<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/15/opinion/israel-gaza-holocaust-genocide-palestinians.html>

**[Opinion:](https://www.nytimes.com/section/opinion) Guest Essay**

**I’m a Genocide Scholar. I Know It When I See It.**

July 15, 2025

**By Omer Bartov**

Dr. Bartov is a professor of Holocaust and genocide studies at Brown University.

A month after the Hamas attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, I believed there was evidence that the Israeli military had committed war crimes and potentially crimes against humanity in its counterattack on Gaza. But contrary to the cries of Israel’s fiercest critics, the evidence did not seem to me to rise to the crime of genocide.

By May 2024, the Israel Defense Forces had ordered about one million Palestinians sheltering in Rafah — the southernmost and last remaining relatively undamaged city of the Gaza Strip — to move to the beach area of the Mawasi, where there was little to no shelter. The army then proceeded to destroy much of Rafah, a feat mostly accomplished [by August](https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2024/08/27/satellite-imagery-shows-vast-destruction-in-rafah/).

At that point it appeared no longer possible to deny that the pattern of I.D.F. operations was consistent with the statements denoting genocidal intent made by Israeli leaders in the days after the Hamas attack. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had promised that the enemy would pay a “[huge price](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-10-07/ty-article/.premium/israeli-prime-minister-netanyahu-we-are-at-war-we-will-win/0000018b-0978-dc5d-a39f-9f7cb7ee0000)” for the attack and that the I.D.F. would turn parts of Gaza, where Hamas was operating, “[into rubble](https://www.gov.il/en/pages/statement-by-pm-netanyahu-7-oct-2023),” and he [called](https://www.gov.il/en/pages/statement-by-pm-netanyahu-7-oct-2023) on “the residents of Gaza” to “leave now because we will operate forcefully everywhere.”

Mr. Netanyahu had urged his citizens to remember [“what Amalek did to you,](https://www.gov.il/en/pages/statement-by-pm-netanyahu-28-oct-2023)” a quote many interpreted as a reference to the demand in a biblical passage calling for the Israelites to “kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings” of their ancient enemy. Government and military officials said they were fighting [“human animals”](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/defense-minister-announces-complete-siege-of-gaza-no-power-food-or-fuel/) and, later, called for “[total annihilation](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-04-30/ty-article/.premium/smotrich-calls-for-no-half-measures-in-the-total-annihilation-of-gaza/0000018f-2f4c-d9c3-abcf-7f7d25460000).” Nissim Vaturi, the deputy speaker of Parliament, [said on X](https://x.com/nissimv/status/1710694866009596169) that Israel’s task must be “erasing the Gaza Strip from the face of the earth.” Israel’s actions could be understood only as the implementation of the expressed intent to make the Gaza Strip uninhabitable for its Palestinian population. I believe the goal was — and remains today — to force the population to leave the Strip altogether or, considering that it has nowhere to go, to debilitate the enclave through bombings and severe deprivation of food, clean water, sanitation and medical aid to such an extent that it is impossible for Palestinians in Gaza to maintain or reconstitute their existence as a group.

My inescapable conclusion has become that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinian people. Having grown up in a Zionist home, lived the first half of my life in Israel, served in the I.D.F. as a soldier and officer and spent most of my career researching and writing on war crimes and the Holocaust, this was a painful conclusion to reach, and one that I resisted as long as I could. But I have been teaching classes on genocide for a quarter of a century. I can recognize one when I see one.

This is not just my conclusion. A growing number of experts in genocide studies and international law have concluded that Israel’s actions in Gaza can only be defined as genocide. So has [Francesca Albanese](https://www.un.org/unispal/document/genocide-as-colonial-erasure-report-francesca-albanese-01oct24/), the U.N. special rapporteur for the West Bank and Gaza, and [Amnesty International.](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-international-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/) South Africa has brought a genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice.

The continued denial of this designation by states, international organizations and legal and scholarly experts will cause unmitigated damage not just to the people of Gaza and Israel but also to the system of international law established in the wake of the horrors of the Holocaust, designed to prevent such atrocities from happening ever again. It is a threat to the very foundations of the moral order on which we all depend.

The crime of genocide [was defined](https://www.un.org/en/genocide-prevention/definition) in 1948 by the United Nations as the “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.” In determining what constitutes genocide, therefore, we must both establish intent and show that it is being carried out. In Israel’s case, that intent has been publicly expressed by numerous officials and leaders. But intent can also be derived from a pattern of operations on the ground, and this pattern became clear by May 2024 — and has since become ever clearer — as the I.D.F. has systematically destroyed the Gaza Strip.

Most genocide scholars are cautious about applying this term to contemporary events, precisely because of the tendency, since it was coined by the Jewish-Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin in 1944, to attribute it to any case of massacre or inhumanity. Indeed, some argue that the categorization should be entirely discarded, because it often serves more to express outrage than to identify a particular crime.

Yet as Mr. Lemkin recognized, and as the United Nations later agreed, it is crucial to be able to distinguish the attempt to destroy a particular group of people from other crimes under international law, such as war crimes and crimes against humanity. This is because, while other crimes entail indiscriminate or deliberate killing of civilians as individuals, genocide denotes the killing of people as members of a group, geared at irreparably destroying the group itself so that it will never be able to reconstitute itself as a political, social or cultural entity. And, as the international community signaled by adopting the convention, it is incumbent upon all signatory states to prevent such an attempt, to do all they can to stop it while it is occurring and to subsequently punish those who were engaged in this crime of crimes — even if it occurred within the borders of a sovereign state.

The designation has major political, legal and moral ramifications. Nations, politicians and military personnel suspected of, indicted on a charge of or found guilty of genocide are seen as beyond the pale of humanity and may compromise or lose their right to remain members of the international community. A finding by the International Court of Justice that a particular state is engaged in genocide, especially if enforced by the U.N. Security Council, can lead to severe sanctions.

Politicians or generals indicted on a charge of or found guilty of genocide or other breaches of international humanitarian law by the International Criminal Court can face arrest outside of their country. And a society that condones and is complicit in genocide, whatever the stand of its individual citizens may be, will carry this mark of Cain long after the fires of hatred and violence are put out.

Israel has denied all allegations of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. The I.D.F. says it investigates reports of crimes, although it has rarely made its findings public, and when breaches of discipline or protocol are acknowledged, it has generally meted out light reprimands to its personnel. Israeli military and political leaders repeatedly describe the I.D.F. as acting lawfully, say they issue warnings to civilian populations to evacuate sites about to be attacked and blame Hamas for using civilians as human shields.

In fact, the [systematic](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2025-06-12/ty-article-magazine/.premium/rafah-is-gone-razed-to-the-ground-its-not-the-only-city-decimated-by-the-israeli-army/00000197-6506-db73-aff7-7d4ee6bb0000?utm_source=App_Share&utm_medium=iOS_Native) destruction in Gaza not only of housing but also of other infrastructure — government buildings, hospitals, universities, schools, mosques, cultural heritage sites, water treatment plants, agriculture areas, and parks — reflects a policy aimed at making the revival of Palestinian life in the territory highly unlikely.

According to a recent investigation by Haaretz, an [estimated](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2025-06-12/ty-article-magazine/.premium/rafah-is-gone-razed-to-the-ground-its-not-the-only-city-decimated-by-the-israeli-army/00000197-6506-db73-aff7-7d4ee6bb0000?utm_source=App_Share&utm_medium=iOS_Native) 174,000 buildings have been destroyed or damaged, accounting for up to 70 percent of all structures in the Strip. So far, [more than 58,000 people](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/13/world/middleeast/gaza-israel-market.html) have been killed, according to Gazan health authorities, [including](https://www.ochaopt.org/content/reported-impact-snapshot-gaza-strip-9-july-2025) more than 17,000 children, who make up nearly a third of the total fatality count. [More than 870](https://trt.global/world/article/bccad0745686) of those children were less than a year old.

More than 2,000 [families](https://www.newarab.com/news/israel-wipes-out-over-2200-palestinian-families-gaza) have been wiped out, the health authorities said. In addition, 5,600 families now count only one survivor. At least 10,000 people are [believed](https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/05/1149256) to still be buried under the ruins of their homes. More than 138,000 have been wounded and maimed.

Gaza now has the grim distinction of having the [highest number](https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-children-who-lost-limbs-in-gaza) of amputee children [per capita](https://onu.delegfrance.org/the-conflict-in-gaza-has-been-particularly-deadly-for-palestinian-children) in the world. An entire generation of children subjected to ongoing military attacks, loss of parents and long-term malnutrition will suffer severe physical and mental repercussions for the rest of their lives. Untold additional thousands of chronically ill persons have had [little access to hospital care](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/feb/17/patients-with-chronic-illnesses-in-gaza-failing-to-get-treatment-doctors-warn).

The horror of what has been happening in Gaza is still described by most observers as war. But this is a misnomer. For the last year, the I.D.F. has not been fighting an organized military body. The version of Hamas that planned and carried out the attacks on Oct. 7 has been destroyed, though the weakened group continues to fight Israeli forces and retains control over the population in areas not held by the Israeli Army.

Today the I.D.F. is primarily engaged in an operation of demolition and ethnic cleansing. That’s how Mr. Netanyahu’s own former chief of staff and minister of defense, the hard-liner Moshe Yaalon, in November [described](https://edition.cnn.com/2024/12/02/middleeast/israel-idf-gaza-moshe-yaalon-palestinians-ethnic-cleansing-intl) on Israel’s Democrat TV and in subsequent [articles](https://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/2024-12-05/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/00000193-915a-d2e5-a9b3-bd5eec520000) and [interviews](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/01/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-yaalon.html) the attempt to clear northern Gaza of its population.

On Jan. 19, under pressure from Donald Trump, who was a day away from resuming the presidency, a cease-fire went into effect, facilitating the exchange of hostages in Gaza for Palestinian prisoners in Israel. But after Israel’s breaking of the cease-fire on March 18, the I.D.F. has been executing a well-publicized plan to [concentrate](https://www.euronews.com/2025/05/26/israeli-military-wants-to-occupy-75-of-gaza-within-two-months-local-media-report) the entire Gazan population in a [quarter](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/05/05/israeli-cabinet-approves-expanded-military-plan-including-occupying-gaza_6740920_4.html) of the territory in [three zones](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2025-05-25/ty-article/.premium/idf-75-of-gaza-to-be-seized-in-two-months-2-million-civilians-to-be-put-in-three-zones/00000197-0875-dc94-ab97-0e7dc5f00000): Gaza City, the central refugee camps and the Mawasi coastline in the Strip’s southwestern edge.

Using large numbers of bulldozers and huge aerial bombs supplied by the United States, the military appears to be trying to demolish every remaining structure and establish control over the [other three-quarters](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israel-aims-to-control-75-of-gaza-in-two-months-military-says-1f0cadfc?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=ASWzDAgPvoZHiWj1_nzKIkQa2t8DkNWF0WSS0ucJilJ8ZJZKfgbL0UZwEeYWuC7zxQ4%3D&gaa_ts=6874ec90&gaa_sig=A0iQC64KjCWWu0qUz4gsR2ch9ameef08_QKXVuz-TotHhOrYaZMHZ_9N-oRKwQOYts_qbBrlPrcgFvVnWGXQuw%3D%3D) of the territory.

This is also being facilitated by a [plan](https://www.972mag.com/gaza-expulsion-aid-delivery/) that provides — intermittently — limited aid supplies at a few distribution points guarded by the Israeli military, drawing people to the south. [Many Gazans are killed](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/26/world/middleeast/gaza-aid-violence.html) in a desperate attempt to obtain food, and the starvation crisis [deepens](https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164551). On July 7, Defense Minister Israel Katz [said](https://www.cnn.com/2025/07/08/middleeast/israel-rafah-ruins-city-gaza-intl-latam) the I.D.F. would build a “humanitarian city” over the ruins of Rafah to initially accommodate 600,000 Palestinians from the Mawasi area, who would be provisioned by international bodies and not allowed to leave.

Some might describe this campaign as ethnic cleansing, not genocide. But there is a link between the crimes. When an ethnic group has nowhere to go and is constantly displaced from one so-called safe zone to another, relentlessly bombed and starved, ethnic cleansing can morph into genocide.

This was the case in several well-known genocides of the 20th century, such as that of the Herero and Nama in German South West Africa, now Namibia, that began in 1904; the Armenians in World War I; and, indeed, even in the Holocaust, which began with the German attempt to expel the Jews and ended up with their murder.

To this day, only a [few scholars of the Holocaust](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14623528.2024.2448061#d1e411) — and no institutions dedicated to researching and commemorating it — have issued warnings that Israel could be accused of carrying out war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing or genocide. This silence has made a mockery of the slogan “Never again,” transforming its meaning from an assertion of resistance to inhumanity wherever it is perpetrated to an excuse, an apology, indeed, even a carte blanche for destroying others by invoking one’s own past victimhood.

This is another of the many incalculable costs of the current catastrophe. As Israel is literally trying to wipe out Palestinian existence in Gaza and is exercising increasing violence against Palestinians in the West Bank, the moral and historical credit that the Jewish state has drawn on until now is running out.

Israel, created in the wake of the Holocaust as the answer to the Nazi genocide of the Jews, has always insisted that any threat to its security must be seen as potentially leading to another Auschwitz. This provides Israel with license to portray those it perceives as its enemies as Nazis — a term [used](https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2025-04-14/ty-article-opinion/.premium/hamas-arent-nazis-and-gaza-isnt-dresden/00000196-353e-dc5b-af96-7dbf3ff00000) repeatedly by Israeli media figures to [depict](https://www.israelhayom.co.il/culture/tv/article/17324321) [Hamas](https://www.ice.co.il/tv/news/article/1048560) and, by extension, all Gazans, based on the popular assertion that none of them are “uninvolved,” not even the infants, who would grow up to be militants.

This is not a new phenomenon. As early as Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Prime Minister Menachem Begin compared Yasir Arafat, then hunkered down in Beirut, to Adolf Hitler in his Berlin bunker. This time, the analogy is being used in connection with a policy aimed at uprooting and removing the entire population of Gaza.

The daily scenes of horror in Gaza, from which the Israeli public is shielded by its own media’s self-censorship, expose the lies of Israeli propaganda that this is a war of defense against a Nazi-like enemy. One shudders when Israeli spokespeople shamelessly utter the hollow slogan of the I.D.F. being the “most moral army in the world.”

Some European nations, such as France, Britain and Germany, as well as Canada, have feebly protested Israeli actions, especially since Israel breached the cease-fire in March. But they have neither suspended arms shipments nor taken many concrete and meaningful economic or [political steps](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/10/world/canada/uk-canada-sanctions-israel-smotrich-ben-gvir.html) that might deter Mr. Netanyahu’s government.

For a while, the United States government seemed to have lost interest in Gaza, with President Trump initially [announcing](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/04/us/politics/trump-gaza-strip-netanyahu.html) in February that the United States would take over Gaza, promising to turn it into “the Riviera of the Middle East,” and then letting Israel get on with the Strip’s destruction and turning his attention to Iran. At the moment, one can only hope that Mr. Trump will again pressure a reluctant Mr. Netanyahu to at least reach a new cease-fire and put an end to the relentless killing.

How will Israel’s future be affected by the inevitable demolition of its incontestable morality, derived from its birth in the ashes of the Holocaust?

Israel’s political leadership and its citizenry will have to decide. There seems to be little domestic pressure for the urgently needed change of paradigm: the recognition that there is no solution to this conflict other than an Israeli-Palestinian agreement to share the land under whatever parameters the two sides agree on, be it two states, one state or a confederation. Robust external pressure from the country’s allies also appears unlikely. I am deeply worried that Israel will persist on its disastrous course, remaking itself, perhaps irreversibly, into a full-blown authoritarian apartheid state. Such states, as history has taught us, do not last.

Another question arises: What consequences will Israel’s moral reversal have for the culture of Holocaust commemoration, and the politics of memory, education and scholarship, when so many of its intellectual and administrative leaders have up to now refused to face up to their responsibility to denounce inhumanity and genocide wherever they occur?

Those engaged in the worldwide culture of commemoration and remembrance built around the Holocaust will have to confront a moral reckoning. The wider community of genocide scholars — those engaged in the study of comparative genocide or of any one of the many other genocides that have marred human history — is now edging ever closer toward a consensus over describing events in Gaza as a genocide.

In November, a little more than a year into the war, the Israeli genocide scholar Shmuel Lederman [joined](https://www.regthink.org/genocidal-intentions/) the growing chorus of opinion that Israel was engaged in genocidal actions. The Canadian international lawyer William Schabas came to the same conclusion last year and has recently described Israel’s military campaign in Gaza as [“absolutely”](https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1VhtGfp81B/) a genocide.

Other genocide experts, such as [Melanie O’Brien](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-committing-genocide-gaza-says-top-legal-scholar-melanie-obrien), president of the International Association of Genocide Scholars, and the British specialist [Martin Shaw (who has also said that the Hamas attack was genocidal),](https://newlinesmag.com/spotlight/the-uses-and-abuses-of-the-term-genocide-in-gaza/) have reached the same conclusion, while the Australian scholar A. [Dirk Moses](https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/more-than-genocide/) of the City University of New York [described](https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2025/05/14/zeven-gerenommeerde-wetenschappers-vrijwel-eensgezind-israel-pleegt-in-gaza-genocide-a4893293) these events in the Dutch publication NRC as a “mix of genocidal and military logic.” In the same article, Uğur Ümit Üngör, a professor at the Amsterdam-based NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, said there are probably scholars who still do not think it’s genocide, but “I don’t know them.”

Most Holocaust scholars I know don’t hold, or at least publicly express, this view. With a few notable exceptions, such as the Israeli [Raz Segal](https://jewishcurrents.org/a-textbook-case-of-genocide), program director of Holocaust and genocide studies at Stockton University in New Jersey, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem historians [Amos Goldberg and Daniel Blatman,](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2025-01-30/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/theres-no-auschwitz-in-gaza-but-its-still-genocide/00000194-b8af-dee1-a5dc-fcff384b0000) the majority of academics engaged with the history of the Nazi genocide of the Jews have stayed remarkably silent, while some have openly denied Israel’s crimes in Gaza, or accused their more critical colleagues of incendiary speech, wild exaggeration, well-poisoning and antisemitism.

In December the Holocaust scholar Norman J.W. Goda [opined](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/dec/20/genocide-definition-mass-violence-scholars-gaza) that “genocide charges like this have long been used as a fig leaf for broader challenges to Israel’s legitimacy,” expressing his worry that “they have cheapened the gravity of the word genocide itself.” This “genocide libel,” as Dr. Goda referred to it in [an essay](https://isca.indiana.edu/documents/ISCA%20research%20papers/isca-paper-2025-3-goda.pdf), “deploys a range of antisemitic tropes,” including “the coupling of the genocide charge with the deliberate killing of children, images of whom are ubiquitous on NGO, social media, and other platforms that charge Israel with genocide.”

In other words, showing images of Palestinian children ripped apart by U.S.-made bombs launched by Israeli pilots is, in this view, an antisemitic act.

Most recently, Dr. Goda and a respected historian of Europe, Jeffrey Herf, [wrote](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/06/03/israel-gaza-genocide-allegations/) in The Washington Post that “the genocide accusation hurled against Israel draws on deep wells of fear and hatred” found in “radical interpretations of both Christianity and Islam.” It “has shifted opprobrium from Jews as a religious/ethnic group to the state of Israel, which it depicts as inherently evil.”

What are the ramifications of this rift between genocide scholars and Holocaust historians? This is not merely a squabble within academe. The memory culture created in recent decades around the Holocaust encompasses much more than the genocide of the Jews. It has come to play a crucial role in politics, education and identity.

Museums dedicated to the Holocaust have served as models for representations of other genocides around the world. Insistence that the lessons of the Holocaust demand the promotion of tolerance, diversity, antiracism and support for migrants and refugees, not to mention human rights and international humanitarian law, is rooted in an understanding of the universal implications of this crime in the heart of Western civilization at the peak of modernity.

Discrediting genocide scholars who call out Israel’s genocide in Gaza as antisemitic threatens to erode the foundation of genocide studies: the ongoing need to define, prevent, punish and reconstruct the history of genocide. Suggesting that this endeavor is motivated instead by malign interests and sentiments — that it is driven by the very hatred and prejudice that was at the root of the Holocaust — is not only morally scandalous, it provides an opening for a politics of denialism and impunity as well.

By the same token, when those who have dedicated their careers to teaching and commemorating the Holocaust insist on ignoring or denying Israel’s genocidal actions in Gaza, they threaten to undermine everything that Holocaust scholarship and commemoration have stood for in the past several decades. That is, the dignity of every human being, respect for the rule of law and the urgent need never to let inhumanity take over the hearts of people and steer the actions of nations in the name of security, national interest and sheer vengeance.

What I fear is that in the aftermath of the Gaza genocide, it will no longer be possible to continue teaching and researching the Holocaust in the same manner as we did before. Because the Holocaust has been so relentlessly invoked by the state of Israel and its defenders as a cover-up for the crimes of the I.D.F., the study and remembrance of the Holocaust could lose its claim to be concerned with universal justice and retreat into the same ethnic ghetto in which it began its life at the end of World War II — as a marginalized preoccupation by the remnants of a marginalized people, an ethnically specific event, before it succeeded, decades later, in finding its rightful place as a lesson and a warning for humanity as a whole.

Just as worrisome is the prospect that the study of genocide as a whole will not survive the accusations of antisemitism, leaving us without the crucial community of scholars and international jurists to stand in the breach at a time when the rise of intolerance, racial hatred, populism and authoritarianism is threatening the values that were at the core of these scholarly, cultural and political endeavors of the 20th century.

Perhaps the only light at the end of this very dark tunnel is the possibility that a new generation of Israelis will face their future without sheltering in the shadow of the Holocaust, even as they will have to bear the stain of the genocide in Gaza perpetrated in their name. Israel will have to learn to live without falling back on the Holocaust as justification for inhumanity. That, despite all the horrific suffering we are currently watching, is a valuable thing, and may, in the long run, help Israel face the future in a healthier, more rational and less fearful and violent manner.

This will do nothing to compensate for the staggering amount of death and suffering of Palestinians. But an Israel liberated from the overwhelming burden of the Holocaust may finally come to terms with the inescapable need for its seven million Jewish citizens to share the land with the seven million Palestinians living in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank in peace, equality and dignity. That will be the only just reckoning.

***Omer Bartov is a professor of Holocaust and genocide studies at Brown University.***

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/23/opinion/israel-gaza-genocide-scholar-response.html>

**The Opinions**

**A Genocide Scholar on the Case Against Israel**

*An Israeli historian answers his critics and explains why his home country’s conduct in Gaza constitutes genocide.*

July 23, 2025

**By Omer Bartov and**[**Daniel J. Wakin**](https://www.nytimes.com/by/daniel-j-wakin)

**Produced by**[**Jillian Weinberger**](https://www.nytimes.com/by/jillian-weinberger)

*Omer Bartov grew up in Israel and served in the Israel Defense Forces. He went on to study the Holocaust and genocide as a historian. In this conversation, he tells the Opinion editor Daniel J. Wakin why he believes Israel is committing genocide in Gaza and what that means for the future of the Middle East and the next generation of Jews in Israel and the United States.*

**A Genocide Scholar on the Case Against Israel**

An Israeli historian answers his critics, and explains why his home country’s conduct in Gaza constitutes genocide.

*Below is a transcript of an episode of “The Opinions.” We recommend listening to it in its original form for the full effect. You can do so using the player above or on the*[*NYT Audio app*](https://apps.apple.com/us/app/nyt-audio/id1549293936)*,*[*Apple*](https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-opinions/id1762898126)*,*[*Spotify*](https://open.spotify.com/show/581OhiIm69lqSyNRbBkXnf)*,*[*Amazon Music*](https://music.amazon.com/podcasts/4b68fc73-2a9c-49b2-a18f-c95461b617ad/the-opinions)*,*[*YouTube*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jT2CZ98oOvo&list=PLdMrbgYfVl-tMEnS1IoUtgT3GyTq75-jp)*,*[*iHeartRadio*](https://www.iheart.com/podcast/269-the-opinions-205695035/)*or wherever you get your podcasts.*

*The transcript has been lightly edited for length and clarity.*

**Daniel J. Wakin:** I’m Dan Wakin, an international editor for New York Times Opinion.

The historian Omer Bartov grew up in Israel in a Zionist home. He spent his career researching and writing about the Holocaust and genocide, and last week [he published an essay](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/15/opinion/israel-gaza-holocaust-genocide-palestinians.html) in Times Opinion, describing Israel’s actions in Gaza as just that: a genocide.

We received a huge response to the piece — both positive and negative — because this issue is deeply fraught for many. So I wanted to talk to Bartov about what moved him to write this essay now, and to ask him to respond to some of the criticism we’ve received. And because Bartov is a historian, I wanted to know what using this word means for how we talk about the past and for the way we think about and study the Holocaust.

Omer, thanks for joining me today.

**Omer Bartov:** Thanks for having me, Dan.

**Wakin:** I think it’s important to start by saying that you reached this conclusion over time. In fact, about a month after Oct. 7, [you published a Times Opinion essay](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/10/opinion/israel-gaza-genocide-war.html) that said, “as a historian of genocide, I believe that there is no proof that genocide is currently taking place in Gaza.”

A lot has happened since you wrote that first essay. Can you please talk about the process of how you changed your mind?

**Bartov:** The point of that earlier op-ed was not simply to say that no genocide is happening. What I was trying to say in it was that I could see that there were war crimes being carried out by the Israel Defense Forces in Gaza and to warn that if this were not stopped, then what the I.D.F. was doing may deteriorate into genocide. So it was written as a warning, and I was, of course, hoping that somebody would pay attention, either in Israel or, more likely, in the United States.

So at the time, my view was this: If the Biden administration had told Netanyahu in November or December 2023, you have two weeks to wrap it up, and after that, you’re on your own, Israel would’ve stopped. And possibly, we wouldn’t be talking about a genocide in Gaza at all.

In the November op-ed, I cited various political and military leaders in Israel making statements that appeared to be genocidal. At the time, one could argue these were said in the heat of the moment, in response to the massacre of 800 Israeli civilians by Hamas. But it turned out that when you looked at the pattern of operations by the I.D.F., it was implementing precisely those statements: *We need to flatten Gaza. There are no uninvolved people there. They’re human animals. They should get no water, no food.* All of these statements had a genocidal tone, and they also served as incitement to the troops on the ground, coming directly from their own political and military leaders.

By May of 2024, I concluded that what the I.D.F. was involved in was not simply trying to destroy Hamas and to release the hostages, but instead was engaged in an operation that is ongoing to demolish Gaza altogether — to make the Gaza Strip into a completely uninhabitable territory to the extent not only that people would not be able to live there, not even on the ruins of their own homes, but also that they would never be able to reconstitute their identity as a group even if the fighting were to stop — and one hopes that it will finally stop.

**Wakin:** I think this is a good point to jump in and ask: How do you define a genocide?

**Bartov:** So genocide is a different type of crime to all others. And it was conceived and articulated by a Jewish Polish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin, who began thinking about this issue in the 1930s when he was considering what happened to the Armenians in World War I. He was trying to understand what it meant when you’re not simply massacring people as a regime, as an organization, but you’re trying to destroy the group as a group.

During World War II, Lemkin had to flee from Poland because he was Jewish. His family was murdered. He ended up in the United States. He published a book in 1944 in which there’s a chapter that defines genocide, and his definition, with all kind of changes, was eventually voted on by the United Nations in 1948 and came into force in 1951. That definition of genocide says that you’re killing people or making life impossible for people, or creating conditions that make their existence increasingly difficult, not as individuals, but as an ethnic, national or religious group. Your goal is to eradicate the group as a group.

So what you have to show if you want to indict a country or any individual for genocide is that they have the intent to do that and that they’re trying to implement that intent. So, of course, numbers matter. They have to be significant numbers. And I’ve seen responses saying, “If Israel killed a million Gazans, then it would be a genocide, but 50, 60, maybe 100,000 — not good enough.” It is good enough if the intent is to destroy the group as a group by violent means, destruction, deprivation of food and chances of life from children, from the next generation and destruction of all the cultural, educational and health institutions. That is clearly an indication of an intent to carry out genocide against that group. That is to eradicate it in whole, in part, as such.

**Wakin:** The same critics, I think, would also raise the idea that in World War II, the Nazis were killing Jews because they were Jewish, because of their Jewishness. And these critics would say, Israel is not inflicting casualties on Palestinian civilians because they are Palestinian, it’s because Israel is fighting an enemy embedded among the Palestinians: Hamas. That Palestinians may be dying even though Israel is trying to do everything it can to protect them. Is there a distinction there?

**Bartov:** No. If you really wanted to make an analogy with the Nazis, I would say that the distinction would be between a particular Nazi racial, biological, scientific, racist ideology, which was quite unique for a regime. And in Israel, although there are members of the cabinet who are Jewish supremacists, the Israeli government as such does not speak in those racial terms. However, what Israel is doing is fighting a war against Palestinians. And the goal of this government is to make it impossible for Palestinians to have any right of self-determination or any ability to resist oppression and occupation by the State of Israel.

**Wakin:** One of the objections raised to your piece was that you’re blaming Israel for carrying out genocide in Gaza, when all that has to happen to stop this situation is for Hamas, which started the war, to surrender and let the hostages go. They could end this there, and they could have ended it at any time. So it’s somehow false to accuse Israel of a genocide when its actions are the result of Hamas’s failure to surrender.

**Bartov:** Yeah, that unfortunately is merely an indication of the success of Israeli propaganda. If Hamas were to surrender, to hand over the hostages, what do you think Israel and the I.D.F. on the ground would do? They would just wrap up their tents and put their tanks in reverse and leave Gaza? No. The only thing that is preventing the I.D.F. from completely demolishing Gaza, whatever is left of it, from taking over everything, is the presence of Israeli hostages there.

So the only limit on movements by the I.D.F. to completely destroy Gaza is the fact that there’s still hostages there. And Netanyahu himself has said that; his goal is absolute victory. Of course, it’s not really defined what he means by absolute victory, but it means complete control over the Gaza Strip.

**Wakin:**And finally, critics of the piece have pointed out that in World War II, hundreds of thousands of German and Japanese civilians were killed — the atomic bombings in Japan, the fire bombing of Dresden. Why was that not considered a genocide, and why is this case considered a genocide?

**Bartov:** That’s a question that’s often asked in World War II. Especially British and American bombers killed and firebombed in Germany alone about 600,000 civilians intentionally. Now, you could have said that was a war crime, why is it not genocide? Well, think about what happened when the Americans occupied Germany. Did they kill all the Germans? Did they say that Germany’s going to never exist again? Did they flatten Germany? No. They decided on the Marshall Plan. Now, they had reasons for that because they were worried, of course, about communist influence. So they wanted to make Germany a viable society. And the German economic miracle was in large part because it began with a Marshall Plan.

And even with Japan — once America came to occupy Japan, it didn’t destroy Japan. Complaints were by the winners that the losers were doing so well economically that they lost the war, but won in the economic competition. Now, had Israel said: *Look, we are fighting Hamas. We’re not fighting Palestinians. We’re not fighting the Palestinian people. We are on your side. Inhabitants, help us destroy Hamas and we will help you build a new society together with us.* You won’t find such statements in Israel.

**Wakin:** So let’s move away from the politics and the issue of morality and talk a bit about you personally. You served in the I.D.F. in the 1970s as a young man. You were on patrol in Gaza. And you’ve written that your military service there made you understand what it meant to occupy other people. Did you think about your experiences in Gaza as you wrote this essay? And, if so, how did you think about them?

**Bartov:** Yes. Look, I was a young officer at the time. My battalion headquarters was in the city of Gaza. It was highly congested. There had been a lot of violence there. People were living in derelict quarters — it was not a great place. I served also in the West Bank as a soldier, and you have to understand, I was raised in Israel, I was raised in a Zionist home. I wanted to be a combat soldier. I was your usual Israeli male.

And it began dawning on me that when you occupy people, there is something about that situation — how would I say it? It was not a profound sort of intellectual consideration. It was a sensation of being an occupier, of being unwanted by the population and asking yourself, *Why am I here?* There was a sense of mutual threat. When you patrol in a city and you are walking 30 men with guns in a city, you are obviously there to threaten people. That’s what you’re doing. But you see them behind their windows, and there are many of them, and you don’t know who they are and what they might do to you. You feel constantly threatened. That’s a situation of occupation that creates this kind of mutual dehumanization. And for me, this was the beginning. It was a process of several years of realizing what occupation does.

More than 50 years later, I think occupation corrupts and it corrupts completely and it seeps into society. The society that I was a member of in the early 1970s and Israeli society today are completely different. The army is completely different, and much of that is a result of precisely that occupation, of the dehumanizing aspect of occupation.

I always think about sitting in a nice cafe in Tel Aviv, having a coffee or a drink with a young man, and they’re nice people. They’re friendly, they’re open, they have a sense of humor, they look great. They’re like anybody else that you would meet in New York or London or Berlin. But the day before, they were in uniform. And what were they doing? They were controlling the occupation. And how do you do that? You show that you are the boss. And how do you do that? You break into people’s homes at 4 in the morning. You drag old people out of their beds. You break children’s toys. That’s how you enforce an occupation.

What does it do to you? What does it do to your society? And that’s without talking about the effect that Gaza will have on a whole generation of young Israelis who have been fighting there and destroying that place.

**Wakin:** Is that kind of dehumanization a prerequisite to genocidal action?

**Bartov:** Yes, it is. One of the signs of genocide is that you start talking about a particular group as not human — as different, and somehow not deserving the same rights or not having the same qualities. You can say: They’re all thieves, they’re all rapists. Or you can say they’re cockroaches. You can say they’re human animals. All this terminology is a prerequisite. It doesn’t mean that necessarily genocide will ensue, but you have to think of the other group as not having rights and not having rights to have rights. And that is something that developed in Israel over time. That for most Israelis — and I’m not talking about the right wing — for most Israelis, the idea that Palestinians should have the same rights as us and the same dignity and the same equality, doesn’t at all rise to people’s consciousness.

People got used to the occupation. That’s one reason I would say why they were so appalled by Oct. 7, because suddenly those people broke out of their cage and attacked us. And we were used to them being on the other side of the fence and being patrolled by our troops, who then the next day could sit with us in a cafe and be completely normal people.

**Wakin:** You’ve spent your career studying the Holocaust, and many Jews around the world believe that education about the Holocaust is paramount, encapsulated by the slogan “never again.” What do you think that Israel’s conduct in Gaza now will mean for the future of how we think about “never again” and how we think about the Holocaust?

**Bartov:** So I spent the early part of my career actually studying the crimes of the German Army on the Eastern Front and the brutalization of soldiers, which for obvious reasons I was interested in. Then I started increasingly studying genocide and the Holocaust. And actually, I wrote about what I thought about the notion of the lessons of the Holocaust, and I was always a bit skeptical about that, in the sense that I was always worried about the idea that the lesson of the Holocaust is that what we need is more tolerance, more humanity. If we teach the Holocaust, then we will understand that. And I was never sure why, when you teach brutality, dehumanization, that that should somehow make you more humane. Make you understand that we are all the same as human beings.

So I was always a little wary about that. That was very much the American interpretation of the Holocaust as it grew because it was not always there. It took a long time. It really came in the 1980s and ’90s. In Israel, of course, the understanding of the Holocaust was always completely different. The understanding of the Holocaust was that the Holocaust meant that the Jews should stick to themselves, and if anyone threatens them, they should eradicate them.

I think, again, on two levels, in the case of Israel, what Gaza has done, it will become increasingly difficult for Israel to be able to argue that because of the Holocaust, because of what was done to the Jews, it can do whatever it takes, and it does not have to pay attention to international law or criticism by other states because it is fighting for its bare existence. See what happened to us in Auschwitz. That because Israel was engaged in such extraordinary destruction of human lives, such callous treatment of other people, it won’t be able to draw on that moral capital anymore.

In terms of the whole culture of memory, commemoration, teaching, pedagogy that use the Holocaust with very good intentions to teach tolerance and humanity — that is becoming increasingly difficult now because those institutions and many of the individuals in those institutions who were charged or appointed themselves to disseminate that culture of commemoration, of memory with the humanistic message of “never again” — never again what? Never again in humanity. Never again genocide. Never again indifference to human lives. They have been silent over what is happening in Gaza. They have not spoken out now for two years. And that, I think, has greatly diminished their authority. And I’m afraid the result of that may be that this culture of commemorating the Holocaust may recede back to where it began, which is a kind of ethnic enclave of Jews talking about their suffering with other Jews.

**Wakin:**I don’t know how to put this.It’shard to say can anything good come of this. As a historian, maybe 50 years from now — casting yourself in the future, if you look back could you see some kind of positive or some sort of cathartic effect of what is happening? Is that at all possible? Can you even speak of this in those terms?

**Bartov:** Yes, of course you can, because we’ve seen this happen with other countries, countries that had violent regimes that were engaged in a great deal of violence. And at some point, whether you talk about Germany or South Africa, these countries have shook themselves free of it and rebuilt themselves as completely different societies. But in order to do that, it doesn’t happen simply because people changed their minds. In Germany it happened because Germany was defeated in World War II. In South Africa, it happened because South Africa was under a huge sanctions regime and just could no longer maintain apartheid.

So I think that it can happen, but I have to say that right now, Israel has enjoyed such incredible impunity in the international community — and especially in that community that matters to it, which is the United States and Western Europe, who are its main supporters — that I’m afraid the more likely prediction for now is that Israel will become increasingly authoritarian and may end up being a full-blown apartheid authoritarian state. And such states don’t last very long.

So, yes, after that there may be a reckoning. If that reckoning comes, it would have to come with a process of truth and reconciliation because Israel will not be able to shake itself free just by erasing what happened — the memory of what it did in Gaza. It will have to confront that. It will have to go back all the way to 1948, and it will have to begin a process of truth and reconciliation that could lead to some kind of settlement between the Jewish and Palestinian inhabitants of that land. But right now it’s heading in the opposite direction.

**Wakin:** The implications for Israel in the immediate future, particularly when it comes to American support, there’s a big growing divide in this country. A generational divide over Israel’s conduct in Gaza. Younger Jews are much more likely than their parents to see Israel as a committer of crimes, as an occupying force. What will that mean for the future of American support for Israel, and what does that mean for Israel’s future?

**Bartov:** So it took a long time for Israel to build up the kind of support — in many ways, love — for Israel that exists in the United States. In Europe, things are a bit different because there’s also a sense of guilt about the Holocaust, but also a kind of admiration for Israel. It took many, many years to build that — decades — and that is now being eroded. And I can’t say that I’m happy about that.

If Israel loses support and it becomes increasingly violent, erodes any of what is left there of liberal democracy — as is happening right now — then this will not bode well for the state of Israel itself. And, unfortunately, it will also have, I would say, a harmful effect on Jewish communities around the world because Israel presents itself as the representative of the Jews around the world. And so it makes them responsible, willy-nilly, for its own actions. And so that process will not only erode support for Israel, but I’m afraid it can also give license to more prejudice against Jews wherever they are.

**Wakin:**You’re hinting at this slightly in your last response, but I’m just curious, how do you feel about Israel inside yourself, emotionally? What is your feeling now as a human being, as an individual — not as a scholar about this but as the country of your birth and your origin?

**Bartov:** Look, I mean, it’s actually heartbreaking. I grew up there. My best friends are there. I have family there. And there are many things I love, and certainly loved, about that country. To see it change so dramatically, both through a long-term process and then in this kind of accelerated, on-steroids transformation since Oct. 7, is heartbreaking.

What I can say is that I’m a big supporter of the state of Israel. I’m an Israeli citizen. I believe the Jewish people, like every other people, have the right to self-determine. I’m not against Zionism at all. I think Zionism was a movement that called for the emancipation and liberation of Jews, for human rights. But the kind of Zionism that exists in Israel now, the kind of state it has become, I can’t support it.

**Wakin:** Omer, thank you so much for joining me in this conversation. I really appreciate it.

**Bartov:** Thanks very much, Dan.

***Daniel J. Wakin has been a reporter and editor at The Times for more than two decades. He is the author of “The Man With the Sawed-Off Leg and Other Tales of a New York City Block.”***[***@danwakin***](https://twitter.com/danwakin)