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## The Genocide that Changed the World

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The question of genocide will never be the same following the Israeli genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza, which is still ongoing after almost two years at the time of writing. This has had a global impact which far exceeds that of other recent cases, and represents a major change in the role of the phenomenon in the international system, with equally transformative significance for its academic study. This article examines the distinctive features of the Gaza case, its consequences and the issues of conceptualization that it poses. It contends that with Gaza, genocide has moved from the margins to the centre of world politics, so that the assumptions about how it can be prevented which prevailed in the previous period are no longer relevant. It also argues that the present conceptual state of the academic genocide studies field is no longer sustainable, and that scholars must revisit its foundations in order to adequately understand the new challenges. In particular, Gaza shows how, even when war and genocide are largely fused, distinct concepts of each are essential for understanding.

### The Genocidal Structure of Palestine and Recognition of the Gaza Genocide

Israel's genocide began as a "counter-genocide," in response to the "subaltern" genocidal massacres committed by Hamas on 7 October 2023,<sup>1</sup> but these themselves represented a dramatic activation of the genocidal structure that had been created in Palestine over the previous century.<sup>2</sup> The Zionist project of developing a Jewish state in the territory of Mandate Palestine, with its ideology of "transferring" Arab Palestinians to facilitate

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<sup>1</sup> For the term "counter-genocide," see René Lemarchand, "Genocide in the Great Lakes: Which Genocide? Whose Genocide?," *African Studies Review* 41, no. 1 (1998): 3–16. On "subaltern" genocide, see Adam Jones and Nicholas Robbins (eds), *Genocides by the Oppressed: Subaltern Genocide in Theory and Practice* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009). The term "genocidal massacres" was proposed by Leo Kuper, *Genocide* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980): 32, and amplifies the provision in the Genocide Convention that genocide may comprise the destruction of a group "in part." It has wide applicability to temporally and spatially limited episodes of mass killing, including within larger wars that are not genocidal in an overall sense: for another recent example, the killings by the Rapid Support Forces at Zamzam, Sudan, on 11 April 2025: see Mark Townsend, "They Slaughtered Us like Animals': The Inside Story of how one of the Biggest Atrocities of the Sudan War unfolded in Zamzam," *The Guardian*, 7 August 2025.

<sup>2</sup> On the eliminationist structure in Palestine, see Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409; on the Gaza genocide and this structure, Martin Shaw, *The New Age of Genocide: Intellectual and Political Challenges after Gaza* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Agenda, 2025), Chapters 5 and 6.

Jewish colonization and a Jewish-majority state, was incipiently genocidal, in so far as it envisaged destroying Palestinian society within the territory under Jewish control.<sup>3</sup> It created a potential for genocide, although there could have been other outcomes and the extent to and forms in which the elimination of Palestinian society was realized depended on contingent international developments, including the Nazi genocide of European Jews, as well as conflict in Palestine itself. Yet Israel had largely implemented this project before 2023: successive waves of expulsion destroyed Palestinian society in the majority of the territory, as the foundational genocidal event, the forced removal of 750,000 Palestinians during the Nakba of 1948,<sup>4</sup> was followed by the expulsion of a further 300,000 in the 1967 war,<sup>5</sup> and – over the 56 years before 2023 – persistent further removals from the areas occupied as a result of that war, which represented “slow-motion genocide.”<sup>6</sup>

The occupation led to Israel’s effective permanent annexation of East Jerusalem and much of the West Bank, the illegality of which the International Court of Justice has recently confirmed.<sup>7</sup> Although the state controlled, directly or (in Gaza) indirectly, millions of Palestinians in the occupied territories, it did not accord them formal citizenship status, since its overriding objective remained further removal. Thus, while greater Israel was an apartheid state, in the sense of fitting the definition of the 1973 UN Apartheid Convention, it differed from the South African original, which imposed inferior statuses on non-whites in a system of rule that was intended to be permanent. Instead, Israel’s apartheid exhibited a permanent logic of genocidal removal. In the West Bank and East Jerusalem, this was manifested in military and settler terror as well as “legal” dispossession and displacement<sup>8</sup>; in Gaza, it produced a harsh blockade and repeated, brutal mini-wars, in which Israel implemented its “Dahiyah” doctrine of “disproportionate” civilian harm.<sup>9</sup> These were rationalized in the notorious strategic euphemism, “mowing the grass,” which brings to mind the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman who noted the genocidal potential of the “gardening society” in his classic study of the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>3</sup> As Benny Morris argues in *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 43, for Zionists “the logic of a transfer solution to the ‘Arab problem’ remained ineluctable; without some sort of massive displacement of Arabs from the area of the Jewish state-to-be, there could be no viable Jewish state.” However, while Israeli-Palestinian relations therefore exhibit a structure of genocide, these relations have not been genocidal in each and every moment.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Shaw, “Palestine in an International Historical Perspective on Genocide,” *Holy Land Studies* 9, no. 1 (2010): 1–25, updated in Shaw, *The New Age of Genocide*, Chapter 6.

<sup>5</sup> Nur Masalha, *The Politics of Denial: Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (London: Pluto, 2003), 178–217.

<sup>6</sup> Steve Lendman, “Israel’s Slow-Motion Genocide in Occupied Palestine,” *The Plight of the Palestinians*, ed. W.A. Cook (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 29–38.

<sup>7</sup> International Court of Justice, *Legal Consequences Arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem* (The Hague: ICJ, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Israeli expropriations comply with the state’s own law, but its application to the occupied territories is part of an internationally illegal regime. They are also genocidal following Raphael Lemkin’s logic in *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (New York: Carnegie Foundation for International Peace, 1944), 79: “The confiscation of the property of nationals of an occupied area on the ground that they have left the country may be considered as a deprivation of their individual property rights. However, if the confiscations are ordered against individuals solely because they are Poles, Jews or Czechs, then the same confiscations tend in effect to weaken the national entities of which those persons are members.”

<sup>9</sup> Wendy Pearlman, “Collective Punishment in Gaza Will Not Bring Israel Security,” *New Lines*, 30 October 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Nadim Rouhana, “Mowing the Lawn: Lethal Metaphors in Israeli National Security Culture Pre-7 October,” *Journal of Genocide Research* (22 May 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2025.2506162>; Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), 91–2.

It was this genocidal structure of the Palestine conflict that Hamas effectively embraced when, together with other organizations, it killed and captured civilians in southern Israel, in an apparent attempt to break the control that Israel exercised through its blockade, force the release of Palestinians from its prisons, and disrupt its rapprochement with Arab states. It was clear to observers – and must have been to Hamas’ leadership – that it was overwhelmingly probable that the humiliation of the Israeli political elite, army and society represented by the mass murder of Israeli Jews would provoke an exponential escalation of the previous pattern of violence against Palestinians.<sup>11</sup>

This was quickly confirmed by the policies of destruction, killing and denial of the means of life that Israel implemented, as well as the threats of its leaders, so that its emerging genocide of the Palestinian population in Gaza was apparent within days of 7 October. The American Israeli Holocaust historian Raz Segal and I recognized it in separate articles published on 13 October 2023, whereas other scholars of genocide took longer to see it. American-Israeli Holocaust historian Omer Bartov would not do so until May 2024; he has recently written that “this was a painful conclusion to reach, and one I resisted as long as I could.”<sup>12</sup> He probably spoke for many, and indeed some who are blinded by allegiance to Israel are still resisting, but by mid-2024 many genocide scholars, including several Israelis, had analysed the state’s campaign in these terms.<sup>13</sup> Yet it was implausible to argue, as Bartov did, that Israel’s campaign only became fully genocidal during 2024: the violence was front-loaded, and analysis confirmed an exceptional rate of killing in the first month of the war.<sup>14</sup> Prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu admitted to Joe Biden that he had effectively chosen the nuclear option.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, the evidence of genocide accumulated so quickly in late 2023 that South Africa was soon preparing a historic case against Israel in the International Court of Justice, which it submitted on 28 December. The genocidal logic was so inescapable that weeks later, the Court delivered the first of three provisional measures rulings containing instructions to Israel, which recognized a “plausible risk” of prejudice to the rights of the Palestinians in Gaza under the Genocide Convention.<sup>16</sup> By the end of 2024, when Amnesty International published a comprehensively evidenced and legally argued case,<sup>17</sup> the consensus that Israel was committing genocide was becoming overwhelming. Around the same time, in November 2024, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants

<sup>11</sup> For this reason, I termed the Gaza genocide a “co-production” of Israel and Hamas: Martin Shaw, “Inescapably Genocidal,” *Journal of Genocide Research* (3 January 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2023.2300555>. For other examples of humiliation by surprise actions causing huge overreactions (although not genocide), consider George W. Bush’s launching of the “global war on terror” in response to 9/11 and Vladimir Putin’s annexation of Crimea in response to the overthrow of Ukraine’s pro-Russian president in 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Raz Segal, “A Textbook Case of Genocide,” *Jewish Currents*, 13 October 2023; Martin Shaw, “Israel, Gaza and the Spectre of Genocide,” *Byline Times*, 13 October 2023; Omer Bartov, “I’m a Genocide Scholar. I Know It When I See It,” *New York Times*, 15 July 2025.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Shmuel Lederman, “Gaza as a Laboratory 2.0,” *Journal of Genocide Research* (3 February 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2024.2309706>; Amos Goldberg, “Yes, it is Genocide,” 16 April 2024, <https://thepalestineproject.medium.com/yes-it-is-genocide-634a07ea27d4>; Omer Bartov, “As a Former IDF Soldier and Historian of Genocide, I Was Deeply Disturbed By My Recent Visit to Israel,” *The Guardian*, 13 August 2024; William Schabas, “A Strong Case that Israel’s Response Constitutes the Crime of Genocide,” *Der Spiegel*, 29 November 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Airwars, *Patterns of Harm Analysis: Gaza, October 2023* (Exeter: Airwars, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> “Biden Recalls Telling Netanyahu in October 2023: ‘You Can’t be Carpet-bombing these Communities,’” *Times of Israel*, 17 January 2025.

<sup>16</sup> International Court of Justice, *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel)* (The Hague: ICJ, 2024, 26 January).

<sup>17</sup> Amnesty International, “*You Feel Like You are Subhuman: Israel’s Genocide Against Palestinians in Gaza* (London: Amnesty International, 2024).

for crimes against humanity and war crimes against Netanyahu and his former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant. Although the prosecutor had not requested genocide charges, the court's statement used the holistic language which "genocide" entails, alleging that the multiple crimes charged were part of a single "widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population of Gaza."<sup>18</sup>

In 2025, genocide recognition has spread to much of the liberal press, and even pro-Israeli Western governments, while not recognizing genocide, now feel obliged to belatedly protest Israel's destruction of civilian life. However, none of this has made much difference to Israeli leaders, who have been emboldened to prepare new plans to solve the "problem" of the famished and brutalized Palestinian survivors, especially after the newly re-elected US President Donald Trump volunteered in February 2025 to take over Gaza. Indeed, planning to complete the genocide has been steadily internationalized – the UK's Tony Blair Institute was consulted on it<sup>19</sup> – while the repression of anti-genocide protest in the USA, Germany, the UK and other countries has only intensified; yet at the same time, Western public opinion is turning strongly against Israel. Israel thus appears to be succeeding, in both its genocide and the wider "sub-imperial" project of subduing the Middle East which the genocide has facilitated, but at huge cost to its global legitimacy and that of the West.<sup>20</sup>

## Character and Dynamics of the Gaza Genocide

The last two years have clarified the necessity of the idea of genocide in order to capture a project of group destruction like Israel's in Gaza. Israeli control over the Gaza Strip before October 2023 was starkly oppressive and involved a form of collective punishment, the permanent blockade, which controlled civilian existence even down to the average number of calories that people could consume.<sup>21</sup> As noted, this was enforced through periodic violent repression, which in its deliberate destruction of civilian neighbourhoods was already episodically genocidal. Yet within these parameters, Palestinians carried on a type of "normal" life, and after each episode of destruction and killing, restorative work took place. In this period, Israel's supporters rejected the charge that it was subjecting people in Gaza to conditions similar to those which the Nazis inflicted on Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto; while their response minimized Israeli cruelty, from an analytical viewpoint it can be conceded that the comparison was, before 2023, somewhat hyperbolic.

The tragic irony is that, after the last two years, this same idea has become entirely plausible. Daily life in Gaza has long become a desperate struggle, and in 2025, starving people seeking food have been repeatedly mown down by Israeli troops working with US contractors. Lemkin argued that Nazi Germany's occupations of European countries led in many cases to the extreme weakening of the conditions of life, so that "a daily fight literally for bread and for physical survival" would "handicap thinking in both general

<sup>18</sup> International Criminal Court, *Situation in the State of Palestine: ICC Pre-Trial Chamber I Rejects the State of Israel's Challenges to Jurisdiction and Issues Warrants of Arrest for Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant* (The Hague: ICC, 2024).

<sup>19</sup> Ben Quinn, "Tony Blair Thinktank Worked with Project Developing 'Trump Riviera' Gaza Plan," *The Guardian*, 7 July 2025.

<sup>20</sup> Adam Schatz, "The World since 7 October," *London Review of Books* 47, no. 13 (2025). For the idea of a state acting as a sub-imperial power under the aegis of a global empire, Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 282–4.

<sup>21</sup> Alex de Waal, "How to Measure Famine," *London Review of Books*, 6 February 2025.

and national terms” by the population.<sup>22</sup> He could have been describing Gaza, where masses of half-starved, orphaned and amputee children live amidst a shattered, homeless and desperately aid-dependent population, and Israel is trying to use this extreme brutalization to entirely destroy Palestinian national thinking and the remnants of a distinct Palestinian society.

In an overall characterization of the Gaza genocide, of course, the ghetto comparison is only suggestive. Nevertheless, it has been clear since October 2023 that Lemkin’s conclusion from his analysis, that genocide may involve the “crippling” as well as the total physical destruction of a society, is an essential starting-point for analysing Gaza. Genocide is “the criminal intent to destroy or *cripple permanently* a human group,” Lemkin wrote,<sup>23</sup> and the latter idea accurately captures Israel’s intent. Its actions therefore contravene Article II(c) of the Genocide Convention, adopted the year after Lemkin published this article, which reflect this aspect of his ideas, listing “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part” as a means of genocide. In 2023–24, Israeli leaders may also have wished to expel the Palestinian population from Gaza, but the opposition of Egypt, other Arab states and the Biden administration meant they lacked realistic ways of achieving this. What they could do, and were intent on accomplishing, was to use bombing and other military means to terrorize and dehouse the population, destroy the built and social infrastructure, and to restrict the supply of foodstuffs and other essential goods, to the point where the Palestinians were comprehensively physically and morally weakened.

These genocidal aims were substantially accomplished within the first few months, but now that Israel has conducted its remorseless violence against civilians for nearly two years, they have been achieved in a far more complete sense. Plans for the concentration of Palestinians in a giant camp complex within Gaza and for their expulsion (even to countries like Sudan and Ethiopia, in each of which genocide was being or had recently been committed) both emerged from late 2024. In 2025, a new plan has been proposed by defense minister Israel Katz, which combines these: a mega-concentration camp is envisaged as a holding pen from which, instead of being expelled *en masse*, individual Palestinians may be coerced to leave for third countries and prevented from returning.

This project would enable the realization of Trump’s scheme for a “Gaza Riviera,” in which Palestinian society would be erased, and in the minds of the perpetrators, the Gaza genocide would be complete, although the project of removing Palestinians from greater areas of the West Bank would remain. Yet in August 2025, it remains uncertain whether or how such schemes will be realized. In any case, the Gaza genocide will continue in the suffering and struggles of the survivors, as well as in global memory, where it will haunt Israel forever.

## The Perpetrator Bloc

Although the chief perpetrators of this genocide have been the Israeli government and the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), a larger array of forces, both within and beyond Israel,

<sup>22</sup> Lemkin, *Axis Rule*, 85.

<sup>23</sup> Raphael Lemkin, “Genocide as a Crime under International Law,” *American Journal of International Law* 41, no. 1 (1947): 145–51. Emphasis added. As we have seen, the “crippling” idea is present in *Axis Rule*, but in this article it becomes a key element of the definition.

has participated from the start. This should not be surprising; the idea of genocide as purely state-centric has long been discredited. Michael Mann argues that it typically involves a trinity of core actors: a radical party-state elite, paramilitaries, and core social constituencies.<sup>24</sup> Israel's case maps loosely on to this framework: Netanyahu's far-right coalition and the military; the people-in-arms in the IDF, the armed settlers in the West Bank and the far-right activists blocking aid; and a media-mobilized population which has been overwhelmingly supportive of the IDF's actions. Mann argues that murderous ethnic cleansing is "the dark side of democracy," and Israel's can even be considered a "democratic" genocide in this sense of actively involving Israeli Jewish society. Yet Israeli "democracy," always substantively confined to this section of the population, has become even less democratic since 2023, as repression of Palestinians and dissident Jews has increased (as Mann's model predicts will happen during genocide).

Moreover, the "perpetrator bloc" has extended, from the outset, far beyond Israel.<sup>25</sup> Without the instant and continuous political, military and economic support of the USA, Israel would have been simply unable to pursue its genocide. Indeed, almost all Western states quickly bought into the campaign, with some, especially Germany and the UK, providing key military and political support. Western civil society was also deeply involved, with media underreporting Israel's crimes, misinterpreting them as caused by war and/or Hamas, and magnifying Israeli and excluding Palestinian voices. State repression of pro-Palestinians was widespread, and social and cultural institutions, including universities, played a significant role in policing opinion, most fully in the USA and Germany.

Yet the dynamics of the bloc altered with Trump's return to power: the axis of perpetration shifted significantly towards the USA. Biden had simultaneously enabled and attempted (intermittently and weakly) to restrain Israel's genocide, but Trump proposed that the USA would become a direct participant with his project for completing it, definitively replacing Palestinian society in Gaza with a new US-Israeli society. Under Trump, too, US agencies participated directly in ousting international relief agencies and pushing the food and security crisis of Gazans to new depths of horror. This was now a fully "international" genocide: centred on a US-Israeli axis, but still also including most other Western states, which through both their own deep pro-Israeli commitments and their fear of Trump failed to break seriously with the US-Israel axis.

The Gaza genocide exhibited all three "elementary forms of denial," "literal," "interpretive," and "implicatory," identified by Stanley Cohen, the sociologist who wrote the classic study of denial after studying the treatment of Palestinians in Israeli detention at the end of the last century.<sup>26</sup> Two principal tropes were central to interpretive denial in the first stage of the Gaza genocide and its denial, binding Western elites tightly to Israel. First, the "anti-antisemitism" which pro-Israelis had propagated during the preceding decades (especially by institutionalizing the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance "working definition of antisemitism," which conflates anti-Zionism with

<sup>24</sup> Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>25</sup> Andrei Gomez-Suarez coined the term "perpetrator bloc" to analyse a multi-centric genocide: "Perpetrator Blocs, Genocidal Mentalities and Geographies: The Destruction of the Union Patriótica in Colombia and its Lessons for Genocide Studies," *Journal of Genocide Research* 9, no. 4 (2007): 637–60.

<sup>26</sup> Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).



antisemitism) was central to the responses of Western states, parties, media and institutions, enabling them to dismiss concern for Palestinian suffering. Second, the idea of “Israel’s right to self-defence” became a key means of justifying its atrocities, although in international law, this right does not apply in occupied territory, which Gaza remains.

In 2025, however, these ideological bulwarks of the perpetrator bloc have increasingly lost their effectiveness: “antisemitism” because the relatively minor threats to Western Jews from genuine antisemitism are obviously dwarfed by the scale of the suffering in Gaza; and “self-defence” because Israel’s campaign seems less directed against Hamas and little concerned with the Israeli hostages still held in the Gaza Strip, who have been harmed by the state’s determination to continue bombing. Although mainstream Western media outlets mostly persist in minimizing Israel’s atrocities, the idea of “genocide” has been more normalized and is widely understood by publics; substantial numbers agree that Israel is committing it.<sup>27</sup> Leaders in several states have responded to this situation with rhetorical criticisms of Israel, while continuing to provide practical support to Israel and intensifying anti-Palestinian repression; it remains to be seen if this balance can be sustained.

## The New Age of Genocide

From the point of view of the historical understanding of genocide, Gaza marks a major shift. In 2003, Samantha Power, in her influential study of “America in the age of genocide,” identified *non*-intervention to prevent genocide as the fundamental problem of US policy. For her, this was a structural issue: non-intervention was not the result of policy failure, because non-intervention was the policy.<sup>28</sup> This type of critique was widespread after the genocides in Bosnia in 1992–95, Rwanda in 1994 and Darfur in 2003–05. In response, demands were made for “humanitarian intervention” and for the adoption of a doctrine of the “responsibility to protect.” Power herself embodied this new policy thrust, heading the Obama administration’s new Atrocities Prevention Board from 2012–16.

This viewpoint was always problematic, because Western states often had more active complicity with genocide, and some cases of international intervention actually deepened this – for example, UN peacekeepers facilitated the Serbian massacres of Bosniaks at Srebrenica in 1995, the worst killings in Europe since 1945.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, as the “colonial turn” in genocide research emphasized, for centuries European empires had been the major sites of genocide, committed especially by colonial authorities and settlers, and doctrines of transgression and intervention derived from these imperial and colonial histories.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, there was a core truth in Power’s argument: in the late twentieth century, genocide was often committed by states and armed organizations that were not Western allies (such as Serbian nationalists), or if by actors that were (like their Croatian counterparts), their genocidal policies were not perceived as representing core Western interests.

<sup>27</sup> Even *The New York Times* has now carried a “genocide” op-ed by Omer Bartov. See note 12 above.

<sup>28</sup> Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America in the Age of Genocide* (London: Flamingo, 2003), xxi.

<sup>29</sup> Marlise Simons, “Dutch Peacekeepers Are Found Responsible for Deaths,” *New York Times*, 6 September 2013.

<sup>30</sup> A. Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).



Gaza marks the definitive end of this era, with its assumptions that genocides are committed by others, not the West, and that the problem is Western non-intervention. Of course, before 2023, 9/11 had already produced US-led interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 which were far from “humanitarian” (even if they incorporated some secondary humanitarian activities involving the UN and NGOs), and which produced new atrocities involving Western and allied forces. Some of these were arguably genocidal; the anthropologist Mahmoud Mamdani memorably asked why Darfur was named genocide, but Iraq was not.<sup>31</sup>

The Russian Federation’s attempt to destroy Ukraine as a distinct state and society in 2022 was also a genocidal project, leading to a return of the genocide debate and setting the stage for that over Gaza. Even if Russia was soon blocked militarily, it successfully destroyed many Ukrainian communities in the country’s southern and eastern regions, where it has consolidated a genocidal occupation.<sup>32</sup> Although this differed from Israel’s occupation in Palestine, both reflected the way Lemkin had outlined military occupation as an integral element in his 1944 conception of genocide: the occupier, after destroying the “national pattern” of the conquered, imposes that of the oppressor either on the population that remains, or on the territory alone, together with colonization by its own nationals.<sup>33</sup> The two occupiers both combined these options, but in different ways: Russia Russified the remaining population while forcing out the large part that was irredeemably Ukrainian; Israel, which believed that Palestinians could not be Judaized, ruled over the population of the West Bank while continuing its efforts to remove them. Both colonized.

Meanwhile, the Chinese regime was already at an advanced stage of its attempt to eliminate Uighur identity and culture in Xinjiang, as well as continuing its similar, long-standing, policy in Tibet, in each case involving extensive colonization.<sup>34</sup> With Trump’s embrace of the elimination of the Palestinians from Gaza, the leaders of all three major military powers, and key permanent members of the UN Security Council, displayed openly genocidal mentalities. Moreover, Xi Jinping supported Vladimir Putin’s campaign in Ukraine, while Trump also seemed prepared to facilitate its consolidation of its occupations.

Nor was the involvement of international leaders in genocide confined to these powers. While European leaders proclaimed their opposition to Russia’s attack on Ukraine, their support for Israel prevented them from pursuing consistent anti-genocidal policies. Similarly, some Global South leaders who opposed Israel were prepared to support Russia in Ukraine; even the Hague Group of states, brought together by South Africa and Colombia to uphold international law, restricted its focus to Israel’s actions in Palestine, and China attended its July 2025 meeting.

The proactive attitude of the ICC prosecutor, in bringing charges against a major Western ally for the first time, promised a broader approach to the enforcement of international law. However, it was immediately met with exceptional US hostility, leading in

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<sup>31</sup> Mahmoud Mamdani, “The Politics of Naming,” *London Review of Books* 29, no. 5 (2007): 5–8.

<sup>32</sup> David Lewis, *Occupation: Russian Rule in South-Eastern Ukraine* (London: Hurst, 2025), and Shaw, *The New Age of Genocide*, Chapter 4.

<sup>33</sup> Lemkin, *Axis Rule*, xi.

<sup>34</sup> Joanne Smith Finley, “Why Scholars and Activists Increasingly Fear a Uyghur Genocide in Xinjiang,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 23, no. 3 (2020): 348–70.

2025 to Trump's sanctions on the court and its officials, as well as on the UN rapporteur on human rights in occupied Palestine, Francesca Albanese. European states and other allies of the US and Israel were mostly muted in their support of the court, and several indicated that Netanyahu would be welcome in their countries despite his indictment – even as they excluded Putin for the same reason.<sup>35</sup> Gaza thus deeply compromised Europe's supposed commitment to international law.

The decisions of the International Court of Justice in the case brought by South Africa, with their provisional orders to Israel, also promised a more proactive legal attitude towards genocide. However, the judgements were "rhetorically strong but operationally weak,"<sup>36</sup> failing to directly challenge Israel's military rationale for its actions; and neither the court nor South Africa nor any other state has intervened further since May 2024, despite the intensification of Israel's starvation policies, the principal subject of the orders. The ICJ's final determination of South Africa's case may be years away and the court will be under strong pressure to maintain its previous narrow approach. Yet Amnesty International has joined legal commentators in carefully undermining restrictive readings of previous ICJ judgements,<sup>37</sup> and the extremity of Israel's policies may make it difficult for the court to avoid a genocide determination, even if this is too late to help the Palestinians in Gaza.

## The Return of the Idea of Genocide

Much commentary since October 2023 has been devoted to proving that Israel's actions in Gaza fit the legal definition of genocide, but it is striking that the idea has once again escaped legal bounds. Indeed, Lemkin's original interest in criminalizing the deliberate destruction of civilian groups was never purely legal: it has been traced also to his desire to find a legal method to replace violent revenge in achieving justice for the victims, following the 1927 trial of Shalom Schwarzbard, a Ukrainian Jew, for the murder of the nationalist Ukrainian leader, Symon Petliura, whom he held responsible for terrible programs in 1918 (Lemkin described the assassination as a "beautiful crime").<sup>38</sup> Lemkin's wartime search for a new word – his 1933 coinage, "barbarity,"<sup>39</sup> was not sufficient – was designed to find a term that would resonate with public opinion and policymakers as well as serve as the anchor for legislation. "Genocide," in other words, was never purely a technical legal term, and it is therefore wrong to treat it only as such, even in a court of law. Indeed, Lemkin himself developed it as a sociological and historical concept, and law needs, ultimately, to correspond to coherent sociological understanding.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> "Netanyahu can Attend Auschwitz Memorial Event, Poland's Tusk says," *Politico*, 10 January 2025.

<sup>36</sup> Nico Krisch, "Speaking the Law, Plausibly: The International Court of Justice on Gaza," EJIL: Talk!, blog of the *European Journal of International Law*, 27 January 2024.

<sup>37</sup> Amnesty International, "You Feel Like You are Subhuman," 101–5.

<sup>38</sup> Suren Manukyan, "A Beautiful Crime: Soghomon Tehlirian and the Birth of the Concept of Genocide," <https://evnreport.com/magazine-issues/a-beautiful-crime-soghomon-tehlirian-and-the-birth-of-the-concept-of-genocide> (2022).

<sup>39</sup> Raphael Lemkin, "Acts Constituting a General (Transnational) Danger Considered as Offences Against the Law of Nations," <http://www.preventgenocide.org/lemkin/madrid1933-english.htm> (1933).

<sup>40</sup> Raphael Lemkin, "Introduction to the Study of Genocide," in Lemkin, *Lemkin on Genocide: Introduction to the Study of Genocide and History of Genocide*, ed. Steven Jacobs (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012), 1–50.

Historian Donald Bloxham is thus wrong to claim that the argument about whether Gaza is genocide or not is “scholastic.”<sup>41</sup> While many in the scholarly community have made the accusation of genocide, and it was taken up effectively by South Africa’s lawyers, the principal demand for “genocide” recognition emerged in the streets, campuses and social media, where millions expressed their outrage at Israel’s campaign and their demands for it to end. For over half a century, the idea of genocide has performed this broad social and political function, which Lemkin and the drafters of the Genocide Convention would have recognized. “Genocide” can never be a neutral social or legal idea, and we should neither try to make it one, nor dispense with it. Rather, the social, historical, and legal sciences have to live with the fact that – as with many other important concepts – our ideas of genocide co-exist with popular understandings.

In this new context, the conceptual confusion around “genocide” that has existed in the field of Genocide Studies in recent decades is no longer sustainable. The idea was narrowed in the Genocide Convention, from Lemkin’s original broad conception of social and cultural destruction to one primarily defined by “physical” destruction, and often further narrowed by some genocide scholars so that to be accepted as genocides, episodes had to be seen as similar to the Holocaust.<sup>42</sup> The corollary of this “maximal standard” proved to be the adoption of what I have called the “minimal euphemism,” the idea of “ethnic cleansing.”<sup>43</sup> This was imported into international discourse from the Serbo-Croatian language during the Bosnian conflict of 1992–95, as a way of describing genocide in which the killing of a minority of a population group was used to forcibly remove the larger group from their homeland. This framework was also used to exclude the Zionist removal of Palestinians from the new state of Israel in 1948 from the scope of genocide – indeed it was not even widely described as “ethnic cleansing” until the present century.<sup>44</sup>

Gaza has exploded this conceptually inadequate binary along with the political ideas which underpin it. In Israel’s campaign, forced removal *within* the territory was from the start an essential method through which it crippled Palestinian life and society; forced removal *from* Gaza, always the clear preference of a large section of the Israeli elite, has increasingly become the perpetrators’ preferred way to complete the genocide. While forced removal can be identified as a distinct method in Israel’s campaign – alongside bombardment, starvation, incarceration, torture, rape, cultural destruction, and so on – no more than any of these other methods should it be categorically separated, as “ethnic cleansing,” from genocide. The sprawling conceptual apparatus in the study of mass violence, with its proliferation of “-cide” and other terms to describe different methods and target groups, seen as distinct from genocide itself, is brought into question by the ways in which different methods have been combined in Israel’s assault. In this sense, Gaza returns us to Lemkin’s original idea, in his analysis of the Nazi case, that genocide is intrinsically a multi-method attack.<sup>45</sup> However, if conceptual proliferation has

<sup>41</sup> Donald Bloxham, “The 7 October Atrocities and the Annihilation of Gaza: Causes and Responsibilities,” *Journal of Genocide Research* (18 March 2025): 15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2025.2483546>

<sup>42</sup> On the sociological incoherence of the idea of genocide as primarily “physical” destruction, see Martin Shaw, *What is Genocide?*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2015): 159–61.

<sup>43</sup> Shaw, *What is Genocide?*, 53–83.

<sup>44</sup> The critical historian Ilan Pappé still appeared to be making a radical terminological choice when he entitled his study of the Nakba *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), although this avoided the question of whether forced removal, in Bosnia itself as well as in Palestine, constituted genocide.

<sup>45</sup> Lemkin, *Axis Rule*, xi–xii.

been brought into question, so has the agnosticism about the conceptual question that is widely prevalent, leading scholars to put it aside or to opt for the UN definition, despite its generally acknowledged deficiencies, as a supposedly uncontroversial benchmark.

## War, Genocide, and Permanent Security

The new salience of “genocide” casts Dirk Moses’ discussion of the “problems of genocide” in a new light.<sup>46</sup> He argues that Lemkin’s combination of extermination and “crippling” was a political device to enable him to link Jewish victimization to that of other occupied peoples, which together with the compromises of the Genocide Convention created “conceptual instability,” indeed “inherent” instability, for the genocide idea.<sup>47</sup> Certainly, in the 1940s, Lemkin argued for “genocide” as part of a political project, and there are many problems with his discussion.<sup>48</sup> However, in contextualizing Lemkin’s political adaptations, Moses gives too little emphasis to the conceptual breakthrough which his 1933 rationale for a general idea of anti-civilian violence (although he did not yet call it “genocide”) represented, with its insistence on viewing crimes against civilians “as a whole” and not simply under the rubric of various war crimes.<sup>49</sup>

Today, Lemkin’s holistic approach continues to inform the case against Israel: it was echoed, we have seen, by the ICC when it issued its arrest warrants for Israeli leaders, and its language was mirrored almost exactly by Amnesty International when it charged Israel with genocide:

Viewed individually, the acts analysed in this report constitute serious violations of international humanitarian law and/or gross violations of human rights. Viewed holistically, a more disturbing picture emerges: the commission of prohibited acts under the Genocide Convention, including killing and causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of a protected group and deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.<sup>50</sup>

The question that remains is whether the “group” emphasis of “genocide” is the right frame for such a general concept of deliberate civilian destruction. Moses proposes its replacement by “permanent security,” and in new work, presents the debate about the Vietnam War, in which claims of genocide by Jean-Paul Sartre and others were not widely accepted even by critics of the war, as a precedent for that over Gaza, underlining the problematic nature of the concept.<sup>51</sup> However, the reluctance of Vietnam War critics to use the term is not mirrored in the thinking of opponents of Israel’s campaign today; certainly, there are those who continue to deny genocide, but they are chiefly defenders of Israel or those who wish to avoid acting against it.

Moses argues that the “novel nature of the Israeli campaign can call for a rethinking of the artificial binary between war and genocide,”<sup>52</sup> and, certainly, the Israeli campaign

<sup>46</sup> The following discussion draws on my critique of Moses’s arguments in *The New Age of Genocide*, Chapter 7.

<sup>47</sup> Moses, *The Problems of Genocide*, 238.

<sup>48</sup> See Shaw, *What is Genocide?*, 18–22, as well as Moses, *The Problems of Genocide*, 136–68.

<sup>49</sup> Lemkin, “Acts Constituting a General (Transnational) Danger;” Moses, *The Problems of Genocide*, 161–2, 173. This approach was continued in his 1944 analysis of the Nazi genocide as multi-method group destruction, and there is also an analytical coherence in his project of conceptualizing Nazi anti-population violence holistically.

<sup>50</sup> Amnesty International, “*You Feel Like You Are Subhuman*,” 279.

<sup>51</sup> A. Dirk Moses, “An Earlier Genocide Debate: Vietnam, International Law, and the Question of Gaza,” *Law and Critique* (11 July 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10978-025-09424-w>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

shows an unusually intimate relationship between the two.<sup>53</sup> The destruction of civilian society has been pursued largely through the same method (bombardment) used to attack Hamas, rather than through a bespoke anti-population campaign *within* the war as has often been typical. Yet while Israel's military and anti-population violence are largely fused in this way, it remains analytically important to recognize Israel's twin aims, its military objective of destroying Hamas and its genocidal objective of crippling or destroying Palestinian society in Gaza.

Within Israel's campaign, while "military" acts have been used simultaneously for genocidal purposes, others have been primarily genocidal, even if they had indirect military significance or were carried out on military pretexts: the destruction of hospitals, schools and cultural institutions, the killing of doctors and journalists, the torture and abuse of detainees, the targeting of children by snipers, and so on. Above all, Israel's starvation policy has stood out as a genocidal, anti-civilian policy. It is probably for this reason that it was prioritized in the ICC's charges and the ICJ's instructions, and why the international recognition of genocide accelerated in summer 2025 when unmistakable signs of starvation emerged in Gaza. However, there is something unsatisfactory about this late recognition of genocide through starvation, since the bombardment policy, protected as "military" in many minds, has actually been the main driver of genocide, causing far more death and destruction, and has enabled starvation by weakening the population.

Thus even in a situation where war and genocide are so intimately fused, there remains a conceptual logic in distinguishing the two, within a "war and genocide" perspective. Indeed, understanding their relationships requires a distinct concept of each. Generally, "genocide" distinguishes violent campaigns against civilian social groups not only from legitimate war, but also from "degenerate" war, in which deliberate civilian harm is systematically used in a primarily instrumental way to defeat armed enemies.<sup>54</sup> The US campaign in Vietnam is a good example of the latter: it certainly used methods comparable to Israel's today, and involved genocidal massacres, such as at Mỹ Lai. However, it lacked overall genocidal objectives: it targeted the Vietnamese population primarily as a means of defeating North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front, and did not seek to destroy Vietnamese society in general or eliminate a Vietnamese state as such, but to buttress anti-Communist South Vietnam.

In Gaza, by contrast, Israel's leaders have repeatedly insisted, from October 2023, that the Palestinians as such, as well as Hamas, are the enemy to be destroyed; their comments were quoted at length by the ICJ when it made its first judgment in January 2024, and were catalogued in December of that year by Amnesty International; they continue to this day.<sup>55</sup> With its technological sophistication and understanding of IHL, Israel could have pursued a targeted (even if still internationally illegal) offensive against Hamas<sup>56</sup>;

<sup>53</sup> I develop this case further in *The New Age of Genocide*, Chapter 5.

<sup>54</sup> Martin Shaw, *War and Genocide: Organized Killing in Modern Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 41–60, and "The General Hybridity of War and Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 9, no. 3 (2006): 461–73.

<sup>55</sup> Amnesty International, "You Feel Like You are a Subhuman," 241–77. These overwhelming public expressions of genocidal intent are ignored by Jeffrey Herf, "The Genocide Accusation and Hamas's Disappearing Responsibility," *Times of Israel*, 20 July 2025, even as he charges Hamas with the same intent.

<sup>56</sup> The justification of self-defence permitted by the UN Charter applies only to attacks by other states, not against resistance to an illegal occupation. Israel could, of course, have defended itself against Hamas's incursions, but almost all its units were concentrated in the West Bank, supporting settler violence, with little protection for southern Israel.

but it chose instead to loosen further the already elastic “Dahiyah” tactical norms so as to allow it to use large numbers of 2000 lb. bombs against densely-inhabited civilian areas. This can only have reflected a strategic decision to pulverise the population and its environment, confirming that the genocidal rhetoric actually informed the conduct of the campaign.<sup>57</sup>

This may initially have been a revenge genocide, but as it became sustained policy, it became clear that Israel was taking the opportunity to escalate its century-old eliminationist project vis-a-vis Palestinian society, including the prevention of a Palestinian state, as many statements by ministers indicated. These aims have been largely pursued though the anti-Hamas war, with “permanent security” justifications leading to the “systematic, methodical annihilation of every neighborhood,” as an Israeli commander boasted of Beir Hanoun in 2025,<sup>58</sup> but the emerging end-game of concentration camps and expulsion shows that a purer genocidal project of destroying Gazan society may be overtaking this.

Comparing Israel’s campaign in Gaza with its June 2025 war on Iran also shows the continuing relevance of the war-genocide distinction, even as the two concepts are used in tandem and Moses’s idea of “permanent security” is used to explain Israel’s actions. Israel’s leaders have articulated permanent security rationales for aggression against *both* societal *and* military enemies, but each has taken a distinct form. Israel has aimed to cripple Gazan society, partly to prevent new generations of Palestinians from emerging to challenge its rule. But against Iran, too, it has also deployed a permanent security logic: it has aimed not just to defend itself, but also to “pre-emptively” destroy (in reality, neuter) the latter’s civilian and putative military nuclear program. The two Israeli campaigns show some similar methods: the Gaza genocide has been carried out under the aegis of its war against Hamas, while against Iran, Israel has targeted civilian neighbourhoods and terrorized the population of Tehran, as it has also done in parts of Lebanon and Syria. Yet the campaign to eliminate Palestinian society in Gaza, extended into major areas of the West Bank, is *overall* of a different character to these wars outside Palestine.

These cases therefore support the argument that “permanent security,” rather than replacing “genocide,” should be reworked as a broad hypothesis for explaining genocide *and* war. Genocide is certainly a complex and difficult concept; but so are all the main ideas of socio-historical knowledge. It does not follow that because inherited understandings are unstable, “genocide” cannot be made coherent. Rather, we should pay more attention to how “war” has become *increasingly* unstable due to the increasing centrality of civilian harm to its understanding. The idea of legitimate war traditionally centred on the primacy of contests between states and armies, but has been fundamentally compromised over the last century by the systematic character of its civilian harm, which has become “ever more brutal.”<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Francesca Albanese, *Anatomy of a Genocide* (New York: UN General Assembly, 2024) shows that instead of abiding by IHL, Israel used it as “humanitarian camouflage” for its violations; Mayaan Geva, *Law, Politics and Violence in Israel/Palestine* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) had already shown that the purpose of the International Law Department of the IDF was to enable, rather than to contain the military’s violence.

<sup>58</sup> Younis Tirawi, “Senior Israeli Commanders Openly Contradict Netanyahu Claim on Gaza Destruction,” *Drop Site*, 10 August 2025, <https://www.dropsiteneews.com/p/senior-israeli-commanders-openly>.

<sup>59</sup> Siniša Malešević and Lea David, “Organized Callousness: Gaza and the Sociology of War,” *Journal of Genocide Research* (11 May 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2025.250356>.

The growing salience of the idea of the civilian and the development of moral and legal doctrines surrounding this – of which “genocide” is one expression – have constantly brought war’s social legitimacy into question. Attempts to counter this trend have often legitimated large-scale civilian harm by breaching widely accepted moral and legal limits, as in Michael Walzer’s doctrine of “supreme emergency” to justify Allied bombing in the Second World War, as well as the attempts to justify US policy in Vietnam that Moses documents.<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, “war,” not “genocide,” is the imperial concept that lacks clothes.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that Israel’s genocide in Gaza has changed the world. Certainly, its occurrence and course have depended on pre-existing structural, as well as contingent historical, factors. 7 October 2023 was a product of the structure of genocide in Palestine as well as its embrace by Hamas; US and Western participation in the genocide depended on deep structures of political and military alliance with Israel, which had long been cemented in strategic and economic relations as well as through ideas of Holocaust uniqueness and anti-antisemitism.<sup>61</sup> These linkages integrated Israel into Western economic, technological, and ideological systems, enabling its advanced military to pursue genocide and war with twenty-first century tools, through the use of Artificial Intelligence to identify Palestinian “enemies” as well as of F-35s to blow up civilian communities. And, of course, both the Israeli government and the returning Trump administration are part of the global new far right, and this trend is part of a wider return of authoritarianism.

Yet, as this Roundtable testifies, the Gaza genocide is a fundamental historical event. It has crystallized all these trends in new ways, and challenges all the old certainties, including those of our fields of study. While the fate awaiting Palestinians in Gaza remains almost unimaginably grim and the Israeli threat to the rest of Palestine and the surrounding peoples has dramatically increased, it might seem foolish to emphasize the positives. But at the same time, Gaza has also shown the extraordinary resilience of the Palestinians, and Israel has not had everything its own way. It hoped to seal the strip by excluding global media, but Gaza’s citizens have used mobile phones to record genocide in real time, making this “the first live-streamed genocide.” Gaza has become the cause of the young in the 2020s, as Vietnam was for my generation in the late 1960s.

Within our field, the taboo on using “genocide” to analyse Palestine over the *longue durée*, which has existed since its inception, has been broken. Omer Bartov must forgive me for quoting once again his riposte in 2010 to my analysis of the Nakba in a genocide perspective: he claimed that “the argument of Israeli genocide of the Palestinians is clearly meant to delegitimize the state and to say that it was born in the blood of innocents and should therefore also go down in blood”; it meant telling Israelis that “they have no right to exist” (I protested that I had no such intention).<sup>62</sup> In 2025, not

<sup>60</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 255–68.

<sup>61</sup> James Renton, “Holocaust Memory and the Universal Sovereignty of the Liberal Democratic State,” *Journal of Genocide Research* (12 February 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462.3528.2025.2517848>.

<sup>62</sup> Martin Shaw and Omer Bartov, “The Question of Genocide in Palestine, 1948: An Exchange between Martin Shaw and Omer Bartov,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 12, nos. 3–4 (2010): 259.



only has Bartov himself recognized that Israel is committing genocide, but it is clear that if anyone is delegitimizing the state, it is its own leaders and armed forces, not its critics.

It is to be hoped that some of these changes will shorten the suffering of the people in Gaza, and in the medium term, contribute to a just and peaceful settlement in the whole of Palestine. At the same time, the historical clarification of the problem of genocide which Gaza has enabled may help scholars to contribute to sharper critiques of political practice as well as explorations of historical phenomena.

### Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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