

Lest We Forget: The Destruction Of Gaza And What Followed Did Not Start On October 7

By [Oded Goldreich](#), [Assaf Kfoury](#) November 2, 2024

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An incendiary war has been raging for more than a year in the Middle East. It has been indescribably devastating on Gaza and has now extended to the West Bank, to northern Israel and Lebanon, with ominous signs of expanding further into a regional war. This is a war driven by an Israeli government bent on exacting vengeful retribution on all of its perceived enemies, unrestrained by its American benefactor and main purveyor of weapons. While this war has been extensively covered by the media, what is mostly understated or forgotten are the circumstances that led to it – a covert decades-long war waged by Israel on the Palestinian people.

For most Israelis, what prevailed in the years leading up to October 7, 2023, was a tolerable or even desirable status quo. A senior researcher ([Tamar Hermann](#)) at the *Israel Democracy Institute* was [reported to have said](#) “the issues of settlements or relations with Palestinians were off the table for years,” and went on to add that “Palestinians hardly caught the attention of Israeli Jews.” That there was a Palestinian problem in their midst or nearby was something mostly ignored, or else slowly receding into a background of collective amnesia.

In 2021 and 2022, various human rights organizations issued scathing reports describing Israel as an apartheid state (see reports by [Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), and the Israeli [B’Tselem](#)). But Israeli officials would routinely dismiss them, with outraged accusations that they are antisemitic attempts to [de-legitimize Israel](#).

Meanwhile, the Israeli economy was thriving, having weathered the pandemic better than most western countries, with [Israel’s GDP growth rate](#) exceeding [that of the U.S.](#) and [that of the E.U.](#) in the three years preceding 2023. It had also become more popular as a tourist destination with [4.9 million visitors](#) in 2019, and a post-pandemic recovery to [2.5 million visitors](#) in the first nine months of 2023.

But that was not all. Once-hostile Arab governments seemed reconciled with – or even welcoming to – a strong Israeli state, largely perceived as a beachhead for the projection of American power in the Eastern Mediterranean. Apart from occasional performative criticism of Israel to placate widespread pro-Palestinian sympathies among their masses, autocratic Arab rulers were lining up to sign accords with Israel, with American guidance and blessing. One of the extraordinary developments of the [Abraham Accords](#), negotiated under American auspices at the end of 2020, was the steady stream of Israeli tourists and entrepreneurs heading to the rich Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

To Israelis lulled into complacency, the days before October 7 probably gave a taste of an imagined world where all Palestinians are faceless or do not exist. Or, if they still worried about a Palestinian problem, they were probably comforting themselves with the fiction that it was permanently contained – a fiction promoted by Prime Minister Netanyahu who, among other things, in his many devious ways, had spent years strengthening Hamas in Gaza against the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, to keep them apart and prevent them from uniting.

Even when the “[populist reform](#)” launched by the Israeli government in January 2023 generated considerable opposition, which spanned the political spectrum of Israeli society from left to much of the right, the mainstream of this opposition failed to acknowledge [the connection between this reform and the oppression of Palestinians](#) under Israeli rule.

What about the Palestinians: What was in store for them in the years leading up to October 7, 2023? For them, what prevailed before October 7 was anything but a tolerable status quo: For those living in Israel, it meant continued discrimination, marginalization and exclusion. For those living in the West Bank, it meant continued subjection to arbitrary oppression, humiliation, and the danger of getting killed or wounded in the course of some IDF operation. For those living in Gaza, it meant a continued indefinite de-facto imprisonment with no hope of parole.

In Israel itself, Palestinians continued to suffer from increasing levels of direct and indirect institutional discrimination and faced rising racism. While some Palestinians managed to improve their living conditions against all odds, they were still marginalized in Israeli society, especially in the political sphere. The process of exclusion is reflected in the [Nation-State Law](#) of 2018, which states that “The State of Israel is the national home of the Jewish people, in which it fulfills its natural, cultural, religious, and historical right to self-determination. The right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people.”

In the West Bank, the biggest plagues threatening Palestinian existence were the expanding settlements and the Wall that was built to protect them. The “security measures” imposed by the Israeli occupation were cruel, humiliating, and deliberately intended to make Palestinians’ daily routine miserable and unbearable: the curfews, the targeted assassinations and their “collateral” victims, the extra-judicial imprisonments, the checkpoints, the withholding of fuel and food supplies, the house demolitions, the land grabs, the Israeli-only “bypass” roads, and other regular atrocities. While those [conditions had been in the making for years and decades](#), they became all the more ominous and threatening with the latest Netanyahu government at the end of 2022, which included extremist far-right and openly racist ministers, people like Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir.

As for Gaza, it became, in the words of the late Hebrew University sociologist Baruch Kimmerling, the “[largest concentration camp ever to exist](#).” It is worth noting that he made that statement back in 2003, when Gaza was not yet fully sealed off; it was only four years later, when Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007, that a complete blockade was imposed on the enclave. In a fact sheet issued in 2018, the Norwegian Refugee Council called the narrow coastal strip “[the world’s largest open-air prison](#).” The prison guard was Israel and its complicit trusty was Egypt; the two countries could act with impunity because their American enabler would always protect them from accountability at the UN and other international forums.

In March 2018, Palestinians in Gaza launched what they called the [Great March of Return](#), an organized campaign of weekly protests near the fence enclosing Gaza. Hamas, the governing authority in Gaza since 2007, allowed it to take place without leading it; it was a civilian unarmed initiative, as made clear in a [UN Human Rights Commission report](#) at the time (March 18, 2019, pp. 68-69). The campaign’s demands were an end to Israel’s blockade and the right of return for the besieged Palestinian refugees to their villages and towns in what is now Israel. These unarmed protests were suppressed by Israel using unrestrained lethal force, as reflected by the casualties of this suppression: According to an Amnesty International [report](#), dated March 2019, more than 195 Palestinians were killed and more than 28,939 injured, while on the Israeli side one soldier was killed and one was moderately injured.

The Great March of Return fizzled out by the end of 2019, with no relief in sight of any kind for the besieged Gazans and with one more failure by the Palestinians at non-violent resistance. For older Palestinians, near and far, the Great March of Return was an echo from the First Intifada in the late 1980s and early 1990s – for its discipline and bravery, its organization and insistence on non-violent means – but also, bitterly, for its ultimate demise.

It was an accumulation of pent-up grievances, public indignities, and suppressed angers, over many years, which burst out on October 7, 2023. The foretold explosion occurred, though its shape and timing were unpredictable. Less an act of vengeance than [an act of desperation](#), the Gazans broke out of their slow death strangulation. [Chaotic beyond expectation](#) to the Palestinians themselves, partly due to Israeli army units around Gaza [collapsing in disarray](#), the events of that single day were abhorrent and horrific, spearheaded by Hamas and thereafter [an assortment of other groups](#) and individuals.

Three days after the October 7 attack, the ever-perceptive Israeli journalist [Amira Hass wrote](#): “In a few days, Israelis went through what Palestinians have experienced as a matter of routine for decades, and are still experiencing,” including “military incursions, death, cruelty, slain children, bodies piled up in the road, siege, fear, anxiety over loved ones, captivity [...] and searing humiliation. [...] Ongoing oppression and injustice explode at unexpected times and places.”

Then the events on every single day since October 7, 2023, have been abhorrent and horrific, perpetrated by the Israeli military, methodically and deliberately on explicit instructions from Netanyahu and his ministers. This has been more than a year as of this writing with no end in sight – an unchecked orgy of manic violence and destruction – with the total tonnage of bombs thrown on Gaza and its two million inhabitants already [surpassing the combined total](#) thrown on Dresden, Hamburg, and London during the entire duration of World War II.

This is the latest phase, more violent and devastating than all the preceding ones, in the century-long trajectory of ethnically transforming Palestine. For the Israeli public at large, Palestinians have been dehumanized to such an extreme over decades of indoctrination that the destruction of Gaza is viewed as just and the Palestinians are viewed as deserving it!

It is not possible to give an account of what prevailed in recent decades leading to this very day without mentioning that American policy in the Middle East had combined unquestioned support for Israel and patronizing neglect for the Palestinians. The total disconnect between American policy and the reality on the ground is reflected by the article that National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, submitted to *Foreign Affairs* magazine on October 2, 2023. In it, [he claimed that the Middle East](#) “is quieter than it has been for decades” and that “we have de-escalated crises in Gaza.” That article was submitted 5 days before October 7, and 17 days before its publication, coincidentally producing a [written record and testimony](#) of the utterly myopic and delusional views of the handful of people responsible for setting American foreign policy.

It is high time that the US changes its policy and forces Israel to stop its incendiary rampage in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon, and enter a fast process aimed at freeing Palestinians from oppressive Israeli rule. May this be a first step towards a just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and wider regional peace!

Oded Goldreich is a professor of computer science at the Weizmann Institute and an Israel Prize laureate (2021). He is a member of the Communist Party of Israel and advocates a political solution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict based on the principle of full political equality among all people who reside between the river and the sea, regardless of the number of states that such a solution may involve.

Assaf Kfoury is a mathematician and professor of computer science at Boston University. He is an Arab American political activist, of Lebanese and Palestinian background, who has worked on many issues related to events in Palestine/Israel and the wider Middle East. He upholds the principle of full political equality among all people who reside between the river and the sea, regardless of its ultimate state configuration.