

PALESTINIAN ADVOCACY: TIPS AND FACTS FOR DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

B. Leeding-Hart, March 2024 (version 2)

Everyone can agree that talking about Israel/Palestine is a delicate topic, which can easily get very heated – especially now. This is made more difficult to navigate due to the complex history of the conflict, and the huge amount of biased and false information that is circulated by the Israeli government, with the assistance of well-funded international lobby groups, professional propagandists, and compliant media and politicians, especially in the USA, UK and Australia. It can be difficult to try to change someone’s mind, or at least counter their arguments, when that person is using an arsenal of dubious ‘facts’ in rapid fire, hoping that at least one of them will catch you out. It is even more difficult if you are not prepared with the knowledge of provable facts and how they connect into the bigger picture, and an understanding of the tricks and traps that are likely to be used to frustrate you. This article is here to help – but be warned, it’s aimed at readers who want to spend some time digging below the surface. If you are looking for something quick and snappy that can be read and digested in your lunch break, this may not be for you.

Basic tips for approaching debate

Firstly, treat the person you are engaging with respect, and do not try to belittle them. Even if they are saying things you know to be untrue, they might not be trying to deceive, and probably really believe their arguments to be truthful. Listen to what they have to say without interrupting until they pause for your response. Try not to be inflammatory (which with this topic, is easier said than done).

Secondly, stay calm and do not react to attempts to provoke you into getting worked up. It is difficult to make a rational, carefully worded argument for what you believe in if you are agitated or angry. Shouting is not helpful and can make you look like the aggressor. Talking calmly and being reasonable and compassionate towards the other person is much more likely to result in a fruitful conversation in which the other person might actually listen and think about what you have to say. It also can defuse tension and turn a potentially hostile confrontation into a productive encounter that might even end with smiles. That outcome might seem unlikely, but it’s something good to aim for. If you’re talking with someone who is aggressive, belligerent, and clearly not interested in listening to you, it’s probably best to wish them peace and walk away.

Thirdly, know what you’re talking about. Pro-Israel pundits or members of the public often have a shallow knowledge of the factual history of Israel/Palestine, and tend to rely on well-trodden soundbites, dubious claims, and emotive trigger terms to frame the discussion in a way that makes a good response difficult if your own background knowledge is also shallow or uncertain. The best thing you can do here is educate yourself so that you can respond to falsehoods or misleading statements with truths that can be backed up with real evidence. This will also give you insights that enable you to intelligently voice your own opinions without having to repeat stock statements learned from a ‘cheat sheet’. Some suggested high quality resources for learning more about this issue are listed at the end. If you don’t know any facts to respond to a given statement or question, don’t try to bluff and make up something that sounds credible. This will only make you look bad if the other person knows, or can later find out, that what you said wasn’t true. If the interaction is being filmed, this is even more important because it will likely be shared with the whole world, labelled on Youtube with something like “Idiot Terrorist Supporter Owned”. Just be honest and admit you don’t know enough about that, but will look into it. Our greatest tool for justice and peace is the truth.

Traps and Pitfalls

Misdirection/distraction to avoid acknowledging the root causes of the conflict (systematic and prolonged dispossession, land theft, humiliation, brutal and inhumane treatment, and mass slaughter by Israelis, all of which has escalated to an unbearable breaking point for Palestinians)

This is one of the key tactics used to try to trip up advocates for Palestinians. Numerous statements, either broad or about specific events, are chosen and reeled out because they are difficult to refute or deny without making you look like you don't know what you are talking about, or that you support extremism – preferably both. If you are well-informed and have the time, you might want to address each point. Most people draw from the same repertoire of points, and if you watch enough interviews, debates and street confrontations you can get a fair idea of what you need to be prepared to respond to. However, you should recognise that you are being led to 'look over here' rather than discuss the truth and unjustness of what's really happening right now in the occupied territories, and why that is happening (the truth of what's happened in the past, up until now).

Weaponised antisemitism

The standard tactic of pro-Israel voices is to label pro-Palestinian voices, or simply critics of Israel's treatment of Palestinians, as antisemitic, or people who hate all Jews. This warped logic equates Israel with all Jewish people, even though many Jewish people (mostly in the diaspora) advocate for the Palestinian cause (or at least sympathise with their plight) and are opposed to the policies and actions of the Israeli government and the IDF. According to this logic, which is supported by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and other staunchly pro-Israel watchdog organisations that present themselves as benign groups who represent the Jewish people and call out antisemitism whenever it occurs. This leads them to have no problem labelling any Jewish person speaking out for Palestinians as an antisemite, and by extension, a 'self-hating Jew'. In this writer's opinion, *that* is antisemitic, and exposes the fact that these organisations do not represent the Jewish people as a whole, but primarily serve to defend Jewish Israel, partly by attacking its critics, Jewish or not.

The slur of antisemitism is also used against people who try to be more specific and say that they are criticising Zionism, not everyone in Israel, and certainly not all Jewish people. It seems that a lot of people don't really know what Zionism is, and confuse it with the discredited early-20th century Russian forgery 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion', which was claimed to be the manifesto of a Jewish conspiracy to rule the world. This document continues to foment genuine antisemitism amongst people who either don't know or don't want to believe that it was fabricated by antisemites to stir up public support for expulsion of Jews en masse from Tsarist Russia. Zionism, on the other hand, is a real ethno-nationalist ideology, and many Jewish Zionist organisations around the world openly call themselves Zionists and feature the word in their name.

Zionism is an ideology created in the late 19th century by a small number of non-religious Jewish men and non-Jewish Christian men, based on the idea that the Jewish people should have a land of their own, preferably in what was then Palestine and hoping to include parts of neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. Key to this plan was that the new state would be exclusively for Jews, and successive Israeli governments have strived for decades to make this a reality by any and all means available. Zionism is effectively the state ideology of Israel as a nation, not a fringe concern. Nor is it necessarily religious, even though atheistic Jewish Zionists back it up with their scriptural claim that the land of Israel was promised to the Jews by God. The fact that a mainly non-Jewish population already lived there and had for thousands of years was simply a minor problematic detail to be dealt with when that time came, by a variety of means, initially with the backing of the British Empire. A popular Zionist motto is 'a land without people for a people without land', which has chilling echoes of the 'terra nullius' claim for Australia at the start of British colonisation.

Until the late 19th century, there was no widespread popular sentiment amongst the Jewish people of the world to reclaim the land of Israel from what was then Palestine, and parts of its neighbouring countries. The popular Israeli line is that the Jewish people have been in exile, longing to return, for thousands of years. In reality, some Jewish people were already living there amongst the Arabs and had been for a long time, and those in the diaspora were apparently content to live elsewhere, wherever they could, unless hostility from their hosts led to expulsions to somewhere else. (This is discussed further below under '*This is a 2,000 year old conflict*'.) Some European Jewish immigrants who came to live in Mandate-era Palestine simply didn't like it there due to the climate, food and culture being too different to what they were used to, and didn't stay long;

for many Jewish people at the time, the USA was a favoured destination to call home rather than the Holy Land.

Obviously it is strange that accurately calling someone a Zionist, or even talking about Zionism, is treated as antisemitic and highly dubious, except in Israel where most intelligent people know the difference. Some Israel advocates simplify things to a ludicrous extent by claiming that 'Zionist' (coming from a non-Jew) is just code for 'Jew', and is used only by antisemites. Who knows whether they really believe this or if it's just a tactic to obscure the truth. If you search Youtube for 'anti-Zionist rabbi' you will find many shining examples of humanity who explain why Zionism is itself not only contrary to Judaism, but arguably antisemitic, and ensuring there will never be peace for either side as long as it is the dominant ideology of the state and its Jewish people. These are the kind, wise rabbis Israel should be giving a voice to, embodying the best of Judaism, rather than the far-right extremist rabbis who have the government's support and dominate the supposed 'religious' voice of the nation by twisting scripture to create justifications for atrocities in the name of ethno-nationalist supremacy.

There are also Christian Zionists, who have their own bizarre motivations related to Biblical prophecy. This amounts to a belief that all Jewish people around the world must return to Israel in order to trigger the Apocalypse, which will bring the return of Christ, and Jewish people who don't then convert to Christianity will not be saved. Clearly this scenario does not have the best interests of Jewish people at heart, and treats them as pawns in somebody else's game, as well as encouraging Jewish people to leave for Israel and never come back. But it does result in a fanatical support for Israel, and some of these Christian Zionists (mainly in the USA) give a lot of money and other assistance to the cause as they see it. Israel is very happy to receive this support, even though it could be seen as coming from two-faced antisemites. In fact, the Israeli government often seems happy to ignore clear antisemitic sentiments and public statements from people who otherwise give political, financial and/or military support to Israel – Donald Trump being perhaps the best-known example.

Antisemitism is a real problem, and is unacceptable. Some antisemites have involved themselves with the pro-Palestinian movement, perhaps thinking they can use it as a cover to be anti-Jewish as part of a legitimate group. Others are genuine in terms of caring about the Palestinian cause, but nonetheless hold strong antisemitic views as well. We should strive to distance ourselves from these people, and not only because they taint the rest of us by association in the public eye. They do not represent this cause, which is not motivated by antisemitism, but seeking long-awaited justice and fair treatment for Palestinians, and demanding that Israel comply with international law.

Valid comparison to Nazis painted as antisemitic and disrespecting the Holocaust

It is popular in some circles to claim that if you call someone a Nazi, you have already lost the argument. This conveniently only serves as protective cover for any person, group, or nation that conducts itself in a manner that is clearly comparable to Germany's Nazi regime of the 1930s and 1940s, as well as the neo-Nazis who have persisted in the world since then. It is a particularly touchy subject with Jewish people, for the obvious reason of the horrific treatment and genocide that the Nazis inflicted on Jewish people in the territories it controlled. Although the project of establishing Israel as a Jewish state was well underway before the Nazis came to power, what happened next gave the Zionist Israel project added urgency as a safe haven for Jewish refugees, explicitly tying the very idea of Israel as vital for the survival of the Jewish people. Therefore, any suggestion that Israel might be doing anything to Palestinians that mirrors the treatment of Jews by the Nazis can trigger strong reactions and a refusal to actually examine whether the claim is valid. The logic of extending this to say that making such a comparison is not only offensive, but antisemitic, is completely flawed. It seems to suggest that the Jewish people were the only group who suffered under the Nazis or were deliberately targeted by them, which is utterly false. Making a Nazi comparison does not minimise or deny the treatment of Jewish people by the Nazis. The real issue should be whether the comparisons are accurate.

The first people to make this comparison of Israeli and Nazi behaviour were Israeli Jews who had participated in the Nakba of 1948. Either during these events or in the years after, many had grim realisations about their own actions, and actions they witnessed by their compatriots – that they were dehumanising, brutalising, murdering, dominating and stealing from a whole people in the same way the Germans had done to them only a few years before, almost as though they were taking revenge (not against those who had wronged them, but a largely defenceless proxy who had nothing to do with it) and in the process losing their compassion and morality, becoming just like their old oppressors. These people felt life-long guilt about what they had done,

and predicted a future situation very much like the one Israelis and Palestinians find themselves in now, placing the blame and responsibility squarely in the Israeli court.

Alongside them in voicing their observations and criticisms were those who would know better than anyone, the Holocaust survivors. Ironically, Israel uses the Holocaust to instill the idea that Israel as an exclusively Jewish state is absolutely necessary to protect Jews from such a tragedy ever occurring again, but Israeli society has tended to treat actual Holocaust survivors as some kind of embarrassment, because they were supposedly weak and didn't sufficiently stand up to the Nazis. Outside of Israel, we would expect that when these people speak out, their voices would be respected and listened to, but inside Israel that is rarely the case, something that should provoke widespread outrage. By now most or all people who survived the Holocaust or participated in the Nakba will have passed on, but we should not forget what they had to say about Israel/Palestine, as their words contain much hard-won truth and insight. (Some were interviewed on camera when still alive, and can be seen and heard in some of the documentaries listed at the end of this article.)

After he had signed the Oslo Accords with Yassir Arafat, Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin was publicly smeared by the right with Nazi comparisons, simply because he had made a deal with the PLO. He was not only depicted in defamatory posters as aiding Palestinian terrorism and putting Israel at greater risk, but he was shown in mocked-up images in an SS uniform and pictured with prominent swastikas. Shortly after he was assassinated by an Israeli terrorist. Surely this treatment of Israel's own Jewish leader by Israelis was antisemitic, as well as shamefully weaponising Nazi comparisons. If that can be done by Israelis on factually shaky ground (and as we will see below, the Oslo Accords in the end were beneficial to Israel, to the detriment of Palestinians), it is terribly unfair that valid fact-based comparisons cannot be made without a vicious reaction from Israelis and their supporters. In a 1995 interview, Moshe Zimmerman, an Israeli historian and respected authority on modern German history, made clear factual comparisons that by today's standards would be called antisemitic:

"There is a monster in each of us, and if we continue to assume that we are always justified, that monster can grow. Therefore, we Jews are obliged to always hold the German example before our eyes. Already today I am witnessing a phenomenon which is growing: there is an entire sector in the Jewish public which I unhesitatingly define as a copy of the German Nazis. Look at the children of the Jewish Hebron settlers: they are exactly like the Hitler Youth. From infancy they are pumped with ideas that all Arabs are bad, of how every Gentile is against us. They are turned into paranoids, they think of themselves as a master race, they are exactly like the Hitler Youth. There is a very dangerous tendency of leniency towards that sector."

It should also not be forgotten that Israel had a very friendly relationship with apartheid-era South Africa between the 1960s and 1980s, a regime that had many parallels with Nazi ideology. Both being white supremacist apartheid states, Israel and South Africa had a lot in common and a lot of notes to share on the successful subjugation and brutalisation of their indigenous populations.

Hamas and terrorism

Dubbed by some satirists as the 'but... Hamas!' excuse for any excessive and illegal treatment of Palestinians, this attempts to point out that Hamas is a terrorist organisation that attacks innocent Israelis, wants to kill all Jews, and are evil, crazed and depraved Islamic extremists who pose a threat to not only Israel, but the rest of the world too. In addition it is pointed out that Palestinians in Gaza voted for Hamas to govern them, which is claimed to equate to all Palestinians being either supporters of Hamas, or members, and therefore they are all terrorists and fair targets for any treatment Israel wishes to mete out to them.

Hamas has undoubtedly been responsible for some words and deeds that are difficult to defend, and should not be defended; the same goes for a number of other militant Palestinian resistance groups and their occasional allies. In terms of words, their original charter was not written by senior members with political maturity, and was not intended to be a definitive statement of what Hamas stands for. It ended up being seen as such, however, and contains some extremist rhetoric that Israelis prefer to interpret as calling for the death of Jews; the latest charter clarifies that their enemy is Zionism and Israel, not all Jewish people. Some of their deeds undeniably constitute terrorism, and the period of suicide bombings against civilians was abominable, even if it was in response to a Jewish settler slaughter of Palestinian Muslims in prayer at a mosque. However there are simplifications, exaggerations and falsehoods that easily cloud discussion of Hamas – who they are, what they claim to stand for, and what their members have said and done, all of which has to be considered in

context and with nuance. It is possible to be factual when talking about Hamas without being an apologist or supporter.

In the western world, usually all we are told is from an Israeli narrative, with the context and nuance removed – basically, terrorism as explained to a 5 year old child in black and white terms, with ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’. Trying to discuss or debate anything about Hamas is only likely to work in private conversations with people you are already friendly with, and even then it is a very delicate topic to navigate without causing some kind of outrage. If people try to corner you into appearing to support Hamas, and you are not prepared to argue your point with confidence, it is best to recognise this as misdirection [see above]. Try to get back on track by pointing out that whatever terrible things Hamas may have done, all Palestinians are not Hamas, and to collectively punish and kill civilians who are just trying to exist is never justified. In addition, after Hamas were voted in there has never been another election, and many younger Gazans, who constitute most of the population, were not old enough to vote, or had not yet been born, when Hamas won that election. This means that a majority of people in Gaza have never had any say in the matter. Before October 7th 2023, support for Hamas in Gaza had dropped to an all-time low.

Hamas is the governing political organisation in Gaza, only a small part of which constitutes armed militants. There are also other political parties and militant groups in Gaza and the West Bank, which operate independently, although they may sometimes cooperate with each other. Therefore to blame all Palestinian terrorist attacks on Hamas is misleading, and to suggest all Hamas members are terrorists or militants is also misleading. Israel constantly blurs this line so that the public is less likely to object to letting it do what it likes to Gaza. A scandalous example is the unarmed March of Return peaceful protests of 2018, which the Israeli and western media and governments portrayed as a violent uprising and potential armed incursion into Israel, organised by Hamas, using human shields to ensure lots of “telegenically dead” Palestinians for propaganda purposes, in Benjamin Netanyahu’s words. A lie was also spread that Hamas was paying people handsomely for every gunshot wound they received.

The reality is that this was a symbolic event not affiliated with or involving any political or militant faction, and the only violence from the demonstrators consisted of stones thrown by a minority of protestors after Israeli forces began shooting unarmed people with sniper rifles (incidentally, using internationally banned bullets designed to drill through flesh and bone before exploding into fragments inside the body) and raining the area with projectiles emitting tear gas, as well as a mysterious chemical gas with lethal effects. The snipers targeted anyone, whether throwing stones or not, including children, women, the elderly, people in wheelchairs and on crutches (generally from injuries previously inflicted by Israelis), journalists with very obvious ‘Press’ jackets, and medics attempting to rescue the wounded. Many were killed, mostly with head-shots, and many more were seriously wounded. The IDF boasted later that every shot was deliberate and that they knew where every bullet went, making it difficult to claim any of the murders or unarmed civilians were accidental. Leaked video footage from an Israeli sniper position revealed the soldiers laughing and cheering as they shot someone through the head, as though they were playing a video game, or slaughtering rabbits for fun.

In a twist that seems almost too strange to be true, it has been confirmed that Hamas was semi-secretly funded by Israel for years, in order to undermine and destabilise Palestinians in Gaza. Shoring up the presence of Hamas ensured Israel had a potentially violent Islamist extremist foe which could easily be provoked into forms of retaliation that served to justify further brutal repression of Palestinian resistance, and to increase distrust and paranoia amongst the Palestinian population. Far from wanting to eliminate Hamas from the outset, Israel has benefitted from using them as an excuse to keep Gaza in a stranglehold, destroy its population and infrastructure in a succession of attacks (not just the current one), eventually hoping to expel the remaining people and annex the land to Greater Israel.

Israeli officials have claimed that part of their rationale for bombing Gaza and inflicting heavy ‘collateral damage’ on civilians was to create fear and uncertainty in the population, and therefore weaken support for Hamas by making them feel like Hamas could not protect them. This is a plain admission of terrorism by Israel. Terrorism is defined as attacking and/or terrifying civilians to achieve a political outcome. Most people only know terrorism as it’s defined by our governments, who choose to classify organisations or even whole countries as terrorists based on whether or not they are currently considered our allies, rather than by any objective and consistently applied definition of the term. Our governments turn a blind eye to terrorism when it is carried out by our friends, some of whom are much worse than those on any official terror list but are called freedom fighters instead. When it is carried out by our own governments we either never hear about it

(unless a whistleblower risks imprisonment by revealing the facts), or it is framed in such a way that it seems like a necessary and honourable intervention. It is not difficult to find examples of Israelis (whether IDF, border police, settler militias or civilian mobs) using terrorism against Palestinians, but it is unusual for a government official to make a statement on the record that shows a calculated intent to carry out dictionary definition terrorism, at the same time as it's actually being done. This can be used to flip the terrorist argument on its head, as Israel cannot say it is fighting against terrorism when it is a perpetrator of terrorism itself, using a state-of-the-art modern army in a massive imbalance of power.

The foundations of the formation of Israel involved terrorism from Jewish militias (against both Palestinians and the British) even before independence, and during the events of 1948 militias for the new state of Israel carried out massacres and other acts of terrorism against Palestinians. Israel has even had some genuine terrorists as Prime Ministers. Menachem Begin was commander of the Irgun, a Jewish terrorist group who in 1946 bombed the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, which killed 91 people and wounded 45 more. Later he founded the Likud party. Yitzhak Shamir (also later in the Likud party) was a leader of another Jewish terrorist group of the time, Lehi aka the Stern Gang, which (incredibly) sought collaboration with the Nazis and Fascist Italy to create a Jewish nationalist, totalitarian state. During and after World War Two they assassinated British personnel in Palestine, and in the Nakba of 1948 massacred over 100 Palestinian men, women and children at Deir Yassin, alongside fighters from the Irgun. This village had only recently signed a peace pact with the neighbouring Jewish village, and therefore was taken completely by surprise at the attack. It wasn't simply a massacre – according to survivors, the militias put people in barrels and shot at the barrels for fun, raped many young women, mutilated bodies, and in one case, ordered a man to throw his own child into a wood-fired oven; when he refused, soldiers threw the child in themselves. Begin called the taking of Deir Yassin “a splendid act of conquest”; ironically, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1978.. In the last few decades terrorism by settlers against both Palestinians and Israeli authorities who have tried to curtail their illegal activities has become more widespread and vitriolic. Even without the IDF, Israeli terrorism is a long-standing fact of life.

Responding to common pro-Israel talking points

This is a 2,000 (or more) year old conflict

The idea that Jews and Arabs – and specifically Palestinians – have been at each others' throats for thousands of years, and are historical natural enemies, has been thoroughly ingrained in the minds of many people. It is, by and large, false. The region of modern Israel/Palestine and its surrounding areas has certainly seen a lot of change over the last few millennia, with a succession of skirmishes, territorial disputes, invasions, and movement and mixing of populations. In the Torah and the Bible, the Philistines frequently featured as the main enemies of the Israelites, and with Palestine being derived from Philistine/Filistin, a lazy connection has been made to equate the Philistines with Palestinians of the modern era. However, the Philistines were annihilated by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II circa 604BCE and ceased to be a significant force. Survivors probably merged with the rest of the Canaanite population, which included Jews and Palestinians.

The narrative of the Jewish people being expelled from the area some 2,000 years ago also has nothing to do with Arabs in general, or Palestinians specifically, and they weren't actually expelled from the whole area. The first big exile followed the conquest of Judea by Nebuchadnezzar II in 597BCE, but only the upper echelons of the Judean/Israelite population were exiled to Babylon; most of the population were allowed to stay, and even the exiles were allowed back after a while. In 70CE, after a few years of Jewish insurrection, the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem, with many massacred and the temple destroyed; however the Jews still living in Judea were only exiled from Jerusalem. Even after another violent Jewish uprising in 135CE, which was again crushed by the Romans, Jews were only forbidden from re-entering Jerusalem, and were not expelled from the whole land. Many probably considered this a good time to move on by their own choice, but already the Jewish people had been spreading far and wide by choice for centuries, making new homes and living amongst the people of other lands. Even if the entire Jewish population of Judea had been expelled, this would not have constituted the whole of the Jewish people being exiled for the next nearly 2,000 years. There have been further events too complex to go into further here, with temporary punishment and exclusion of Jews from Jerusalem following their roles in violent uprisings, but still Jewish people as a whole were never forced out of

the whole area. It's ironic that given this history, Israel supporters don't see a problem in the mass forced and permanent expulsion of Palestinians that Israel carried out in 1948.

There is also a lazy tendency to picture the age-old conflict as one between Judaism (the religion of the Jews/Israelites) and Islam (the religion of the Arabs, a false simplification). Yet Islam wasn't founded as a religion until 622CE. Additionally, Islam, Christianity and Judaism are closely related, tracing a common lineage back to the proto-Jewish patriarch Abraham, with Islam showing more respect for its predecessor religions than they generally offer to Islam. Predominantly Muslim countries have traditionally treated Christian and Jewish members of the population as 'protected communities', as long as they did not break the laws of the land. In fact, the main religious foe to a Jewish presence over the last two millennia has been Christianity. Jewish people forced to flee the rampant antisemitism in Christian countries or territories in Europe have frequently found safe refuge in Muslim countries. Even in the terrible 1929 Hebron riots and massacre of Jews by a mob of Palestinians (spurred by the rumour, possibly not unfounded, that local Zionist Jews were planning to seize the Temple Mount / al-Aqsa Mosque), many Jewish people were sheltered and kept safe by local Palestinian families. This temple site has great religious significance for Jews, Muslims and Christians, and access to it is still a source of heated friction, but contrary to another lazy assumption, this is not the root cause of the Israel/Palestine or Jewish/Arab conflict.

Palestinians/Arabs/Muslims all hate us and want to kill us because we are Jewish

Perhaps some do, but it is both inaccurate and racist to make this claim for entire ethnic groups, or entire religions. Jewish people should be able to acknowledge that due to their own history of antisemitic persecution. The long history of peaceful and respectful co-existence, marred by some unfortunate hiccups, was mentioned above. In the modern era (in this case, from the birth of the Zionist movement in the late 19th century through to now) much anti-Jewish sentiment in the Middle East has been directly related to anger at Zionist plans for the region, which originated from a small number of European Jews and their Christian political allies, rather than the Jewish people who had been living mostly peacefully alongside Arabic people in the Palestine region for centuries. Zionism is explained above, so it won't be repeated here, but it's obvious that the people already living there would not be too thrilled about one group mostly comprised of people with little to no living connection of the land or its existing culture, making plans to take the whole land for themselves to construct an exclusively Jewish state modelled on European culture, and actively discriminating against the locals in a wide variety of ways designed to marginalise them economically and politically (with the backing of the British).

Since 1948, with the formation of Israel, much has been said and done to reinforce the idea that Israel IS the Jewish people, and vice versa. For many non-Jewish people living in the area their whole lives, their only experience of Jewish people is in relation to them representing Israel, the country of people who openly proclaim that they hate and want to kill Arabs and Muslims; the country with a long history of destabilising the region by its treatment of Palestinians and carrying out assassinations, military strikes and land grabs in neighbouring countries; the country propped up by the USA, which itself has caused so much damage with its many decades of meddling in the region for its own benefit. The warmth with which anti-Zionist, pro-Palestinian Jewish people (Israelis or from the diaspora) are welcomed by many Palestinians, Arabs or Muslims shows that anti-Israel sentiment from these groups has nothing to do with whether someone is Jewish and everything to do with fairness and justness in relation to Israel's policies and actions in the Middle East.

Israel has a right to exist

In a legal and moral sense, Israel only has the right to exist because of backing from western nations, most importantly the USA and the UK, and the United Nations which defined how the new national borders would be drawn up, to allocate some territory for Palestine. This was unfair from the outset because the Palestinians (who were not involved in the decision) received less land than Israel, yet comprised a majority of the population in 1947. Israel also got more of the best land in terms of access to water and fertile soil. Even though they had the better side of the deal (which Palestinians had no real say in negotiating), after declaring independence Israel almost immediately went on to seize more land than they had been allocated during the Nakba of 1948, and especially since 1967 has continued to do so, gobbling up more and more of the West Bank and seizing Golan Heights from Syria. Israel has ignored every UN resolution that has tried to get it to adhere to international law, including one in 1948 which stated Israel must allow the ousted Palestinian refugees to return to their land.

In addition, over the years Israel has undeniably committed a long list of war crimes according to the Geneva Convention, which Israel has been a signatory to since 1951. Taken in total, Israel's long history of flouting international law in its treatment of Palestinians could be said to negate the right of Israel to continue to exist, at least in its present form. That does not mean Israelis should be expelled from the area entirely, but with the violent hatred of Arabs that permeates Israeli culture it is difficult to see the majority of Israelis being willing to live peacefully alongside them in a future fair and democratic society on Palestinian land, something most Palestinians yearn for. Any fair two-state solution, which in the current climate seems like the only viable compromise, must involve Israel handing back the land that has been illegally annexed, a threat that Jewish settlers have traditionally responded to with terrorism, and the Israeli public at large with outrage.

The biggest complicating factor in Israel's right to exist is that according to the Torah and the Old Testament, the land was promised to the Jewish people – then the Israelites – by none other than God. Even some atheistic Israelis use this to support their historical land claim. Although these texts do attempt to document the origins of humanity and later, specifically the history of the Jewish people, they are not considered on the whole to be reliable historical documents by serious scholars, and even if they were, the claim that 'God said so' cannot carry any legal weight in the modern world. The whole of human history involves people moving around from place to place, settling, populations coming together and spreading apart, invasions and conquests, borders changing.

The Jewish people undeniably have a historic claim to living in the area that is now Israel/Palestine, as well as other surrounding areas – but so do others. The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, in which the Israelites/Jews could be said to have ruled over the land, only lasted a few hundred years (approximately 931-587BCE). Incidentally, the region around Gaza and the southern 'triangle' of Israel/Palestine that contains the southern Negev Desert were not part of the historic Israel and Judah, but their inclusion in the borders of Mandate-era Palestine that was bequeathed to Israel did not result in Israel saying "we don't have any claim to that territory, somebody else should get to have it." The Jewish claim to this land is not exclusive – it has always been shared, and repeatedly conquered by different peoples, and the ethnicity of the overall populations who have shared it is not able to be neatly carved up into convenient groups that persist unchanging over time. This is complicated further as people who are not ethnically Jewish can convert to Judaism, but according to Israeli law can still move to Israel, become a citizen and enjoy far more rights than a Palestinian.

The Palestinians aren't a 'real' people and weren't doing anything to cultivate or develop the land before the Jewish people came along

Israeli pseudo-historians have invented a host of reasons to deny the historical connection of modern Palestinians to the land of Israel/Palestine. This seems to be a post-Nakba project to make Israelis feel better about how their country was formed, and to use against their critics. To begin with, the Zionist slogan 'a land without people for a people without land' implies that the land was uninhabited and waiting for its rightful owners (the Israelites/Jews) to return. Yet even Israel's first Prime Minister Ben Gurion (a strident Zionist and not a fan of the Palestinians and their inconvenient presence to say the least), admitted that the Palestinians were the indigenous people of the land, descended from the ancient Judeans. That may come as a shock, but Palestinians are in fact genetically very close to Jewish people, having diverged perhaps 2,000 years ago, making them practically family. According to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Arabs have a common ancestor with the Jewish people in Abraham, who had a son Ishmael first with his wife's Egyptian handmaiden/slave (as his wife Sarah hadn't been able to conceive), then later a miraculous second son Isaac with Sarah when she was very old. Ishmael's descendents became the Arabs, Isaac's descendents became the Israelites/Jews. Not all religious people believe that is the literal truth, and modern historians, archaeologists and geneticists would argue the truth is a lot more complicated. It is clear that Palestinian Arabs and Middle Eastern Jews have both lived in the area of Palestine/Israel for several thousand years, even as borders and regional names were modified by a succession of foreign rulers. Not only that, but Hebrew and Arabic are both classed as semitic languages, having a common root. Also, many historic Jewish people who never left the area converted to Islam when that came along, thus becoming Palestinians who are actually of distinctly Jewish ancestry; some of them continue to follow Jewish religious and cultural traditions in private, and have not forgotten their roots.

Another narrative accepts that Palestinians had a historic presence, but were merely wandering herders or unemployed wastrels, being on the land but doing nothing useful with it, and not establishing towns or a distinct culture. Often the 'historic presence' is only described as recent, claiming Palestinians are all just Arabs

from elsewhere who settled in the area in the period of post-Byzantine rule by Muslim empires. The Jewish people, in this view, saved the land by reclaiming it as their own, planting trees and crops, working hard to make the land fertile again, and basically building a country from the dusty nothing the Palestinians had let it degrade to. This is completely false. Some of the land is desert, unsuitable for much farming and agriculture, but much of the country had been worked on and cared for by generations of Palestinians, although they were under foreign rule for centuries. The ancient cultivated olive tree groves, so valued by rural Palestinian families and so ruthlessly cut down by vengeful settlers, are testimony to that. By the end of the First World War, having helped the British overthrow Ottoman rule with the promise of independence, the Palestinian people were desperate for long-overdue self-determination. However they were betrayed by the British Empire who favoured the rights of Jewish Zionist immigrants over the Palestinians and pursued the implementation of the Balfour Declaration of 1917, to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. We all know the strife this led to, but amongst it all, Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s was a vibrant, thriving place, moving towards modernisation but retaining local cultural character.

A popular tactic that has been in use for decades is to deny the existence of Palestinians by claiming that the land was never called really Palestine, and its inhabitants didn't call themselves Palestinians before the 20th century, therefore as a 'real' people they are a modern invention formulated to trick us into thinking they have a legitimate claim to the land. This is just an attempt to confuse and anger, which denies how geopolitical change in the world works and turns history into a fantasy to be manipulated and viewed selectively in any way that suits Israel. It attempts to secure a double standard, as the whole territory comprising modern Israel/Palestine was never called Israel, only part of it was, and then only for a very short period in historical terms. Obviously, it is without question that the whole territory was called Palestine during the Mandate. Under Ottoman rule this and surrounding areas were subdivided and named quite differently, but going further back the area was part of Syria-Palestina, and even earlier the southwest portion was called Palestina/Philistina/Palaistine/Phalastin/Filistin, all derived from the Philistines who lived there. Although the borders, names and rulers have changed, there is greater historical precedent for Palestine as the name of the general area (or at least part of it) than there is for Israel. For a very long time the area of modern Israel/Palestine was called Canaan; although borders going back that far are uncertain, and some estimates have Canaan as including parts of Syria, Jordan and southern Lebanon, it is often depicted as occupying roughly the same territory as modern Israel/Palestine, and therefore could be argued to be a more historically-accurate name than either Israel or Palestine.

Attempts at denying the existence of Palestinians as a 'real' nationality or ethnic group, or refuting their claims to the land, are frequently hypocritical and collapse under scrutiny. They ultimately amount to a form of racist dehumanisation with the sole purpose of helping to justify the expulsion of Palestinians, and the refusal to give back seized/annexed/controlled land or allow the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on land Israel sees as its own. Perhaps if more people knew how closely related Jews and Palestinians are, the two groups could find it easier to come together in peace.

Palestinians weren't forced to leave their homes in 1948, they left by choice, and those that were killed were only killed because they attacked first

A statement like this is partly true, but only if you selectively ignore most of the facts about what happened in 1948 (as well as the periods before and after). Histories of Israel endorsed by the state and its favoured pseudo-academics generally endorse a view, which all Israelis (and many in the diaspora) learn at school and have reinforced throughout their lives, that completely ignores or reframes the ugly facts, in favour of a partial fantasy that casts the founders of the new Israel in a highly favourable and honourable light. Official Israeli documents that tell parts of the truth – not including orders that officials deemed best not to have a record of – were only declassified relatively recently, but most Israelis would seemingly prefer not to know the uncomfortable truths they reveal, and government agencies tend to hinder researchers who try to explore and publicise this information in a way that is critical of Israel. Also damning are the first-person testimonies of survivors from both sides, recorded when they were still alive.

What happened in 1948 following the declaration of independence by the newly-created Israel is called the War of Independence (or sometimes 'the Miracle') by Israel, and the Nakba ('the Catastrophe') by Palestinians. Incidentally, Israel has a law that prohibits public observance of the Nakba; even the word itself is practically forbidden, guaranteed to raise hackles if spoken in public, and barred from school text books.

The UN partition plan for Israel/Palestine, unveiled in 1947, was already unfair to the Palestinians, who mostly did not want partition at all. Most Palestinians wanted the independent nation they had previously been promised by the British, and had no problem with Jewish people living there, simply wanting to restrict immigration. Palestinians were very aware of Zionist plans for the region, and had already been struggling against the beginnings of a gradual Zionist takeover for years. Through the 1920s and 1930s immigrant Zionists had been busy buying up land, with many evictions of farmers who had lived and worked there for generations; dominating many sectors of employment with the active exclusion of non-Jews; aiding the illegal immigration of more Zionists to bolster the Jewish demographic; attacking or harassing Palestinian villagers (to be fair, Palestinians sometimes attacked new Jewish villages as well); and generally doing whatever could be done to diminish the ability of the Palestinians to make a living or have political influence. They were aided to some extent by the British, who favoured the Jewish population and the Zionist agenda, but some Zionists didn't think the British were doing enough to help them, and that ultimately they might be betrayed in the granting of a Jewish state. This led to the formation of anti-British, anti-Palestinian Zionist terrorist groups (discussed earlier) who played a large part in the atrocities of the Nakba.

Putting aside the back-and-forth violence that occasionally flared up in the preceding decades, who attacked first in 1948? It is important to remember that the Zionists had been preparing for this, with forced expulsion of the Palestinian population in mind. The Israeli side had put together an army, mostly with British, Czech and German weapons, assisted by some international non-Jewish volunteers fresh from World War II who initially thought they were on the right side of a heroic and honourable event. The Palestinians had been diarmed by the British, and having no real army or unified leadership of their own, they had to scramble to put together small militia units. The Palestinians had nowhere near enough guns and bullets to make an effective resistance, and frequently used antique rifles that were barely functional.

Anyone interested should read more detailed historical coverage, as a lot was happening in this time, with lots of underlying political and factional influences, especially regarding the Palestinians both amongst themselves, and in relation to their Arab neighbours, who had their own complicated shifting alliances and agendas. Here is a simplified version of what happened next. After the partition plan was declared in late 1947, there was some rioting by outraged Palestinians, as well as small clashes between mostly young male Palestinians and Jewish troops. Things escalated into a kind of civil war. Jewish troops slowly began the planned expulsion of Palestinian villagers, and in April the massacre and orgy of war crimes at Deir Yassin was carried out by Jewish forces (see above). Much of the Palestinian 'elite' fled the country, hoping to come back once things settled down. After the last of the British troops left, Israel declared independence (May 15th) and immediately intensified efforts to expel the Palestinian population, having already done so to 1/3 of the people. Various Arab armies entered the fray, at first occupying the areas that the partition plan had allocated for Palestine; these armies were from Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Jordan (which had secretly already made arrangements with the pre-Israelis to take control of the West Bank. Bear in mind that although this sounds like a devastating collection of force, in this post-WWII, post-colonial new world some of these countries were newly formed themselves; even added together, they were not very strong or effective. Also, they seem to have been operating more for their own interests, hoping to seize territory, rather than aiding the Palestinians altruistically.

Fighting continued, and Israeli forces continued their planned, systematic expulsion of every Palestinian village or town in their new territory. Some were attacked, with futile resistance, and more massacres occurred, such as the notorious Tantura massacre. When we say 'massacre' here, it is not in the context of battle, but the systematic slaughter of an unarmed, captive, civilian population. (The way they were treated before they were murdered was frequently incredibly cruel and rivals anything claimed to have been done more recently on Oct. 7th.) One novel method of attack by the Israelis was to roll barrels filled with explosives down slopes leading into a town, which one survivor described as the kind of thing that taught Palestinians about terrorism. Many civilian populations were terrorised into leaving; psychological operations were also used to scare them away, such as playing loud recordings of gunfire and explosions to convince them war was upon them, or spreading rumours of massacres in nearby villages. Those who left in terror hoped to return to their homes later, and took their house keys and deeds with them.

Most of the captured Palestinian villages were completely destroyed, erasing obvious signs anyone ever lived there; some such ruins are sold to tourists as being Roman. In the case of town or villages with mixed Jewish/Palestinian populations, the Palestinians were systematically expelled at gunpoint, with barely any time

to gather whatever they could carry of their belongings. Their now vacant homes were looted by Israelis (sometimes on order from higher up, in the case of books, which were collected, catalogued and put into storage), and quickly had new occupants. Only in a few cases did Palestinian populations refuse to leave, were somehow not killed anyway, and remained living in Israeli territory. On the forced mass march of these 700,000 new refugees, many were later stopped by Israeli soldiers and stripped of valuables. Once out of Israel/Palestine, they were not allowed back, despite a UN order that they be allowed to do so. Israel later passed a law that classed any Palestinian trying to get back into the country to visit their home or land as an enemy infiltrator. Many were shot, or captured and expelled, trying to return to gather anything that might remain where they once lived, to check on the health of their trees, or attempt to harvest their crops.

After a truce in the middle of the year, a UN embargo prevented the Arab armies from replenishing their arms and ammunition, while the Israelis found ways around the embargo, so that once fighting resumed the balance had changed, and Israel went on to effectively win the war, ending with armistice deals between all parties except the Palestinians, who weren't included. By 1949 Egypt was left controlling the Gaza strip, and Jordan with the West Bank, but in the process Israel had seized huge amounts of the territory designated for the Palestinian state by the UN. In 1967 they seized the Gaza strip and West Bank, too. Incidentally, on Sept. 17th 1948 the Swede Count Bernadotte, who was sent to Jerusalem by the UN to act as a mediator, was assassinated by the Lehi terrorist group we're already familiar with. From this point, the UN understandably became less enamoured with supporting the Zionist cause no matter what. In December of 1949 UNWRA was founded to assist the Palestinian refugees, and the rest is history. These combined facts should make it clear that the Palestinians did not just pack up and leave forever by choice, and that the 'War of Independence' was not simply a matter of Israel being attacked by Arabs and successfully defending itself.

Israel has a right to defend itself

In normal circumstances – such as an invasion by another country – this is true. However, according to international law, as an occupying force it does not have the right to defend itself with military aggression against the people it is occupying (ie. the Palestinians). As an occupied people, international law recognises (in theory) the right of the Palestinians to resistance, including by violent means. In practice, this right is denied by Israel and its international supporters, who condemn Palestinian resistance as terrorism (whether it is or not) and call Israeli terrorism self defence (even when they strike first). As discussed above, even explicitly peaceful mass demonstrations such as the March of Return get portrayed as terrorist acts by the media, and are repressed as brutally as armed resistance. It seems that Israel is allowed to 'defend' itself even pre-emptively, but Palestinians subject to the whole spectrum of aggression are expected to just meekly take it, for life, generation after generation.

Hamas attacked innocent Israelis and committed atrocities (they are as bad as, or worse than, ISIS and the Nazis) so Israel's actions are justified

See also *Hamas and terrorism* above. Hamas are hardly the Girl Scouts, but to compare them to ISIS/IS/Daesh or the Nazis is going too far the other way. They have been responsible for terrible acts, and claimed by Israel to be responsible for even more terrible acts (but without credible evidence having been offered up for scrutiny). Yet Israel has also been responsible for terrible acts against Palestinians, with the full weight of a modern military and demographic superiority. It is a matter of PR, selling the exaggerated deeds of an enemy as evil, while minimising and transforming the same deeds committed by your own side as honourable and even restrained, because you are fighting for good. Since 1948, the number of Palestinian civilians killed, severely wounded, mutilated, raped or tortured by Israeli aggression vastly outnumbers casualties on the Israeli side. This is not comparable to the scale and nature of the death and misery wrought by the Nazis, and is not motivated by Nazi antisemitism or ethnic supremacy. In regards to ISIS/IS/Daesh, they are an extremist organisation which could be described as a death cult using false religious doctrines to justify the most appalling acts. They are rejected by the vast majority of the Muslim world and have nothing to do with genuine Islamic religion, as well as being enemies of Hamas. Hamas represents stricter interpretations of Islam than many people are comfortable with (including Palestinians), but they are not as extreme as Daesh or even the Taliban.

To discuss everything bad Hamas has ever been accused of is beyond the scope of this article, but we will look at the most recent event that has been used by Israel and complicit global media and Israel-allied western governments to portray Hamas as totally barbaric and evil, and to justify Israel's military response – October

7th 2023. I will try to be brief, as anyone reading this article already knows at least the basic story. The first most of us heard about it, we were told by the media that Hamas terrorists had broken through into Israel from Gaza, invaded a music festival, slaughtered as many people as they could and took hostages. The incursions into the nearby kibbutz and IDF base, as well as activities in other areas where insurgents broke through, were barely mentioned initially. A lot of gruesome tales quickly emerged, such as the infamous '40 beheaded babies'. What was subsequently ignored by the vast majority of the western media was that the most horrific claims were rather quickly exposed as total fabrications, by Israeli media and diligent independent journalists publishing on the internet. Many of the burned or mutilated bodies turned out to be dead Palestinians. Much of the rest was exposed as either lacking any supportive evidence beyond Israeli spokespeople saying 'trust us', or looking suspiciously like heavy IDF firepower was responsible for much of the carnage, rather than the light weapons carried by the Hamas and other insurgents.

It turned out that was an accurate observation, as IDF personnel and Israeli survivors came forward to tell how their own helicopter gunships had been ordered to fire on anything that moved when they showed up to the music festival, many revellers were shot in crossfire between insurgents and Israeli police, and tanks fired their cannons into Kibbutz houses knowing that there were Israeli captives inside as well as insurgents. This is deemed allowable due to the IDF's 'Hannibal Directive', a 'kill 'em all' tactic to avoid the taking of hostages who could be used as leverage against Israel. It is doubtful many Israeli citizens knew of the existence of this tactic before Oct. 7th, but now this has made it clear the state expects them to sacrifice themselves to the firepower of their own whenever the state deems it advantageous to the greater good. Somehow most of our media has chosen to avoid mentioning any of this, although all Israelis and anyone else with an internet connection either know all about it or can easily find out. The world was later shocked to find this even applied to hostages who had escaped and approached IDF forces naked, waving white flags, and shouting words to the effect of 'don't shoot, we're Israelis!' and were shot dead anyway.

It is possible that any of the remaining claimed war crimes from that day not known to be false but still unproven, such as alleged rapes, were committed by opportunistic criminals and undisciplined militants who piled into Israeli territory through the breached Gaza perimeter, as Hamas were not the only group with armed men coming from Gaza. Oct. 7th became so chaotic as the day unfolded, it is reasonable to acknowledge that Hamas could not control the behaviour of other factions with action taking place over a large area. Even so, whilst experts in these matters acknowledge that rape in wartime is ubiquitous by fighters from all sides, all over the world, this generally occurs during breaks in fighting, not whilst people are still running around shooting at each other. A lot of questions remain about what really happened, and who did what out of what really did happen. Israel has a long proven history of lying about its opponents and fabricating evidence, and that has been on rapid-fire open display since Oct. 7th, which should cast any claims from Israeli officialdom about Hamas subject to extreme suspicion, unless irrefutable evidence can be presented and independently assessed by a team of experts. Don't hold your breath.

Whether you believe them or not, Hamas have rejected claims that their own fighters committed any rapes, let alone using 'mass rape as a weapon of war'. They claim to adhere to a strict code that forbids mistreatment of women and children. Testimony from released hostages revealed that they were treated very well by their Hamas captors, surprising them more than anyone, given the terrible treatment they had been indoctrinated to expect. One woman in a Kibbutz with her children had Hamas insurgents enter her house, who assured her they would not be harmed because of their Muslim code, and asked for a banana from the fruit bowl, which was given; then they left without even taking anything else, let alone hostages! Needless to say, it didn't take long before the Israeli media stopped airing interviews with survivors who had personal stories to tell that didn't align with the officially promoted scenario.

Israel has deliberately obscured how many of the hostages were actually IDF personnel, as opposed to non-serving civilians, and it is now clear that the primary target of the insurgency was to attack IDF bases, police stations and kibbutzim, and take hostages from there. The Supernova music festival, between Gaza and the IDF base and nearby kibbutz Re'im, took the insurgents by surprise as they didn't know it would be there, having been moved to that location at short notice. There are suspicions this was a deliberate attempt to situate the festival as a human shield (see below for more discussion of human shields), because we now know that Israeli intelligence knew of the planned incursion a year before and took no measures to be on alert. The official statement is that they did not think Hamas could pull it off, and therefore didn't take it seriously. For a state as security-conscious and fond of heavy-handed prevention and 'first strike' deterrence as Israel, this

excuse beggars belief; normally, even the suspicion that a minor attack could happen would warrant the pre-emptive mobilisation of forces, to be ready and waiting on high alert in case something happens. This suggests the Israeli government intended to allow an atrocity to unfold (and as it turned out, contribute to the Israeli body-count themselves) in order to justify the destruction of Gaza and Hamas with it, followed by the subsequent re-annexation of Gaza into Greater Israel, and continued violent expulsions from the West Bank while most of the world is looking the other way. Even if Hamas did every terrible deed they have been accused of, it does not provide any legal or moral justification to collectively punish the entire population of Gaza (let alone the occupied territories), especially not to the extreme extent that Israel has taken it. Genocide is never justifiable, and Israelis should know that better than anyone.

It's not a genocide

People who say this in regards to Israel's actions either do not understand or do not care what genocide actually means. They may say something like "there are 2 million Palestinians in Gaza and Israel has 'only' killed a fraction of that, so it's not much of a genocide – if Israel wanted to kill them all they easily could, and the fact they haven't means they aren't trying to." It's sickening that tens of thousands of civilians can be slaughtered and there are people more concerned with genocide denial than calling it out and trying to stop it. According to the International Criminal Court, genocide is legally defined as "a crime committed with the intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, in whole or in part." This is a crime Israel has been perpetuating gradually in fits and bursts since 1948 (arguably before), and the intent has been made clear not only in declassified Israeli documents from that year, but in public statements ever since from Israeli political leaders and other politicians, government spokespeople, state-sponsored far-right rabbis, and the Arab-hating Israeli majority who support them. It is also clear that the current Israeli leadership (at the time of writing) intends to find a way to expel the remaining Palestinians who haven't yet been killed, so that Gaza can be reclaimed by greater Israel. Even if someone can't accept calling it genocide – or even attempted genocide – it is hard to deny a textbook plan of ethnic cleansing is being carried out. And in case anyone forgets, slaughtering civilians, turning their cities, refugee camps, hospitals and other infrastructure into rubble, and denying them access to food, clean water and medical supplies are war crimes and crimes against humanity.

'What would you do?'

It isn't unreasonable to ask, if you were being attacked by hostile forces, wouldn't you retaliate to defend yourself? Even most pacifists would probably say yes. The problem is, this fails to look at the situation from the Palestinian perspective, ignoring everything that has been done to them by Israel since 1948, and by Zionist settlers and British occupying forces in the decades before. Palestinians, too, are subject to terrifying attacks from Israelis, but endure far harsher daily living conditions than Israelis and do not have a real army or statehood to back them up. As an occupied people, they have a right to violent resistance according to international law, but most of the time, most Palestinians endure their treatment without resorting to violent retaliation, in which they are outnumbered, outgunned, and lacking the support of powerful nations or western media. Palestinian militias and their regional allies do sometimes launch violent attacks into Israel, but study of these events shows the majority to be reactions to first-strike Israeli aggression and oppression. Western media and governments tend to portray events in a way that ignores this, starting the narrative from the Palestinian aggression sparking an Israeli 'defensive' offensive in response. "We have no choice – what would you do?" This phrase is easily turned on its head to justify any violent acts of resistance or retaliation by Palestinians, because it could also be coming from their mouths, and with greater moral weight. If you and your family had to live the life of a Palestinian in Israel – having a real understanding of what that entails – what would you do?

Hamas uses human shields

Like many claims made by Israel about Palestinians and repeated uncritically by western media and government spokespeople, this has always lacked credible evidence. Israel repeatedly claims that Hamas uses human shields by situating their infrastructure, personnel and fighters amongst the civilian population, including in schools and hospitals, as well as driving around in ambulances. Any evidence offered to support these claims has turned out to be fake; usually no actual attempt at offering evidence is made, beyond assuring us that they definitely have the evidence but can't share it. (You may have noticed this last sentence has also applied to nearly all of Israel's claims since October 7th.) Gaza is so densely populated that Hamas, as the governing authority, has no choice but to exist surrounded by civilians. Israel uses this as an excuse to

bomb buildings (sometimes with last-minute warnings, but usually completely by surprise) including the schools and hospitals mentioned above, illegally use white phosphorous munitions on civilian areas and blow up ambulances ferrying the wounded, as though they had no choice in killing civilians en masse in order to kill 'terrorists'. Many Israelis regard all Palestinians as terrorists anyway, which allows them to accept mass civilian casualties not simply as 'collateral damage', but as a fate they deserve.

The legitimate use of human shields is when unarmed civilians place themselves in a potentially dangerous situation, such as a protest likely to be met with violent force, with the humanitarian assumption that their presence will ensure there is no violence meted out to break up the protest. If women, for example, march at the front of demonstrations of their own free will, they are called human shields by Israel, as though the women want to get beaten or shot for PR purposes. Israeli forces generally oblige anyway (preferably only if no cameras or press are present, but sometimes they can't help themselves and carry on regardless) and blame the victims for their fate. It's a lot like the old "look what you made me do" excuse from perpetrators of domestic violence. Sometimes sympathetic Israelis and international activists put themselves in these situations alongside the local Palestinians, hoping their presence will work to deter violence, as Israeli forces are more likely to be uncomfortable attacking fellow Israelis, and attacking foreigners is bad for their international image (what's left of it). However, even this doesn't always work, at least not for the Israeli protestors, who usually end up getting roughed up a bit and arrested if they refuse orders to leave.

On the other hand, Israel does use human shields, both its own citizens and Palestinians. IDF headquarters is situated in metropolitan Tel Aviv, surrounded by civilians, shopping malls and schools. IDF bases are likewise frequently nestled amongst civilian areas and near settlements, and armed soldiers roam the streets. Additionally, many Israelis have served in the IDF or are IDF reservists, and are armed or have quick access to a firearm if needed, making a large proportion of the civilian population effectively combatants in waiting. Clearly it can be argued this is necessary to protect the Israeli population, but it undeniably constitutes using their own people as human shields, and blurring the line between civilian and combatant. Furthermore, NGOs have gathered a large amount of evidence of IDF forces using Palestinians as human shields in different ways, such as by forcing people at gunpoint to go first into areas that may be mined.

Israel is doing everything it can to avoid harming civilians

To begin with, Israeli forces harm Palestinian civilians on a daily basis and on a wide scale, even when not 'at war'. Just walking from one place to another, any random Palestinian faces the threat of violence from armed Israelis. They may be arrested on the slightest suspicion of involvement in resistance activities of any kind, or even just for displaying a Palestinian flag, and languish in prison without charge, enduring extended torture in an attempt to force a confession for something, anything. The siege of Gaza since 2006 has undeniably harmed its civilian population by making it nearly impossible for them to have a normal life or support themselves and their families, and Israel can and does shut off the water supply (which they control) at any time, having bombed Gaza's only desalination plant years ago.

Rather high 'allowable' levels of civilian casualties, or 'collateral damage', are set when explosive strikes from armed drones or fighter/attack jets are made without warning in targeted assassinations; the more important the target is deemed to be, the higher the number of allowable collateral casualties. In practical terms this can mean dropping one of the most powerful high explosive bombs available on a multi-story residential building at night, to kill one man sleeping at home with his family. In the current era, the targets are chosen by AI, the 'mass assassination factory' recently exposed in the Israeli media. That this is the normal state of affairs says a lot about how little Palestinian lives register as important to Israel.

Israel claims that prior to bombing, it warns civilians to move to designated safe areas; what they don't acknowledge is that those safe areas are then bombed as well, and this obviously adds to the fear and uncertainty the people of Gaza are enduring, and dying with. Surely this is terrorism on a horrendous scale. Additionally, IDF forces have been caught on video beating civilians brutally, shooting dead civilians waving white flags with arms in the air, shooting at medical personnel trying to get the wounded to a hospital that hasn't yet been bombed and raided, and shooting journalists clearly identified as 'Press'. More journalists have been killed in Gaza since Oct. 7th than in any previous war. The IDF even brazenly attacked journalists in southern Lebanon – who were reporting to camera on fighting that could be seen across the border in Israel – with a helicopter gunship and tank fire. The whole incident was captured on video, which can be seen by anyone online because the cameras were not totally destroyed. Israel has always had a hostile attitude to

foreign press (even their own press) reporting from the Palestinian perspective, and these recent killings seem to represent a deliberate pattern of lethally silencing journalists to prevent the truth of what's happening emerging. Thanks to the brave journalists who have been killed in the line of duty, and those who continue to do their job despite knowing they could die at any moment, this time Israel has failed to control what the rest of the world gets to see. Within Israel, it's a different story.

When civilians, especially young children and babies, do get maimed or killed in Israeli attacks, the tendency has long been for Israelis, with much of the western world nodding along in agreement, to claim that the Palestinian casualties are play-acting with fake blood, the babies are actually dolls, and the wailing grief of the bereaved is also an act honed with years of practice. This continued into the early part of Israel's post-Oct. 7th assault, but with an added hypocrisy – notoriously, TikTok was awash with content from Israelis mocking Palestinians for their 'fake dead babies', but also cheering on the continuing slaughter and mocking Palestinians' very existence in extremely racist and sociopathic ways. Finally, it seems even Israelis acknowledge that Palestinian civilians, including thousands of babies and children, are indeed being slaughtered for real by Israel, but the sad flip side is that many don't actually care anyway.

Israel just wants peace, but Palestinians keep attacking us and refusing peace deals

Firstly, the protests against the Israeli government that have been growing in the early part of 2024 might give the impression to people in other parts of the world that many Israelis want real peace, and that they want the slaughter of Palestinians to stop. There are a small minority of Israelis who feel this way, and face violence and disgusting verbal abuse from the majority when they demonstrate. However it is important to recognise that the growing calls for Netanyahu to leave power have little to do with Palestinians, and a great deal to do with the loss of Israeli lives. IDF soldiers are being killed in greater numbers than the government is willing to admit, civilians are again suffering rocket attacks from Lebanon in response to Israeli aggression there, and the Israeli public is more aware than the rest of the world that the IDF and Israeli police killed many Israelis on Oct. 7th, probably a lot more out of the total death toll than they admit. Additionally, Israel is deliberately endangering its own hostages and has killed an unknown number of them by continuing the decimation of Gaza, effectively using them as human shields (see above) whilst simultaneously claiming that it is necessary to do this to save them, using them to the bitter end as a justification for genocide. This is why the families of the hostages, generally not pro-Palestinian by any stretch, are angrier right now at their own government than Hamas.

If Israel wants peace, it is peace on Israel's terms, with no meaningful concessions given to the Palestinians. The US-brokered 'peace process' has always been sold to the world as having failed to achieve a lasting peaceful resolution because of the Palestinian side being difficult, boycotting talks, making unreasonable demands and refusing good deals that have been tabled. We have been led to think Palestinians are negotiating in bad faith, and won't be happy until they get rid of all the Jews. A closer look reveals that this is a mirror image of the true history. Palestinian delegations (generally selected for the Palestinians by Israel, the US and other interested parties, almost like court-appointed lawyers) have repeatedly been offered terrible, insulting deals that don't promise to address any of the basic Palestinian conditions. Israel (as the dominant party) typically refused to compromise, dragging their feet whilst blaming the other side, all the while continuing to make life so miserable for Palestinians they would hopefully just leave for good and solve 'the Palestinian problem' by their absence.

A pre-condition to the 'peace talks' imposed by the US was that both sides should avoid doing anything to jeopardise the success of the talks, which for Israel specifically meant 'stop building illegal settlements in the West Bank for the time being', but Israel repeatedly ignored this and kept expanding the settlements. The intent is clearly both to signal to the US that even they cannot tell Israel what to do, and to permanently claim so much Palestinian territory illegally that in the event a true sovereign Palestinian state is forced upon Israel, they can just refuse to give back what they have already seized, leaving only scattered crumbs for the Palestinians, rendering their newfound sovereignty a lost cause before it even begins. For Israel, the peace process has always been a stalling tactic, dangling the promise of a possible Palestinian state, one day in the future, whilst expanding and consolidating the total domination of Palestinians still living on land Israel sees as its own inalienable right. Our media and governments facilitate this by promoting the entirely false impression that Israel is doing its best to carve a road to peace, if only the Palestinians would be reasonable.

Israel has never had a government willing to enter into a fair two-state resolution because that would involve giving back territory that the Israeli right-wing majority bitterly refuses to surrender; a fair one state resolution

is also not an option because giving Palestinians equal rights, including right of return to homes in Israel they were forced to leave, would completely negate the existence of the exclusively Jewish state the same right-wing majority insists on. The only leader willing to make some concessions was Yitzhak Rabin, who signed the Oslo Accords with Yassir Arafat in 1993, but after a period of appalling incitement, outrage and murderous vitriol from the right-wing majority (including the Likud party) Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish extremist for his efforts. The Oslo Accords were actually a terrible deal for Palestinians, approved by inexperienced negotiators for the PLO who did not realise they had been tricked into accepting a deal that was basically no different to the rejected deals of the past. But they seemed to offer the only possibility for peace at the time, and Arafat reluctantly signed knowing it was a bad compromise, hoping some good would come of it. However, after Rabin's sudden death Benjamin Netanyahu swept to power and only implemented the parts of the Oslo Accords that he liked, tightening the screws on the Palestinians in new ways as the prospect of peace receded into the distance. Things have only gotten worse since then as Israel's far-right tendencies have become more entrenched and emboldened in the belligerent domination of every aspect of Palestinian's lives.

'From the River to the Sea' means Palestinians want to drive all the Jews into the sea

This phrase or slogan actually derives from the 1977 charter of the Likud party, the far-right political party in power headed by Benjamin Netanyahu at the time of writing. The wording was different, but the meaning the same, in favour of Israel – "Between the sea and the Jordan there will only be Israeli sovereignty." Pro-Palestine advocates rephrased it, perhaps because it rhymes with 'Palestine will be free'. This means different things to different people, but there is broad agreement that it is not calling for anyone to be driven into the sea. What it is calling for is for Palestinians to be able to live as free and equal citizens in the whole territory of Israel/Palestine. Incidentally, the Likud charter also states that "The right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel is eternal and indisputable", a core Zionist belief shared by most Israeli political parties which doesn't leave much room for negotiation of an equitable resolution. Such a position is further evidence that Israel has no intention of allowing genuine Palestinian sovereignty. It's worth adding that in 1948, Israeli forces themselves drove unarmed Palestinians into the sea, even shooting at their small boats; many drowned.

Israel is a progressive, liberal democracy, and Palestinians have rights there like everyone else – what more do they want?

Modern Israel has long presented itself to the rest of the world in this way. Representatives of the Israeli government and its affiliated 'grass roots' influence organisations frequently take politicians and other influential people on curated tours of Israel and the occupied territories, making sure they only see the good things. They even manage to find some Palestinians to tell the visitors how they enjoy equal rights and experience no bad treatment or racism. Peeking behind the curtain of PR, it is clearly apparent that this is false, or at best true only if you look at certain examples in isolation. But let's get one thing out of the way first – Israel frequently tries to court a positive image by claiming it is the only democracy in the Middle East. That may have been true in the past, but Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Kuwait (and arguably Iraq) are democratic countries to varying degrees.

Israel began with left-wing leanings when it came to Jewish people, but right-wing when it came to Palestinians and anyone else who might potentially be a threat. From the 1967 war, Israeli society and politics swung more and more to the right, to the point where in the last few decades Israel has become scarily far-right. Open, virulent racism and street attacks on Arabs and African immigrants, as well as Christians of any ethnicity or nationality, seem to be normal in parts of Israel and the occupied West Bank. Many examples can easily be found on Youtube and social media, as well as shockingly candid vox pop street interviews with random Israeli citizens cheerily endorsing the genocide of Arabs (and this has been happening since long before October 7th). The political parties and citizens who think of themselves as left-wing and moderate are actually centre-right by normal standards elsewhere, and people who are truly left-wing comprise the very few – some estimates say around 3% of the population – who support Palestinian rights to equal treatment and their land. These brave few face constant surveillance, abuse, death threats and harassment, much like Palestinians themselves.

Laws have changed over time regarding the rights of Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories, usually in a negative trend of ever-shrinking Palestinian rights. In Israel, theoretically Palestinians have normal legal rights in many ways, whilst some rights are for Israeli citizens only. To become a citizen, a Palestinian must sign a loyalty pact that asserts the recognition of Israel as a Jewish state, and as a citizen a Palestinian Israeli

supposedly has equal rights to Jewish Israelis, as long as they accept that they are on a lower rung of the social hierarchy. In real life, these rights can be conveniently forgotten at any time, especially if problems arise between a Jewish citizen and a Palestinian citizen. In such cases the police, courts, government and society at large almost always enforce a result in favour of the Jewish citizen, regardless of facts or fairness.

The Israeli establishment has always been fixated on maintaining a strong Jewish majority, driving towards the ultimate goal of an exclusively Jewish ethno-state as promised by Zionism. In terms of population demographics, this has been achieved by pushing Palestinians into Gaza, the West Bank or refugee camps in neighbouring countries after bulldozing or taking over their homes with forced evacuation at very short notice; encircling and fragmenting Arab communities with new Jewish communities (including illegal settlements) to prevent them from growing and consolidating; and denying building permits to Arabs. These and other methods are aimed at making life incredibly difficult and unpleasant in the hope that the Palestinian population will leave voluntarily, and if that doesn't work, they are eventually removed by force, dwellings bulldozed and the land seized. Palestinian representatives in the Knesset are and will always remain a tiny minority voice, regularly showered with vile insults and verbal and physical abuse within Knesset sittings (many examples are described in Max Blumenthal's must-read book 'Goliath', listed at the end of this paper). Their presence is effectively purely symbolic, enduring just by their presence, which says "whatever you do to us, we are not going anywhere." With this in mind, although Israel is technically a democracy, today it is only a democracy for the right-wing Jewish majority.

In the occupied territories of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Palestinians have almost no rights, and live under military law. They are officially governed by the Palestinian Authority, but this simply acts as a Palestinian-run administrative proxy for Israel, and it does what Israel wants. PA members enjoy more rights (or rather, privileges) than the citizens in exchange for cooperation with Israeli forces. Movement is heavily restricted, especially if Palestinians need to pass over into West Jerusalem or Israel proper, where there are many roads they are not allowed to drive on, and areas they are not allowed to go. Between the IDF, Border Police, Shin Bet (the Israeli secret police) and armed extremists from the illegal settlements, Palestinians are constantly hassled. Men, women and children are daily stopped and searched (sometimes strip-searched), beaten without cause, subjected to humiliating treatment, and forced to do pointless actions such as standing on one leg on a rock while blindfolded for as long as the soldiers find it amusing. Identity cards, which Palestinians need to be able to go about their business without being arrested at the next random checkpoint or inspection, can be confiscated at the whim of soldiers or armed settlers.

The situation was much the same in Gaza until Israel pulled out from its occupation in 2005-2006, and subsequently walled in the whole area and maintained it ever since as a self-governed open-air prison which they occasionally bomb and invade. Israel controls what goes in and what goes out (even to the extent of carrying out illegal piracy in international waters of the Mediterranean Sea), and very little is allowed either way, which necessitated smuggling of goods through underground tunnels. In terms of the meagre food items allowed in, the Israeli government calculated the minimum amount of food required to allow the population of Gaza to not quite starve. People who need to travel to hospitals in the occupied territories for vital medical care or surgery need to apply for permission, which is frequently refused after weeks, months or years of waiting, by which time the people may have died. This is also the case for mothers trying to get a travel permit so they can be with their sick child, who is in a far away hospital alone and scared. Of course, since October 7th even these conditions are a luxurious fantasy.

Concluding remarks

This is indeed a complex topic, with many avenues to be explored. This article doesn't claim to be comprehensive, and there's a lot that hasn't been covered in order to keep things concise. It was initially meant to be only a few pages long, but once the writing began I realised that I couldn't do the subject matter justice with a few bullet points or overly simplified summaries. Those will not get you far in a real debate. To the best of my knowledge the information presented here is accurate, and is presented as a jumping-off point for you to research the history and facts yourself.

Further research – a selection

Books

- The Balfour Declaration – Empire, the Mandate and Resistance in Palestine. Bernard Regan, 2017.
- Between River and Sea – Encounters in Israel and Palestine. Dervla Murphy, 2015.
- The Biggest Prison on Earth – A History of the Occupied Territories. Ilan Pappé, 2017.
- Brokers of Deceit – How the US has Undermined Peace in the Middle East. Rashid Khalidi, 2013.
- Footnotes in Gaza. Joe Sacco, 2009.
- Goliath – Life and Loathing in Greater Israel. Max Blumenthal, 2013.
- The History of Modern Palestine. Ilan Pappé, 2022 (3rd edition).
- Palestine. Joe Sacco, 2003 (1993-1996).
- Palestine Hijacked – How Zionism Forged an Apartheid State from River to Sea. Thomas Suarez, 2022.
- Palestine in Israeli School Books – Ideology and Propaganda in Education. Nurit Peled-Elhanan, 2012.
- State of Terror – How Terrorism Created Modern Israel. Thomas Suárez, 2016.

Papers, articles and documents

- ‘A mass assassination factory’: Inside Israel’s calculated bombing of Gaza. Yuval Abraham. +972 Magazine, November 30, 2023. <https://www.972mag.com/mass-assassination-factory-israel-calculated-bombing-gaza/>
- A Threshold Crossed – Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution. Human Rights Watch Report, 2021.
- Deligitimizing solidarity: Israel smears Palestine advocacy as anti-semitic. Ben White. Journal of Palestine Studies 49(2):65-79, 2020.
- Here’s what Pramila Patten’s UN report on Oct 7 sexual violence actually said. Feminist Solidarity Network for Palestine, March 11. 2024. <https://mondoweiss.net/2024/03/heres-what-pramila-pattens-un-report-on-oct-7-sexual-violence-actually-said/>
- How Israeli forces trapped and killed ravers at the Nova Festival. William Van Wagenen, Jan 12, 2024. <https://new.thecradle.co/articles-id/18526>
- Inside the Pro-Israel Information War. Lee Fang & Jack Poulson, Dec 8, 2023. <https://www.leefang.com/p/inside-the-pro-israel-information>
- Israel deliberately forgets its history. Shlomo Sand. Le Monde Diplomatique, September 2008. <https://mondediplo.com/2008/09/07israel>
- Israeli general killed Israelis on 7 October then lied about it. Ali Abunimah & David Sheen, Dec 24, 2023. <https://electronicintifada.net/content/israeli-general-killed-israelis-7-october-then-lied-about-it/43176>
- Israel’s historical role in the rise of Hamas. Brahma Chellaney, Nov. 21, 2023. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2023/11/21/world/israel-failed-policy/>
- Jewish Terrorism and the Modern Middle East. David A Charters. The Journal of Conflict Studies, Winter 2007:80-89.

Media Bias Gaza 2023-24. Faisal Hanif. Centre For Media Monitoring Report, March 2024.

Meta's Broken Promises – Systemic Censorship of Palestine Content on Instagram and Facebook. Human Rights Watch Report, 2023.

U.S. Sponsorship of International Terrorism: An Overview. Edward S. Herman. Crime and Social Justice 27/28:1-31, 1987.

Documentaries

Budrus (2009)

5 Broken Cameras (2011)

Gaza Fights For Freedom (2019)

The Great Book Robbery (2012)

Israelism (2023)

Israel Vs Israel (2010)

The Lobby (2017)

The Lobby: U.S.A. (2018)

1948: Creation and Catastrophe (2017)

The Occupation Of The American Mind (2016)

On The Side Of The Road (2013)

Palestine Is Still The Issue (2002)

Tantura (2022)

The War Around Us (2013) [warning: this features a lot of graphic and distressing footage]

Web resources

Australian Palestine Advocacy Network. <https://apan.org.au>

Breaking the Silence. <https://www.breakingthesilence.org.il>

The Electronic Intifada. <https://electronicintifada.net>

Jewish Voice For Peace. <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org>