

Death and Destruction in Gaza: “Have You No Decency?” Prof. John J. Mearsheimer

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I do not believe that anything I say about what is happening in Gaza will affect Israeli or American policy in that conflict. But I want to be on record so that when historians look back on this moral calamity, they will see that some Americans were on the right side of history.

What Israel is doing in Gaza to the Palestinian civilian population – with the support of the Biden administration – is a crime against humanity that serves no meaningful military purpose. As J-Street, an important organization in the Israel lobby, puts it,

“The scope of the unfolding humanitarian disaster and civilian casualties is nearly unfathomable.”^[1]

Let me elaborate.



Featured image: US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin (L) and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant meet in Brussels on June 15, 2023. (Photo Credit Elad Malcha/Defense Ministry)

First, Israel is purposely massacring huge number of civilians, roughly 70 percent of whom are children and women. The claim that Israel is going to great lengths to minimize civilian casualties is belied by statements from high level Israeli officials. For example, the IDF spokesman said on 10 October 2023 that “the emphasis is on damage and not on accuracy.” That same day, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant announced:

“I have lowered all the restraints – we will kill everyone we fight against; we will use every means.”^[2]

Moreover, it is clear from the results of the bombing campaign that Israel is indiscriminately killing civilians. Two detailed studies of the IDF’s bombing campaign – both published in Israeli outlets – explain in detail how Israel is murdering huge numbers of civilians. It is worth quoting the titles of the two pieces, which succinctly capture what each has to say:

“‘A Mass Assassination Factory’: Inside Israel’s Calculated Bombing of Gaza”^[3]

“The Israeli Army Has Dropped the Restraint in Gaza, and the Data Shows Unprecedented Killing.”^[4]

Similarly, the *New York Times* published an article in late November 2023 titled: “Gaza Civilians, Under Israeli Barrage, Are Being Killed at Historic Pace.”^[5] Thus, it is hardly surprising that the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, said that

“We are witnessing a killing of civilians that is unparalleled and unprecedented in any conflict since” his appointment in January 2017.^[6]

Second, Israel is purposely starving the desperate Palestinian population by greatly limiting the amount of food, fuel, cooking gas, medicine, and water that can be brought into Gaza. Moreover, medical care is extremely hard to come by for a population that now includes approximately 50,000 wounded civilians. Not only has Israel greatly limited the supply of fuel into Gaza, which hospitals need to function, but it has targeted hospitals, ambulances, and first aid stations.

Defense Minister Gallant's comment on 9 October captures Israeli policy:

"I have ordered a complete siege on the Gaza Strip. There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed. We are fighting human animals, and we are acting accordingly." [7]

Israel has been forced to allow minimal supplies into Gaza, but the amounts are so small that a senior UN official reports that "half of Gaza's population is starving." He goes on to report that, "Nine out of 10 families in some areas are spending 'a full day and night without any food at all'." [8]

Third, Israeli leaders talk about Palestinians and what they would like to do in Gaza in shocking terms, especially when you consider that some of these leaders also talk incessantly about the horrors of the Holocaust. Indeed, their rhetoric has led Omar Bartov, a prominent Israeli-born scholar of the Holocaust, to conclude that Israel has "genocidal intent." [9] Other scholars in Holocaust and genocide studies have offered a similar warning. [10]

To be more specific, it is commonplace for Israeli leaders to refer to Palestinians as "human animals," "human beasts," and "horrible inhuman animals." [11] And as Israeli President Isaac Herzog makes clear, those leaders are referring to all Palestinians, not just Hamas: In his words,

"It is an entire nation out there that is responsible." [12]

Unsurprisingly, as the *New York Times* reports, it is part of normal Israeli discourse to call for Gaza to be "flattened," "erased," or "destroyed." [13] One retired IDF general, who proclaimed that

"Gaza will become a place where no human being can exist," also makes the case that "severe epidemics in the south of the Gaza Strip will bring victory closer." [14]

Going even further, a minister in the Israeli government suggested dropping a nuclear weapon on Gaza. [15] These statements are not being made by isolated extremists, but by senior members of Israel's government.

Of course, there is also much talk of ethnically cleansing Gaza (and the West Bank), in effect, producing another Nakba. [16] To quote Israel's Agriculture Minister,

"We are now rolling out the Gaza Nakba." [17]

Perhaps the most shocking evidence of the depths to which Israeli society has sunk is a video of very young children singing a blood-curdling song celebrating Israel's destruction of Gaza:

"Within a year we will annihilate everyone, and then we will return to plow our fields." [18]



Fourth, Israel is not just killing, wounding, and starving huge numbers of Palestinians, it is also systematically destroying their homes as well as critical infrastructure – to include mosques, schools, heritage sites, libraries, key government buildings, and hospitals.^[19] As of 1 December 2023, the IDF had damaged or destroyed almost 100,000 buildings, including entire neighborhoods that have been reduced to rubble.^[20] Consequently, a stunning 90 percent of Gaza’s 2.3 million Palestinians have been displaced from their homes.^[21] Moreover, Israel is making a concerted effort to destroy Gaza’s cultural heritage; as NPR reports, “more than 100 Gaza heritage sites have been damaged or destroyed by Israeli attacks.”^[22]

Fifth, Israel is not just terrorizing and killing Palestinians, it is also publicly humiliating many of their men who have been rounded up by the IDF in routine searches. Israeli soldiers strip them down to their underwear, blindfold them, and display them in a public way in their neighborhoods – sitting them down in large groups in the middle of the street, for example, or parading them through the streets – before taking them away in trucks to detention camps. In most cases, the detainees are then released as they are not Hamas fighters.^[23]



President Joe Biden participates in a restricted bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the Hotel Kempinski in Tel Aviv, Israel, Wednesday, October 18, 2023. (Official White House Photo by Cameron Smith)

Sixth, although the Israelis are doing the slaughtering, they could not do it without the Biden administration's support. Not only was the United States the only country to vote against a recent UN Security Council resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, but it has also been providing Israel with the weaponry necessary to wage this massacre.^[24] As one Israeli general (Yitzhak Brick) recently made clear:

"All of our missiles, the ammunition, the precision-guided bombs, all the airplanes and bombs, it's all from the U.S. The minute they turn off the tap, you can't keep fighting. You have no capability.... Everyone understands that we can't fight this war without the United States. Period."^[25]

Remarkably, the Biden administration has sought to expedite sending Israel additional ammunition, by-passing the normal procedures of the Arms Export Control Act.^[26]

Seventh, while most of the focus is now on Gaza, it is important not to lose sight of what is simultaneously going on in the West Bank. Israeli settlers, working closely with the IDF, continue to kill innocent Palestinians and steal their land. In an excellent article in the *New York Review of Books* describing these horrors, David Shulman relates a conversation he had with a settler, which clearly reflects the moral dimension of Israeli behavior toward the Palestinians.

"What we are doing to these people is actually inhuman," the settler freely admits, "But if you think about it clearly, it all follows inevitably from the fact that God promised this land to the Jews, and only to them."^[27]

Along with its assault on Gaza, the Israel government has markedly increased the number of arbitrary arrests in the West Bank. According to Amnesty International, there is considerable

evidence that these prisoners have been tortured and subjected to degrading treatment.^[28]

As I watch this catastrophe for the Palestinians unfold, I am left with one simple question for Israel's leaders, their American defenders, and the Biden administration: have you no decency?

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Notes

^[1] <https://jstreet.org/press-releases/moment-of-truth-for-israels-government/>

^[2] Both quotes can be found in:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-09/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/the-israeli-army-has-dropped-the-restraint-in-gaza-and-data-shows-unprecedented-killing/0000018c-4cca-db23-ad9f-6cdae8ad0000>

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^[4]

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-09/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/the-israeli-army-has-dropped-the-restraint-in-gaza-and-data-shows-unprecedented-killing/0000018c-4cca-db23-ad9f-6cdae8ad0000>

^[5] <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/25/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-death-toll.html>

^[6]

<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/press-encounter/2023-11-20/secretary-generals-press-conference-unep-emissions-gap-report-launch>

^[7]

https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/defense-minister-announces-complete-siege-of-gaza-no-power-food-or-fuel/

^[8] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67670679>

Also see:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/11/opinion/international-world/us-government-gaza-humanitarian-aid.html>

^[9] <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/10/opinion/israel-gaza-genocide-war.html>

Also see:

<https://www.nybooks.com/online/2023/11/20/an-open-letter-on-the-misuse-of-holocaust-memory/>

[10] <https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/global-currents/statement-of-scholars-7-october/>

[11] <https://youtu.be/Fr24GcCDgyM>

[12]

<https://news.yahoo.com/israeli-president-says-no-innocent-154330724.html#:~:text=“It%20is%20an%20entire%20nation,It%27s%20absolutely%20not%20true.>

[13] <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/15/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-war-rhetoric.html>

[14] <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/10/opinion/israel-gaza-genocide-war.html>

<https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2023-11-23/ty-article-opinion/.premium/giora-eilands-monstrous-gaza-proposal-is-evil-in-plain-sight/0000018b-f84b-d473-affb-f9eb09af0000>

<https://mondoweiss.net/2023/11/influentia-israeli-national-security-leader-makes-the-case-for-genocide-in-gaza/>

[15]

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/far-right-minister-says-nuking-gaza-an-option-pm-suspends-him-from-cabinet-meetings/>

[16]

<https://mondoweiss.net/2023/10/israeli-think-tank-lays-out-a-blueprint-for-the-complete-ethnic-cleansing-of-gaza/>

[17]

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-12/ty-article/israeli-security-cabinet-member-calls-north-gaza-evacuation-nakba-2023/0000018b-c2be-dea2-a9bf-d2be7b670000>

[18]

<https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/watch-israeli-children-sing-we-will-annihilate-everyone-gaza>

[19] <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-gaza-public-library-destroyed-bombing>

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231211-report-israel-destroyed-192-mosques-in-gaza-strip/>

<https://www.npr.org/2023/12/09/1218384968/mosque-gaza-omari-israel-hamas-war>

[20] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67565872#>

[21] <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/israel-gaza-attacks-north-south-us-veto-un-ceasefire-resolution/>

[22] <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/03/1216200754/gaza-heritage-sites-destroyed-israel>

[23]

<https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israel-says-groups-of-hamas-militants-surrendered-amid-gaza-fighting-7891bc22>

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<https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-vetoes-un-security-council-resolution-demanding-immediate-gaza-ceasefire/>

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<https://www.jns.org/biden-is-the-primary-obstacle-to-israeli-victory/>

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/09/world/middleeast/us-israel-tanks-ammunition.html>

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<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2023/12/21/a-bitter-season-in-the-west-bank-david-shulman/>

[28]

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/israel-opt-horrifying-cases-of-torture-and-degrading-treatment-of-palestinian-detainees-amid-spike-in-arbitrary-arrests/>

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