

## Israel's Genocidal Assault on Gaza and the Rise of Global Nakba Memory

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Raz Segal

On 11 March 2024, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in an [interview](#) on Fox News in response to US President Joe Biden's "red line" to Netanyahu not to invade Rafah: [PP] "The president and I agree that we have to destroy Hamas. We can't leave a quarter of the Hamas terror army in place. They're there, in Rafah. This would be equivalent to saying ... after the Allies [during World War II] fought back ... through Normandy, went through Germany, we'll leave a quarter of the Nazi army in place, and we won't go into Berlin."

This depiction of Gaza as Nazi Germany figured in Israeli political and public discourse immediately after the Hamas-led attack on 7 October, and it is furthermore based on a deeper tendency in Israeli politics, well before 7 October, to portray Palestinians as Nazis. Among the more well-known examples are Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin comparing in 1982, in the context of Israel's attack on Lebanon, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in Beirut to Adolf Hitler in his bunker in Berlin at the end of World War II. Three decades later, in October 2015, it was Netanyahu who 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. This was, of course, an unashamed fabrication, without any basis whatsoever in historical reality.

The stage was thus set for former Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett to respond angrily in an interview on Sky News on 12 October to questions about a high civilian death toll already in the first few days of Israel's attack on Gaza, by saying: "We're fighting Nazis." Then, on 17 October, Netanyahu described Hamas in a press conference, together with the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, as the "new Nazis." The message was clear: a war against Nazis requires the lifting "of all restrictions," as Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant explained on 10 October.

S., a community worker in Gaza, conveyed what that meant on the ground in a WhatsApp message to a friend by writing: “Terror, terror, terror.” A., a journalist and translator, conveyed this terror in more detail, as it unfolded, in a [voice message](#) to a friend on 15 October: [PP] “I am still in my home in Gaza [City]. Many people fled to the South, but many stayed here in the north after they saw the massacre of 70 people and more than 200 injured on the road south [A. reported on this in another voice message the previous morning] – people got scared, including the people who had intended to flee and decided to stay here. And then, after that, there was so much bombing in the south, so much bombing and bombing and bombing, massacres, so many people martyred, so many killed. That is to say – people left Gaza [City], went to the south and sought shelter with people there and then they all got shelled. You even have people who fled to the south and came back to Gaza [City].”

This was not the only mass killing that occurred after Israel ordered, on 13 October, more than a million people to leave the northern part of the Gaza Strip. On 21 December, the *New York Times* confirmed the scale of killings when it [reported](#) [PP] that “during the first six weeks of the war in Gaza, Israel routinely used one of its biggest and most destructive bombs in areas it designated safe for civilians.” Palestinians also faced the dreadful prospect of moving south under the “total siege” conditions that Israel’s Defense Minister Yoav Gallant had [proclaimed](#) on 9 October, with water, food, fuel, and medical supplies quickly running out within days. In a voice message from 15 October, A. reported that “there’s no water at all. It’s a huge problem, it’s catastrophic.” When Israel’s evacuation order was announced three days earlier, he understood its destructive implications, and asked in another voice message: “Where is the West? Where are these human rights they preach? Where is international law?” “This is genocide,” he continued, “and it should be immediately stopped.”

When US President Joe Biden landed in Israel three days later, on 18 October, he came to trample on human rights, to violate international law, to support rather than stop an unfolding genocide, and he did so through Holocaust weaponization: [PP] “ 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.”

President Biden repeated this weaponization of the Holocaust just recently in his [speech](#) on 7 May, to mark Israeli Holocaust Memorial Day the previous day. “This ancient hatred of Jews didn’t begin with the Holocaust; it didn’t end with the Holocaust, either, or after ... That hatred was brought to life on October 7th in 2023. On a sacred Jewish holiday, the terrorist group Hamas unleashed the deadliest day of the Jewish people since the Holocaust. Driven by ancient desire to wipeout the Jewish people off the face of the Earth.”

It was, most likely, not a coincidence therefore that, as Biden was speaking, Israel crossed Biden’s “red line” and proceeded in its deadly invasion of Rafah.

A powerful state, with powerful allies and a powerful army, engaged in an attack against stateless Palestinians under decades of 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 over 1,100 Israelis and migrant workers and the taking of over 240 hostages in the Hamas-led attack on 7 October. This was indeed the single largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. But its context 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.”

It was Israeli Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu, member of the far-right Jewish Power party, who demonstrated in a radio interview on 5 November the slippage in Israeli politics, media, and society from describing Hamas as Nazis to describing all Palestinians as Nazis. Eliyahu expressed his desire for the total destruction of Gaza by repeating Israeli President Isaac Herzog’s assertion in a press conference on 10 October that “there is no such thing as uninvolved civilians in Gaza.” Eliyahu further explained his objection to humanitarian aid for Palestinians in

Gaza by saying that “we would not hand the Nazis humanitarian aid,” and suggested the possibility of dropping a nuclear bomb on Gaza.

Israel’s attack on Gaza has, in fact, included the dropping so far of more than 65 tons of explosives, which are the equivalent of three atomic bombs of the kind that the US dropped on Japan at the end of World War II. Israeli bombings and invasion have left the vast majority of the Gaza Strip almost completely destroyed, as Israel targeted EVERYTHING: residential buildings, hospitals, schools, ALL the universities, cultural sites, archives, libraries, bakeries, and agricultural fields. It has also killed more than 35,000 Palestinians, including more than 14,500 children; wounded over 80,000 people; and forcibly displaced nearly the entire population of 2.3 million Palestinians who are now facing famine conditions, as a result of Israel’s “total siege” policies.

The unprecedented levels of destruction and mass killing in Israel’s attack on Gaza has led to large-scale demonstrations around the world, which played a role in the charge of genocide against Israel that South Africa brought in its submission to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on 29 December 2023. The Court issued a provisional ruling nearly a month later, on 26 January, that South Africa succeeded in arguing that it is plausible that Israel is perpetrating genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, based on the dozens of explicit statements of “intent to destroy” by Israeli state leaders, war cabinet ministers, and senior army officers and on the dynamics of violence against people in one of the most densely populated areas in the world.

The depiction of Palestinians as Nazis disrupts the axiom in Israeli politics and society that the Holocaust is incomparable and unique, though at the same time it strengthens another dominant idea that stems from the view of the Holocaust as unique: that Israel, where many Holocaust survivors tried to build their lives, is a unique state. The concept of genocide has functioned, from its formulation in the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1948, in relation to this double uniqueness: Nazism and what we now call the Holocaust were imagined on a hierarchy as more terrible than genocide, which placed Israel, the state of Holocaust survivors, on another imagined hierarchy as more moral than any other state in the world. This gave rise to a common view in Israel and the west that the Israeli army is the

most moral in the world, so that from Israel's establishment in May 1948, it became unimaginable that it would perpetrate any crime under international law, let alone genocide. Maintaining this foundational image of Israel required the denial of the Nakba, Israel's foundational crime—the expulsion and dispossession of 750,000 Palestinians, amidst massacres and killing of around 15,000 Palestinians, and the destruction of hundreds of Palestinians towns and villages in the 1948 war. The denial of the Nakba also stemmed from the broader impetus to deny the nature of the Israeli state as a settler-colonial project, even as Zionists themselves had described Zionism as colonialism, with Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky's essay from 1923 “The Iron Wall” as one of the more well-known examples.

So, just to reiterate an important point: the concept of genocide functioned, as it emerged, to maintain the exceptional status of the Holocaust and therefore the exceptional status of Israel in the international legal system; this, then, enabled rather than challenged a paradoxical situation: the post-Holocaust reproduction of racism and white supremacy through the Israeli settler-colonial state, even as racism and white supremacy had targeted Jews for exclusion and, ultimately, destruction in Europe.

Nakba denial through Holocaust memory is reflected in the landscape of Yad Vashem, Israel's main Holocaust museum and memorial site and a central institute of global Holocaust memory in the last three decades [PP]. The new Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem, which opened in 2005, cuts into a hill and ends on a balcony overlooking a beautiful valley. The vast majority of visitors on that balcony, however, do not know that they are looking at the place where once stood the Palestinian village of Dayr Yasin, the site of an infamous massacre in April 1948, when Jewish forces murdered over one hundred Palestinians. Another example is the Forest of the Martyrs in the mountains just outside Jerusalem, a project of the Jewish National Fund, contains six million trees to commemorate the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. It also covers the lands of five Palestinian villages— Aqqur, Dayr 'Amr, Bayt Umm al-Mays, Khirbat al-'Umur, and Kasla— which Jewish forces in 1948 razed to the ground after expelling their residents.

Furthermore, Dany Dayan, the chairman of Yad Vashem since 2021, is a settler who served from 2007 to 2013 as the chairperson of the Yesha Council, the umbrella organization of Jewish

settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. Dayan took pride in 2015 that, because of his tenure as the Council's chairperson, a Palestinian state "today is farther than ever." The blurring of Israeli mass violence against Palestinians also figures in the USHMM permanent exhibition, which concludes with the establishment of Israel – without a word about the Nakba or Palestinians.

Wielding the Holocaust as a weapon has characterized another case of mass violence not too long ago. On 24 January 2020, 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 World War II 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 mostly as Nazi collaborators. Putin used precisely this weaponization of Holocaust history when he launched his assault on Ukraine in February 2022, explaining it as a campaign of "denazification". Explicit and unashamed, just like Bennet, Netanyahu, Eliyahu, and other Israeli leaders, Putin also used the Holocaust to create a world turned upside down: Ukrainians facing a brutal and unprovoked Russian attack became Nazis.

Polish President Andrzej Duda and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy were not invited to speak at Yad Vashem in January 2020; Duda therefore refused to attend, and Zelenskyy arrived in Israel but eventually also decided not to attend. Yad Vashem historian Havi Dreifuss wrote in *Haaretz* a couple weeks after the event that the scholars working at Yad Vashem were not in any way involved in what "will be remembered as one of the low points in the struggle about the historical story."

This and the continued and intensifying weaponization of the Holocaust after 7 October very sadly blurs how the history of the Holocaust does offer us important guidance in these horrible days.

First and foremost, the history of the Holocaust reminds us to center the voices of those facing state violence and genocide, not the perspective of the state, certainly not the perspective of leaders of extremely violent states, such as Putin and Netanyahu. What is more, the history of the Holocaust points to the importance of holding state authorities accountable, even as post-Holocaust accountability remained limited. 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. No value related to the study of the Holocaust and its memory occupies a more central place perhaps than truth. And 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 provisional ruling of the ICJ, which I mentioned, is incredibly important in this context because it marks the beginning of the end of the impunity that Israel has enjoyed in the international legal system.** It was particularly significant that the day of the provisional ruling was also the day of the hearing in another legal case related to Israel's attack on Gaza, the one that the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) filed in federal court in California, on behalf of Palestinian organizations and individuals, against US President Biden, Secretary of State Blinken, and Secretary of Defense Austin for failure to abide by the legal obligations of states according to the UN Genocide Convention to prevent genocide in Gaza and for complicity with genocide, due to the continued US military and diplomatic support to Israel after 7 October.

The hearing in California began a few hours after the ICJ provisional ruling. Remarkably, Judge Jeffrey S. White allowed Palestinian plaintiffs to testify in court that day, both those who live in the US but were born and grew up in Gaza and those who are now in the West Bank and Gaza. One after the other, they told the court, over three hours, about their family histories during the Nakba, their own experiences of Israeli mass violence, relatives they have lost after 8 October, neighborhoods in which they grew up that are no more, schools that Israeli bombings and invasion have turned to rubble, cafes where they will never be able to drink tea again, and feelings of dread and loss.

Dr. Omar Al-Najjar testified via Zoom from a hospital in Rafah, taking a brief break from work around the clock, with barely any medical supplies. “I have lost everything in this war ... I have nothing but my grief. This is what Israel and its supporters have done to us.” In a recent press release of the CCR, on 7 May, Dr. Al-Najjar, who had managed to leave Rafah just before Israel’s onslaught, reiterated that “every single day of the past seven months, we have seen more death and destruction. ... My home and entire neighborhood is under the rubble.”

Ahmed Abofoul, a Palestinian lawyer working at Al-Haq, described how his grandfather had refused to leave Gaza City in October, even as his relatives told him that they would later return. “That is exactly what they told me in 1948,” he responded, having survived the Nakba but never able to return to the where he grew up.

Palestinians in court that day said the word Nakba dozens and dozens of times, again and again, affirming with the force of truth embodied in this word that we have entered a new period, beyond Israeli impunity as it intertwined with Nakba denial. It was perhaps a coincidence that the ICJ provisional ruling and the hearing in the CCR case took place one day before International Holocaust Memorial Day, on 27 January, which marks the day when Soviet forces liberated the Nazi death camp in Auschwitz in 1945. It was, in any case, important that, following the Palestinian plaintiffs, came the turn of Holocaust scholar Barry Trachtenberg to take the stand, to testify about the declaration he had submitted, together with fellow Holocaust and Genocide Studies scholars Victoria Sanford and John Cox, in support of the CCR case. Drawing on his work on the failure of the US to respond on time to the Nazi assault on Jews, Trachtenberg stressed the significance of Holocaust memory in the US and the urgent need that the US government does not repeat its failure and acts now to stop Israel’s unfolding genocide in Gaza.

While Judge White decided on 31 January to dismiss the case on jurisdictional grounds—as the court could not, in his view, interfere in government decision-making related to foreign policy—he nevertheless issued an unprecedented ruling, stating that “both the uncontroverted testimony of the Plaintiffs and the expert opinion proffered at the hearing on these motions as well as statements made by various officers of the Israeli government indicate that the ongoing military



siege in Gaza is intended to eradicate a whole people and therefore plausibly falls within the international prohibition against genocide. As the ICJ has found, it is plausible that Israel's conduct amounts to genocide" and, therefore, the "Court implores Defendants [Biden, Blinken, and Austin] to examine the results of their unflagging support of the military siege against the Palestinians in Gaza."

Judging from the dozens and dozens of arms shipments from the US to Israel after this ruling --- including the one most recently, after Israel crossed Biden's "red line" and invaded Rafah --- Biden, Blinken, and Austin have clearly not listened to Judge White, certainly not to the Palestinians who testified in his courtroom. They also wave away Holocaust scholars such as Barry Trachtenberg.

Still, Israel's impunity in the international legal system continues to crack. On 28 March, the ICJ responded to a request from South Africa for additional provisional measures, in view of the intensifying Israeli attack since 26 January, particularly its policy of starving the Palestinians of Gaza. "The Court observes with regret that, since then, the catastrophic living conditions of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip have deteriorated further, in particular in view of the prolonged and widespread deprivation of food and other basic necessities to which the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip have been subjected." The Court also noted that we were not, two months ago now, facing anymore the risk of famine, but that famine was then "setting in." Having thus in effect acknowledged that Israel had not followed the Court's original provisional orders, the Court, again with the support of the vast majority of the judges, reaffirmed them and added three new ones that mostly introduced stronger language than the original provisional orders to "take all necessary and effective measures to ensure, without delay, in full co-operation with the United Nations, the unhindered provision at scale by all concerned of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance." Again, however, the Court did not order Israel to cease its military attack, even though, again, there is no other way to follow the provisional measures without doing so.

This time, however, some of the Judges wrote in separate declarations that, quoting from the joint declaration of Judges Xue, Brant, Gómez, Robledo, and Tladi, “the present scale of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the overwhelming consensus that, without the suspension of military operations, this catastrophe will even worsen, constitute circumstances that require the Court to *explicitly* order a suspension of military operations,” affirming also that the provisional measures—these and the original ones—do actually order a ceasefire.

Stressing the urgency of following one of the goals of the UN Genocide Convention to prevent genocide, Judge Yusuf wrote that “all the indicators of genocidal activities are flashing red in Gaza.”

Yet, prevention of genocide has in many ways already failed in Gaza. Atef Abu Saif, an important Palestinian writer in English and Arabic and the Palestinian Authority Minister of Culture, recently published *Don't Look Left: A Diary of Genocide*, describing his experiences since October, when he happened to be in Gaza. In the final published entry, from December 30, he writes: “There will be no old city [in Gaza]. No Saftawi. No Jabalia as I know it. Gaza, the one I knew will not be there anymore. If there is to be anything, it will need to be rebuilt from scratch. It will need to be reborn from the flames—like the city’s emblem, the phoenix—it will need to rise up against all odds, against all possibilities.”

There is, though, perhaps some possibility, precisely because the voices of Palestinians who are facing Israel’s genocide assault, voices such as that of Atef Abu Saif, are now, for the first time in the history of the ongoing Nakba, front and center around the world. Also in national and international courts, from California to The Hague, marking an era beyond impunity for Israel, when the crime of genocide serves not as it had emerged to blur Israeli state violence, but now to support the struggle against it and --- I hope --- to hold Israeli leaders, politicians, army officers, and journalists accountable. It is, furthermore, striking, that it is the voices of Palestinians that now point to a new era when the promise of Holocaust memory, to center the voices and experiences of survivors and forcibly displaced people --- that promise may now, amidst Gaza’s ruins but also amidst the vision of Gaza again rising up, that promise may finally be fulfilled. In this new era, Holocaust memory will not serve to deny the Nakba and to silence Palestinians, but

to give rise to a world where the voices of those facing state violence, Palestinians *and* the many millions of other people who the international legal system has abandoned for decades --- think about the more than 100 million forcibly displaced people around the world today --- their knowledge, their histories, their perspectives, not those of the state leaders and state authorities who attack them, will guide us to truth, justice, and peace. This, as I suggest in the title of my lecture, may be --- I hope --- the rise of global Nakba memory.

On 10 October, Palestinian poet, novelist, and teacher Hiba Abu Nada wrote a poem in response to the terror she felt in those first days of Israel's attack on Gaza. She titled it, [PP] "I Grant You Refuge." An Israeli airstrike killed her ten days later. Professor of Arabic literature at UPenn Huda Fakhreddine translated the poem into English on 3 November, and I conclude with Hiba Abu Nada's words from the last stanza of the poem:

I grant you refuge  
from hurt and suffering.

With words of sacred scripture  
I shield the oranges from the sting of phosphorous  
and the shades of cloud from the smog.

I grant you refuge in knowing  
that the dust will clear,  
and they who fell in love and died together  
will one day laugh.

Thank you.