

Opinion | Genocide or Not, Israel Is Perpetrating War Crimes in Gaza

Many Israelis are outraged at their actions in Gaza being characterized as genocide. But ask them what should be done to the enemy and they'll say: Obliterate, block aid, and go on bombing and killing.

Ofri Ilany, *Haaretz*, November 17, 2024.

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What will the event now underway in the Gaza Strip be called in the future? Israel calls it a "war." There's no doubt that a war is underway, on several fronts. But within the framework of war, a crime is being committed in Gaza. Israel is deliberately obliterating a large city that is thousands of years old (Gaza City), carrying out killing on an immense scale and trying to expel the population of an entire region. Last month, the director of the Shin Bet security service, Ronen Bar, called for humanitarian aid to disaster-stricken Gaza to be curtailed. "There's no need to excel on the humanitarian issue," he said, and, "We need to do the minimum required by international law."

Fortunately international law still exists, but from these remarks one can infer that Israel is doing all it possibly can to instigate a humanitarian disaster, while making sure to evade [serious measures](#) being taken against it. The army that terms itself the "world's most moral" is now declaredly contenting itself with no more than a passing grade, wink wink. And that, of course, is only what's [spoken openly](#).

In the words of Amit Segal, a TV commentator who is close to the government, what's happening in the northern section of the Gaza Strip is "an event different from anything we've seen until now." What is that event whose name we dare not speak? In much of the world it's called "[genocide](#)." Jewish Israelis are aghast at this label, and for good reason. The Jewish people already were the victims of genocide on a vast scale, and the very use of the word is perceived as an antisemitic ploy intended to erase the memory of the Holocaust. I too remember the teacher in the third grade saying that word – "genocide" – to us for the first time. The comparison is appalling. The Holocaust is the Holocaust. But after the Holocaust, and before it, other things happened.

Perhaps it would be prudent to affix an asterisk to the word "genocide" each time the word is used, and to note that what is being done in the Gaza Strip doesn't approach the dimensions and the gravity of the Holocaust. Comparisons to the Holocaust are only harmful. In any event, the word "genocide" doesn't need to be invoked.

The term was coined within a specific political context, after World War II. It encompasses certain crimes, and does not encompass others. We tend to think that as long as there is no intent to annihilate utterly a whole people, there is no justification for using the word "genocide." The present crime can be termed "[ethnic cleansing](#)," or "mass killing," even an "intentional humanitarian disaster" or a "semi-intentional" one.

There are people in Israel who are infuriated by the sheer accusation. But if you ask them what should be done in Gaza, some of them will say exactly that: obliterate, prevent aid and above all, continue bombing and

killing more tens of thousands. They will say that Israel is living up to the criteria of international law, even as they decry international law. They will explain that there's no choice, that the Palestinians brought it on themselves. One can argue with all of this, but that doesn't nullify the existence of the crime as such.

Of course, not all people in Israel talk that way. The war is one thing, [war crimes against civilians](#) are something else, even if it's hard to distinguish between them. In any event, one needs to be naïve or self-righteous to deny that within the framework of the war that Israel is prosecuting there are forces that are intentionally committing war crimes, and not just as collateral damage. That is manifested in video clips, in texts and in eulogies. It's already obvious to everyone. What is still more appalling is that the Kahanist government of Netanyahu, Smotrich and Ben-Gvir is one of those forces. Actually, at this point in time it's more accurate to say that some of Israel's combat forces are not committing war crimes. That's pretty pathetic consolation.

Existential dread

There's no point in directing accusations at the hesitant and the bewildered. The accusations only lead to entrenchment in one's viewpoint, and heighten the paranoid anger trip. There are good reasons to be bewildered. But that's why it's important to draw distinctions. The whirlpool in which we've been immersed for more than a year includes and included a number of elements, and the fact that they overlap can blur our judgment.

It started with the [October 7](#) massacre, which in itself was a genocidal act. After the massacre came moments of existential dread, justified more or less. And there is the abandonment of the [Israeli hostages in Gaza](#), and the question of whether Israel is winning the war or losing it. And there are the anti-Israel demonstrations worldwide, within which some are depicting Zionism as an unforgivable colonial crime from its very inception. And there is the Netanyahu government's continuing attempt to overthrow the judicial system, and the struggle between groups in Israeli society.

We live in a time of ideological polarization, and therefore whoever is against the war of obliteration in Gaza is liable to conclude that this necessarily obligates an anti-Israel stand on all fronts. But even though the various issues are intertwined, each question also stands in its own right. And at the present time, the most substantive "event" is this: the obliteration, the killing and the starving of Gaza.

It's important to draw distinctions. Because the simple thing needs to be said: It is essential to stop the obliteration, the killing and the starving of Gaza. We should have stopped long ago, but that doesn't mean we should not stop now. There are still millions of Palestinians, human beings, who are alive and who could continue to be alive.

A deal is needed, the war needs to be done with, a settlement is needed that will ensure the security of Israel, of Lebanon and of the Palestinians. But before all else, the ethnic cleansing and the mass killing must stop. Not because of the economy, not because of the day after, not even because of the hostages. But because it's a crime that has no justification.

Even if Israel emerges from this campaign with the upper hand, and even if by some miracle it succeeds in liberating the hostages, the atrocities that are taking place in Gaza are a low point in Israel's history, beside which the other low points pale.