

Israel: Double-standards, myths and facts

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I have written this mainly for Jewish people brought up to believe Israeli propaganda but who are having doubts about what they have been taught. I too went through a period of doubt before coming to realise that I had been taught myths unsupported by evidence, and to apply different standards to Palestinians and Israeli Jews in order to ignore uncomfortable facts. I hope this will help others come to the same realisation.

What I write here assumes very little in common politically with readers. I hope you accept that all people irrespective of their religion, nationality or ethnic background, have the same rights. For the Israeli-Palestinian conflict the most important documents that defend these rights are the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948](#), the [Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948](#) and the [Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court that came into force in 2002](#). Instead of using emotive language and explicit condemnations, I indicate what appear to be breaches of these documents, whether committed by Israeli or Palestinian forces.

I focus on the crimes that Israel has committed because this article's aim is to assist readers to break free from the hold of Hasbara – Israeli propaganda. This should not be read as an apology for the crimes of Palestinian militants or Israel's neighbours, for Hamas's oppressive policies or the ineptitude of the Palestinian Authority. In any case the latter are copiously documented in the media.

This article is long and is therefore intended primarily as a reference that people can use to counter [Hasbara](#).

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1 Israel versus Gaza 2023

1.1 Myth: The 2023 war started with Hamas's attack on 7 October.

Fact: In just 2023 up until and including 6 October, over 230 Palestinians and 29 Israelis had been killed “in the context of the occupation and conflict” [according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Refugees](#) (OCHR).

From 24 January 2008, which is as far back as OCHR's public database goes, to the end of 2022, nearly 6,200 Palestinians and just under 280 Israelis had been killed in the conflict. Most of those killed were civilians, i.e. “neither a member of security forces (including police) nor [fulfilling] a combat function within an armed group”.

Palestinian deaths are typically more than an [order of magnitude](#) greater than Israeli ones, reflecting the asymmetric power of this conflict.

The attack on 7 October, in which multiple war crimes (as defined by Article 8 2bi and ii of the Rome Statute) were committed, was unprecedented in scale by Palestinian militants. But the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) has several times since 2008 carried out operations on a similar scale. In [Operation Cast Lead over three weeks in 2008-2009](#) the IDF was responsible for between 1,100 and 1,420 Palestinian deaths. In [Operation Protective Edge](#) the IDF was responsible for over 2,300 Palestinian deaths, the vast majority of them civilians. The high civilian death tolls in these wars indicate that multiple war crimes were committed, particularly by the IDF. For the 2008 war, this was confirmed by the report of the [Goldstone Commission](#).

Of course the conflict didn't start in 2008. It precedes the 1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza by Israel although this changed the nature of the conflict. It also precedes the founding of Israel in 1948. It goes back to at least the first Zionist Congress in 1897 and possibly even the 1870s and the creation of the first Jewish settlements in Palestine.

Further reading:

- [All that remains](#) by Avi Shlaim
- [OHCHR Casualties of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#)
- [The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World](#) by Avi Shlaim
- [The Hundred Years War on Palestine](#) by Rashid Khalidi
- [One Palestine Complete: Jews and Arabs Under the British Mandate](#) by Tom Segev
- [1967: Israel, the War, and the Year that Transformed the Middle East](#) by Tom Segev

1.2 Double-standard: The Israeli government has a more expansive view of who constitutes a Palestinian combatant than an Israeli one.

Israel, correctly, counts any Israeli not engaged in combat who is injured or killed by Palestinian armed groups as a civilian casualty. This is despite the fact that most Israeli adults [serve in the IDF](#) (32 months for men and 24 months for women), and then serve as reservists until at least the age of 40. The principle is that if one is not on active duty involved in military operations, one is a civilian.

But this is how Itamar Ben-Gvir, Minister of National Security, defines what he [considers a legitimate Palestinian target](#): “Let it be clear, when they say that Hamas has to be eliminated, it also means those who sing, those who support, and those who give away candy, all of these are terrorists. And they also need to be eliminated!”

The IDF in practice employs a loose understanding of who is a Palestinian combatant, using the flimsiest excuse to kill Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. This precedes the 2023 war in Gaza.

For example, a Human Rights Council [investigation](#) of protests in 2018 against the separation fence between Gaza and Israel “*found reasonable grounds to believe that during these weekly demonstrations, the Israeli Security Forces (ISF) killed and gravely injured civilians who were neither participating directly in hostilities nor posing an imminent threat to life. Among those shot were children, paramedics, journalists, and persons with disabilities. 183 people were shot dead and another 6,106 were wounded with live ammunition. ... While the demonstrations were civilian in nature, bringing them under a law enforcement legal paradigm, they were at times violent, including throwing stones, cutting through the separation fence, and launching incendiary kites and balloons. The Commission found, however, that the use of lethal force in response was rarely necessary or proportionate. For lethal force to be permissible, the victim must pose an imminent threat to life or limb. The ISF violated international human rights law in most instances the Commission investigated.*”

Further reading:

- [Learning from Israel’s past Gaza Strip invasions](#) by Nadav Weiman
- [Testimonies by Israeli soldiers as recorded by Breaking the Silence](#)
- [‘A mass assassination factory’: Inside Israel’s calculated bombing of Gaza](#) by Yuval Abraham
- [Amnesty International’s articles on Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories](#)
- [Israel and Palestine: Events of 2021](#) by Human Rights Watch

1.3 Myth: The IDF tries to keep civilian casualties to a minimum.

Few can continue to believe this nonsense after the widely documented war crimes by the IDF following 7 October. In the previous Israeli wars on Gaza, the IDF operated using the Dahiya doctrine. This is [explained](#) by Nadav Weiman:

“The Dahiya doctrine maintains that, in an asymmetrical conflict against a non-state actor, a period of calm can be achieved by causing disproportionate damage to military assets and civilian infrastructure and properties. Such response would create deterrence and turn the civilian population against the non-state organization that operates from its territory.”

Weiman also explains the “zero-risk” to soldiers principle: “It gives the highest priority to the safety of Israeli combatants. This may sound reasonable enough, but the principle also maintains that the soldiers should be made safer by transferring the risk to civilians in Gaza, even if they are not involved in hostilities.”

+972 Magazine has [published a report uncovering the IDF's approach](#) in Operation Swords of Iron (the post 7 October 2023 war):

“The Israeli army’s expanded authorization for bombing non-military targets, the loosening of constraints regarding expected civilian casualties, and the use of an artificial intelligence system to generate more potential targets than ever before, appear to have contributed to the destructive nature of the initial stages of Israel’s current war on the Gaza Strip”.

The consequence of the IDF approach in Swords of Iron is swiftly becoming apparent: the current war – or, more accurately, the current phase of the war that started many decades ago – is likely already the deadliest in the history of Israel. There are likely [well over 25,000 deaths](#) (excluding missing people) on all sides at the time of writing with no ceasefire expected in the short-term. Approximately 20,000 people died in the [war of 1947-49](#). There were fewer than 20,000 fatalities in the [Six Day War](#), and fewer than 21,000 in the [1973 War](#).

Further reading:

- [South Africa's submission to the International Court of Justice](#) on 28 December 2023

1.4 Double-standard: Hamas is condemned for taking hostages on 7 October but thousands of Palestinians are detained by Israel without trial.

Hamas kidnapped over 200 people and held them as hostages on 7 October. This is a war crime as defined in Article 8(2) of the Rome Statute. But Israel uses its state apparatus to indiscriminately imprison Palestinians without trial on a far greater scale.

[Btselem explains](#): “In administrative detention, a person is held without trial without having committed an offense, on the grounds that he or she plans to break the law in the future. As this measure is supposed to be preventive, it has no time limit. The person is detained without legal proceedings, by order of the regional military commander, based on classified evidence that is not revealed to them. This leaves the detainees helpless – facing unknown allegations with no way to disprove them, not knowing when they will be released, and without being charged, tried or convicted.”

Further: “Since March 2002, not a single month has gone by without Israel holding at least 100 Palestinians in administrative detention.”

Amnesty International on 8 November 2023 [reported](#): “Since 7 October, Israeli forces have detained more than 2,200 Palestinian men and women, according to the Palestinian Prisoners’ Club. According to Israeli human rights organization HaMoked between 1 October and 1 November, the total number of Palestinians held in administrative detention, without charge or trial, rose from 1,319 to 2,070.”

Both the Israeli government’s use of administrative detention and Hamas holding people as hostages are breaches of Articles 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).

In this context, where people are being captured by both sides to further political and military goals, perhaps a more appropriate, neutral term than either “prisoner” or “hostage” is “captive”.

Further reading:

- [Btselem on Administrative Detention](#)
- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)

1.5 Double-standard: Hamas is accused of operating too close to civilian infrastructure, but Israel does the same.

As a salient example, the IDF headquarters are in Kirya, Tel Aviv, alongside civilian infrastructure. The headquarters are in a heavily built up area and [linked by a bridge](#) to the Azrieli shopping mall.

Anyone who visits Israel cannot help but notice how integrated into civilian life the military is. Everywhere one sees armed soldiers: major roads, transport hubs, tourist sites, places of worship. The division between civilian and military life in Israel is murky at best.

Further reading:

- [Militarism in Israeli society](#) by [New Profile](#)
- [List of IDF bases](#) on Wikipedia

1.6 Double-standard: There is justified outrage against Palestinian militants accused of having committed rape on 7 October. Yet sexual violence is used by Israeli soldiers and authorities too.

Here are some examples:

- For five years, from 2016 to 2021, the [IDF gagged details of the case](#) of a soldier convicted of raping a Palestinian woman.
- The Public Committee Against Torture in Israel [documents ill-treatment of a sexual nature](#), allegedly carried out by Israeli security authorities on Palestinian men.
- In July 2023 Al Jazeera [reported allegations of sexual abuse](#) against children held in Israeli detention.
- Here is a post 7 October article about a Palestinian woman prisoner who describes an interrogator threatening to have [soldiers rape her](#).
- Here is a story of gang rape by Israeli soldiers from 1949 as told in [Al Jazeera](#) and [Haaretz](#).

Further reading:

- [Women's liberation mustn't stop at either side of the Gaza fence](#) by Samah Salaime

1.7 Mostly myth: “The problem is Netanyahu.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is the most extremist prime minister in Israeli history. But right-wing governments, often headed by Netanyahu since 1996, have been repeatedly elected by Israelis. He and his governments and their policies have clearly had substantial support.

Every Israeli government has perpetuated systematic human rights violations against the Palestinians. Until 1966 Arab citizens of Israel lived under military law. Since 1967 every Israeli

government has facilitated settlement of the West Bank, even the Israeli parties on the so-called left, including the governments of prime ministers Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres and Ehud Barak.

Further reading:

- [Lords of the Land: The War for Israel's Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967–2007](#) by Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar
- [New report outlines how Golda Meir's Israel poisoned Palestinian land in ethnic cleansing operation](#) by Jonathan Ofir
- [What to Know About the Arab Citizens of Israel](#) by Kali Robinson

1.8 Double-standard: The Palestinian Health Ministry is accused of exaggerating casualties but when Israel reduces its body count, it's called a "revision".

US President Joe Biden cast doubt on Palestinian casualty figures. "I have no notion that the Palestinians are telling the truth about how many people are killed," Biden stated according to Al Jazeera.

With the destruction of infrastructure, including hospitals, it is extremely difficult for the Ministry of Health in Gaza to accurately count deaths, but Reuters and other news publications report that "[most international humanitarian agencies consider them broadly accurate and historically reliable](#)". (See also [this report by Al Jazeera](#).)

Meanwhile Israel [revised down it's original estimate of the death toll from the Hamas attack](#) on 7 October from 1,400 to 1,200.

1.9 Unlikely: Palestinian armed resistance will be reduced by wiping out Hamas. Fact: Palestinian support for armed resistance has increased since 7 October.

The Israeli government's stated aim following the terror attack of 7 October is to destroy Hamas. Since then the IDF has killed more than twice as many Palestinians as it killed in all its military operations combined since Israel "disengaged" from Gaza in 2005 (Israel still retains control over Gaza's airspace, sea access and borders, including what can be legally imported, so disengagement is a misleading term).

Since 2005 Israel has conducted multiple [military operations](#): [Operation Summer Rains](#), [Operation Hot Winter](#), [Operation Cast Lead](#), [Operation Returning Echo](#), [Operation Pillar of Defense](#), [Operation Protective Shield](#) and [Operation Black Belt](#). After decades of conflict, in which Israel's approach has been consistently hawkish, there has simply been a cycle of violence; Israel and Palestine are further away from a just settlement than ever.

[The War Around Us](#) is a documentary about two Al Jazeera journalists who covered the war in Gaza in 2008. The film shows numerous traumatised Palestinian children. Some of them are injured. Some of them have lost their parents. Some are simply shell-shocked. On watching it one cannot

help but wonder if some of those children, now grown up and quite likely vengeful towards Israel, participated in the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023.

Further, the 2023 war has been far worse than the 2008 one for Palestinian children. Many of these children are likely to become militants in the future, taking up armed struggle against Israel.

The IDF might be able to destroy the current institution that calls itself Hamas, but it is unlikely that it will destroy the ideas Hamas espouses. On the contrary Operation Swords of Iron, is likely to harden Palestinian attitudes and ferment terror in the future.

Further reading:

- [Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research: Public Opinion Poll No 90](#)
- [How the Israel-Hamas War in Gaza Is Changing Arab Views](#)

2 Other pervasive myths

2.1 Myth: The Palestinians have continuously rejected peace.

Fact: Israel has never formally offered the Palestinians a viable state.

Israel wants peace; the Palestinians don't – is a pervasive myth. The Abba Eban [quote](#) “The Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity” is repeatedly told.

The history of peace negotiations is highly disputed. In the dominant telling in most European and American media, the Palestinians are portrayed as the main rejectionists of peace. The Palestinians are especially blamed in the US for rejecting Ehud Barak's offers in 2000 and 2001 and Ehud Olmert's offer in 2008. Bill and Hilary Clinton have [blamed the Palestinians](#) for the [failure](#) to reach an agreement.

But there is a Palestinian version of events in which the Israelis are the rejectionists.

Israel has never formally offered the Palestinians an independent state. Instead the Israeli government and its negotiators have consistently undermined Palestinian aspirations for a state, equality or freedom. This is [described in detail in this article](#) by Jon Schwarz.

Even during the negotiations for the Oslo Accords, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin [stated](#), “We do not accept the Palestinian goal of an independent Palestinian state between Israel and Jordan. We believe there is a separate Palestinian entity short of a state.”

It is frequently claimed that PLO leader Yasser Arafat rejected a reasonable offer from Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak at Camp David talks in 2000. But what was offered was Palestinian “sovereignty” in three non-contiguous parts of the West Bank, these areas sprinkled with Israeli settlements and with Israel retaining control over the Jordan river for an unspecified time. See this [map](#). Of course Arafat had to reject this.

Subsequent negotiations appeared to be promising until Barak broke them off and lost an election to Ariel Sharon. After Arafat died and Sharon became disabled, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and president of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas may have come close to a settlement but according to Abbas there were significant gaps in what Olmert offered and what the Palestinians

could accept. In any case Olmert lost the prime-ministership to Benjamin Netanyahu who has opposed any progress towards Palestinian statehood.

Nathan Thrall has [summarised](#) the situation succinctly: “the history of failed negotiations suggests it’s largely because Israel prefers the status quo”.

Further reading:

- [All the Times Israel Has Rejected Peace With Palestinians](#) by Jon Schwarz
- [The many, many times Israelis and Palestinians tried to make peace — and failed](#) by Nicole Narea
- [Israel-Palestine: the real reason there’s still no peace](#) by Nathan Thrall
- [With Status Quo On Its Side, Israel Happily Rejects Peace](#) by Saeb Erekat
- [Palestine Peace Not Apartheid](#) by former US President Jimmy Carter
- [Reiterating the keys to peace](#) by Jimmy Carter
- [Israel Rejected Peace with Hamas on Five Occasions](#) by Zachary Foster

2.2 Myth: Anti-Zionism is antisemitism.

Judaism is a several thousand year old [ethno-religion](#). Political Zionism is a form of nationalism and has only been around since the late 19th century. The first Zionist Congress was only held in 1897. Conflating Zionism with Judaism is dangerous: Israel frequently breaches the Rome Statute. This is causing a worldwide backlash against Israel, which can only fuel antisemitism.

Since the onset of political Zionism, there have always been Jews, both secular and religious, who have opposed it. Zionism was [supported by a minority of Jews until the rise of Nazism](#) in the 1930s, explains Carolyn L. Karcher.

It is in the interests of many Zionists to equate Judaism with Zionism so that criticism of Israel can be rebuffed as antisemitism. The [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance](#) (IHRA) definition of antisemitism contains clauses that make it too easy to deflect strong criticisms of Israel as antisemitism. For example one of the 11 examples of antisemitism given by the IHRA definition is this:

“Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour”.

It is not at all obvious that the right to self-determination involves the existence of a Jewish state in the land currently under the control of the state of Israel; millions of Jews live full and free lives outside of Israel. Many don’t believe they need a connection with Israel to sustain their freedom. The displacement and oppression of the Palestinians is an ongoing racist endeavour and, some argue, an unavoidable consequence of Zionism. Even if one disagrees with these contentions, they at least require debate and an acknowledgement that they are not necessarily antisemitic.

The controversy surrounding the IHRA definition resulted in the competing and much more sensible [Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism](#). This explicitly states that it is a response to the

confusion and controversy generated by the IHRA definition. The Jerusalem Declaration gives examples of expressions that are on the face of it antisemitic and also ones that on the face of it are not antisemitic.

Here is an example that on the face of it **is** antisemitic:

“Denying the right of Jews in the State of Israel to exist and flourish, collectively and individually, as Jews, in accordance with the principle of equality.”

Here is an example that is **not** on the face of it antisemitic:

“Criticizing or opposing Zionism as a form of nationalism, or arguing for a variety of constitutional arrangements for Jews and Palestinians in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. It is not antisemitic to support arrangements that accord full equality to all inhabitants ‘between the river and the sea,’ whether in two states, a binational state, unitary democratic state, federal state, or in whatever form.”

Further reading:

- [Antisemitism: What is the IHRA definition and why is it controversial?](#)
- [A tribute to Marek Edelman](#) by Gerard Stewart (Edeleman was a Jewish hero of the Warsaw uprising who opposed Zionism.)
- [General Jewish Labour Bund in Poland](#) (The Bund’s members were proud and brave and opposed Zionism.)

2.3 Myth: Israel is singled out for unfair criticism while worse human rights offenders are ignored.

Israel is indeed singled out for special treatment, especially by the United States. Despite its sustained breaches of Articles 7 and 8 of the Rome Statute, including its policy of separation in the West Bank, its frequent uses of military force against civilians and discrimination against Israeli Palestinians, the US continues to provide military aid to Israel. Israel faces no substantive sanctions. This contrasts with other systematic human rights abusers such as Iran, North Korea and Syria, as well as Russia following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Further reading:

- [Why is Israel singled out?](#)

2.4 Myth: The Arab countries told the Palestinians to leave in 1948. Fact: Evidence does not support this claim.

The details of the war that resulted in the state of Israel (30 November 1947 to 20 July 1949) are highly disputed. Numerous competing histories have been written. Wikipedia has an over 12,000 word entry titled [Causes of the 1948 Palestinian expulsion and flight](#).

For decades there was a widely circulating claim that Palestinians evacuated their homes because they were told to by Arab leaders, in the belief that they would return once the Zionist forces were defeated. This is at best a minor cause of the Palestinian exodus. It is [probably outright false](#).

Palestinian historian Walid Khalidi conducted a search for evidence of calls by Arab leaders for Palestinians to leave, and found nothing.

Israeli historians, such as Benny Morris, Avi Shlaim and Tom Segev, have described how in the 1947-49 war Arabs were driven out of their villages, often massacred. Recently Morris and Benjamin Kedar have described [Operation 'Cast thy bread'](#), Israel's bacteriological warfare campaign in 1948, in which the wells in Palestinian villages were poisoned to prevent the people who lived there from returning.

Further reading:

- [Why did the Palestinians leave?](#) By Walid Khalidi
- [The debate about 1948](#) by Avi Shlaim
- [The birth of the Palestinian refugee problem](#) by Benny Morris
- [The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World](#) by Avi Shlaim

2.5 Mostly myth: Israel is the only democracy in the middle-east.

Even if this were an unequivocally true claim, it's unclear why it would justify Israel's war crimes, settlement of the West Bank, system of separation in the West Bank or siege of Gaza.

Nevertheless it is true is that there are no countries in the Middle East that meet what has become the modern standard of democracy, i.e. that nearly all a country's inhabitants get to regularly elect the leadership of those responsible for setting the laws and policies that govern their lives.

Israel is the occupying entity that determines some of the most important laws and policies governing the lives of nearly five million Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank, yet none of the Palestinians in those areas can vote in Israeli elections. On the other hand Israeli settlers living on the West Bank do vote in Israeli elections.

As Salem Barahmeh [explains](#): "Israel occupies and controls the entirety of the West Bank and has de facto annexed large portions of it through the settling of 650,000-750,000 Israelis on Palestinian land. Under the Rome statute of the international criminal court, a settlement enterprise of this nature is not only illegal but also considered a war crime. Yet these illegal settlers are able to run, campaign, and vote in Israeli elections and have come to occupy the position of king-makers in Israeli coalition politics."

Barahmeh also excoriates the Palestinian Authority for the undemocratic, repressive way it runs elections. And Hamas suppresses dissent in the areas it controls. But this cannot justify the failure of Israel to allow the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza self-determination.

Further reading:

- [The Israeli and Palestinian elections offend democracy – each in their own way](#) by Salem Barahmeh

2.6 Double-standard: “Do you accept Israel’s right to exist?” but what about “Do you accept the right of the Palestinians to a state?”

A frequent pro-Israel question to critics, used more as a refrain, is: Do you accept Israel’s right to exist? Saying “no” traditionally excludes one from the reasonable spectrum of debate and invites accusations of antisemitism.

But the question is laced with presumption. Whether the state of Israel should have been created in the first place is debatable (see section 4 below). But Israel does exist and attempting to destroy it now would produce a catastrophe for everyone in the region.

The extent to which Israel faces an existential threat by being defeated militarily, by Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, Syria or a combination of forces, is unclear. Most experts think there isn’t currently a substantial threat to Israel’s existence. But even if there is, finding lasting just solutions that reduce the risk of war is a better way to deal with such an existential threat than waging war.

It’s also odd to ask about the right of a state. People, not states, are usually thought of as having rights.

The true meaning of the question appears to be: Do you accept that there should be a Jewish state called Israel? For those who are opposed to the idea of states privileging religious groups, the answer might be nuanced: there shouldn’t be Jewish, Muslim or Catholic states, but there are such states and they, including Israel, are not going anywhere. Moreover all the people living in Israel and Palestine should be free to practise their religions without fear of violence or discrimination.

But the double-standard associated with the question is that there is generally no corresponding commitment from the people who ask this question to bringing into existence a Palestinian state.

2.7 Myth: “From the river to the sea Palestine will be free” is *necessarily* antisemitic or a call to commit genocide.

The slogan “From the river to the sea Palestine will be free” has become a rallying call for Palestinian activists. But British Home Secretary [Suella Braverman](#), British Labour Party leader [Keir Starmer](#) and Twitter/X owner [Elon Musk](#) have all interpreted it as antisemitic or a call for genocide.

The slogan has many interpretations. It depends on who is saying it and in what context. Some extremists use it with genocidal intent. But for many protesters it is a call for a one-state “solution” in Israel and Palestine in which everyone has equal rights. Whether or not one thinks this is a viable political option (I don’t), it is not antisemitic or a call for genocide.

There is also a double-standard here. The extremist Jewish youth movement Betar has a song called [The East Bank of the Jordan](#). It includes the lyrics “The Jordan river has two banks. This is ours and that as well.” It means that the West Bank, Gaza and the country of Jordan should be part of Israel. Betar is [linked](#) to the ruling Likud party. And while there is no longer a serious movement for Israel to take over Jordan, the settler movement wants Gaza and the West Bank to be part of Israel.

Further reading:

- [The controversial phrase “from the river to sea,” explained](#) by Ellen Ioanes

- [‘From the river to the sea’: where does the slogan come from and what does it mean?](#) by Daniel Boffey
- [What Does “From the River to the Sea” Really Mean?](#) By Yousef Munayyer

2.8 Debatable: Israel has made the world safer for Jews.

The main justification for Israel’s existence was to make the world safer for Jews. Supporters of Israel will point to it being a home for Jewish migrants from oppression in Russia, the Arab world and Ethiopia. But in all these cases it is difficult to know the extent to which the existence of Israel itself fuelled the antisemitism. Under the Ottoman empire which controlled much of the middle-east, the history of the Jews is a complex one but much more positive and less laced with antisemitism than the story of European Jewry. With the rise of political Zionism and then the formation of Israel, oppression of Jews increased in the formerly Ottoman controlled lands.

Israel’s violence and oppression is fuelling antisemitism. And as 7 October showed, the relative safety of Jews in Israel now also cannot be assumed. Perhaps organising for the civil rights of Jews after World War II would have been better done using the Universal Declaration of Human Rights rather than through a nationalist endeavour based on displacing another people.

Here is an interesting and prescient historical footnote. The [1917 Balfour Declaration](#) announced the British government’s commitment to a Jewish state in Palestine. Carolyn L. Karcher [writes](#): “The sole Jewish member of the cabinet, Edwin Montagu, voted against the Balfour Declaration, warning that it would make Palestine’s Muslims and Christians ‘foreigners’ in their own land, while making Jews ‘foreigners in every country but Palestine.’”

Further reading:

- [Does Israel Really “Keep Jews Safe”?](#) by Carolyn L. Karcher
- [Supporting Palestinian rights is antisemitic because Israel wants it to be](#) by Abraham Gutman

2.9 Myth: There is no such thing as a Palestinian nation.

There is a long history of Zionists denying that Palestinians are a genuine nation. Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir in 1969 infamously [said](#) that there was no such thing as Palestinians. In March 2023 Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich [argued that the idea of Palestinian nationhood was invented](#).

But all nationalism – whether Jewish, Palestinian, Irish, Serbian, Czech, Afrikaner or African – is “invented”, often in response to oppression. Palestinian nationalism, which was primarily a response to Zionist aspirations and the British Palestine Mandate, is about as straightforward an example of how nationalism develops as one can find: The Palestinians are the native population of the geographical region of Palestine. They have suffered displacement, discrimination and extreme violence over the past 100 years or so. Their aspiration to have their own government and determine their own future within the geographical boundaries of the region of Palestine is analogous, for example, to the same desire of the people of Ireland or the black people of South Africa under apartheid.

There are two aims of the denial of Palestinian nationhood: (1) the prevention of a Palestinian state and (2) to strengthen the absurd claim that it is Israel's neighbours, such as Jordan and Egypt, who must take responsibility for the Palestinians. But it is neither Jordan nor Egypt that displaced the Palestinians who lived or continue to live in the areas controlled by Israel including Gaza and the West Bank.

True, after the 1947-49 war that led to the formation of the state of Israel, the [United Arab Republic \(predominantly Egypt\) controlled Gaza](#) and Jordan controlled the West Bank until the Six-day war in 1967, and there is much to be criticised about the way Gaza was ruled. But the Palestinian territories are no longer under the control of Egypt and Jordan. They are the responsibility of Israel.

Some point out that there was no state of Palestine before Zionism. But the modern nation state didn't exist at the time that the Ottoman empire conquered the area of Palestine in the 16th century.

Further reading:

- [The Hundred Years War on Palestine](#) by Rashid Khalidi
- [Palestinian Nationalism: An Overview](#) by As'ad Ghanem
- [Palestine has not disappeared](#) by Edward Said
- [Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims](#) by Edward Said

3 Some uncomfortable facts

3.1 Fact: There is a long history of massacres in support of Israel's goals.

Three of the most well-known examples are Deir Yassin, the Sabra and Shatila massacres and Operation Cast Lead:

- In April 1948 the [Irgun and Lehi paramilitaries killed over 100 people in the neighbourhood of Deir Yassin](#), about half of them women and children. After the massacre, houses were dynamited. The website Deir Yassin Remembered states: "The massacre of Palestinians at Deir Yassin is one of the most significant events in 20th-century Palestinian and Israeli history. This is not because of its size or its brutality, but because it stands as the starkest early warning of a calculated depopulation of over 400 Arab villages and cities and the expulsion of over 700,000 Palestinian inhabitants to make room for survivors of the Holocaust and other Jews from the rest of the world."
- The death toll in the massacre at the [Sabra and Shatila refugee camps that took place in Beirut over three days in September 1982](#) is unclear; a common estimate is 2,000 to 3,500. The scale of the massacre was comparable to Hamas's 7 October massacre, and possibly much bigger. "Testimonies from the mass killing describe horrific acts of slaughter, mutilation, rape and mass graves," explains [Al Jazeera](#). The massacre was carried out by Christian Lebanese forces, but with the support of the IDF, who prevented people from leaving the refugee camps. An independent commission found that Israel as the occupying power of the camps bore responsibility for the massacre. Even an [Israeli inquiry, the Kahan](#)

[Commission](#), held the IDF indirectly responsible, resulting in Ariel Sharon, the Israeli Defence Minister, being forced to resign.

- The Goldstone Commission found that both Israel and Hamas committed war crimes during Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in 2008. Avi Shlaim summarises this: “The IDF received much more severe strictures than Hamas, on account of the scale and seriousness of its violations. Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups were found guilty of launching rocket and mortar attacks with the deliberate aim of harming Israeli civilians. The Goldstone team investigated 36 incidents involving the IDF. It found 11 incidents in which Israeli soldiers launched direct attacks against civilians with lethal outcomes (in only one case was there a possible ‘justifiable military objective’); seven incidents where civilians were shot leaving their homes ‘waving white flags and, in some of the cases, following an injunction from the Israeli forces to do so’; an attack, executed ‘directly and intentionally’ on a hospital; numerous incidents where ambulances were prevented from attending to the severely injured; several attacks on civilian infrastructure with no military significance, such as flour mills, chicken farms, sewage works and water wells—all part of a campaign to deprive civilians of basic necessities. In the words of the report, much of this extensive damage was ‘not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly’. Shlaim’s [article in Prospect](#) should be read.

All of this is relatively small though compared to the massacres in Gaza by the IDF, ongoing at the time of writing.

Further reading:

- Background section of [South Africa’s submission to the International Court of Justice](#)

3.2 Fact: An official system of separation exists on the West Bank.

Israel has implemented an official policy of separation on the West Bank. This involves severe restrictions on Palestinian movement, including a permit system. There are separate legal systems and courts, separate roads and amenities for settlers and Palestinians. It is a textbook case of the crime against humanity known as apartheid defined in Article 7 of the Rome Statute.

In Hebron’s old city the presence of about 1,000 settlers has been used as an excuse to prevent Palestinians access to the main road, [Al-Shuhada Street](#). People with houses on the street cannot exit or enter via their front door. They’ve had to install metal grills over their windows because settler children frequently throw stones at them. Hateful graffiti in Hebrew is sprayed over closed Palestinian shops. This is not merely tolerated by the Israeli government; it has been facilitated by the state.

The extent of the situation on the West Bank is summarised by Human Rights Watch: “Palestinians face systematic discrimination merely because of their race, ethnicity, and national origin, depriving them of electricity, water, schools, and access to roads, while nearby Jewish settlers enjoy all of these state-provided benefits. While Israeli settlements flourish, Palestinians under Israeli control live in a time warp - not just separate, not just unequal, but sometimes even pushed off their lands and out of their homes.”

Further reading:

- ['This is like apartheid': ANC veterans visit West Bank](#) by Donald Macintyre
- [Israel/West Bank: Separate and Unequal](#) by Human Rights Watch
- [A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution](#) by Human Rights Watch

4 What needs to happen?

When Theodor Herzl formed the Zionist Organisation in 1897 it was a response to antisemitism in Europe. Herzl was deeply influenced by the [Dreyfuss Affair](#), an event he covered as a journalist, and that exemplified the hatred of Jews by the French military establishment. But political Zionism implied a colonial project: building a Jewish state in land occupied by a majority of non-Jewish people. From the start it was bound to lead to conflict and expulsions of the native population. Nearly 130 years later we are left with a legacy of dispossession, oppression and violence.

Nevertheless the existence of Israel cannot be undone. There are over 7 million Jews living in Israel in 2023. Most were born there. It is their home and they should not have to leave. Likewise there are over 7 million Palestinians living in the area controlled by Israel, including the West Bank and Gaza, probably slightly more than the Jewish population. They were born there. It is their home and they should not have to leave. Another four million Palestinians are estimated to live outside of Israel and the occupied territories. Many yearn to return to their ancestral homes.

Israel's Jewish population will not agree to a democratic single state that includes the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Unlike South Africa under apartheid there is no substantial integration of the West Bank and Gaza Palestinians into the Israeli economy. Even on the Israeli and Palestinian left there is acknowledgement that a single democratic state is Utopian. Moreover the aim of Palestinian nationalism is to have a state. With this in mind this is what needs to happen:

- First, the Israeli occupation must end. This at minimum means:
 - Shuhada Street in Hebron must be reopened to Palestinians. The implantation of hundreds of Israeli settlers in the middle of the city has produced the most visceral hatreds anywhere in the region. There is no practical alternative to them being moved back into green line (1967 borders) Israel.
 - The system of checkpoints, movement restrictions and separate infrastructure in the West Bank must be ended.
 - All settlement outposts should be dismantled.
 - The withdrawal of IDF personnel to behind the green line must commence. Soldiers may remain in **established** settlements, for example Ariel, until their final status is determined.
 - The militant Judaising of the Old City in Jerusalem and neighbourhoods like Silwan must be stopped.

- The siege of Gaza needs to be lifted. Gaza should be able to control its borders, imports, exports and airspace.
- Negotiations for a Palestinian state that includes the West Bank and Gaza must commence in the context of a ceasefire on both sides. The outcome of these negotiations must be an independent Palestinian state. There should be no restrictions on that state that do not apply to any other state.
- The Palestinian state should be approximately equivalent in size to the sum total of the West Bank and Gaza. That may include land swaps. But if land swaps cannot be agreed, then settler cities, like Ariel, must fall under the Palestinian state. The Israeli settlers living there will have to choose to either live under Palestinian rule or repatriate to Israel.
- The Old City of Jerusalem will need a separate agreement on its final status that ensures access to places of worship for Jews, Christians and Muslims. (The [1937 British partition plan](#) proposed that Jerusalem be under international supervision.)

Currently this may also seem like wishful thinking. No Israeli government since 1967 has shown sufficient inclination to establish an independent Palestinian state or to end settlements on the West Bank. But in large part Israel gets away with this belligerent position because it has almost unconditional American government support, including billions of dollars annually in military aid, as well as to a lesser extent European Union and British support.

A Palestinian state should not be called a two-state “solution”. The establishment of such a state will not miraculously bring peace, justice and consistent respect for human rights to the region. It will leave unanswered the question of Israeli Palestinians who face discrimination. There is no guarantee that a new Palestinian state will be democratic or tolerant. Cross-border skirmishes, including missile launches, will not end overnight, nor the tensions between Israel and Hezbollah. Extremist groups on both sides can be expected to do their utmost to block progress.

Instead the establishment of a Palestinian state should be seen as a two-state “situation” (as [Yehuda Shaul](#) calls it). It is the most likely path towards a more just and peaceful situation in Israel and Palestine than currently exists. Perhaps one day in the very distant future far beyond the lifespan of anyone alive today, when nationalism becomes unfashionable, a single democratic state in what is today Israel and Palestine may evolve.

To my mind then the primary short to medium-term political project must be to change the policy positions of the United States and European governments. Jewish people can play a significant role here, by criticising pro-Israel policies and making it clear that Jews increasingly reject Israel’s racism and violence. Further pressure can be put on Israel to end the occupation and make progress to a Palestinian state by refusing, as much as is practically possible, to buy Israeli products.

There is no guarantee that this will work. Even if the US and Europe do change their policies towards Israel, Israel may be economically strong enough to resist the pressure. Nevertheless, this must be tried if there is to be some hope of attaining justice and peace in Israel and Palestine.