

Why Palestine Matters

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Why does Palestine matter? It's a question I ask myself nearly every day. Another way to put it is, "Is the devotion of major attention to the plight of the Palestinians an obsession worthy of suspicion or an appropriate response to a grave historic and continuing injustice?"

No one will be surprised when I reply that major attention is an appropriate response. Palestine matters and should matter. I will try to explain why.

First, perhaps most basically, the sheer cruelty — the scope of the violation of human, i.e., natural individual, rights — of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians warrants the concern of all who favor freedom and other (classical) liberal values: justice, social cooperation, free exchange, and peace.

Let's start with the Occupied Palestinian Territories. As B'Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, [says](#) front and center on its website:

"Israel's regime of occupation is inextricably bound up in human rights violations."

No one who sheds the blinders of the Official Narrative can help but feel pain over the institutional barriers to normal life, not to mention the literal destruction of life, that are regular features of Israel's rule in the West Bank (with nearly 3 million Palestinians), East Jerusalem (over 300,000), and Gaza Strip (nearly 2 million). It is no exaggeration to describe the system as an instance of apartheid, which is the word used by [Israeli human-rights organizations](#) and [former government officials](#). (Then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin used the word in a [warning](#) as far back as 1976. So did Israel's first prime minister, [David Ben-Gurion](#), when he was out of office after the 1967 war.)

The West Bank and East Jerusalem

The Palestinians in the first two places have lived under harsh military rule for over half a century. This rule consists of "low-level" repression such as checkpoints (even for ambulances), travel permits, and Jewish-only roads that subject Palestinians to daily humiliation, disruption, and the arbitrary whim of soldiers charged with the task of controlling an occupied population.

Imagine trying to live a normal life — making a living, caring for your children — when you don't know how long you will be delayed en route from Point A to Point B because you are stopped, questioned, and searched by unaccountable, heavily armed government officers

who don't like you because of your race, ethnicity, or religion or who are suspicious of people who naturally resent being dominated. Imagine, further, a life of poverty in which water (in the arid Middle East!), electricity, and education are scarce and unreliable simply because the government providers of those services favor subsidized, comfortable Jewish settlers (many from America) living nearby. The juxtaposition of water shortages for Palestinians with swimming pools for Jews is too obvious an outrage to require comment.

This daily mistreatment is frequently accentuated by outright violence at the hands of the military rulers: bone-breaking beatings, torture, killings, house demolitions for reasons of collective punishment and ethnic cleansing, indefinite detention without charge or trial, and the like. These measures are intensified whenever Palestinians stage largely nonviolent *intifadas* (uprisings) and mass civil disobedience. Any of this would be regarded (one hopes) as intolerable in America or anywhere else in the West.

Add to this Israel's continuing *de facto* annexation of the West Bank (East Jerusalem has been annexed *de jure*) through the expansion of illegal (by international law) Jewish-only settlements and a wall that snakes through the West Bank, isolating Palestinian towns, separating communities from each other and their farmland, and making a mockery of the "two-state solution." (Not that Israel's leaders ever intended to vacate the lands conquered in 1967 during an expansionist war of choice against four Arab nations during which the Israeli air force also [attacked](#) the US intelligence ship *USS Liberty*, killing 34 sailors and wounding more than 170.)

The Gaza Strip



Great March of Return (Source: Green Left Weekly)

But that horror doesn't begin to describe how the nearly two million people, more than half of them children, in the densely populated Gaza Strip live every day. Their territory has been described — even by Israelis — as an open-air prison. Israel's defenders claim that the Jewish State "withdrew" from Gaza more than a decade ago without any resulting peace dividend, but this is misleading. Yes, the military left, and the settlers went with them. But that is like cheering guards for withdrawing from a prison to positions just outside the walls.

Under the decade-old blockade the state determines who and what can enter and leave Gaza. As Norman Finkelstein [points out](#) in his exhaustive research on Gaza, even toys, chocolate, and potato chips are barred. Drinking water is contaminated because of the blockade on items needed to repair facilities destroyed by the Israeli military.

Palestinians who get too close to the fence along the Gaza-Israel border risk being shot by soldiers. Peaceful demonstrators far from the fence face the same risk. Israel controls Gaza's Mediterranean coast as well, including the crucial ability to fish beyond a certain point. Closer in the fish are likely to be contaminated by sewage for the reason noted above.

This daily hardship (to use a grossly mild noun) is underscored by periodic massacres — indistinguishable from terrorism according to international law — committed by Israeli warplanes, drones, and ground troops, incredibly brutal assaults that have left many civilians (including children) dead and maimed, tens of thousands of homes destroyed, and ton and tons of rubble in their wake. These regular violent onslaughts against the people of Gaza — a level of brutality that shocks even people who have been in the worst war zones — serve two purposes: to demonstrate Israel's deterrent power to others (after humiliating defeats by Hezbollah in southern Lebanon) and to ["mow the lawn,"](#) that is, to maintain the people at a certain low level of nutrition and morale, thereby limiting in their ability to resist even nonviolently.

"Israel's evolving modus operandi for restoring its deterrence capacity," Finkelstein [writes](#), "described a curve steadily regressing into barbarism."

With many experts predicting that Gaza will soon be ["unliveable,"](#) this is a campaign of genocidal proportions.

"But Hamas..." is no counterargument to the foregoing. [Israel helped nurture Muslim Hamas](#) in the 1980s in a divide-and-conquer move, that is, as a rival to the *secular* Fatah and PLO, which had already recognized Israel as a state, thereby conceding 78 percent of historic Palestine to the Zionists. Hamas's influence is a direct result of Israel's refusal to talk to the moderate Palestinian leadership in good faith. In other words, Hamas is a "threat" of Israel's own making.

Moreover, Israel on several occasions violated ceasefires that Hamas had been honoring. When Hamas responded with what are [misleadingly called "rockets,"](#) Israel has responded with monstrous force, killing many noncombatants, including children and leaving Gaza buried in rubble.

Further, the Palestinians in Gaza, sick of the West Bank Palestinian leadership's corruption and fecklessness, elected Hamas in a monitored and fair election during the George W. Bush years (2006), for which the Gazans were punished with harsh US and European Union sanctions and a US-backed failed coup attempt by the Palestinian Authority, Israel's subcontractor for internal security in the Occupied Territories. (The bankrupt PLO leadership took on that lucrative quisling assignment under the deceptive Oslo Accord.)

Bush officials had demanded an election in Gaza, then regretted it when they saw the results. Indeed, Bush critic Sen. Hillary Clinton [commented](#) after the balloting,

“I do not think we should have pushed for an election in the Palestinian territories. I think that was a big mistake. And if we were going to push for an election, then we should have made sure that we did something to determine who was going to win.” (Emphasis added. What’s that she now says about alleged Russian meddling to keep her from winning presidency?)

But most crucial, Hamas has [changed](#) its inflammatory charter to accept, *unlike successive Israeli governments*, Israel’s 1967 borders, i.e., the two-state solution, which entails a complete Israeli withdrawal — settlements and separation wall — from the West Bank and Gaza in accordance with international law. But no matter. Hamas has been too convenient an excuse for Israel to claim it has no unified partner for peace. But when Hamas has joined with the West Bank Palestinian administration, Israel then claims it can’t talk to anyone who would partner with Hamas — even though the partner has conceded 78 percent of Palestine to Israel, as [the PLO did 30 years ago](#). (Israel has built settlements for 600,000 Jews on and otherwise directly controls more than half of the remaining 22 percent the Palestinians were willing to settle for.)

At any rate, Hamas must be judged against the larger context: namely, the Israeli occupation and de facto annexation of Palestinian property and the total subjugation of the Palestinian people. Killing noncombatants is of course immoral, but Israel, which routinely targets civilian neighborhoods in Gaza and the West Bank, hardly has clean hands in that regard.

Inside Israel

The 1.5 million Palestinian “citizens” inside Israel (20 percent of the citizen population) have it better than their counterparts in the Occupied Territories, but only somewhat. After being under military rule from 1948 to 1966, the Palestinians inside Israel settled into second- or rather third-class citizenship. As the self-proclaimed State of the Jewish People (everywhere in the world), Israel does not treat non-Jewish citizens the way it treats Jewish citizens. (This is an ethno-national, rather than a religious, designation, although there is no Jewish ethnicity or race.) Although Palestinians (i.e., those who managed to survive the ethnic cleansing of 1947-48) can vote, form political parties, and hold office, they nevertheless may not change Israel into a democratic republic for *all* its citizens. A recent attempt in the Knesset to do that was [quashed](#) without debate or vote. Nor can they end the systemic discrimination against Palestinians in access to land (most land is off limits to non-Jews) and in the allocation of government-provided services like utilities and schooling. In addition, Palestinians driven from their homes in 1947-48, the Nakba, may not return, yet anyone *born anywhere and living anywhere* who has a Jewish mother or who was converted by an approved rabbi can become an Israeli citizen automatically no matter where he was born or is now living.

In light of all this, note the significance of the recent Israeli demand that the Palestinians on the West Bank and in Gaza recognize Israel not just as a *legitimate* state, but as a *Jewish* State. Such a concession would betray the non-Jewish citizens of Israel.

America the Enabler

The second reason why Palestine matters is that American taxpayers are forced to underwrite this system of injustice and repression. The US government gives Israel, the Middle East’s only nuclear state, over [\\$3 billion a year](#) in military aid on the most favorable

terms. Even the allegedly anti-Israel Obama administration set records in giving military aid to Israel, which violates US law (and international law) by using the weapons to repress the Palestinians and to wage offensive war against civilians. Obama never once penalized Israel for expanding West Bank and East Jerusalem settlements even though the US government has always officially regarded them as in violation of international law.



President Trump meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in New York on Sept. 18, 2017.
(Screenshot from Whitehouse.gov)

Some justify this unstinting and unique support for Israel on grounds that Israel is an American “strategic asset,” and Israeli leaders cynically talk in those terms. But this makes no sense. For one thing, as many American political and military leaders have acknowledged since 9/11, rather than being an asset, Israel has been a liability. A big reason for the Muslim terrorism directed at Americans is precisely the unconditional US assistance to, not to mention diplomatic support of, Israel. What goes a long way toward explaining the huge sums given to Israel each year — over \$10 million a day — is the influential [Israel Lobby](#), which brags about its power over US politicians. (See [this article](#) by former American Israel Public Affairs Committee staffer M. J. Rosenberg.) AIPAC and other organizations have created an environment in which criticism of Israel or Zionism is smeared as anti-Semitism, although this baseless association has finally begun to wear thin. It’s worth pointing out that [the first most and incisive anti-Zionists were Jewish](#).

Would things change drastically if US aid ended? It’s hard to say; ending the aid would be a big blow to the pocketbook, but the ideological commitment to keeping the Palestinians down is strong. Nevertheless, Americans’ forced complicity in the injustice must end.

A Wider War

The third reason I want to point to is the threat of a wider war, one that could reach beyond Palestine and Israel and even beyond the Middle East. Analysts have long warned that the region could be a flashpoint for a war involving Iran, a long-standing regional power, and Russia. We need only look at Syria, where Russian and Iran have intervened on behalf of their ally President Bashar Assad, and the US and Israel are trying to undermine Assad — and necessarily assisting groups related to al-Qaeda, the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks. It

is not far-fetched to envision a clash between US and Russian forces in that country. Moreover, the US and Israel have conducted covert warfare and sponsored terrorist acts against Iran, which Israeli politicians have found useful for distracting attention from their oppression of the Palestinians. A US war against Iran, which would be virtually inevitable should Israel attack the Islamic Republic, would be a regional if not larger catastrophe.

The Trump administration's so-called peace initiative, led by his patently unqualified and biased son-in-law Jared Kushner and [other unabashedly pro-Israel figures](#), has shaped up as nothing more than an effort to unite Israel and the Arab countries (especially the illiberal regimes in Saudi Arabia and Egypt) against Iran — with the Palestinians being sacrificed in the process. The Saudis are expected to “deliver the Palestinians,” a phrase that drips with condescension, for a deal that essentially enshrines Israel's domination and crushes Palestinian hopes for self-determination. (See details [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).)

The attempt to subordinate the Palestinians' grievances to the reckless anti-Iran campaign will only make things worse, both by provoking Iran, which is surrounded by US military facilities, and dashing any remaining hope that the Palestinians will at last see some justice. Even on pragmatic grounds, why leave it to Iran alone to champion the long-suffering Palestinians.

Not So Complicated

In light of [my personal background](#), it has not been easy for me to write this; it's been enervating and even painful. But as Finkelstein shows in heavily documented books and YouTube lectures (e.g., [this one](#)), the Palestine-Israel “conflict” is really not complicated. Contrary to those solemn pundits who, seeking to discourage people from looking at the matter closely, write about the “clash of civilizations,” the ancient religious feud, and other such rubbish, widespread agreement exists among historians (including Israelis) that Palestinian enmity toward Zionists was based on a justified fear of land theft and that Israel was founded through ethnic cleansing — what can the establishment of a Jewish (majority) State entail if not the removal of the majority non-Jews? Before the rise of Zionism, Arabs got along reasonably well with Jews, far better than the European Christians did.

Israeli historians reported on the incriminating official documents more than 30 years ago. The leader in this effort was Benny Morris, who acknowledges and documents the wholesale removal and killing of Palestinians while approving of it. Indeed, he [writes](#), “The fear of territorial displacement and dispossession was to be the chief motor of Arab antagonism to Zionism.” Morris also [wrote](#) that “transfer [of the Palestinians out of Palestine] was inevitable and inbuilt into Zionism — because it sought to transform a land which was ‘Arab’ into a ‘Jewish’ state and a Jewish state could not have arisen without a major displacement of Arab population....” This is from a defender of Israel's founding, one who laments that the ethnic cleansing was incomplete.

The point is that the facts are not seriously disputed.

Further, unanimous agreement exists among all respected human-rights organizations (including Israeli organizations) that since the state's founding, Israel has routinely treated the Palestinians brutally and discriminatorily, with the most egregious cases being the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, which were acquired by war contrary to international law. Still further, the International Court of Justice has [ruled](#) (14-1, with the one “dissenter,” (who did not call his opinion a dissent, agreeing with much of the majority position) that the

separation wall in the West Bank is illegal because the occupation of and settlements in the West Bank are illegal.

So where is the controversy among people who bother to study the matter? On every major moral and legal question, it doesn't exist. Contrary to what some Israel defenders suggest, the same moral and legal principles that identify the Nazi Holocaust as unspeakably evil also apply to Jews. (A few *political* controversies, such as whether the right of return for the Palestinian refugees is *feasible*, remain.)

The reasonable *minimal* steps toward a just remediation therefore follow: complete Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, including dismantling of the settlements, removal of the wall, and compensation for those whose property was damaged by its construction, and the liberation of Gaza, permitting the Palestinians full "self-government" (alas, libertarianism isn't on the menu today), the right of return for Palestinian refugees driven from their homes 70 years ago (though monetary compensation may figure in lieu of this), and full rights for the Palestinian citizens of Israel.

This sounds like the famous two-state solution, but an alternative focusing on one democratic state with equal rights for all citizens has gained prominence. (This is what PLO chief Yasser Arafat [called for](#) in his UN General Assembly address 44 years ago.) It comes down to a debate over what is realistically achievable in the near term.

On one side are those who say it's too late for two states because since 1967, a de facto single state has existed between the Mediterranean Sea and the River Jordan. Thus, the only remaining question, they argue, is what kind of state shall this be: democratic or [apartheid](#)?

After all, this side adds, when the UN General Assembly in 1947 *recommended* partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states — the UN [never partitioned](#) Palestine and did not have the power to do so — the Jews were assigned 56 percent of the territory, the Arabs 44 percent, even though the Arab Muslims and Christians were the overwhelming majority and Jewish land purchases amounted to only about [less than 7 percent of Palestine \(much of that of dubious legitimacy because of Ottoman feudalism\)](#). But after the ethnic-cleansing and after the neighboring Arab governments feebly attempted to defend the overrun Palestinians (the so-called War of Independence), Israel had expanded into nearly 80 percent. (The Palestinians had rejected the partition recommendation; from the time that Great Britain first contemplated ruling the Middle East and then conquered Palestine during World War I, the Palestinians were deemed unworthy of consultation about the fate of their own land.)

Then, when the Occupied Territories were acquired in 1967, Israel methodically established "facts on the grounds" — Jewish-only settlements, roads, the separation wall, etc. — precisely to guarantee that the Territories would never have to be given up. The Palestinian state thus shrunk from the original 44 percent to 11 percent, which consists of communities cut off from each other, plus Gaza miles away. What kind of state is that, ask the advocates of a single democratic state? Better, they say, to declare equal rights for all throughout Israel-Palestine and let reforms flow from the new democratic environment.

The two-state advocates respond that it will be much easier (however difficult) to persuade Israel to withdraw from the Territories than to persuade it to change from a Jewish state to a secular liberal democratic state in which Jews would soon be the minority. (In the whole of Israel-Palestine today the population split is roughly 50-50.)

As tempting as it is to weigh in on this debate, I think Norman Finkelstein [put it best](#) in 2014:

I don't advocate anything. It's not my place to advocate. First of all, I'm not a Palestinian. Second of all, I'm not Israeli.... I don't live anywhere near the affected regions.... Anyone who's involved in politics knows that politics is not about personal preferences. If you ask my personal preference, I would say that I don't believe in two states; I don't believe in one state; I happen not to believe in any states. I'm an old-fashioned leftist in that regard. But politics is not about what you prefer; it's not about what I prefer. Politics is about a realistic assessment of the balances of forces in the world.

I would add, as Finkelstein has on many occasions, that the best we can do is to work to build broad public support for a solution rooted in justice, liberty, and peace for all, enlisting sound moral intuitions and established liberal legal principles in the service of reasonably achievable ends.

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