

Israel's Gaza Campaign Is the Gravest Moral Crisis of Our Time

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I write this essay as a senior American Buddhist monk of Jewish ethnicity who has been deeply distressed by Israel's military assault on the population of [Gaza](#). I see this campaign as perhaps the gravest moral crisis of our time. The blistering bombardments, the ever-mounting death toll, the deadly blockade of vital essentials, the annihilation of innocent human lives—all these events sear the moral consciousness like a red-hot iron and demand a loud shout from the depths of the soul: "For God's sake, stop it!" Indeed, in its own discreet tones, the International Court of Justice has issued such a shout, yet it seems to have fallen on deaf ears.

Given the many instances of sheer inhumanity unfolding over just two decades—in Iraq, Syria, Tigray, Myanmar, and Ukraine—why should I highlight Gaza as the major moral calamity of our time? I will lay down five reasons this is the case.

The first concerns *the sheer intensity* of the assault. Arif Husain, the chief economist at the United Nation's World Food Program, bears testimony to this with [his remark](#):

"I've been doing this for the past two decades, and I've been to all kinds of conflicts and all kinds of crises. And, for me, this is unprecedented because of, one, the magnitude, the scale, the entire population of a particular place; second, the severity; and third, the speed at which this is happening, at which this has unfolded."

The figures representing deaths, injuries, and destruction in Gaza bear out Husain's words. We are told that 70% of the victims are women and children; that doctors, medical staff, journalists, and university professors are being targeted; that all of Gaza has become a death camp where no one is safe anywhere. We learn of whole families being liquidated at the drop of a bomb, three generations wiped out in an instant; of kids losing their parents

and all their siblings, left with no surviving family members in the world; of hospitals being shuttered and their patients forced to walk miles to designated safety zones, only to be hit by sniper fire en route or struck by rockets when they arrive.

On top of the deaths, injuries, and demolitions directly caused by the bombardments, Israel's near-total blockade of vital essentials—food, water, fuel, and medicines—drives the spike of suffering even more deeply into the hearts of Gaza's population, subjecting displaced people to extremes of hunger, thirst, and infectious disease. Now that the major Western donors are suspending their funding of UNRWA, the U.N. relief agency for Palestinian refugees, the very lifeline for the people of Gaza is being cut. Like a ravenous hawk, famine hovers just above the strip, ready to strike.

The second factor that underscores the moral gravity of the crisis in Gaza is *its visibility, its living immediacy*. Unlike the Nazi Holocaust and other war crimes—including Russia's blood-curdling operations in Ukraine—the genocide in Gaza unfolds live on our television and computer screens, right before our eyes. The images jump out from the screen and beg us to act: children with amputated limbs, their bodies torn and broken; babies abandoned in powerless incubators; apartment buildings and universities collapsing like decks of cards; historic churches and mosques destroyed beyond repair; refugees crammed into infested camps, crying out for water and food; corpses thrown into mass graves; captives blindfolded and stripped naked, paraded like cattle through desolate streets.

Such images make all our normal activities—chatting with friends, going out for a meal, joining a family gathering, going to a concert—seem insipid, hollow, and pointless. Once we bear witness to these horrific crimes, we feel a heavy moral responsibility has fallen on our shoulders, a burden we can't shake off by claiming these atrocities don't concern us. The burden is painful, but also exhilarating in reminding us of our capacity for empathy.

A third factor that heightens the moral gravity of the Gaza crisis derives from the fact that it is *the state of Israel*, the self-declared national home of the Jewish people, that is inflicting all this suffering, anguish, and death on Gaza. Yes, we do hold Israel to a higher moral bar than we do most other nations, but not from anti-Jewish bias. We do so because the Jews are the ethnic group that experienced the horror of the Holocaust and would should therefore be the most vigilant defenders of the inviolable right of people to be free from ethnic persecution.

The vow "Never again," as understood by Jews of conscience, means *never again for anyone*. Yet, instead of showing empathy, Israel is now using the past trauma of the Holocaust—and the guilt of the countries that inflicted that trauma—as a shield to silence criticism and maintain its impunity. It's as if they are saying to the world, "You can't touch us because you bear the guilt for our past suffering."

The fourth way in which the crisis in Gaza bears moral weight relates specifically to us here in the United States. Our country is complicit in Israel's crimes. With our own tax dollars, we fund Israel's military, supplying it with the most advanced weaponry available. We give Israel diplomatic cover at the U.N. through our use of the veto. And we give Israel moral cover by echoing the messages of its propaganda machine at press conferences and international gatherings, while tarring those who criticize its actions.

When all the moral dimensions of the situation in Gaza are viewed together—the sheer

volume of indiscriminate killing; the fact that the devastation is starkly visible to us through the media; the fact that the operation is being carried out by the state representing the Jewish people, the historic victims of persecution and genocide; and the complicity of the United States—they point to the fifth reason this is a deeply moral crisis. Taken conjointly, *all these factors shatter the moral framework offered to us as the key for understanding our world.*

For decades, the major Western powers have presented themselves as the bulwarks of the rules-based international order, the defenders of human rights and decent human morality. Yet now, under the shallowest of pretexts, they throw their weight behind Israel, even when the World Court designates its operations a “plausible genocide.” This unwavering loyalty to a nation that flouts international law overturns the moral lens through which we’ve been taught to view the global order. Now the masks come off, exposing the hypocrisy of the major Western powers hidden behind their polished exteriors.

The crisis in Gaza shows those nations that should be defending international law and humanitarian values to be openly betraying their commitments. Their moral bankruptcy couldn’t be more glaring. They advise Israel to carry out its operations in accordance with international law, but continue to provide it with weapons even when it breaks those laws. They say they favor peace, but at the U.N. Security Council they veto or abstain from resolutions calling for a humanitarian cease-fire. They say they are opposed to genocide, but dispute South Africa’s case at the World Court. They say that Israel should treat prisoners humanely, but turn a blind eye when it tortures, humiliates, and even executes them.

Since we, as Americans, are citizens of the nation foremost in shielding Israel from accountability, this places on us the moral burden of opposing our country’s policies. Given this responsibility, how can we keep silent? There is simply no excuse for standing speechless on the sidelines. We can’t let silence reign as the final word. We can’t let silence replace the word. Since the U.S. government represents us, as Americans we must boldly speak up and oppose its support for Israel’s operations.

The plain fact is that the key to a solution lies in the hands of the U.S. Only if the U.S. applies tough economic and political pressure on Israel can the conflict be justly resolved. And crucially, a just resolution would also serve Israel’s long-term interest, finally permitting it to live at peace with a free Palestinian state, for the mutual benefit of both nations.

Every voice counts, and we can do our share in a variety of ways: by joining marches, writing to the White House and our representatives in Congress, posting relevant news articles and commentary on our social media platforms, writing articles, and talking with friends. It’s not enough to post bromides on social media about love and peace or to pin doves and hearts to our profiles. To fulfill our duty as moral beings, we need to actively express our solidarity with the besieged Palestinians who can’t speak for themselves. And that means, for a starter, *calling for a complete cease-fire*. Not just for “peace,” but for a *real, complete, monitored cease-fire*.

But a cease-fire is only the first step. Beyond stopping the present round of destruction, we should also demand a genuine, sincere, concerted attempt to finally fulfill the aspirations of the Palestinian people for a fully sovereign state of their own, which will also be the precious key to Israel’s security. The road to a solution of this long-standing problem will be rocky and hard, but we need to join voices and hands with the many others calling for the first

steps to be taken—and to be taken now.

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Featured image: The bodies of 30 Palestinians were discovered under a mound of rubble at the grounds of the Khalifa bin Zayed elementary school in Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip on 31 January 2024 (Supplied to MEE)

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