

# The Inconvenient Narrative Behind the Catastrophe in Gaza

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## Preamble

The following article is an updated version of the article, “The Convergence of the Past, Present and Future in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” that appeared in The Huffington Post on July 24, 2014 in the midst of the 2014 Gaza War. It is offered as a companion piece to Munther Isaac’s prophetic sermon, “Christ in the Rubble,” and Rabbi Ben Rosen and the board of Tzedek Chicago’s statement “In Gaza Israel Is Revealing the True face of Zionism.” While the severity of the two contexts is different, the effort was made to update statistics and relevant information throughout.

At the time of writing, the official death toll in Gaza has just exceeded 30,000, with another 69,737 injured and more than 7,000 missing, in the 142 days since the horrific attack by Hamas in Israel.<sup>1</sup> Over 17,000 Palestinian children in Gaza are unaccompanied.<sup>2</sup> Starvation is rampant and infrastructure flattened. Life in Gaza is being snuffed out in real time and livestreamed for all to see. Words fail and emotions flare up and stutter in halting pulses when they can’t be held together for too long.

The genocide that we are witnessing in Gaza is part of an inconvenient narrative, a historical unfolding that those who hold most of the power — especially in the United States and Israel — do not want revealed, popularized, internalized, and absorbed, particularly if this leads to collective action. However, it is a narrative of cross-bearing that can still experience resurrection in what Palestinian pastor and peacemaker, Munther Isaac, calls, “a Palestinian Christian narrative of lament and hope,” in his important book, *The Other Side of the Wall*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Israel-Gaza war in maps and charts: Live tracker,” *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/longform/2023/10/9/israel-hamas-war-in-maps-and-charts-live-tracker> (accessed February 26, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel - reported impact | Day 142,” *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs* (13 February 2024): <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-142> (accessed February 26, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Munther Isaac, *The Other Side of the Wall: A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020).

As is the case whenever Gaza has been the target of U.S.-made bombs dropped by Israeli fighter jets, I am often asked for my opinion on this military onslaught in Gaza. And although I probably shouldn't, I also read the cacophony of infuriating public comments at the bottom of news reports on the ongoing violence, many of which are woefully ignorant of the historical backdrop to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict generally and the recent Israeli bombing and ground incursion in Gaza by extension. Except they don't know that it's by extension. And that's the problem.

Poet David Whyte reminds us of an Irish saying that goes; "The thing about the past is that it isn't the past." This is true of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict like no other on earth, as the past, present, and future converge in this colonial war on Palestine in ways that are both unique and devastating. The past, because of the historical narrative that animates this conflict; the future, because of the predictive apocalyptic impulses especially in conservative Evangelical Christianity that myopically affirms and emboldens Israel's every move; and the present, because the decisions and actions today rest on both trajectories simultaneously.

French anthropological philosopher and originator of the Mimetic Theory, René Girard, wrote the following in his book, *Battling to the End* (2009):

Among humans, the fact that no one ever feels they are the aggressor is because everything is always reciprocal. The slightest little difference, in one direction or another, can trigger the escalation to extremes. The aggressor has always already been attacked. Why are relations of rivalry never seen as symmetrical? Because people always have the impression that the other is the first to attack, that they are never the ones who begin, though in a way they are always the one. Individualism is a formidable lie.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, individualism *is* a lie. We are all far more interconnected than we often realize — we are all "interdividuals." The individualistic tendency to pick sides obfuscates this interconnectedness and forces us to ignore atrocities as they happen, right now, in-the-moment regardless of their origin and target. Yes, violence in all its forms should be rejected.

That said, two layers are important to hold in tension here. On a micro level, each individual killed — whether Jewish or Palestinian — begs our compassion and should elicit our denunciation of the

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<sup>4</sup> René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoit Chantre*, translated by Mary Baker (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 18.

source of violence against them. But we also need to acknowledge that the struggle between Israel and Palestine on a macro level is analogous to a hulking 250-pound abusive dad wailing on his 6-year-old son who can only muster an unavailing flurry of desperate but ultimately futile punches in pitiable defiance.

I am all for balance if the circumstances call for it, but if we are against all violence regardless of its origin, shouldn't we be *more* against the sources of *most* of the violence — direct violence, yes, but also systemic and structural? If there is more violence coming from one side compared to another, doesn't this demand for balance also demand that our equal weight given to each violent incident will accumulate into a more frequent and louder denunciation of the source of most of the violence? Clearly, the story of David and Goliath has taken on new meaning.

When Hamas fires rockets into Israel, it is incumbent upon us to ask, why are they doing this? In his speech, "The Other America," Martin Luther King, Jr. observed, "a riot is the language of the unheard." Failure to probe the historical reasons for violent resistance entrenches the erroneous perception that the conflict is only two weeks old rather than over a century long. It is a convenient and lazy oversight. Rather, when we censure Hamas' militant wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, as well as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other such groups, for firing rockets into Israel (as we should), our answer to why they are taking these drastic measures will lead us to others whom we should also denounce — Israeli power brokers and their supporting cast who created and perpetuate the structural sources of desperation and humiliation for Palestinians.

This conflict, as the Palestinian Christian peace activist and Executive Director of Holy Land Trust, Sami Awad, has remarked, is *not* between Jews and Palestinians; it's between those who want peace and those who don't. It is when we have articulated this fuller, and therefore more representative and necessary, denunciation that we can begin to focus our attention on the victims on all sides, nonviolent peacebuilding initiatives that we should implement, actors in the conflict, root and secondary causes, memories and stories — the history and narrative, as inconvenient as it may be. In this regard, I make the distinction between violence from a position of weakness and desperation and violence from a position of power and rapacity. Neither violence is acceptable, but the former at least invites the practical and entirely feasible alleviation of the sources of violent desperation by those with the power to do so.

The popular narrative in the Western corporate media is that there is no narrative. As government spokespersons and media pundits continuously parrot the trite affirmation that Israel has the right to defend itself, we need to do a better job of pulling this conflict out by its blood-soaked roots to more accurately trace their meandering and tangled trajectories. In a word, it's the occupation, stupid — as both Robert A. Pape and Hagai El-Ad so bluntly put it.<sup>5</sup> From the Balfour Declaration of 1917, massacres in response to the 1936–39 Arab Revolt, the Nakba of 1948, and the new lines drawn on the map in the aftermath of the June War, or Naksa (setback), of 1967, to the deplorable yet routine bombings and offensive operations against Gaza since the year 2000, we can point to an overwhelming array of discriminatory and racist Israeli policies and actions against Palestinians over the past century.<sup>6</sup>

As an illustration, however, when Qassam rockets (a designation that is itself informed by relentless Palestinian memories) are fired at Sderot, Ashdod, and Ashkelon in Israel, they are firing at the former Palestinian villages of Njad, Isdud, and al-Majdal. They are firing on the infrastructure that once held together their stolen lives rebranded as ancient Israeli cities, built up around the homes and fields of Palestinians who were violently herded into refugee camps in what is now Gaza — a population that has ballooned to 2.1 million people today in an area a bit smaller than my hometown of Abbotsford, BC (pop. 135,000). This part of the inconvenient narrative is still fresh in their minds, and it — along with the Israeli refusal of a right to return — is a constant source of understandable humiliation, frustration, and desperation.

This is the Nakba, or "catastrophe," when approximately 750,000 Palestinians — or 80 percent of the Arab population of what eventually became the state of Israel — were forced from their homes, land, livelihood, relationships, and all that they have known into refugee camps in Gaza and the West Bank during the Arab-Israeli war in 1948 — all after the Palestinians justifiably rejected the UN Partition Plan (1947) that would have given Israel 56 percent of the land even though Jews made up only 31 percent of the population (increased from only 3.2 percent in 1878) and even though Palestinians owned 92 percent of the land.<sup>7</sup> The Jewish paramilitary group Haganah and

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<sup>5</sup> Robert A. Pape, "It's the Occupation, Stupid," *Foreign Policy*: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/10/18/its-the-occupation-stupid/> (accessed Feb. 26, 2024); Hagai El-Ad, "It's the Occupation, Stupid," +972 Magazine: <https://www.972mag.com/its-the-occupation-stupid/> (accessed on February 26, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> For a brief historical background on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, please read this primer written by the Middle East Research and Information Project: <https://merip.org/palestine-israel-primer/>  
For an accessible and very helpful documentary on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, I highly recommend viewing 'Occupation 101': <https://vimeo.com/18333779>

<sup>7</sup> Joel Beinin and Lisa Hajjar, "Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict," *Middle East Research and Information Project*: <https://merip.org/palestine-israel-primer/> (accessed February 26, 2024)

Jewish terrorist organizations, Irgun and Lehi (all eventually incorporated into the newly created Israeli Defense Forces in 1948), controlled 774 Palestinian towns and villages at this time and swiftly depopulated and destroyed 531 more, committing 70 documented massacres in the process that resulted in the deaths of approximately 15,000 Palestinians.<sup>8</sup>

Immediately thereafter, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, declared in June of 1948, "I do not accept the version that [we] should encourage their [the Palestinians'] return ... we should prevent their return ... we must settle Jaffa, Jaffa will become a Jewish city... we must prevent at all costs their return."<sup>9</sup> The various forms of direct, systemic, and structural violence against Palestinians have only multiplied since then: unchecked illegal settlement expansion in the West Bank; thousands of home demolitions; countless prisoners (adults and children) in flippant violation of anything that even remotely resembles *habeas corpus*; the often life-threatening, unjust, and humiliating obstruction of the separation wall and various checkpoints; a debilitating blockade of the Gaza Strip. All of these have become sources of desperation that can render violent resistance an attractive option when peaceful alternatives appear continually out-of-reach. It is barely even worth beginning to enumerate these examples; there are so many, you will miss more than you list.

This is where the past and future converge in this inconvenient narrative. All of these oppressive measures are unwaveringly and unashamedly supported by the influential Christian Zionist electorate and related powerful lobby groups, especially in the United States.<sup>10</sup> The motive for this unconditional support of Israel? A relatively recent futurist and deterministic interpretation of events described in the biblical books of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation, wherein proponents of this apocalyptic timeline perform logic-defying hermeneutical gymnastics to disfigure messages of comfort intended for Jewish exiles in Babylon in the 6th century BCE and persecuted Christians under Nero's merciless reign in the 1st century CE into doomsday predictions about geopolitics in the 21st century.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "12.1m Palestinians around the world in 2014," *Middle East Monitor*: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20150513-12-1m-palestinians-around-the-work-in-2014/> (accessed on February 26, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> Simha Flapan, "The Palestinian Exodus of 1948," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 16, no. 4 (Summer 1987): 17.

<sup>10</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Israel Lobby in the United States," *Jordan Journal of International Affairs* 1, no. 3 (Summer 2008), 35–44.

<sup>11</sup> For a much more nuanced and faithful interpretation of these texts, see Munther Isaac, *The Other Side of the Wall: A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 45–98.

Unfortunately, the Christians who hold to this reading of the Bible — unheard of in Christian history before it was invented in the mid-19th century by the Plymouth Brethren originator of dispensationalism, John Nelson Darby, after his dubious dream of a pre-tribulation rapture — form a formidable block of the American electorate to whom US policymakers must acquiesce.<sup>12</sup> The National Unity Coalition for Israel alone boasts a membership of 40 million Americans, and the long list of Christian Zionist organizations, including Christians United for Israel — America's "largest and most dependable pro-Israel group" — receive an estimated \$210 million annually to underwrite their lobbying efforts in Washington, DC and other supporting activities.<sup>13</sup>

These dollars and members represent power and votes, and these in turn dictate foreign policy, political sound bites, and calculated media misinformation. As the Director of the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution, Rabbi Marc Gopin, observes, "leaders are followers and followers are leaders, and neither knows it."<sup>14</sup> So much so, in fact, that, for example, according to the former IDF Chief of Staff, Gabi Ashkenazi, US taxpayers have contributed more to the Israeli defense budget over the years than have Israeli taxpayers.<sup>15</sup> The ignorance of the past and reliance on a pretended future has created a breathlessly intractable state of affairs. So, what can we do right now to work towards peace for everyone involved? Aside from Marc Gopin's thoughtful suggestions in his article, "What 'We' Must Do Right Now for Palestine and Israel, Beyond Governments," in the wake of the 2014 Gaza War,<sup>16</sup> we can educate ourselves and others to rely more on a past we can know than on a future we can't.<sup>17</sup>

We can use this knowledge to better understand the sources of frustration that lead to desperate uses of violence. We can learn how power corrupts. We can learn how power and fear are

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen Sizer, "Christian Zionism: Misguided Millennialism":

<https://stephensizer.com/articles/coloradohistory.htm> (accessed February 26, 2023).

<sup>13</sup> See Saliba Sarsar, "The Question of Palestine and United States Behavior at the United Nations," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 17, no. 3 (Spring, 2004): 461; Jennifer Ruben, "Ried Under Fire for Sanctions," *The Washington Post* (11 February 2014): <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2014/02/11/reid-under-fire-for-defying-majority-on-sanctions/> (accessed February 26, 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Marc Gopin, "What 'We' Must Do Right Now for Palestine and Israel, Beyond Governments," *The Huffington Post* (18 July 2014): [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-we-must-do-right-now\\_b\\_5599510](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-we-must-do-right-now_b_5599510) (accessed February 26, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> "Ashkenazi: Preserving US ties a security necessity," *The Jerusalem Post* (11 September 2012): <https://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/Ashkenazi-Preserving-US-ties-a-security-necessity> (accessed February 26, 2024).

<sup>16</sup> Marc Gopin, "What 'We' Must Do Right Now for Palestine and Israel, Beyond Governments," *The Huffington Post* (18 July 2014): [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-we-must-do-right-now\\_b\\_5599510](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-we-must-do-right-now_b_5599510) (accessed February 26, 2024).

<sup>17</sup> See Andrew Klager, "Shifting Loyalties: Abandoning Apocalyptic Determinism in Favour of Compassion for Palestinians," in *Canadian Christian Zionism: A Tangled Tale* by Ron Dart (Synaxis Press, 2014).

two sides of the same coin. We can build the courage to drown out this fear of the Other and encourage others to do the same. We can ask questions. We can dialogue — *really* dialogue. We can use all available democratic avenues at our disposal (or at least what's left of them) to prod policymakers to divert resources away from the military industrial complex and into proven strategic peacebuilding and conflict transformation initiatives. For Christian Zionists, we can begin to acknowledge that if the Gospel is not good news for Palestinians too, it's not good news at all.

While the horrific accounts of persecution against Jews began in Christian Europe, the memories of persecution against Palestinians began in the midst of this lamentable 100+ years colonial war in their own homeland. We must, therefore, listen to the past, embodied in the memories and stories of Palestinians that animate their decisions, judgments, and resolve today. The resulting change will be nearly imperceptibly slow, but the tide can indeed turn — *is* turning — within this generation in the direction of a more compassionate posture toward all. History is replete with hopeful examples. Everything may be in the past, but this also means that the past can be a source of inspiration for a better future.