamas does not represent the Palestinian people..." Indeed, what polling is available indicates that Hamas may be supported by around 20% of Gaza's population, maybe much less.

(Jim Zogby of the Arab American Institute estimates more like 11%. See also Amaney A. Jamal and Michael Robbins, "What Palestinians Really Think of Hamas," *Foreign Affairs*, October 25, 2023. This new poll was completed just before Oct. 7 when the Israel-Gaza war broke out. A few of many results: Both Hamas and Fatah have the support no more than 30% and much less by most measures.)

But such U.S. pronouncements hardly square with statements by Israel's state president Herzog that "Gaza is Hamas," or Benjamin Netanyahu at the United Nations displaying a flag showing Greater

Israel including Gaza and the West Bank. That's the real-life result that Biden's pledge of massive new military assistance for Israel will provide.

Meanwhile the new catastrophe has revealed, and deepened, the polarization in the U.S. Jewish community over Israel and Palestine. During the week of October 16 in actions on a scale never seen before, Jewish Voice for Peace, If Not Now and other Jewish-led solidarity organizations shut down exits from the White House on Monday and swarmed Capitol Hill on Wednesday, demanding an immediate cease-fire. The JVP-led October 27 mass sit-in shut down New York Grand Central Station with over 400 arrests.

But a typical establishment response was penned in the Detroit Free Press (Sunday, October 16) by Rabbi Asher Lopatin, who has an undeserved reputation as a moderate and conciliating voice:

" Hamas' wholesale targeting and murder of families babies, children, mothers and grandmothers — was the worst one-day catastrophe for our people since the Holocaust. And it brought back memories of the pogroms in Eastern Europe before and after the Russian Revolution, when Jews were attacked and killed in brutal raids. But this time even more extreme, like the brutality practiced by ISIS, but this time ISIS is here for the Jews."

Some historical context is missing here, to say the least! Jewish communities targeted by pogroms in Europe, let alone in the Nazi genocide, were not only defenseless but even more important, had nothing to do with creating the conditions that led to their murder.

The Israeli victims of the Hamas attack, certainly innocent in themselves, were citizens of the grotesquely self-described "nation-state of the Jewish people" - a state that not only claimed to be defending them, but produced the conditions for their murder and helped set in motion the force that perpetrated the October 7 massacre.

Comparisons of Hamas with ISIS, like Netanyahu's pronouncement that "Hamas is ISIS" (and Biden's blather that "these guys make al-Qaeda look pure"), provides a cover for war without limit or restraint, while West Bank settler atrocities escalate by the day. It's more accurate to see Hamas and the Israeli occupation as asymmetric, but symbiotic, death-spiral dance partners.

One can say that the Israeli government and Hamas, each for their own reasons, wanted the current war, and the United States is either unwilling or incompetent to stop it. On the other hand, none of the state actors want the apocalypse of a regional war — not Israel, not Saudi Arabia or Iran, certainly not Lebanon which would be annihilated, and not the USA.

If, however, states and/or their client forces blindly stagger into a regional war, then no one knows where it will lead or how much the gates of hell might swallow.

Demanding an immediate cease-fire for Gaza has become the global movement's central driving priority. The spreading outrage around the world, along with the growing protest among U.S. Palestinians, Arabs, progressive sectors of the Jewish community and other allies in solidarity, are the best hope right now for blocking the road to genocide.

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P.S.

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<https://againstthecurrent.org/catastrophe-in-palestine-and-israel/>

- David Finkel is an editor of *Against the Current* and a member of Jewish Voice for Peace - Detroit chapter and the Ukraine Solidarity Network.