

THE HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF ISRAEL'S WAR ON THE GAZA STRIP

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Introduction

Israeli and Western political officials and representatives often intentionally decontextualise the 7 October events, speaking as if they happened in a historical vacuum. Contextualising the events offers a different interpretation. This is not to justify what happened; instead, to try to understand the events within a wider history of dispossession and colonisation. In addition, it acknowledges the political context that includes escalating settler attacks in the West Bank, and Israeli politicians openly telling Palestinians to leave. Through contextualisation, we come to see Israel's attack on the Gaza Strip as a continuation of past efforts to eliminate and replace Palestinians.

After the October events, settler attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank and Israeli home demolitions in East Jerusalem increased. On 27 October 2023, West Bank settlers distributed leaflets in Salfit, near Nablus, warning Palestinian residents: "By God, we will descend upon your heads with a great catastrophe soon. You have the last chance to escape to Jordan in an organised manner."¹ In Israel, extremist activists and some Likud politicians, including Bezalel Smotrich, the finance minister, called for Gazans to be evicted from the Strip and for settlements to be (re)constructed.²

Israel's war on the Gaza Strip

In the period 7 October 2023-2 April 2024, more than 5,479 students and 261 teachers were killed in the Strip, with all schools damaged or destroyed entirely. All universities were destroyed, impacting 200,000 students. On 17 January 2024, the Israeli army posted social footage of its forces destroying Al-Israa University, in the south of the Strip, with explosives.³ This is part of a broader destruction that does not just target Gazans but also West Bank Palestinians (including Jerusalemites) and even Palestinian citizens of Israel. Surgeon Dr. Ghassan Abu Sitta, who is helping treat victims of Israeli bombing at the Al-Ahli Baptist

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¹ Shalash, Fayha. (2023). "Israel-Palestine war: Settlers Threaten West Bank Children with Bloody Dolls". *Middle East Eye*, 27 October. [Israel-Palestine war: Settlers threaten West Bank children with bloody dolls | Middle East Eye](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-settlers-threaten-west-bank-children-with-bloody-dolls)

² Al Jazeera (2024). Israeli Ministers Join Gathering Calling for Resettlement of Gaza, *Al-Jazeera*, 29 January. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/29/israeli-ministers-join-gathering-calling-for-rebuilding-settlements-in-gaza>

³ Euro-Med Monitor (2024). Israel Kills Dozens of Academics, Destroys Every University in the Gaza Strip, *Euro-Med Monitor*, 20 January. <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/israel-kills-dozens-academics-destroys-every-university-gaza-strip-enar>

Hospital in Gaza, claims “[t]his is a war unlike any and its aim is to make Gaza uninhabitable,”⁴ adding it is a continuation of the 1948 Nakba that sought to expel Palestinians from their land. Indeed, declassified documents show that Israeli politicians discussed the transfer of Gazans,⁵ continuing a theme deeply inscribed in Zionism since its inception.⁶

Abu Sitta works in a wider environment where the targeting of Palestinian healthcare centres, hospitals and medical care staff has left them barely functioning. On 15 February, Israeli forces raided Nasser Hospital, in Khan Younis, arresting, stripping and beating doctors and medical staff.⁷ In mid-March, Israeli forces raided and attacked Al-Shifa, the largest hospital in the Strip, besieging the hospital for two weeks, killing health workers and patients, including Dr Ahmad al-Maqadmeh, a plastic surgeon, and his mother, a general practitioner, killed in their home near the hospital.

On 2 May, Dr. Adnan al-Bursh, head of orthopaedic medicine at al-Shifa hospital, died in an Israeli prison more than four months after his arrest⁸ – the Israeli prison service has given no details and continues to hold his body. Like al-Bursh, Palestinians are subjected to harsh conditions, cut off from the outside world, deprived of basic needs, and physically and verbally abused, including the two detainees found dead in the temporary detention facility in Sde Teiman, in the Naqab, on 28 May: two names to be added to the 35 others killed here since 7 October.⁹ One Israeli doctor, after visiting a field hospital holding about 600 Gazan prisoners, expressed no surprise when encountering two prisoners who needed to have their legs amputated as a result of handcuff injuries, and instead reflected this was a routine occurrence.¹⁰

Along with causing catastrophic loss of life, Israel has destroyed countless Palestinian institutions, including cultural and religious sites and healthcare and educational facilities. Israeli airstrikes on the Strip have damaged and destroyed more than 200 cultural and archaeological sites, including the oldest Omari mosque in Gaza.¹¹

⁴ Taawon. (2023) “Taawon Talks Guest Speaker Dr. Ghassan Abu-Sittah”, YouTube, 10 November. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDx-bXrORHQ>

⁵ Raz, Adam (2021). When the Shin Bet Chief Warned That Educated Arabs Are a ‘Problem’ for Israel. *Haaretz*, 16 September. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-when-the-shin-bet-chief-warned-that-educated-arabs-are-a-problem-for-israel-1.10214323>

⁶ Masalha, Nur (1992) “Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of ‘Transfer’ in Zionist Political Thought, 1882-1948”. In Gabriel Piterberg (ed.) *The Returns of Zionism: Myths, Politics and Scholarship in Israel*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies. 2008. London: Verso.

⁷ Cuddy, Alice (2024). Gaza medics tell BBC that Israeli troops beat and humiliated them after hospital raid. *BBC*, 12 March. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-68513408>

⁸ Middle East Eye (2024). “War on Gaza: Prominent Palestinian Doctor Tortured and Killed in Israeli Detention”, *Middle East Eye*, 2 May. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/war-gaza-prominent-palestinian-doctor-tortured-and-killed-israeli-detention>

⁹ Peleg, Bar and Breiner Josh (2024). Internal IDF Report Finds Two Gazans Died After Being Beaten en Route to Israeli Prison. *Haaretz*, 28 May. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-05-28/ty-article/.premium/sources-idf-report-finds-two-gazans-died-after-being-beaten-en-route-to-israeli-prison/0000018f-bbbb-df3d-abbf-bffb68980000>

¹⁰ Shezaf, Hagar and Hauser Tov, Michael (2024). “Doctor at Israeli Field Hospital for Detained Gazans: ‘We Are All Complicit in Breaking the Law’”, *Haaretz*, 4 April. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-04-04/ty-article/.premium/doctor-at-idf-field-hospital-for-detained-gazans-we-are-all-implicit-in-breaking-law/0000018e-a59c-dfed-ad9f-afdfb5ce0000>

¹¹ Librarians and Archivists with Palestine (LAP) (2024) *Israeli Damage to Archives, Libraries, and Museums in Gaza*, October 2023-January 2024. N.D: LAP. <https://librarianswithpalestine.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/LAP-Gaza-Report-2024.pdf>

Prominent academics have also been killed, including Professor Sufyan Tayeh, the president of the Islamic University and among the top two percent of physics and applied mathematics researchers in the world, who was killed alongside his family. Palestinians, in reflecting on his and other educator deaths, speak of “educide”. The Palestinian sporting community has also been badly affected, with football and sports infrastructure, stadiums, and the Palestine Football Association headquarters damaged or destroyed. After the Israeli army turned Yarmouk Stadium into an internment camp, Israeli soldiers posted photos of themselves on social media on February 2024, showing them raising the Israeli flag alongside blindfolded Palestinians in their underwear.¹²

Some context

The colonial reality has consolidated since the “peace process” came into effect in 1993. Fragmentation, corresponding to the development and application of different administrative regimes and rules, became an established reality; Jerusalem, due to the introduction of a permit system, also became increasingly inaccessible to Palestinians outside the city, with settlement construction and Palestinian evictions also increasing in East Jerusalem. The Gaza Strip and the West Bank also became increasingly cut off from each other.

After the Second Intifada broke out, the colonial reality further consolidated, with the construction of roadblocks, checkpoints, settlements, and the apartheid wall all further accelerating the “Bantustanisation” of the West Bank. After Hamas seized the Gaza Strip on 14 June 2007, the Palestinian Authority, coming under growing international pressure, recommitted to its role as an effective security subcontractor, endeavouring, with renewed commitment, to crush resistance and internal dissent and opposition.¹³


Conclusion: future prospects

Palestinians remain steadfast in their resistance and participation in international anti-colonial movements and solidarity groups that demand justice and for Israel to be held accountable, investing hope and optimism in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. In western countries, most notably the US, mobilisation in universities manifests in students calling on their institutions to divest from Israeli higher education establishments and cut ties with corporations who invest in Israeli weapons and arms.

As before 7 October, international law has also been an important accompaniment to these struggles. On 29 December 2023, legal representatives of the South African government registered a legal submission with the International Court of Justice (ICJ), accusing Israel of violating its commitments under the 1948 Genocide Convention before, on 24 May, the Court ordered Israel to immediately halt its military attack on Rafah. While the Israeli government ignored this order, it nonetheless further fed into a growing international predisposition to see Israel's actions as indefensible and “beyond the pale”.

¹² Karim, Zidan (2024). “The Systematic Destruction of Gaza's Football Stadiums”, *Sports Politika*, 27 February. <https://www.sportspolitika.news/p/gaza-football-stadiums-israel-war>

¹³ Naser-Najjab, N. and Hever, S. (2021). “Elite and Popular Contradictions in Security Coordination: Overcoming the Binary Distinction of the Israeli Coloniser and the Colonised Palestinian”. *Critical Studies on Security* 9(2), pp.112-125.



Even before the 7 October attacks, it was increasingly recognised that the two-state solution was an impediment to peace, which obstructed efforts to work towards and develop alternative courses of action. At present, the only viable remaining course for a peaceful settlement is the full and complete dismantling of the colonial structure, which will enable Palestinians and Israelis to live alongside each other, based on justice and equal rights in one democratic state.