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Palestine

What Genocide Looks Like

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THE TELEVISED AND live-streamed war in Gaza following October 7th gives new insights into things that previously couldn't be seen in real time. In their essay "Gaza: A Ghastly Window into the Crisis of Global Capitalism" William I. Robinson and Hoai-An Nguyen observe:

The twentieth century saw at least five cases of acknowledged genocide, defined by the United Nations Convention as a crime committed with the intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, in whole or in part. The century started with the genocide of the Herero and Nama by German colonialists from 1904 to 1908 in what is today Namibia. This was followed by the Ottoman genocide of Armenians in 1915 and 1916, the Nazi holocaust of 1939-1945, and the Rwandan genocide of 1994. [1]

"As Israeli genocide in Gaza is livestreamed, the rules of warfare no longer apply, if they ever did, for Tel Aviv and Washington. There were more [civilian deaths](#) recorded in Gaza in the first two months of the conflict, nearly 20,000, than in the first 20 months of the Russia-Ukraine conflict [the full-scale 2022 Russian invasion —ed.] which took 9,614 civilian lives. [2]

In the popular imagination, "genocide" probably conjures up the Nazi industrial death apparatus of cattle cars and gas chambers, mass machine-gunning of victims forced to dig their own graves, Jewish ghetto populations earmarked for transport and extinction. But that ultimate 20th century horror doesn't exhaust the definition.

Article II of the United Nations "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide" (1948) specifies "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

Four of these points, (a)-(d), were fully documented in South Africa's submission to the International Court of Justice on Israel's assault in Gaza. (The ICJ is a separate body from the International Criminal Court, which indicted Vladimir Putin on the fifth point, the kidnapping of Ukrainian children for "adoption" in Russia.)

If anything, "measures to prevent births within the group" stand out, with women and children making up over half the Gaza deaths, with medical collapse forcing women (50,000 are pregnant in Gaza) to give birth without prenatal or proper hospital care, and with malnutrition making nursing practically impossible — all this before Israel's pending invasion of Rafah, with close to 1.5 million displaced Gazans living in unspeakable conditions.

Frankly, in the eyes of the great majority of the world, calling this a genocide is not a close call. Israel's rather pathetic rebuttal to the South African legal team's submission did not refute a single factual point, and barely even tried. Stripped of rhetorical flourish, Israel basically raised two arguments: (1) We're the Jewish State born from the Holocaust, how dare anyone accuse us of genocide? (2) Hamas committed mass atrocities on October 7, and Israel has "the sacred right and responsibility to defend itself."

Of these, point (1) is a demand for permanent immunity. (Wouldn't Donald Trump be proud?) And (2) is irrelevant to the case at the ICJ, which deals with charges against states. Leaders of Hamas, and Israel, could be charged at the International Criminal Court but Hamas as a non-state entity is not a party in ICJ proceedings.

Before probing the status of Israel's "right of defense," let's be clear about basic facts, whatever ultimately emerges from many tangled claims about who killed how many people in Israel on October 7. The military wing of Hamas (whatever other parts of the organization, or Gazans in general, may have wanted) carried out a terrorist attack on a terrorist state. It included killings of noncombatant civilians and, by credible reports, hideous and murderous sexual violence.

The ICJ case, however, is not about the character of the Hamas attack, but about whether Israel's state terrorism in Gaza amounts to "intent to destroy, in whole or in part," its population.

As a rough analogy, let's imagine that China — with or without some kind of provocation — were to wage a bombing campaign and ground invasion in Xinjiang province (the Uighur territory) and in just over three months killing one percent (an undercount) of the population, deliberately destroying almost all the hospitals and blasting ambulances with tank shells, killing over 100 journalists in what are clearly targeted attacks, instructing the civilians to move and bombing them as they flee, suggesting that the population might be "voluntarily" transferred, and openly saying the war will continue for a year.

It is not hard to imagine what the world, the U.S. government and media would call that. And what if, say, a power like Russia were supplying China with the bombs and artillery for the assault? That analogy suggests that the South African case at the ICJ had one shortcoming, in failing to call out the United States as a partner in the Gaza massacre, which Washington funds and supplies.

Occupation and "Right of Defense"

Israel's right of self-defense against Hamas is so widely repeated, across the political and media spectrum, that it's taken as axiomatic. That's why it needs to be sharply interrogated.

Under principles of international law — even if in practice Israel ignores them, under the umbrella of the United States' protective dispensation — Gaza has the status of Israeli-occupied territory. The withdrawal of Israeli settlements in 2005, after it became too expensive to protect them, didn't remove Israel's control of Gaza's economy, which it systematically underdeveloped and looted, and its control over what could come in and go out.

Since 2007 when Hamas took power in Gaza (following a failed U.S.-backed anti-Hamas coup), the Detroit-size strip of territory with 2.3 million people has been subject to a 16-year siege with food supplies allowed at just subsistence levels, punctuated by repeated episodes of Israeli bombing and infrastructure destruction.

There are established rules governing occupied territory taken in wartime (Fourth Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, August 1949: Section III, "Occupied Territories," Articles 47-78). These specify in detail that the occupying power bears responsibility for the well-being of the occupied population — which means that Israel's right of self-defense is constrained by the fact that it has no more right to bomb Gaza and its people than it has to bomb its own citizens.

Even apart from the monstrous disproportionality of the mass killing and destruction that Israel has inflicted, and its

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blatant lies about “minimizing civilian casualties” — when the opposite is obviously true — it simply had no right to launch such a military operation in the first place.

Consequences of a Genocidal War

In reviewing the bare facts of the destruction as of the beginning of February, we’re entirely aware that the statistics will be hugely outdated by the time we’re in print. Even right now, the stated death toll of 27,000 in Gaza must be grossly understated.

With thousands of unrecovered bodies under destroyed buildings, the real number must be over 30,000, and that’s before the almost inevitable rapid spread of epidemic disease from the collapse of health services, the bombing of almost all the hospitals, the absence of clean water, overcrowding and hunger verging on famine.

Well over half the structures in Gaza are rubble, to the extent that it’s hard to see how it can be made habitable again. In addition to this is deliberate cultural demolition — the Israeli army’s destruction of universities and museums with priceless records and artifacts, rivaling what the Islamic State was doing in Syria and Iraq.

Leading Palestinian intellectuals have been targeted, along with more than 100 journalists, and over 300 medical workers. The Israeli army has killed 94 university professors, along with hundreds of teachers and thousands of students, as part of its ongoing assault on Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, according to the Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor.

Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor stressed that “Israel’s actions fall within the framework of its public policies of making the Gaza Strip uninhabitable and expelling its Palestinian residents...by establishing a coercive atmosphere devoid of basic services and necessities for survival, i.e. by destroying people’s physical safety and psychological stability, which may ultimately force the Strip’s inhabitants to evacuate.”

The Geneva-based human rights organization stated that Israel “has [targeted](#) academic, scientific, and intellectual figures in the Strip in deliberate and specific air raids on their homes without prior notice.” These horrific figures will be outdated within weeks, but they foreshadow further ugly consequences.

1) On the popular level in the Middle East and Muslim world, Israel will never be forgiven for what it has done to impose a second Nakba on Palestine — even though Saudi Arabia and other oil kingdoms happily intend to resume “normalization” of relations at the earliest opportunity.

2) In U.S. and global politics, the slaughter in Gaza has produced a hemorrhaging of Joe Biden’s support base among Arab Americans as well as progressive and young Jewish voters. Meanwhile both Benjamin Netanyahu and Vladimir Putin are awaiting the U.S. election, in expectation of the return of Donald Trump — with all its implications for the United States, the world, and the global environmental catastrophe.

3) Even with incomplete reporting, it’s clear that the Israeli military in Gaza and the West Bank is committing acts of sadistic savagery including executions of unarmed prisoners — recalling Russian army atrocities in Bucha and other Ukrainian towns — as well as blasting ambulances with tank shells, and random shootings on the street, about which we know mainly from the case where the victims turned out to be three escaped Israeli hostages.

This indicates a significant presence of the extremely racist far right within the Israeli Defense Force, which is going to feed back into Israel’s volatile political crisis as it resurfaces. The obscene celebratory “Settlement Brings Security and Victory” conference for the depopulation and Israeli recolonization of Gaza shows that the fascist forces in the

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Israeli government no longer need to hide their intentions. With the Netanyahu coalition in increasing peril from both the far right and the general disillusionment of the populace, the struggle inside Israel threatens to see more violence both against Palestinian communities and between Israeli-Jewish political forces.

4) The danger of a much wider regional war, whether in Lebanon with Hezbollah or potentially with direct U.S. and Iranian involvement, is growing as the Gaza massacre continues, although it is difficult to assess the level of the threat.

5) We don't know at this writing what's happening in the semi-secret talks over an extended two-month "pause" and hostage/prisoner exchange. Nor will we know, if such a deal materializes, what the secret clauses might be. What's clear for the pro-Palestinian and peace movement is that if such a pause comes about, it will be imperative to intensify the struggle for an immediate and permanent ceasefire to a point where it becomes politically impossible for the U.S. government to allow Israel to resume the massacre.

As we go to press, the Israeli military says its full-scale assault on Rafah will proceed unless all hostages are released by the start of Ramadan. Meanwhile, even though U.S. mainstream media are showing much less than what most of the world sees, the daily livestream of the destruction of Gaza and Palestine continues. So in the year 2024, we can now say that "this is what genocide looks like" — and that we will be living with the consequences for decades.

March-April 2024, [ATC 229 <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc229/what-genocide-looks-like/>].

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[1] To this list should be added, for example, the Belgian colonial genocide under King Leopold in the Congo. The genocide of Native Americans in the United States, of course, is another case although largely completed in the 19th century.—ed.

[2] First published at [The Philosophical Salon](#).