



# DISCUSSING GENOCIDE

A RESOURCE FOR REFLECTION  
AND DISCERNMENT

*Partners for Progressive Israel is a progressive American Zionist organization dedicated to the achievement of a durable and just peace between the State of Israel and its neighbors, which includes an end to Israel's occupation based on a two-state solution. We support Israelis working to ensure social justice, civil rights, and equality for all of Israel's inhabitants. Partners promotes a just Israeli society by cultivating Jewish-Arab partnerships and seeks to deepen American Jews' understanding of the complexities of both Israeli and Palestinian societies.*

# A RESOURCE FOR REFLECTION AND DISCERNMENT

Our hearts have been shattered since October 7th, 2023. The terror attacks perpetrated by Hamas on that day were war crimes, and took the lives of at least 1,200 people, including some of our close organizing partners in Israel. We continue to sit with worry and grief for over the two hundred and three hostages taken from Israel to Gaza that day, forty-eight of whom remain in Gaza. Israelis and Palestinians both have a right to be safe and free, and we understand the Israeli government to have been well within its rights to respond militarily to these horrific attacks. Two years after this terrible day, however, we are witnessing continued military action in Gaza without a clear or achievable strategic objective articulated by Israel's leadership, and even [public disagreement](#) between the Israeli government and military heads.



## Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1951), Article II

Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

The allegations that Israel has been committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza in the midst of its campaign against Hamas are heartbreaking. In our profound care for our communities, and with our particular connection to Israel, there is deep pain in this conversation, and even more in the reality of what is happening in Gaza every day. We cannot deny: the current Israeli government has been initiating acts that appear to fall under the [Genocide Convention of 1951](#).

We realize that among Jews who have built their political home amongst a broader progressive movement, there is particular pain in acknowledging that a genocide is taking place in Gaza. Many of us get “stuck” along certain lines of thinking and feeling – confusion, denial, shame, heartbreak, and so much more. However, we cannot let our grief and our deep distress keep us from continuing to shy away from the catastrophe occurring every day in Gaza. The pain of acknowledging this is acute. And it cannot stand in the way of telling the truth about what we are collectively witnessing. **At Partners, we are sharing this resource after a long process of discernment and reflection, to help our community move through our fear, our grief, and our hesitancy to confront this reality head-on.**

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## WHY “GENOCIDE?”

While the texts and precedents of international human rights law are evolving and are only as strong as the institutions and communities that articulate and enforce them, they provide clear assertions of [the rights of all civilians](#) during war and mass atrocity. **Recognition of a genocide reflects the international community’s responsibility to protect all civilians in the region and to prevent further death and loss, as outlined in [Article I of the Genocide Convention](#).**

Our invocation of the legal definition of genocide is not about trying to “say the right thing,” or present a litmus test to the progressive political ecosystem. We are deeply concerned and our hope is that a broad understanding will unite us and enable building wide and effective coalitions to effect an immediate political resolution to the crisis for Palestinians that we are witnessing.

This shift in our own language is in service of our desire to ensure the human rights of every single person in this Land that we hold dear. We recognize the genocide in Gaza alongside other attempts at genocide currently underway globally, including of the Rohingya in Myanmar, the actions of the RSF and allied militias in Darfur, or by Russian military officials towards Ukrainians. These are all situations that require international action at this moment. However, our organizational mission is one of education about and deep connection with Israelis and Palestinians fighting for human rights. We cannot move forward without a deep reckoning specifically with the events of the last two years in the Land.

We do not want to simply wait for this war to end while insisting on a political resolution, but rather feel obligated to play a role within our spheres of influence to actively help bring this war to an end.

**We do not wish to wring our hands in regret years down the line when international investigating bodies conclude post-facto that a genocide has occurred: we feel obliged to play a role in helping to end this now.**

We share in the grief experienced by Israelis on October 7th. And we cannot be partners in building a better future for everyone between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River if we hold ourselves back from confronting the depth of devastation Palestinians have experienced since October 8th. We also share in Palestinian grief and pain.

Supporting the human rights of Israelis and Palestinians means not only listening to Palestinians or acknowledging a narrative held widely in the Palestinian community, but being accountable to both communities.

**Human rights are not a zero-sum game: recognizing and protecting the human rights of Palestinians does not in any way lessen the human rights of Israelis.**

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## DID A GENOCIDE START ON OCTOBER 8TH, 2023?

A major part of the legal definition of genocide is the establishment of the intent of the perpetrating party, alongside the actualization of the violence that falls under the purview of the Genocide convention. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant invoked dehumanizing language in the immediate days after the Hamas attacks on October 7th, and used this language in conjunction with outlining their plans for an Israeli military response to Hamas. We also must acknowledge that there was explicit intent by Hamas leadership in the planning and perpetration of the massacres of October 7th. These are clear war crimes, and this intent has also been recognized by international war crimes bodies and should be prosecuted as such. In the present moment, Hamas does not have the physical capability to further actualize its genocidal intent and perpetrate additional war crimes on this scale.

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"It's an entire nation out there that is responsible. It is not true, this rhetoric about civilians who were not aware and not involved. It is absolutely not true." – Israeli President **Isaac Herzog**, Oct. 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023

"Vengeance is a great value. There is vengeance for what they did to us... in 100 years they will know that you don't mess with the Jews. It will take so many years to revive from this blow... this place will be a fallow land. They will not be able to live here." – IDF Col. **Erez Eshel**, Nov. 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023

"I have ordered a complete siege on the Gaza Strip. There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed...We are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly." Former Israeli Minister of Defense (2022-2024) **Yoav Gallant**, October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023

"Bring down buildings!! Bomb without distinction!! Stop with this impotence. You have the ability. There is worldwide legitimacy! Flatten Gaza. Without mercy! This time, there is no room for mercy!" – Member of Knesset **Tally Gotliv**, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023

This dehumanizing language has also been invoked by current and former members of Israel's security cabinet, prior to the October 7th attacks and the military response by Israel. While we understand the Israeli government to be within its rights to militarily respond to Hamas after its attacks on October 7th, 2023, it is clear to us that the implementation of this military response and the wider campaign of manufactured famine and systematic destruction in Gaza and of its residents has actualized the threat present in this language.

**It is the responsibility, ultimately, of legal bodies to determine when this threat of systematic destruction of Palestinian people in Gaza was made manifest, but we cannot deny what we are now witnessing.**



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## WHAT'S HAPPENING IN GAZA DOESN'T LOOK LIKE THE HOLOCAUST – AND THAT'S BECAUSE IT ISN'T

*The Holocaust was genocide on an extreme scale and characterized by a unique mechanized system of mass murder by the state. The legal definition of genocide – the one we invoke to call upon the responsibility of the international community in this moment – includes the Holocaust but also a number of other historic and contemporary manifestations.*

*"The fact that there are already 50,000 dead in Gaza is necessary and required for future generations... for every Israeli killed on October 7th, fifty Palestinians should die."*

*"It doesn't matter if they're children. I'm not speaking out of revenge. I'm talking about a message for future generations. From time to time, they need a Nakba to feel the cost."*

-Former Israeli Major General  
**Aharon Haliva**, head of the IDF  
Military Intelligence Directorate  
from October 2021- April 2024

For many of us, the Holocaust was our original measure of genocide, until we realized every genocide is different. We have read about and know descendants of survivors of the genocides in Namibia and Armenia, and we have witnessed in our own lifetimes the genocides of Srebrenica, Rwanda, Darfur, Myanmar, and of the Yazidis. None of these were a Holocaust, but that does not mean they were not genocides. Similarly, the Israeli government is not the only government whose leadership is currently facing an indictment from international criminal courts for crimes against humanity: these include Russian, Filipino, and Libyan former governmental leaders, as well as leaders of Hamas and AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb).

We do not claim that the Israeli government is actively trying to exterminate every Palestinian, **though several of its ministers have made clear statements in that direction.** Rather, the repeated wanton disregard for Palestinian lives over the past 22 months in its (originally justified) reaction to the barbarous atrocities Hamas committed on October 7, 2023, provide probative evidence that the current Israeli government is intentionally attempting to destroy a "part [of] a national, ethnical, racial or religious group..." (*Genocide Convention, Art. II*). It is not an accident that when speaking recently about the scale of death in Gaza, former military intelligence chief Aharon Haliva insisted that, "[from time to time, \[Palestinians\] need another Nakba.](#)"

Israel has not allowed international observers or media into Gaza in any substantial way in the past two years, so it is difficult to fully evaluate the scope of the devastation on the ground. Despite this, in late August of this year the IPC – **the Integrated Food Systems Phase Classification** body comprised of twenty one organizations and intergovernmental institutions – [officially recognized a famine](#) in Gaza, highlighting ongoing military maneuvers, civilian displacement, restricted access to humanitarian aid and supplies, and a total collapse of food systems in the enclave: "After 22 months of relentless conflict, over half a million people in the Gaza Strip are facing catastrophic conditions characterized by starvation, destitution and death." This is a manufactured famine that puts no less than one in four Palestinians in Gaza at immediate risk. This famine, which is occurring against a backdrop of conflict that has been marked by the targeting of international journalists, the "[erasure](#)" of Northern Gaza in late 2024, and the establishment of "[buffer zones](#)" by the Israeli military within Gaza that have led to the complete destruction of infrastructure, homes, and agriculture in these zones. Our colleagues at **Physicians for Human Rights-Israel** have also mapped the systemic destruction of the entire medical and healthcare infrastructure system within Gaza in their [sixty-five page, detailed report](#). **We are witnessing forced starvation, collective punishment and destruction of Palestinians** within Gaza, without regard to their involvement with Hamas or other militant groups.

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## IF THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT IS PERPETRATING GENOCIDE, WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES?

As an involved member of the international community of nations, Israel's political and military leaders can be held accountable for the perpetration of war crimes including collective punishment, ethnic cleansing, forced mass transfer, and genocide, but this accountability does not mean that Israeli civilians in any way forfeit recognition of their own human and national rights.

Many in the international Jewish community have an unspoken or even explicit concern that Israel will cease to exist if the extent of its war crimes are confronted. Threats from countries and movements overtly hostile to Israel's existence only exacerbate this fear. But let us be clear: This is not on the table with the organized international community, nor is it in the purview of the International Criminal Court nor the International Court of Justice. As this document was written, the international community— including the nations of the Arab League —voted in the UN General Assembly to comprehensively recognize Israel's international standing as part of support for a two state solution to the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

As the Israeli-born professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Brown University Omer Bartov recently [reflected](#), regimes that embrace apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and/or fascist models of governance actually do not last very long on the world stage. We care about Israeli sovereignty, safety, and self-determination, and keeping Israel from continuing down this path also preserves the long-term safety and legitimacy of a Jewish and democratic state. The psychological impacts of this war on a generation of Israelis also cannot be understated – [studies](#) are now showing that the moral injury and [psychological impact](#) on not just civilians but even [currently-serving soldiers](#) is devastating.

There is no way we can move forward without a deep reckoning regarding the ideologies and rhetoric, as well as the pogromist and state violence, that has led to this moment. We cannot say where that reckoning will end, and acknowledge that this prospect is deeply frightening for many in our communities. At the same time, those fears cannot take precedence over the reality of the existing and ongoing suffering in Gaza.

Since the 1950s various countries have been accused of apartheid, ethnic cleansing, genocide and other internationally recognized crimes. Some have been held internationally accountable, but their peoples' rights to self-determination and international recognition as a nation have not been revoked or even questioned because ***this is not the function nor within the power of international legal bodies.***

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# WHO IS TO BLAME FOR THIS?



Graffiti in Tel Aviv reading "Grandma, what did you do during the genocide?"

We do not indict "Israel." Rather, we specifically accuse the current far-right Israeli government of going so far outside of its mandate that it has become politically illegitimate, and puts Israel well on the path to becoming a pariah among the nations.

We stand with the two thirds of the Israeli populace that has repeatedly spoken out, through demonstrations and in polling, for ending the war immediately and the return of the remaining hostages. This rogue government's illegitimacy is further demonstrated by its current bloody campaign to reoccupy Gaza City and to move a million Palestinians to the already destroyed south of the enclave, disregarding the clear opposition of most Israeli citizens, besides the further calamity for Gazans.



"In Gaza and in Sderot, children want to live"

The ultranationalist and Kahanist ideology embraced by Israel's current administration has been present among a larger conversation within the Zionist community for decades. While as Jews we are aware of and embrace the multivocal political conversation that has fueled the Jewish national project in the last century and a half, we also must acknowledge and work to much more effectively reject not only the existence of this strain of thought, but also of its actualization in the Land and its material consequences for generations of Palestinians.



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## I'M AGAINST THE OCCUPATION, BUT HOW DOES THIS WAR FACTOR IN?

At the root of all of this, of course, is the disastrous and continuous occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The same forces that have carried out this ruinous war are attempting to annex these areas, which most of the world has already recognized as the state of Palestine.

Israel was founded as a democracy, and has continued as one recognized by the international community— albeit one that in 1967 occupied significant amounts of territory that it explicitly did not annex to avoid what it deemed a “demographic issue,” i.e. creating an enfranchised Palestinian majority with Israeli citizenship. We cannot ignore either the clarion call of Israel's Declaration of Independence nor the reality of the context in which it was made. Israel's ability to continue as a democratic state requires not only the end to the genocide in Gaza, but also of the Occupation.

**Most immediately, we need an end to this war, a full hostage exchange deal, and the immediate surge of food, medical aid, and international observers into Gaza. As we have stated for decades as an organization, any peaceful long-term future for Israelis and Palestinians will also include an end to the Occupation.**

We salute with respect the Israeli, Palestinian, and international scholars and organizations (including our colleagues at Physicians for Human Rights and at Combatants for Peace) whose careful and wise analyses preceded us, and the two million Palestinians in Gaza who have worked under unimaginable conditions to tell the truth of their experiences – indeed, we draft this resource in both gratitude and accountability to their work.

We reiterate our support for the state of Israel envisioned by Israel's Declaration of Independence, while recognizing the material consequences that have been born by Palestinians since the Nakba, and assert that acknowledgement of Palestinian existence and rights are an essential component of any future for the region.