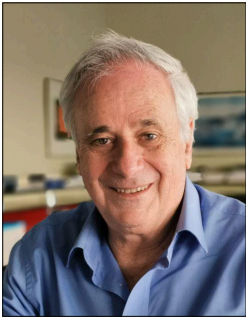


Middle East

Why Israel wants to erase the context in the war on Gaza

The dehistoricisation of what is happening helps Israel pursue genocidal policies in Gaza

by Ilan Pappé,* Israel/England



Ilan Pappé. (Photo ma)

On October 24, a statement by *United Nations* Secretary-General *Antonio Guterres* caused a sharp reaction by Israel. While addressing the UN Security Council, *the UN chief said*¹ that while he condemned in the strongest terms the massacre committed by

Hamas on October 7, he wished to remind the world that it did not take place in a vacuum. He explained that one cannot dissociate 56 years of occupation from our engagement with the tragedy that unfolded on that day.

The Israeli government was quick to condemn the statement. Israeli officials demanded Guterres's resignation, claiming that he supported Hamas and justified the massacre it carried out. The Israeli media also jumped on the bandwagon, asserting among other things that the UN chief "*has demonstrated a stunning degree of moral bankruptcy*".²

This reaction suggests that a new type of allegation of anti-Semitism may now be on the table. Until October 7, Israel had pushed for the definition of anti-Semitism to be expanded to include criticism of the Israeli state and questioning the moral basis of Zionism. Now, contextualising and historicising what is going on could also trigger an accusation of anti-Semitism.

Fade out the previous history

The dehistoricisation of these events aids Israel and governments in the West in pursuing

policies they shunned in the past due to either ethical, tactical, or strategic considerations.

Thus, the October 7 attack is used by Israel as a pretext to pursue genocidal policies in the Gaza Strip. It is also a pretext for the United States to try and reassert its presence in the Middle East. And it is a pretext for some European countries to violate and limit democratic freedoms in the name of a new "war on terror".

But there are several historical contexts for what is going on now in Israel-Palestine that cannot be ignored. The wider historical context goes back to the mid-19th century, when *evangelical Christianity in the West* turned the idea of the "return of the Jews" into a religious millennial imperative and advocated the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine as part of the steps that would lead to the resurrection of the dead, the return of the Messiah, and the end of time.

"Return" of the Jews to Palestine

Theology became policy toward the end of the 19th century and in the years leading up to World War I for two reasons.

First, it worked in the interest of those in Britain wishing to dismantle the Ottoman Empire and incorporate parts of it into the British Empire. Second, it resonated with those within the British aristocracy, both Jews and Christians, who became enchanted with the idea of Zionism as a panacea for the problem of anti-Semitism in Central and Eastern Europe, which had produced an unwelcome wave of Jewish immigration to Britain.

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Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1978. He completed his doctorate in 1984 at the University of Oxford under *Albert Hourani* and *Roger Owen*. From 1984 he was Professor of Political Science at the University of Haifa. He founded the *Academic Peace Institute* in Giw'at-Chawiwa in 1992, which he headed until 2000. From 2000 to 2006, he was chairman of the *Emil Tuma Institute for Palestine Studies* in Haifa.

When these two interests fused, they propelled the British government to issue the famous – or infamous – *Balfour Declaration* in 1917.

Israel as a panacea

Jewish thinkers and activists who redefined Judaism as nationalism hoped this definition would protect Jewish communities from existential danger in Europe by homing in on Palestine as the desired space for “rebirth of the Jewish nation”.

In the process, the cultural and intellectual Zionist project transformed into a settler colonial one – which aimed at Judaizing historical Palestine, disregarding the fact that it was inhabited by an Indigenous population.

In turn, the Palestinian society, quite pastoral at that time and in its early stage of modernisation and construction of a national identity, produced its own anti-colonial movement. Its first significant action against the Zionist colonisation project came with *al-Buraq Uprising of 1929*,³ and it has not ceased since then.

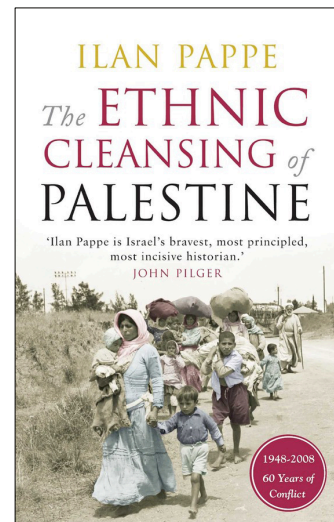
Ethnic cleansing in Palestine

Another historical context relevant to the present crisis is the 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestine that included the forceful expulsion of Palestinians into the Gaza Strip from villages on whose ruins some of the Israeli settlements attacked on October 7 were built. These uprooted Palestinians were part of the 750,000 Palestinians who lost their homes and became refugees.

This ethnic cleansing was noted by the world but not condemned. As a result, Israel continued to resort to ethnic cleansing as part of its effort to ensure that it had complete control over historical Palestine with as few of the native Palestinians remaining as possible. This included the expulsion of 300,000 Palestinians during and in the aftermath of the 1967 war, and the expulsion of more than 600,000 from the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip ever since.

There is also the context of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Over the past 50 years, the occupational forces have inflicted persistent collective punishment on the Palestinians in these territories, exposing them to constant harassment by Israeli settlers and security forces and imprisoning hundreds of thousands of them.

Since the election of the present fundamentalist messianic Israeli government in November 2022, all these harsh policies reached unprecedented levels. The number of Palestinians killed, wounded and arrested in the occupied West Bank *skyrocketed*.⁴ On top of that, Israeli government policies towards Christian and Muslim holy places in Jerusalem became even more aggressive.



ISBN 978-1-85168-555-4

Siege on the Gaza Strip

Finally, there is also the historical context of the 16-year-long siege on Gaza, where almost half of the population are children. In 2018, the UN was already warning that the Gaza Strip would become a place unfit for humans by 2020.

It is important to remember that the siege was imposed in response to democratic elections won by Hamas after the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the territory. Even more important is to go back to the 1990s, when the Gaza Strip was encircled by barbed wire and disconnected from the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem in the aftermath of the Oslo Accords.

The isolation of Gaza, the fence around it, and the increased Judaisation of the West Bank were a clear indication that Oslo in the eyes of the Israelis meant an occupation by other means, not a path to genuine peace.

Israel controlled the exit and entry points to the Gaza ghetto, monitoring even the kind of food that entered – at times limiting it to a certain calorie count. Hamas reacted to this debilitating siege by launching rockets on civilian areas in Israel.

The Israeli government claimed these attacks were motivated by the movement’s ideological wish to kill Jews – a new form of *Nazim* – disregarding the context of both the *Nakba* and the inhuman and barbaric siege imposed on two million people and the oppression of their compatriots in other parts of historical Palestine.

Hamas, in many ways, was the only Palestinian group that promised to avenge or respond to these policies. The way it decided to respond,

however, may bring its own demise, at least in the Gaza Strip, and may also provide a pretext for further oppression of the Palestinian people.

Still no game-changing event

The savageness of its attack cannot be justified in any way, but that does not mean it cannot be explained and contextualised. As horrific as it was, the bad news is that it is not a game-changing event, despite the huge human cost on both sides. What does this mean for the future?

Israel will remain a state established by a settler-colonial movement, which will continue to influence its political DNA and determine its ideological nature. This means that despite its self-framing as the only democracy in the Middle East, it will remain a democracy only for its Jewish citizens.

The internal struggle inside Israel between what one can call the state of Judea – the settlers' state wishing Israel to be more theocratic and racist – and the state of Israel – wishing to keep the status quo – that preoccupied Israel until October 7 will erupt again. In fact, there are already signs of its return.

Israel, an apartheid state

Israel will continue to be an apartheid state – as declared by a number of human rights organisations – however the situation in Gaza unfolds. The Palestinians will not disappear and will continue their struggle for liberation, with many civil societies siding with them and their governments backing Israel and providing it with an exceptional immunity.

The way out remains the same: a change of regime in Israel that brings equal rights for everyone from the river to the sea and allows for the return of Palestinian refugees. Otherwise, the cycle of bloodshed will not end.

Source: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/11/5/why-israel-wants-to-erase-context-and-history-in-the-war-on-gaza>, 5 November 2023

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/24/un-chief-says-clear-violations-of-international-humanitarian-law-in-gaza>

² <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-770186>

³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/al-jazeera-world/2015/11/11/jerusalem-dividing-al-aqsa>

⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/22/israeli-forces-kill-palestinian-in-northern-west-bank>