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## Israel's Blowback Genocide



Image by Leon Wu.

Words can't express the horrors of Israel's genocide in Gaza. To actually *feel* the nightmare, you would have to be there under the bombs, fleeing with Palestinians desperately seeking a safe place that doesn't exist; seeing building after building destroyed; treading through blood in one of the few, only partially standing hospitals; and witnessing children and other patients sprawled on hospital floors, limbs amputated without anesthesia (Israel having blocked all medical supplies).

It has taken the Jewish state's savagery to break decades of silence about its history of crimes against humanity. U.S. military historian Robert Pape has called the onslaught against Gaza

“one of the most intense civilian punishment campaigns in history.” Former U.N. Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Andrew Gilmour has said that we are witnessing “probably the highest kill rate of any military... since the Rwandan genocide of 1994.”

### **An Unsent Letter**

Palestine is finally an international cause. Outrage surges via global demonstrations. Israel has become a pariah in the global South. In the United States, organizations including A Jewish Voice for Peace, Code Pink, and the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights have been marching against the horrors now underway.

Within this charged atmosphere, the 66th reunion of my 1958 Philadelphia High School for Girls graduating class will take place in June 2024. Girls’ High was that city’s leading academic public high school of my time, together with its brother school, Central High (attended by Noam Chomsky). It was stellar not only for its academic excellence but for its integration of Black and White students at a time of deep segregation elsewhere. My mother, who graduated from Girls’ High in 1924, sent me there because of its policy of racial inclusiveness.

I recently began preparing an open letter to my classmates about the genocide in Gaza and the ongoing settler pogroms of ethnic cleansing on the West Bank — houses burned, olive trees uprooted, Palestinians made to flee. Ours is the prototypical Zionist generation and I particularly wanted to address my former classmates, some of whom still cling stubbornly to their allegiance to Israel. I was told, however, that there wouldn’t be time to read the letter at our reunion which lasts just a few afternoon hours. What follows, then, is based on the letter I was preparing to read then, had the time been available.

### **Zionism and The Six Day War**

In the early 1950s, my best childhood friend collected money to plant trees in Israel. At one point, her synagogue, which sponsored that project, needed “straight pins.” Somehow, I heard “shraypins” instead, a mysterious Hebrew word my imagination concocted and that her friends would find funny indeed. Zionism, in other words, was simply foreign to me.

The first time I recall a thrill from it came right after Israel’s triumph in the 1967 Six Day War. I was then actively involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement on my graduate school campus and, on a trip to Paris that year, didn’t want to identify as American. I spoke French quite well and not being able to tell from my slight accent that I was an American, someone asked me where I was from. Searching for a nationality I wouldn’t be ashamed of, I blurted out that I was an “Israelite.”

“Oh, your people!” he exclaimed. “Such a small people, but such a brave people!” For the first time, I felt deeply proud of being Jewish, not the sort of Jew who had (to my mind) cowered in a ghettoized Europe, but a strong, triumphant Jew with a powerful army. Soon after, my husband told me about Israel’s history — its 1948 expulsion of 750,000 Palestinian Arabs and its exploitation of the territories it illegally occupied after the 1967 war. Not long after that, I read Noam Chomsky’s first book about Israeli settler-colonialism, *Peace in the Middle East?*, and never looked back.

### **Settler Violence in the 1970s**

My husband, Louis Kampf, taught in the humanities department of M.I.T. Chomsky was a colleague and became a good friend. It was under his influence that, in 1979, I first went to Israel and visited the occupied West Bank. I had an assignment to write about Israeli women — I was then a feminist columnist for Cambridge’s *The Real Paper* — and also agreed to do pieces for New York’s *The Village Voice* and *Liberation Magazine*. For the *Voice* I wrote about Gush Emunim — the Bloc of the Faithful, the ancestor of the Jewish settlers’ movement. For *Liberation*, I wrote about a Palestinian village, Halhul, two of whose teenagers were murdered by Israeli settlers from nearby Kiryat Arba.

I stayed in Kiryat Arba, thanks to a distant cousin of my husband’s who got me there in an undercover fashion. One of my interviewees assured me that she believed in “a great chain of being,” Jews on top, all other humans below, with Arabs at the very bottom, just before animals, vegetables, and minerals. Her husband referred to the Talmudic injunction to “rise and kill first.” Another settler assured me that the Arabs could stay on the West Bank only if they would “bow their heads.”

Muhammad Milhem, Halhul’s mayor, led me to the highest hill in his village and, pointing toward Kiryat Arba, said, “This is a cancer in our midst.” I wonder if he realized how tragically prophetic his words would prove to be.

### **Genocide in the 2020s**

Since October 8th, I’ve been riveted by the genocide in Gaza being perpetrated by the Israeli military, which had prepared for it in a retrospectively unsettling fashion by decades of dehumanizing Palestinians. Hamas clearly committed war crimes on October 7th, but international rules still govern war. A nation’s reprisal for acts against its population must still be proportional to the original crime, which Israel’s war on Gaza isn’t — not faintly! Instead, it’s been distinctly genocidal. On March 28th, Reuters reported that, according to Gaza’s health ministry, at least 32,552 Palestinians had been killed and 74,980 injured in

Israel's post-October 7th military offensive in the Gaza Strip, while more than 7,000 Gazans are missing, many likely buried under the rubble.

Israel has cut off most food and water to the region. A March 18th Oxfam press release announced that Gaza hunger figures are the “worst on record.” The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that famine, a rare and catastrophic circumstance, is imminent. Usually caused by extreme natural events, the famine in Gaza is wholly human-made. Famine leaves the body prone to all sorts of horrendous diseases. According to the WHO, “[I]llness may ultimately kill more people than Israel's offensive. Infectious diseases are ‘soaring,’ particularly among children with 100,000 reported cases of diarrhea, 25 times higher than before Israel's assaults.”

Were I able to show my classmates scenes from the hell that is now the Gaza Strip, where would I begin? Would it be the infant whose face was partially blown off by an Israeli strike? Would it be the 12 year old with burns over 70% of his body? Would it be the countless unarmed civilians, including children, shot in the head and upper body with murderous intent? Would it be a baby with both legs amputated, who will never learn to walk?

Dr. Yasser Khan, an ophthalmologist specializing in eyelid and facial plastic and reconstructive surgery, spent 10 days in Gaza and, in an interview with a reporter from the *Intercept*, described what he had seen in the European Gaza Hospital, now barely functioning, where 35,000 people were reportedly sheltering. People were cooking in the hallways of a building in which no sterile environment was possible because there was nothing with which to sterilize. The medical workers were still often performing 14 or 15 amputations on children daily. Khan saw patients like an eight-year-old girl, rescued from the rubble with a fractured leg, all of whose family — mother, father, aunts, uncles — was wiped out. And there are thousands more like her, suffering from trauma that coming generations will undoubtedly inherit. They have given rise to a new acronym: WCNSF, or Wounded Child No Surviving Family. Khan removed the eyes of patients whose faces had been damaged by shrapnel, leaving an appearance he dubbed “shrapnel face.”

### **Aid Workers Targeted**

I would have wanted to remind my classmates that Israel has frequently targeted aid workers, killing seven World Central Kitchen (WCK) employees in early April. The Israelis claimed that it was an accident and fired the officers it held responsible. But chef Jose Andres, WCK founder, insisted the attack was purposeful, that Israel had targeted the aid convoy “car by car.”

“This was not just a bad luck situation where ‘oops’ we dropped the bomb in the wrong place,” Andres said. “This was over 1.5, 1.8 kilometers, with a very defined humanitarian convoy that had signs in the top, in the roof, a very colorful logo that we are obviously very proud of. It’s very clear who we are and what we do.”

“WCK is not just any relief organization,” wrote Jack Mirkinson in *The Nation* magazine. “Andrés is a global celebrity with ties to the international political establishment. WCK had been working closely with the Israeli government both in Gaza and in Israel proper. It would be difficult to think of a more mainstream, well-connected group.” It was as if Israel were showing off, Mirkinson added, “flaunting its ability to cross every known line of international humanitarian law and get away with it.”

### **International Court of Justice Ruling**

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled on January 26th that Israel’s slaughter in Gaza is a plausible case of genocide and additional testimony from Francesca Albanese, the U.N.’s Special Rapporteur on Palestine, “Anatomy of a Genocide,” only emphasized that point, given how little is left but rubble in so much of Gaza. The majority of its homes no longer exist, nor do its schools, universities, libraries, or music conservatories.

Violating the 49th Geneva Convention, Israel has fired on ambulances and killed more than 685 health workers, while wounding about 900 of them. It has destroyed all but a few of Gaza’s 36 formerly flourishing hospitals, claiming that Hamas fighters are hiding in tunnels under the buildings. Against the civilian population Israel has used weapons like white phosphorous, which burns to the bone and cannot be easily extinguished. In the past, the Israeli military has been known for using Gaza as a laboratory for weapons experiments and the same is true of the current round of fighting.

Israel’s “war” against Gaza did not, of course, start on October 7th. In 2006, after Gazans elected Hamas to govern them, Israel imposed a siege on the Strip. As lawyer Dov Weisglass, then an aide to the prime minister, said at the time, he wanted to keep Gazans just below starvation level — not enough to kill them, but not enough to fill them either. The present siege has turned Gaza into what’s been called the largest open-air prison on earth, a virtual concentration camp. A U.N. commentator described this as “possibly the most rigorous form of international sanctions imposed in modern times.” Such conditions helped produce the October attack.

Occupying the West Bank since 1967, Israel has distinctly contravened international law. Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention stipulates that “the Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.” It also

prohibits “individual or mass forcible transfers, as well as deportations of protected persons from occupied territory.” Israel, however, has settled about 700,000 Israeli Jews in the West Bank. Once upon a time, there was indeed room for a separate Palestinian state. No more.

### **Arabs to the Gas Chambers**

When I visited the West Bank city of Hebron in the 1980s, I saw graffiti on walls that proclaimed: “ARABS TO THE GAS CHAMBERS.” Back then, the renowned Israeli public intellectual Yeshayahu Leibowitz warned that Israel was turning its soldiers into Judeonazis. Recent YouTube videos of soldiers mocking their victims bear out his prophecy. Fascism is now pervasive in Israel. There are courageous exceptions like journalists Amira Hass and Gideon Levy who write for the newspaper *Haaretz* and the group Combatants for Peace. But all too many Israelis have supported their country’s assault on Gaza, or even wanted something worse. I wish I could have told my classmates that, should they care about Israel, it’s their responsibility to speak out now.

The genocide in Gaza has been enabled, of course, by President Biden, who continues to send billions of dollars’ worth of weaponry, including devastating 2,000-pound bombs, to Israel. Without those arms, the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu couldn’t be acting as it is. While it purports to be searching for and killing Hamas perpetrators of the October 7th atrocities, it’s actually gone to war against the entire population of Gaza. Israeli historian Ilan Pappé sees it as “a massive operation of killing, of ethnic cleansing of depopulation.”

When Jews were being slaughtered by the Nazis, the world turned away. Now, the world has awakened to Israel’s crimes. Many American Jews, like those in A Jewish Voice for Peace (whose demonstrations I’ve attended) are indeed speaking out.

It’s often asked how a people who suffered so much could cause such suffering. In fact, almost all the survivors of the Holocaust are dead. Obviously, none of the perpetrators of the genocide in Gaza and the ethnic cleansing of the West Bank were in European concentration camps. In a 1979 interview, renowned Israeli dissident, Hebrew University chemistry professor Israel Shahak pointed out that no Holocaust survivor had ever been a member of the Israeli government. Israel frequently uses the Holocaust to justify its actions in the Palestinian territories. This is a sacrilege, while one of history’s great crimes is being committed, and this member of the class of 1958 knows it.

*This article first appeared on TomDispatch.*

**Ellen Cantarow**, a Boston-based journalist, first wrote from Israel and the West Bank in 1979. Her work has been published in *Le Monde diplomatique*, the *Village Voice*, *Grand Street*, *Tom Dispatch* and *Mother Jones*, among other publications, and was anthologized by the South End Press. More recently, her writing has appeared at *CounterPunch*, *ZNet*, and *Alternet*.

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