

Israeli society's dehumanization of Palestinians is now absolute

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In the past, Israel's moral debate about its military actions may have been narrow and hypocritical, but at least it existed. Not this time.

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Palestinians mourn the death of their relatives in an Israeli airstrike at the Al-Awda School in Abasan, east of the city of Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, July 10, 2024. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)

At 5:40 a.m. on Aug. 10, the IDF Spokesperson sent a message to reporters informing them of an Israeli airstrike on a "military headquarters located in Al-Taba'een school compound near a mosque in the Daraj [and] Tuffah area, which serves as a shelter for residents of Gaza City."

"The headquarters," the Spokesperson continued, "was used by terrorists of the Hamas terrorist organization for hiding, and from there they planned and promoted terrorist attacks against IDF forces and citizens of the State of Israel. Prior to the attack, many steps were taken to reduce the chances of harming civilians, including the use of precision munitions, visual equipment, and intelligence information."

Shortly after this announcement, shocking images from Al-Taba'een school circulated around the world, showing piles of dismembered flesh and body parts being removed in plastic bags. The images were accompanied by reports that around 100 Palestinians had been killed in the Israeli attack, with [many more hospitalized](#). Most of those killed were in the middle of *fajr*, or dawn prayers, at a designated space inside the school compound.

In the hours and days that followed, as expected, a war of narratives developed over the number of civilian fatalities. The IDF Spokesperson [published](#) the photos and names of 19 Palestinians who it claimed were Hamas or Islamic Jihad "operatives" killed in the attack; many were given the label without specifying their alleged position or rank.

Hamas denied the allegations. The Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor also [disputed](#) the Israeli army's information: the NGO found that some of the people on the military's list had in fact been killed in previous attacks in Gaza, that others had never been Hamas supporters, and that some even opposed the group. The army later published an additional list of 13 more Palestinians that it alleges were operatives killed in the bombing.

While only an independent investigation can determine definitively the identity of all of the victims of the attack, the IDF Spokesperson's initial statement is indicative of the dramatic change that Israeli

society has undergone when it comes to the lives of Palestinians in Gaza.

Protest against the detention of Israeli reserve soldiers suspected of sexually assaulting a Palestinian prisoner, at the Beit Lid military base, July 29, 2024. (Chen Leopold/Flash90)

The IDF announcement explicitly stated that the school “serves as a shelter for residents of Gaza City,” meaning that the IDF knew refugees had fled there in fear of the army’s own bombings. The statement did not claim that there was any gunfire or rocket attacks from the school, but that “ Hamas terrorists ... planned and promoted ... terrorist acts” from it. Nor did it claim that the civilians who took refuge in the school were given any warning, only that the army had used “precision weapons” and “intelligence.” In other words, the army bombed a populated shelter knowing full well the deadly repercussions its assault would inflict.

As if starving millions was a hobby

It should come as no surprise that the Israeli media endorsed the IDF Spokesperson’s claims. When it comes to the resounding security failures that led to October 7, the Israeli media, and especially the right-wing media, is allowed to be critical and skeptical of the army. But when it comes to killing Palestinians, such skepticism is thrown out the window: in Gaza, the army is always right.

“In war, schools are off limits,” Prof. Yuli Tamir, Israel’s former education minister, [wrote](#) in Haaretz. “Isn’t there a single commander who will say, ‘No more?’” The answer is a resounding no. Every war entails a certain level of dehumanization of the enemy. But it seems that in the current war in Gaza, the dehumanization of Palestinians is close to absolute.

After every war in recent decades that Israelis have fought in, there have been public displays of remorse. This has often been criticized as a mentality of “shooting and crying” — but at least the soldiers were crying.

Following the 1967 Six-Day War, the hugely successful book “The Seventh Day: Soldiers’ Talk about the Six-Day War” was published, containing testimonies from soldiers trying to grapple with the moral dilemmas they faced during the fighting. After the Sabra and Shatila massacres in 1982, hundreds of thousands of Israelis — including many who served in the Lebanon war — took to the streets to protest the army’s crimes.

During the First Intifada, many soldiers spoke out about the abuse of Palestinians. The Second Intifada gave rise to the NGO [Breaking the Silence](#). The moral discourse about the occupation may have been narrow and hypocritical, but it existed.

Testimonies by Israeli soldiers who were stationed at the West Bank being read in front of Ha’Kirya military base in central Tel Aviv, an action of the NGO Breaking the Silence, July 1, 2017. (Tomer Neuberg/Flash90)

Not this time. The Israeli military has killed at least 40,000 Palestinians in Gaza — about two percent of the Strip’s population. It has wreaked total havoc, systematically destroying residential neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, and universities. Hundreds of thousands of Israeli soldiers have fought in Gaza over the past 10 months, and yet the moral debate is almost non-existent. The number of soldiers who have spoken out about their crimes or moral difficulties with serious reflection or regret, even anonymously, can be counted [on the fingers of one hand](#).

Paradoxically, the senseless and gratuitous destruction that the military is wreaking in Gaza can be seen from the hundreds of videos that Israeli soldiers have filmed and sent to friends, family, or

partners out of pride in their actions. It is from their recordings that we watched troops blowing up universities in Gaza, shooting randomly at houses, and destroying a water facility in Rafah, to name just a few examples.

Brigadier General Dan Goldfuss, commander of the 98th Division, whose lengthy retirement [interview](#) was presented as an example of a commander who upholds democratic values, said: "I don't feel sorry for the enemy ... you won't see me on the battlefield feeling sorry for the enemy. Either I kill him, or I capture him." Not a word was said about the thousands of Palestinian civilians killed by army fire, or about the dilemmas that accompanied such slaughter.

Similarly, Lt. Col. A., commander of the 200th Squadron which operates the Israeli Air Force's fleet of drones, [gave an interview](#) to Ynet earlier this month, in which he claimed his unit had killed "6,000 terrorists" during the war. When asked, in the context of the rescue operation to free four Israeli hostages in June, which resulted in the killing of over 270 Palestinians, "How do you identify who is a terrorist?" he answered: "We attacked on the side of the street to drive civilians away, and whoever did not flee, even if he was unarmed, as far as we were concerned, was a terrorist. Everyone we killed should have been killed."

This dehumanization has reached new heights in recent weeks with the debate over the legitimacy of [raping Palestinian prisoners](#). In a discussion on the mainstream TV network Channel 12, Yehuda Shlezinger, a "commentator" from the right-wing daily Israel Hayom, [called for](#) institutionalizing rape of prisoners as part of military practice. At least [three Knesset members](#) from the ruling Likud party also argued that Israeli soldiers should be allowed to do anything, including rape.

But the biggest trophy goes to Israel's Finance Minister and Defense Ministry deputy, Bezalel Smotrich. The world "won't let us cause 2 million civilians to die of hunger, even though it might be justified and moral until our hostages are returned," [he lamented](#) at an Israel Hayom conference earlier this month.

Minister of Finance and Head of the Religious Zionist Party Bezalel Smotrich leads a faction meeting at the Knesset in Jerusalem, July 22, 2024. (Oren Ben Hakoon/Flash90)

The remarks were strongly condemned around the world, but in Israel they were received with indifference, as if starving millions to death was merely a mundane hobby. If the seeds of dehumanization had not already been sown and widely legitimized, Smotrich would not have dared to say such a thing publicly. After all, he sees how readily the Israeli government and army have effectively embraced his "[Decisive Plan](#)" in Gaza.

'As long as we kill, they deserve to die'

When talking about the moral corruption that the occupation brings, we often recall the words of Prof. Yeshayahu Leibowitz. In April 1968, not yet a year after Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza began, he [wrote](#): "The state ruling over a hostile population of 1.4 to 2 million foreigners will necessarily become a Shin Bet state, with all that this implies for the spirit of education, freedom of speech and thought, and democratic governance. The corruption that is characteristic of all colonial regimes will also infect the State of Israel."

When we consider the moral abyss in which Israeli society now finds itself, it is hard not to attribute prophetic ability to Leibowitz. But a close examination of his words reveals a more complex picture.

One could argue that the Israel of 1968 was even less democratic than today. It was a one-party state ruled by Mapai (the antecedent to today's Labor Party), which excluded not only its Palestinian

citizens, who had emerged only two years earlier from Israeli military rule, but also Mizrahi Jews from Arab and Muslim countries, and kept religious and ultra-Orthodox Jews in a corner. The Israeli media hardly criticized the government, and the school textbooks I learned from in the 1960s and '70s were not particularly progressive.

Within the Green Line, Israel is much more liberal today than it was in 1968. Women are increasingly in positions of power, not to mention LGBTQ+ people, whose very existence was a crime. Economically, Israel is a much freer country than the centralized statist economy of the 1960s (and the inequalities grew accordingly), and the country is much more connected to the rest of the world.

One could argue that this is not a contradiction, but rather complementary processes. The occupation has not only enriched Israel (defense exports have reached a record of \$13 billion in 2023, for example), but has helped it to maintain two parallel systems of government — colonialism and apartheid in the occupied territories, and liberal democracy for Jews within the Green Line — and perhaps even two parallel moral systems. The disconnect between expanding the rights of Israeli citizens and erasing the rights of Palestinian subjects has become an inseparable part of the state. "[Villa in the jungle](#)" is not just a picturesque term; it describes the essence of the Israeli regime.

An Israeli tank seen near the Gaza border fence, March 26, 2024. [Chaim Goldberg/Flash90]

The current fascist government has upset what was once a more delicate balance. By turning "liberalism" into an enemy, politicians like [Yariv Levin](#), [Simcha Rothman](#), and their associates are trying to break down the barrier between the parallel worlds through their [judicial coup](#). The senior positions given to racists and fascists such as Smotrich and Itamar Ben Gvir contributed to this process.

In the face of the atrocities inflicted by Hamas on October 7, the discourse of these Israeli fascists remains the primary voice in the public discourse, since the supposedly liberal Israel, which ignored the occupation for years, did not know how to place Hamas' violence within a broader context of structural oppression and apartheid. That's how we got to the point whereby, in mainstream Israeli society, there is no real opposition to the total dehumanization of the Palestinians.

The Israeli killing machine does not know how to stop, wrote +972 and Local Call's Orly Noy on [Facebook](#) after the bombing of Al-Taba'een school, because it operates by inertia and tautology. "It is acting out of inertia because stopping it will force Israel to internalize what it has caused, what atrocity on a historical scale is registered in its name ... And that's where the tautological logic comes in: As long as we kill, it's obvious that they still deserve to die." Just like the commander of the 200th Squadron said a few days later.

Nevertheless, within the Green Line there is still a civil society and a liberal camp that holds considerable power, as seen at the weekly demonstrations against the government. The question is what will happen if a ceasefire is reached and the Israeli "extermination machine" is forced to stop. Will parts of Israeli society realize that the unbridled violence Israel has unleashed since October 7, and the forces of dehumanization that drive it, threatens the very existence of the state?

"Silence is wretched," wrote Ze'ev Jabotinsky in the poem that became the anthem of the Revisionist Zionist movement Beitar, the forefather of Likud. The fact that Netanyahu and his partners want the [noise of constant war](#) is clear. The question is why the liberal camp is keeping quiet.

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P.S.

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<https://www.972mag.com/dehumanization-moral-abyss-israelis/>

A version of this article was first published in Hebrew on Local Call. Read it [here](#).

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Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war. The world is reeling from Israel's unprecedented onslaught on Gaza, inflicting mass devastation and death upon besieged Palestinians, as well as the atrocious attack and kidnappings by Hamas in Israel on October 7. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing this violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to intensify their attacks on Palestinians. The most far-right government in Israel's history is ramping up its policing of dissent, using the cover of war to silence Palestinian citizens and left-wing Jews who object to its policies.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 14 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, entrenched occupation and apartheid, and a normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land.

Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is a leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists, activists, and thinkers can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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