

# Foundational Questions on Israel, Zionism, and the War in Gaza

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# 1) Foundational Questions on Israel and Zionism

## 1.1 How can we understand the historical origins of modern Israel in relation to Palestinian and Arab claims to the same land?

Understanding the historical origins of Israel along with Palestinian and Arab claims involves recognizing various narratives and historical moments.

### Jewish Historical and Cultural Roots

- **Jewish connections to the land of Israel date back over 3,000 years**, supported by religious texts, secular historical records, and extensive archaeological evidence.
- Despite periods of exile and dispersion, particularly following the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, **there has always been a continuous Jewish presence in the region**, notably in cities like Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias, and Safed.
- Over the centuries, the land passed through various empires' control and was referred to by different names. During the centuries of Ottoman rule (1517–1917), it was not a distinct political unit but part of the broader province of Bilad al-Sham, or Greater Syria. The British revived the name “Palestine” during the Mandate period (1920–1947), based on the Roman term “Syria Palaestina,” originally used to weaken Jewish ties to the land.
- Zionism emerged in the late 19th century as a nationalist movement advocating **Jewish self-determination in the ancestral homeland of Israel** in response to persistent antisemitism and the failure of Jewish emancipation and assimilation in Europe. Beginning in the 1880s, successive waves of Jewish immigration (known in Hebrew as aliyot) brought tens of thousands of Jews primarily from Eastern Europe to Palestine, motivated by Zionist ideals. Smaller groups, such as Yemenite Jews, also immigrated during this time, driven more by religious yearning than by modern political nationalism.
- Milestones like the [1917 Balfour Declaration](#), the [1937 Peel Commission](#), and the [1947 United Nations Special Committee On Palestine \(UNSCOP\) Partition Plan](#) provided international recognition of Jewish claims while emphasizing coexistence alongside existing Arab communities. While local Arab leaders have objected to any partition of the land, mainstream **Jewish leaders accepted the 1947 partition plan** despite its challenging borders because it provided a critical opportunity for recognized sovereignty. **Israel's establishment in 1948 and subsequent recognition by the United Nations affirmed its international legal legitimacy.**
- Following Israel's establishment, approximately 850,000 Jews from Arab and Muslim countries were forced into exile, fleeing persecution, violence, and property confiscation. Most resettled in Israel, significantly reshaping its demographic landscape.

### Palestinian and Arab Historical Claims

- **Palestinians possess deep historical and cultural roots in the same land**, with a continuous Arab presence stretching over a millennium. For centuries under various empires, Palestinian Arab society was characterized by village-based agriculture, market towns, religious diversity, and localized community life. Major cities such as Jerusalem, Nablus, Gaza, Hebron, and Jaffa were centers of commerce, education, and religion.
- **Though the land did not exist as a sovereign “Palestinian” state, a strong sense of place and belonging defined the lives of its Arab inhabitants.** Social identity during Ottoman rule was often tied to religion, family, tribe, or locality rather than nationalism in the modern sense.

- Palestinian national consciousness began to take shape more distinctly during the late Ottoman and British Mandate periods, especially in response to the growth of modern nationalism across the Arab world and increasing Jewish immigration. British policies under the Mandate (1920–1948) and the Balfour Declaration (1917) deepened Palestinian fears of displacement and galvanized political activism.
- Initially, many Arabs in the region identified more with a broader Arab nationalism, aspiring toward unity within Greater Syria (Bilad al-Sham). **However, a specifically Palestinian identity solidified in reaction to both British colonial rule and Jewish immigration and land acquisition** and sparked growing nationalist resistance, culminating during the 1936–1939 Arab Revolt.

### The 1948 War (Israel's Independence / Palestinian Nakba)

- In May 1948, Israel declared independence following the UN partition recommendation. **Neighboring Arab states invaded**, aiming to prevent the establishment of a Jewish state. Israel survived, expanding beyond the partition borders, but surrounding Arab countries did not recognize Israel's existence or borders. Israelis referred to the 1947–1949 War as the War of Independence.
- **The 1947–1949 war displaced around 700,000 Palestinians.** The Arab world referred to this war as al-Nakba (The Catastrophe). Causes of displacement varied, ranging from wartime flight to forced expulsions. About 150,000 Palestinians remained in Israel and became Israeli citizens, though they lived under military rule until 1966. The war secured Israel's independence but left Palestinians stateless, marking the beginning of the prolonged conflict.

### Towards a Nuanced Understanding

Addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict requires **moving beyond simplistic oppressor-oppressed narratives**. Both communities possess legitimate historical connections and have experienced profound suffering. Recognizing this fact is crucial for any meaningful step forward in Israeli and Palestinian relations.

**Zionism and Colonialism:** Framing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict purely through a colonial lens misses crucial nuances. Zionism differs fundamentally from traditional colonial models, representing **a return movement for a persecuted diaspora seeking refuge and self-determination**, not exploitation of distant territories. Simultaneously, this movement intersected tragically with Palestinian aspirations, resulting in significant displacement and conflict. Portraying Jewish immigration to Palestine as European or white colonialism overlooks Jews' longstanding connections to the land, their desire for self-determination in their ancestral homeland, and the notably multi-ethnic composition of Israel's Jewish population. Israeli Jews are not predominantly of European origin, but largely hail from Middle Eastern, North African, Ethiopian, and Asian locales, complicating simplistic colonial narratives.

## 1.2 What is Zionism and what is anti-Zionism?

**Zionism**, at its core, is about **Jewish self-determination in the ancestral homeland**, responding to historical persecution and the desire for a secure future. Its main values and goals include:

### Historical and Cultural Continuity

- Jerusalem (Zion) has long symbolized Jewish spiritual and cultural identity, central to Jewish life even during periods of exile. Zion is significant as it was a central location for the development of Jewish civilization. The First and Second Temples were built in Zion.
- Throughout periods of diaspora, Jews hold a special connection to Zion. Traditional Jews face Zion to pray three times a day. In many traditional Hebrew blessings, Jews pray for Zion with a deep longing to return and rebuild this sacred place. Zionism transforms the millennia-old Jewish connection to the land of Israel, deeply rooted in religious and cultural traditions, into a political project aiming for sovereignty and national revival.

### Self-Determination and Refuge

- Initially emerging in response to widespread antisemitism and the failure of Jewish emancipation and assimilation efforts in Europe, **Zionism stresses the necessity of a sovereign homeland to ensure Jewish safety, cultural preservation, and continuity.**

### Diverse Ideological Spectrum

- Zionism encompasses various interpretations, including secular Zionists prioritizing cultural and political renewal, and religious Zionists viewing statehood as part of a divine plan. Politically, Zionism includes a broad spectrum from socialist and even communist-inspired coexistence advocates to more security-focused nationalist approaches.
- Pre-1948, there were a multiplicity of Zionisms each vying for their ideal imagined state.

### Coexistence and Democracy:

- Zionist leaders historically demonstrated a willingness to share land, exemplified by accepting the 1947 UN Partition Plan, later peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, and efforts toward Palestinian statehood in the Oslo Accords. (See question 6.1)
- Within Israel, coexistence principles are reflected in the **democratic** participation and rights granted to Arab citizens, who comprise a significant minority of roughly 20%. (see below)

**Anti-Zionism** refers to opposition to Zionism, the movement supporting Jewish self-determination in the historical land of Israel. Its meaning and implications have shifted significantly over time and must be understood in context.

### Before 1948

- Prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, anti-Zionism existed within both Jewish and non-Jewish circles. Some Jews, including religious groups like the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) opposed Zionism on theological grounds, believing that the return to the Land of Israel should await divine redemption. Others, especially among secular Jews, favored assimilation or socialist and Marxist internationalism over Jewish nationalism.



- In the broader political landscape, opposition to Zionism also came from Arabs living in Mandatory Palestine who viewed Zionist immigration as a threat to their own national aspirations. **These early forms of anti-Zionism reflected ideological and political disagreements rather than antisemitic animus per se.**

#### After 1948

- Following Israel's establishment, **anti-Zionism increasingly became associated with the denial of the legitimacy of the Jewish state.** For non-Jews, anti-Zionism in this context often manifests not as a critique of specific policies, but as a rejection of the idea that Jews are entitled to national self-determination. This rejection is widely regarded as antisemitic, as it denies Jews the right to self-determination which is afforded to other national groups.
- While some Jews today identify as anti-Zionist (whether for religious reasons or political convictions), this stance remains a minority position within global Jewry. Historically, Jewish anti-Zionism does not carry the same stigma as non-Jewish anti-Zionism, which more easily overlaps with or invokes antisemitic ideologies and conspiracies. However, within a younger generation of Jews, there is a noticeable ideological shift that elevates powerlessness as a moral ideal. This worldview can foster skepticism toward Jewish nationalism and lead to anti-Zionist positions, particularly when Zionism is equated with state power or perceived oppression. Nonetheless, such views remain on the margins of mainstream Jewish thought and identity.

#### Modern Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism

- **Today, anti-Zionist rhetoric often includes forms of delegitimization, demonization, and double standards toward Israel that echo or directly invoke antisemitic tropes.** This is especially evident when Jewish individuals or institutions are targeted because of their perceived connection to Israel, or when Israel is singled out as inherently racist or uniquely evil.
- While there is room for critical perspectives on Zionism (as with any national movement), calls for the dismantling of Israel as a Jewish state, erasure of Jewish historical claims, or application of one-sided moral frameworks frequently cross into antisemitism. (See question 1.3)

In sum, anti-Zionism is not inherently antisemitic in its historical origins, particularly within Jewish discourse before 1948. But in today's context, especially when expressed by non-Jews or used to advocate for Israel's elimination, it often serves as a vehicle for antisemitic ideas, even when presented as political critique.

#### Why is Zionism frequently equated with racism?

- Zionism is sometimes equated with racism due to historical and political factors, notably influenced by the Cold War-era propaganda campaign led by the Soviet Union and the Arab League aimed at delegitimizing Israel. This culminated in the now-revoked 1975 UN Resolution 3379 that explicitly labeled Zionism as racism. These characterizations persist today, often reinforced by terms like "apartheid" or "settler-colonialism," used to simplify or demonize the complex dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- However, Zionism fundamentally advocates Jewish self-determination, safety, and cultural revival in the ancestral homeland, not racial superiority or exclusion. Furthermore, unlike racist systems like apartheid South Africa, Israeli society includes a diverse, multi-ethnic population. Arab citizens, representing approximately 20% of Israel's population, possess full democratic rights and actively participate in political, judicial, and societal roles.

- It is fair to say that Israel aspires to be both a Jewish and democratic state, though the full realization of these ideals remains a work in progress. Discrimination and prejudice persist within Israeli society: among different Jewish communities, between Jewish and Palestinian Arab citizens, and in the broader Israeli-Palestinian context. These tensions often align with ethnic, religious, and national distinctions rather than racial categories.
- Furthermore, Israeli Jews themselves largely descend from diverse Middle Eastern, North African, and Ethiopian backgrounds, contradicting simplistic racial categorizations.
- Security measures in contested territories such as the West Bank, though subject to legitimate criticism, primarily respond to national conflict and terrorism rather than racial prejudice.
- Accusations of racism in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict often reflect an imposition of Western constructs of race and pigmentation of skin color onto a fundamentally different geopolitical and historical situation. The label of racism is an attempt to suggest Israel was born in sin and therefore should be dismantled. The conflict encompasses territorial disputes, religious and cultural tensions, competing nationalist movements, and deeply held historical narratives. It is not accurately defined as a racial conflict.
- Thus, equating Zionism with racism oversimplifies and distorts both the intentions and realities of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel, and obscures the complex realities critical for genuine dialogue and peace-building.

### 1.3 How can we responsibly differentiate legitimate criticism of Israeli policies from antisemitism?

Like criticism of any government, **criticism of Israel is a valid and essential part of global political discourse.** However, it becomes problematic when it shifts from addressing specific policies to attacking the legitimacy of Israel's existence or invoking antisemitic tropes.

**Legitimate criticism focuses on governmental decisions or military actions.** Examples include opposing settlement expansion, questioning military decisions, or advocating for diplomatic solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Legitimate critiques are grounded in evidence and avoid bias, inflammatory language, historical distortions, or targeting Jews as a group or denying their national rights.

**By contrast, criticism veers into antisemitism when it includes:**

- **Delegitimization:** Denying Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, the Jewish people's right to national self-determination, or calling for the dismantling of Israel as a Jewish state.
- **Demonization:** Portraying Israel as uniquely evil or inherently racist and genocidal, for example through comparisons to Nazi Germany or apartheid South Africa.
- **Double Standards:** Singling out Israel for criticism while ignoring or excusing similar or worse actions by other groups.
- **Antisemitic Tropes:** Suggesting Jewish/Zionist control of media, finance, or governments, or portraying Jews/Zionists as collectively responsible for Israel's actions (many committed Zionists have been outspoken critics of Israel's policies).
- **Collective Blame:** Protesting or threatening synagogues, Jewish community centers, or individuals who are not directly connected to the Israeli government.

Constructive criticism is rooted in factual analysis, acknowledges the complexities of the conflict, and advocates **for justice, peace, and security for both Israelis and Palestinians**. It avoids erasing Jewish historical ties or denying the legitimacy of Jewish national identity.

A contemporary example of problematic criticism can be seen in current calls for a “ceasefire now” or to “end the war” without simultaneously demanding that Hamas release Israeli hostages. While advocating for an end to violence is understandable, ignoring or downplaying the role of Hamas and its responsibility for taking and holding civilians hostages distorts the nature of the conflict. (See question 2.1) It frames Israel as the sole aggressor while omitting the initial and ongoing acts of violence that provoked the war. This asymmetry can slip into demonization and double standards, as Israel is portrayed as uniquely guilty or malicious, while the actions of its adversaries are ignored or excused.

## 1.4 What role does Israel play in contemporary Jewish identity worldwide?

Zionism and the State of Israel play significant and multifaceted roles in contemporary Jewish identity, shaping how Jewish communities globally understand themselves in religious, cultural, historical, and political contexts.

- **Religious and Spiritual Significance:** The land of Israel is central to Jewish religious life, embodying the ancient connection to Zion and Jerusalem, focal points of prayer, pilgrimage, and spiritual longing throughout centuries of exile. Holidays, rituals, and prayers regularly reference the land of Israel and underscore its sacred status and spiritual centrality in Jewish tradition.
- **Cultural Significance:** The State of Israel symbolizes continuity and revival. It preserves Jewish heritage and serves as a vibrant center for Jewish arts, literature, language (Hebrew revival), and other cultural expressions.
- **Historical Significance:** The historical experiences of exile, persecution, and the Holocaust have deeply intertwined Israel’s existence with modern Jewish narratives and reinforced its role as a refuge and symbol of Jewish resilience.

### Diverse Perspectives and Debates in the Diaspora

- “Diaspora” refers to the dispersion of the Jewish people outside of their ancestral homeland, particularly following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Despite dispersion, Jewish communities maintained cultural, religious, and often emotional ties to the land of Israel.
- For many Jews in the diaspora, Israel represents a source of pride, identity, collective memory, a sense of unity, and shared destiny.
- However, within global Jewry, attitudes towards Israel and Zionism encompass a wide spectrum, including unconditional support, constructive criticism, advocacy for peace and human rights, and a minority of anti-Zionist perspectives.
- Debates around Israeli policies – especially regarding democracy, human rights, and religious pluralism – are part of a vibrant and evolving discourse within global Jewry.
- However, while criticism of government actions is common, questioning Israel’s fundamental right to exist as a Jewish state falls outside the bounds of legitimate debate and is broadly rejected across the Jewish spectrum.

In short, Zionism and Israel remain integral yet contested elements of contemporary Jewish identity, reflecting a rich diversity of experiences, beliefs, and aspirations across global Jewish communities.



## 2) Hamas and Other Regional Actors: Ideological and Sociopolitical Frameworks

### 2.1 What is Hamas, what is its ideology, how did it gain power in Gaza, and what impact does it have on Palestinian civilians and Israeli-Palestinian relations?

Hamas is an Islamist Palestinian organization founded in 1987 as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. It is designated as a terrorist organization by countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the European Union.<sup>1</sup> Hamas's ideology, rooted in its founding Charter and reiterated regularly by its leaders, combines Palestinian nationalism with Islamic fundamentalism. It advocates armed struggle against Israel and rejects its right to exist. Hamas explicitly calls for the establishment of an Islamic state in all areas of present-day Israel and Palestinian territories.

Hamas initially gained popularity through its social and charitable services, including schools, clinics, and welfare programs, which significantly boosted its grassroots support among Palestinian civilians in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Hamas repeatedly used violence and terrorism against civilians to undermine peace initiatives. During the Oslo peace process of the 1990s, Hamas carried out a wave of suicide bombings in Israeli cities, severely damaging Israeli public support for negotiations and playing a key role in the failure of the peace talks. Similarly, Hamas played a major role in the violent Second Intifada (2000–2005), which further eroded trust between Israelis and Palestinians.

In 2005, Israel unilaterally disengaged from Gaza, withdrawing all settlements and military presence. (See question 3.1) The following year, Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections. Following violent clashes with Fatah, the dominant faction in the Palestinian Authority, Hamas forcibly took complete control of Gaza in 2007 and has since governed independently as an authoritarian entity. Although primarily governing Gaza, Hamas maintains a presence in the West Bank through political activism and underground operations, despite ongoing suppression by both Israeli and Palestinian Authority security forces.

Under Hamas's governance, Gaza has become increasingly isolated economically and politically. The group has prioritized military resistance over civilian well-being, investing billions of dollars (including international aid from Qatar and others) into building underground tunnel networks and weapons infrastructure rather than public services or economic development. This had left many Palestinians in Gaza living under severe hardship. In many cases, Hamas has embedded its military infrastructure, including command centers and rocket launchers, beneath or adjacent to civilian buildings such as hospitals, schools, and mosques, knowingly putting its own population at risk and deepening the humanitarian crisis.

Hamas maintains strict authoritarian control over the Gaza Strip, suppressing dissent and political opposition, and eliminating press freedom. Women and LGBTQ individuals face harsh restrictions and systemic persecution under Hamas's rigid interpretation of Islamic law.

<sup>1</sup> These designations are typically made based on legal assessments that the group engages in deliberate acts of violence targeting civilians to achieve political aims.

**Hostage-Taking as a Longstanding Strategy:** Hamas's use of hostage-taking is a well-known and ongoing strategy that dates back to its inception. Israeli hostages are often abducted and held in harsh, secretive conditions, with no regard for international humanitarian standards and no access to organizations like the Red Cross.<sup>2</sup> These individuals are used primarily as bargaining chips in negotiations to secure the release of Palestinian prisoners, extract political concessions, or apply diplomatic pressure on Israel. This tactic is part of a broader pattern of asymmetric warfare that prioritizes psychological impact and international leverage over conventional military outcomes (see questions 4.1).

**Blurring the Lines: Hamas's Political vs. Military Wings:** Hamas often presents itself as having distinct political and military wings. However, this separation is largely artificial, intended to gain political legitimacy and international engagement while continuing violent operations. The same leadership oversees both arms, and decisions regarding conflict and diplomacy are deeply intertwined. This blurring enables Hamas to confuse observers and maintain plausible deniability, allowing third parties to justify dialogue with its "political" representatives despite ongoing militant activity. One prominent and contemporary example of this confusion is the use of the term "Gaza Health Ministry," which is frequently cited in media reports and humanitarian updates. In practice, this body is controlled by Hamas and functions as part of its political apparatus. (See question 4.2)

## 2.2 How are Israel and the Jewish people portrayed in the Palestinian education system, and what evidence exists regarding school curricula or religious messaging that may contribute to antisemitic or hostile narratives?

Research from multiple sources, including United Nations bodies, independent NGOs, and academic institutions, shows that the Palestinian education system and affiliated religious messaging frequently portray Israel and Jews in hostile and, at times, overtly antisemitic ways. These portrayals appear in school textbooks, UNRWA<sup>3</sup> materials, mosque sermons, and broader cultural programming.

### Educational Content in PA and UNRWA Schools

Studies by NGOs, as well as reports commissioned by the European Union and United Nations, reveal persistent patterns in Palestinian Authority (PA) and UNRWA educational materials. Examples include excluding any acknowledgment to Israel from maps, glorification of violence and martyrdom culture from early age, absence of Holocaust education, and imagery that echoes classical antisemitic tropes. Independent reviews from the Georg Eckert Institute (commissioned by the EU) confirmed that many PA textbooks fall short of UNESCO standards for peace and tolerance. An IMPACT-se report reveals that several UNRWA schools are led by principals identified as Hamas operatives and use educational materials that deny Israel's legitimacy, promote antisemitic libels, and insert gratuitous content inciting hatred and violence against Israel.

### Religious Messaging and Sermons

Extremist rhetoric in public sermons is aired by PA- and Hamas-affiliated media. Examples include:

- **Dehumanizing Language and Calls for Genocide:** Referring to Jews as "filthy animals" and "descendants of apes and pigs." These sermons often include prayers for the annihilation of Jews and praise attacks on civilians.
- **Holocaust Inversion:** Sermons and PA media have downplayed or denied the Holocaust while accusing Jews of exploiting it for political purposes.

### Regional Comparison and Reform Trends

PA textbooks are among the most extreme. Other countries such as the UAE, Morocco, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia have begun reforming their curricula to include acknowledgment of Jewish historical presence, positive portrayals of Judaism as a monotheistic faith, and removal of references to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

<sup>2</sup> The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), under its mandate established by the Geneva Conventions, is responsible for providing humanitarian assistance to individuals affected by armed conflict, including hostages. While the ICRC's foundational documents, such as its charter, do not explicitly guarantee access to hostages, international humanitarian law (IHL) mandates that parties holding captives must permit ICRC visits to ensure their health and well-being. This obligation is firmly rooted in the Geneva Conventions: the Third Geneva Convention (1949) grants the ICRC the right to visit prisoners of war, while the Fourth Geneva Convention ensures access to civilian internees. These legal provisions are intended to uphold humane treatment standards and enable the ICRC to fulfill its humanitarian mission effectively.

<sup>3</sup> UNRWA -- United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

#### Sources:

- [IMPACT-se. Study Cards: Palestinian Authority Ministry of Education \(2021–2022\), Grades 1–11. IMPACT-se, 2022.](#)
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- [Meir Litvak. Representation of Jews and Judaism in Palestinian Authority Schoolbooks. Institute for National Security Studies \(INSS\), 2023.](#)
- [IMPACT-se. Gaza’s Educational Frameworks: A Review of Curricula Used in the Gaza Strip. IMPACT-se, 2021.](#)
- [Georg Eckert Institute. FAQ: Report on Palestinian Textbooks \(PALTEX\). GEI, 2022.](#)
- [IMPACT-se. Review of UNRWA Schools Headed by Hamas Principals. IMPACT-se, 2021.](#)
- [MEMRI TV. Hamas Official Sheikh Reyad Regeb Allah in Rafah Friday Sermon: Annihilate the Jews, Slit Their Necks. Middle East Media Research Institute \(MEMRI\), July 2021.](#)
- [MEMRI. Holocaust Denial in Arab and Muslim Media: Ongoing Denial and Distortion. MEMRI, 2020.](#)

**IMPACT-se (Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education):** A Jerusalem-based research and policy organization that examines school textbooks and curricula to assess whether they meet international standards for peace, tolerance, and non-violence as defined by UNESCO.

**Georg Eckert Institute (GEI):** An academic center based in Germany, specializing in comparative and international research on textbooks and educational media. It often collaborates with the European Union, UNESCO, and national governments. In 2022, GEI was commissioned by the EU to independently evaluate the Palestinian Authority’s school textbooks.

**INSS (Institute for National Security Studies) and Meir Litvak:** An Israeli think tank affiliated with Tel Aviv University, known for its research on regional security, strategic policy, and ideological trends in the Middle East. Meir Litvak is a Professor at the Department of Middle Eastern History at Tel Aviv University and has extensively studied antisemitism in Arab societies, Palestinian narratives, and educational frameworks.

**MEMRI (Middle East Media Research Institute):** A Washington, D.C.-based organization that translates Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, and Pashto media into English. It was founded to bridge language gaps and provide policymakers, academics, and journalists with access to original source materials from the Middle East. MEMRI has built a large archive of sermons, broadcasts, and social media content from official and unofficial sources, including those affiliated with the Palestinian Authority and Hamas.

### 2.3 What roles do Iran and its proxies play in the current conflict, and why is understanding these actors crucial for comprehending Israel's regional security challenges?

Iran plays a central role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through its leadership of a regional alliance known as the **"Axis of Resistance."** These groups, detailed below, differ in their religious affiliations and political contexts, but they are united by a shared hostility toward Israel, the United States, and pro-Western Arab governments such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

**This alliance is not merely strategic, it is ideological.** Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has positioned itself as the vanguard of a global struggle against Western influence in the Middle East. Supporting armed proxies allows Iran to project power and influence across the Middle East without direct confrontation. Central to this vision is the claim to defend the Palestinian cause and lead the Islamic world against Israel. These narratives help Iran justify its regional ambitions and appeal to Shi'a and Sunni populations frustrated by Western influence.

#### The Axis of Resistance:

- Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shi'a political and terrorist organization, has long been the crown jewel of Iran's proxy network. Hezbollah built an enormous arsenal (estimated at over 150,000 rockets) and embedded itself deeply in Lebanese society and politics. In the immediate aftermath of Hamas's October 7 attack, Hezbollah launched its own coordinated strikes against northern Israel, opening a second front and drawing Israeli forces into a prolonged border conflict. In response, Israel launched a massive military operation aimed at neutralizing this threat. In the course of that campaign, Israel eliminated Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, dismantled the organization's command structure, destroyed most of its long-range rocket capabilities, and neutralized key launching sites hidden within civilian areas. Hezbollah's defeat marks a major blow to Iran's deterrent strategy and its ability to pressure Israel from the north.
- In Gaza, Hamas and Islamic Jihad have received Iranian funds, weapons, and training.
- The Houthis in Yemen, while geographically distant, have launched long-range ballistic missiles and drones at Israel in coordination with Iran since the start of the Gaza war. Though previously focused on the Yemeni civil war and attacks against Saudi Arabia, the Houthis have increasingly positioned themselves as part of Iran's anti-Israel front and serve as a proxy for Iran.
- Shi'a militias in Iraq, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah, have targeted U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria and, in 2024, claimed drone and missile attacks on Israel—often operating with funding, training, and guidance from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Understanding the role of these Iranian-backed actors is crucial because they represent a coordinated, multi-front threat to Israel's security. Iran's **"war by proxy"** strategy allows it to surround Israel with armed non-state actors who can strike from different directions, making conflict more unpredictable and persistent. It also complicates the efforts of regional actors, including newer allies of Israel such as the UAE and Bahrain under the Abraham Accords, to promote stability or normalization.

For more information on Iran's "Axis of Resistance":

- [CFR.org Editors, "What Is Hezbollah?," Council on Foreign Relations, last updated October 29, 2024.](#)
- [Matthew Levitt, "Iranian External Operations Interactive Map and Timeline," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 6, 2024.](#)
- [Kali Robinson and Will Merrow, "Iran's Regional Armed Network," Council on Foreign Relations, last updated April 15, 2024.](#)
- [Ashley Lane, "Iran's Islamist Proxies in the Middle East," Wilson Center, September 12, 2023.](#)
- [Matthew Levitt, Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God, Georgetown University Press, 2013.](#)
- [Matthew Levitt, Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad, Yale University Press, 2006.](#)
- [Christopher Hamilton, "Hezbollah's Global Reach," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 28, 2006.](#)

### 3) October 7, 2023: Context and Implications

#### 3.1 What exactly happened during Hamas's attack on October 7, 2023, who was targeted, and why is understanding this event essential within the historical context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

On October 7, 2023, Hamas executed an unprecedented attack against Israel, breaking a pre-existing ceasefire by launching **thousands of rockets** into civilian areas in southern and central Israel and **infiltrating** southern Israeli communities and army bases near the Gaza Strip, an area known as the "Gaza Envelope." This border region consists primarily of small towns, farming villages, and kibbutzim (communal settlements). This area includes small, often left-wing leaning communities that had long advocated for peace and coexistence with their Palestinian neighbors (some residents had been [prominent peace activists](#) who [volunteered to drive sick Gazans to hospitals in Israel](#)). Hamas-led militants launched a coordinated assault on Israel, infiltrating over 20 towns and communities. Numerous eyewitness accounts and later video evidence confirmed systematic executions of entire families, including children and the elderly, as well as sexual violence and torture. The psychological and symbolic targeting of peace-oriented communities and the massacre at the Nova music festival, where over 360 civilians were murdered, left an enduring trauma within Israeli society. Overall, approximately 1,200 people were killed, including entire families. Additionally, 251 hostages were taken into Gaza, among them 37 children. The massacre was the deadliest single-day attack against Jewish people since the Holocaust.

##### Additional Context:

- While various peace efforts, such as the Oslo Accords (1993-1995), sought compromise between Israelis and Palestinians through mutual recognition, **Hamas has consistently undermined peace initiatives through terror attacks**, contributing to cycles of violence and mistrust.
- The unprecedented scale and brutality of the October 7 attack suggest **Hamas aimed to provoke a severe Israeli response**, deepen the conflict, derail regional diplomatic initiatives (including the normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia), and strengthen its domestic legitimacy within Palestinian politics at the expense of its rival, the Palestinian Authority, while knowingly risking civilian lives in Gaza.
- **Before the October 7 attack, a tense yet relatively stable ceasefire arrangement existed between Hamas and Israel.** Hamas violated this ceasefire without direct provocation from Israel, signaling an intentional escalation. Past ceasefires have historically failed due to Hamas's violations.
- The path towards a sustainable resolution requires addressing core issues such as Gaza's governance, reconstruction, and disarmament of Hamas. **A ceasefire alone cannot address the deeper ideological and political drivers behind Hamas's agenda.**

**Understanding the 2005 Gaza Disengagement:** Israel was not occupying Gaza on October 7, 2023. In 2005, it unilaterally withdrew all military forces and evacuated around 9,000 Jewish settlers in a move intended to reduce conflict and promote Palestinian self-governance. But in 2007, Hamas seized control of Gaza through violent clashes with the Palestinian Authority. Rather than investing in civil infrastructure, Hamas turned the territory into a base for launching rockets and other attacks on Israeli civilians.

In response, since 2007, Israel has enforced a blockade on Gaza in coordination with Egypt, which controls Gaza's southern border. The restrictions do not amount to a complete closure and are driven by security concerns, particularly Hamas's history of rocket fire and weapons smuggling. Essential supplies like food, fuel, and electricity do enter, mostly via Israel. Israel has also issued work permits to thousands of Gazans, offering a fragile but crucial source of income for many families. However, the flow of good and people is tightly controlled and often insufficient, especially during conflict. Critics argue the blockade harms civilians and



stifles Gaza's economy; supporters emphasize its necessity given Hamas's extensive militarization, including a massive network of underground tunnels. Egypt also enforces restrictions at Gaza's southern border due to concerns over radical Islamism in the Sinai. While Israel no longer occupies Gaza, the blockade is often mistakenly equated with occupation. Hamas's aggression reflects a broader ideological commitment to end Israel's existence, not a reaction to Israeli presence inside Gaza.

**Historical Background of the Gaza Strip:** From 1948 to 1967, Gaza was under Egyptian military rule, but Egypt neither granted its Palestinian residents citizenship nor annexed the territory. Israel captured Gaza from Egypt during the 1967 Six-Day War, along with the Sinai Peninsula and the West Bank (from Jordan). In the 1979 peace treaty, Israel returned the Sinai, but Egypt declined to take back Gaza, supporting instead its future inclusion in a Palestinian state. This left Israel administering a densely populated territory with no clear sovereign owner. Gaza's unresolved status has fueled instability, especially after Hamas's 2007 takeover and its transformation of the Strip into a base for attacks against Israel.

## 4) The Current War in Gaza: Military & Humanitarian Dimensions

### 4.1 What are Israel's primary objectives in its military actions in Gaza, and how does it balance military goals with humanitarian responsibilities toward Palestinian civilians?

Israel's military campaign in Gaza is driven by three strategic objectives:

- **Neutralize Hamas's military capability.** This marks a significant shift in Israeli policy following the October 7 attack, which shattered long-held assumptions that Hamas could be contained through deterrence. The scale and surprise of the assault revealed deep security failures and led Israel to abandon its strategy of periodic containment in favor of a more sustained effort to dismantle Hamas's military infrastructure.
- **End Hamas's governance of Gaza.** Israel sees Hamas's rule as inseparable from its armed operations. Weakening or replacing Hamas governance is a long-term goal aimed at enabling a different political future for Gaza.
- **Free Israeli hostages.** To secure the release of civilians and soldiers abducted on October 7, whether through diplomacy or military action.

**Urban Warfare and Human Shields:** Israel faces a dual challenge in Gaza: the territory's extreme population density and Hamas's deliberate embedding of military infrastructure within civilian areas (schools, hospitals, mosques, and homes). This strategy shields Hamas operatives while increasing civilian risk, aiming both to deter Israeli strikes and provoke international condemnation when casualties occur.

**Efforts to Minimize Civilian Harm:** Despite this environment, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have implemented what military urban warfare expert [John Spencer](#) calls "a historic new standard" in civilian harm mitigation. According to Spencer, before its ground offensive, the IDF evacuated over 850,000 civilians from northern Gaza through extensive warnings: millions of calls, texts, leaflets, and voicemails with evacuation instructions. It used drones, loudspeakers, and real-time tracking to guide movement and implemented daily humanitarian pauses. Spencer highlights the IDF's unusually low combatant-to-civilian death ratio (estimated at 1:1 to 1:1.5) and concludes that Israel has set a new standard in minimizing civilian harm despite facing an enemy embedded in the civilian population and accepting greater risks to its own forces.

**Acknowledging the Reality of War:** Despite unprecedented efforts to minimize harm, war remains chaotic. Intelligence can fail and targets may be misidentified. Civilian casualties, while tragic, are an inevitable aspect of high-intensity urban combat, especially when confronting an enemy that blends into civilian populations and uses its own civilians as shields. Israel's campaign aims to eliminate the Hamas threat while navigating the immense challenge of fighting in densely populated areas. Assessing its conduct requires balancing moral responsibility with the complex demands of asymmetric warfare.

#### Further Readings:

- [John Spencer, "Israel Has Created a New Standard in Urban Warfare. Why Will No One Admit It?" Newsweek, March 13, 2024.](#)
- [Dave Deptula, "On the Ground in Gaza: What I Saw of Israel's Military Operations," Forbes, July 31, 2024.](#)

**What standards help determine whether civilian casualties are proportionate or excessive?** The scale of civilian suffering in Gaza is undeniably grave. At the same time, civilian harm in war must be judged by the standards of international humanitarian law, not by emotional reactions to tragic images or destruction. Key legal principles include:

- 1) **Distinction:** Was the attack directed at legitimate military targets, not civilians?
- 2) **Proportionality:** Was the expected military advantage significant enough to justify the risk to civilians, given what was known at the time?
- 3) **Precautions:** Did the attacking force take reasonable steps to minimize civilian harm, such as issuing warnings, facilitating evacuations, and using precision strikes?
- 4) **Operational Context:** How does this operation compare to others in similarly complex environments?

Urban warfare expert John Spencer warns against judging a military action solely by the visible damage it causes. Without accounting for the tactics of the enemy, the conditions on the ground, and the intent behind the use of force, such assessments risk being misleading and unjust. Allegations of misconduct or disproportionate harm should be examined seriously and objectively. Where evidence supports criticism, accountability should follow. The law should be applied impartially to wherever it leads.

In line with its democratic traditions, Israel has a history of convening state commissions of inquiry -- independent bodies with legal authority to compel testimony, access classified materials, and produce public reports -- to investigate national crises and the conduct of wars. These commissions have played a crucial role not only in upholding domestic accountability and public trust, but also in demonstrating to the international community Israel's commitment to the rule of law and self-scrutiny. In the current context, growing segments of Israeli society are calling for such a commission to examine the conduct of the war and the failures leading up to it, even as political leaders have so far resisted launching a formal inquiry.

#### **Understanding Gaza Casualty Figures: Who Counts, and Can We Trust the Numbers?**

Gaza's casualty figures are primarily reported by the "Gaza Health Ministry," a body controlled by Hamas. These numbers are often cited uncritically by international media and institutions, but their credibility is deeply questionable.

- **Questionable Source:** The "Gaza Health Ministry" is not a neutral institution but an integral part of Hamas. It attributes all deaths, including from natural causes, to Israeli action, and does not distinguish between civilians and combatants.
- **Statistical Irregularities:** Reported totals often rise at a near-linear rate, regardless of battlefield intensity, with daily breakdowns showing implausible patterns.
- **UN Revisions:** In May 2024, the UN revised its reporting to separate verified deaths from Hamas-provided figures, significantly lowering reported civilian tolls.
- **Israeli Estimates:** Israeli estimates suggest around 12,000 Hamas fighters have been killed, indicating a lower civilian-to-combatant ratio than Hamas claims.

### Further Readings:

- [Gabriel Epstein, “Assessing the Gaza Death Toll After Eighteen Months of War,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 21, 2025.](#)
- [Jake Horton, Shayan Sardarizadeh & Adam Durbin, “Gaza war: Why is the UN citing lower death toll for women and children?” BBC, May 16, 2024.](#)
- [“UN Halves Its Estimate of Women and Children Killed in Gaza,” Foundation for Defense of Democracies, May 11, 2024.](#)
- [David Adesnik, “ Hamas’s Casualty Numbers Games,” Wall Street Journal, April 4, 2024.](#)
- [Abraham Wyner, “How the Gaza Health Ministry Fakes Casualty Numbers,” Tablet, March 6, 2024.](#)
- [Isabel DeBre, “What Is Gaza’s Ministry of Health and How Does It Calculate the War’s Death Toll?” PBS NewsHour, November 7, 2023.](#)

## 4.2 What should we consider when evaluating media reports and human rights accusations against Israel, particularly regarding civilian harm and humanitarian aid access in Gaza?

Critically assessing media reports and human rights allegations about Israel’s conduct in Gaza requires clarity, context, and intellectual honesty. Accusations that Israel deliberately targets civilians or withholds humanitarian aid deserve close scrutiny, but they must be weighed against the full scope of available evidence, including the realities of urban warfare, the tactics of Hamas, and the legal frameworks governing armed conflict.

Accusations that Israel targets hospitals or civilian infrastructure are common, but often overlook that **Hamas deliberately embeds military assets in these sites**, violating international law and increasing civilian risk. This strategy turns every strike into a moral dilemma. While civilian deaths are tragic, proximity to military targets does not make those targets immune. Israel frequently issues warnings, opens evacuation routes, and conducts precision operations, often at increased risk to its own forces, to reduce harm.

Claims that Israel deliberately withholds humanitarian aid often ignore critical context. Under international law, states are not required to supply aid to an enemy during conflict, especially when there’s clear risk of diversion. Despite this, Israel has regularly allowed food, fuel, and medical supplies into Gaza, even under fire. Hamas has repeatedly exploited these shipments, diverting them for military use, black-market profit, and propaganda. Israel has at times withheld aid to pressure Hamas, but resumed deliveries when it became clear Hamas remained unmoved by civilian suffering. These dynamics are often overlooked in public debate, which rarely acknowledges how **Hamas weaponizes human suffering to prolong the conflict and deflect blame**.

Unlike in other conflicts like Syria or Ukraine, where evacuating civilians was widely supported as a means of reducing harm, many international actors have strongly opposed civilian displacement in Gaza, warning that large-scale evacuations could amount to illegal forced transfer or even ethnic cleansing under international law.<sup>4</sup> This stance has no basis in international law, which permits temporary displacement to save lives. Instead, it reflects a political effort to preserve Gaza’s demographic status quo, even at the cost of civilian safety. The result: Israel’s ability to create buffer zones is constrained, Hamas’s human shield strategy is

<sup>4</sup> UN Secretary-General António Guterres has stated that “any forced displacement of people is tantamount to ethnic cleansing.” (See UN News, “Guterres calls for full Gaza ceasefire, rejecting ‘ethnic cleansing,’” February 5, 2025.). Additionally, countries like Norway and Iceland have condemned Israel’s proposed plans to evacuate Palestinians from Gaza, declaring them as illegal forced displacement under international law. (See Gwladys Fouche, “Israel’s plan to evacuate Gaza would be illegal forceful displacement, Norway and Iceland say,” Reuters, May 8, 2025.)

reinforced, and responsibility for civilian harm is disproportionately placed on Israel. By opposing evacuations and demanding uninterrupted aid despite diversion, some international policies have unintentionally protected Hamas and prolonged the war. Without legal and strategic clarity, humanitarian pressure can deepen the crisis it seeks to resolve.

Claims about Israeli actions often rely on sources like the Hamas-controlled Gaza Health Ministry, which lacks independence and shapes narratives to serve its interests (see question 4.1). But even reports from human rights groups must be critically examined, as some **hold Israel to rigorous standards while neglecting or minimizing Hamas's human rights violations** (e.g. use of human shields and aid diversion). Accurate assessment requires weighing source credibility and understanding Hamas's tactics. Ignoring this risks promoting misleading and one-sided narratives and undermining true human rights accountability.



## 5) Political, Legal, and International Responses

### 5.1 Why is the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) involved, and how can we responsibly evaluate accusations of war crimes and even genocide against Israel under international law?

The **International Criminal Court (ICC)** prosecutes **individuals** for crimes like genocide and war crimes. In 2024, it sought arrest warrants for both Hamas leaders (for the October 7 attacks) and Israeli leaders (for the military campaign in Gaza). Israel and the U.S. condemned the move, with the U.S. passing sanctions against ICC officials. Canada supported the ICC's legitimacy but cautioned against equating a democratic state with a terrorist group.

The **International Court of Justice (ICJ)** hears **cases between states**. In 2024, South Africa accused Israel of genocide. The ICJ did not find Israel guilty, but determined that the claim met the threshold of being "plausible", meaning it could not be dismissed outright without a full review. The Court allowed the case to proceed and ordered Israel to take steps to prevent potential genocidal acts while the trial unfolds, a process likely to take years.

#### The Origins of the Term "Genocide"

The term "**genocide**" was coined in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-Jewish legal scholar, in his influential work *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, in which he documented the Nazi regime's systematic extermination of entire ethnic and national groups. Lemkin developed the term by combining the Greek word *genos* (meaning "people" or "tribe") with the Latin *-cide* (killing), to capture the unique horror of efforts to annihilate entire populations. His definition was shaped not only by his legal insight but also by personal loss, as 49 members of his own family were murdered in the Holocaust. Lemkin's work directly influenced the drafting of the 1948 UN Genocide Convention, which established genocide as a crime under international law.

#### What Do "Genocide" and "War Crimes" Mean in Law?

**Genocide** is the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. The key legal requirement is **intent**, which is very difficult to prove and is not simply about high civilian casualties.

**War crimes** are violations of the laws of war, such as targeting civilians, using human shields, or attacking protected sites like hospitals and schools. These acts can be committed by both state and non-state actors. It is important to note that under international humanitarian law, **civilians and protected sites lose their protection if used for military purposes**. This does not give free license to bomb them, but it allows strikes if proportional and after feasible precautions to avoid civilian harm. The moral and legal weight rests on intent, evidence, military necessity, and efforts to reduce civilian harm.

#### How Can We Responsibly Evaluate Claims?

- **Use Legal Terms Precisely:** Genocide is a specific legal term, not a moral slogan. The term carries profound moral and legal weight and must be applied with precision. Using it loosely, especially in complex armed conflicts, risks politicizing a grave legal concept and undermining efforts to respond to real genocides globally. Furthermore, misuse of the term can turn a legal concept into a political weapon, inflame polarization, and even justify extreme responses, including violence. Such rhetoric doesn't advance justice but obstructs it. Accusations of genocide demand legal precision, rigorous evidence, and intellectual integrity.
- **Examine All Sides:** International law applies equally to Israel and Hamas.

- **Seek Trusted Sources:** Human rights groups play an important role in documenting suffering, but they are not neutral legal authorities. Even respected organizations can make claims that exceed the evidence or reflect political bias. Some organizations have been criticized for selective reporting, for overlooking the complexities of asymmetric warfare, or for misusing legal terms like “genocide”.
- **Consider Context and Intent:** Civilian deaths in war are tragic, but they are not necessarily imply war crimes. The legal question is whether combatants intended to harm civilians, whether the response was proportionate, and whether precautions were taken to avoid harm.
- **Recognize the Moral Inversion at Play:** The term genocide was coined as a direct response to the Holocaust, the systematic attempt by Nazi Germany to annihilate the Jewish people. Accusing Jews, or the Jewish state, of committing genocide today risks turning that legal and moral framework on its head. When such claims lack clear evidence of intent to destroy a people, they not only distort international law but also invert the historical meaning of genocide itself, weaponizing a term born from Jewish suffering against the Jewish people.

### Is Israel Committing Genocide? A Closer Look

Accusations of genocide against Israel began almost immediately after the October 7 Hamas attacks, even before Israel’s ground operation. The term “genocide” carries enormous moral and political weight and must be used with care.

#### Assessing the genocide claim and why it falls short:

- **No intent to destroy a people:** Israel’s stated objective is to dismantle Hamas, not eradicate Palestinians. Its actions (evacuation warnings, humanitarian corridors, and aid coordination) reflect that aim.
- **Restraint despite capacity:** Israel has the military capability to inflict far greater harm but has chosen more limited operations, even in challenging urban combat.
- **Focus on combatants, not civilians: Israel targets combatants, not civilians.** Civilian casualties are tragic but largely stem from Hamas embedding fighters and military infrastructure in civilian areas. International law accounts for such complexity when protected sites are used for military purposes.
- **Ongoing aid efforts:** Israel continues to facilitate humanitarian aid, even while under attack. This approach is inconsistent with genocidal policy.
- **Population growth in Gaza:** From 1.4 million in 2000 to over 2.3 million in 2023, Gaza’s growing population contradicts claims of systematic group destruction.

#### Further Readings:

- [The United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide](#)
- [Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court](#)
- [International Court of Justice, “How the Court Works”](#)
- [International Court of Justice, Summary 2024/1: Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip \(South Africa v. Israel\) – Request for the Indication of Provisional Measures, Peace Palace, The Hague, January 26, 2024](#)
- [Jonah Goldberg, “The Headlines Said Amnesty International Accused Israel of Genocide. Here’s What They Missed,” American Enterprise Institute, December 10, 2024.](#)
- [Amichai Cohen and Yuval Shany, “Critical Observations on Amnesty International’s Genocide Report,” Just Security, December 16, 2024.](#)
- [Michael Powell “The Double Standard in the Human-Rights World,” The Atlantic, March 2025.](#)

## 5.2 Why is Western media hyper focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts?

The intense focus of Western media on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reflects deeper ideological choices, cultural biases, and historical patterns that deserve careful scrutiny.

### Historical and Symbolic Significance

The Holy Land has long drawn global attention due to its deep religious significance for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Jerusalem, sacred to billions, amplifies any conflict into a story of global relevance. Themes like colonialism, nationalism, and human rights make the issue especially resonant in the West.

### Narrative Over Reality

Western media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict rarely presents the region as a complex and multi-sided reality. Instead, it often reduces the situation to a simplified morality tale, in which Israel is cast as the aggressor (militaristic, nationalistic, and colonialist) while the Palestinians are portrayed largely as passive victims. Context is often stripped away: terrorist acts, internal Palestinian repression, corruption, or the rejection of peace initiatives are minimized or reframed as reactions to oppression, rather than autonomous strategic choices. At the same time, stories illustrating Israeli restraint, Palestinian extremism, or cooperative initiatives that challenge simplified narratives are frequently underreported or ignored entirely.

This trend may reflect a broader shift in journalism toward narrative framing, where facts are interpreted through ideological lenses and stories are evaluated not for accuracy, but for how they align with broader values and ideologies. Israel often becomes a focal point because it “fits” neatly into a dominant Western moral lens: a powerful, Western-aligned nation portrayed as colonial, nationalist, and militaristic. As journalist Matti Friedman observed, stories that challenge this script are often buried. The resulting narrative often resonates with Western sensibilities around historical injustices by offering a compelling yet oversimplified sense of moral clarity, at the expense of understanding the region’s complex realities.

### Narrative Over Reality

This treatment of Israel follows a much older pattern. For centuries, Jews have been cast as symbols of society’s ills: greedy capitalists, subversive communists, racially inferior. Today, in a progressive moral framework where the greatest evils are racism, colonialism, and nationalism, Israel is portrayed as the embodiment of all three. The intense focus on Israel isn’t driven by the scale of the conflict, but by the symbolic role it plays in Western moral psychology. **Media coverage of Israel often reflects Western moral frameworks more than the local complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.** In this framework, criticism of Israel often functions less as policy analysis and more as a form of symbolic moral expression. As the world’s only Jewish state, Israel is frequently cast as a symbol of the very forces (militarism, nationalism, colonialism) that some in the West seek to reject. This helps explain why Israel faces scrutiny unmatched by any other nation, including authoritarian regimes. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict merits attention, but responsible journalism requires accuracy, historical context, and balance. Selective or ideological coverage deepens division and obscures the path to genuine understanding or resolution.

### Further Readings:

- [Matti Friedman. “What the Media Gets Wrong About Israel.” \*The Atlantic\*, November 30, 2014.](#)
- [Matti Friedman. “An Insider’s Guide to the Most Important Story on Earth.” \*Tablet Magazine\*, August 26, 2014.](#)

## 6) Efforts Toward Peace and Coexistence

### 6.1 What major peace initiatives have Israelis and Palestinians pursued since Israel's establishment, and why have past efforts succeeded or failed?

Since the establishment of Israel in 1948, achieving lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians has been a deeply complex and elusive objective. While numerous initiatives have aimed at reconciliation, they have struggled to address core issues effectively, leading to persistent cycles of hope and disappointment. Understanding these efforts requires a critical examination of past negotiations, underlying challenges, and future opportunities for coexistence.

#### Past Negotiations

- **The Oslo Accords (1993-1995)** marked a breakthrough with mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO and introduced limited Palestinian self-rule in the West Bank and Gaza. Hopes for a two-state solution soon faltered over unresolved issues (Jerusalem, refugees, and settlements, see below) and were further undermined by ongoing terrorism during and after key negotiations, which eroded Israeli trust in Palestinian leadership. From the Palestinian perspective, the slow pace of progress, continued expansion of Israeli settlements, and lack of sovereignty over key areas led to growing frustration and disillusionment with the peace process. The 1995 assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish extremist was also a major blow to the peace process.
- **The 2000 Camp David Summit** exposed the same core obstacles again. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered major concessions, including withdrawal from most settlements and parts of East Jerusalem, but the talks failed over unresolved issues: refugees and Jerusalem. The breakdown deepened Palestinian perceptions that negotiations reinforced the status quo rather than ending the occupation. The talks collapsed into the Second Intifada (2000-2005), marked by widespread terrorist attacks, including suicide bombings. The involvement of Fatah factions in the violence, despite their official role in peace efforts, further eroded Israeli trust in Palestinian leadership.
- **Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip:** In 2005, Israel unilaterally withdrew its military and settlements from Gaza under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, aiming to reduce conflict and improve security. While the 2005 disengagement was initially celebrated by many Palestinians -- particularly by Hamas, which framed it as a victory for resistance -- others viewed it as a unilateral step that failed to deliver meaningful progress toward statehood. Gaza was soon left politically and economically isolated, especially after Hamas seized control in 2007 and escalated rocket attacks on Israel. The failure of the 2005 disengagement led many Israelis to view unilateral withdrawals as ineffective and unlikely to be repeated without firm and reciprocal commitments.

- The **2007 Annapolis Conference** aimed to revive final-status negotiations. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert
- offered major concessions, including near-total West Bank withdrawal and shared control of Jerusalem. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas declined to finalize the deal. From the Palestinian perspective, the offer risked locking in vague promises while Israeli settlement activity continued. For many Israelis, the refusal to accept what they saw as a historic compromise confirmed doubts about the Palestinian leadership's willingness or ability to reach an agreement, especially amid the Fatah-Hamas split and lingering trauma from the Second Intifada. Both sides emerged with greater mistrust, but the collapse of the talks defies easy blame and underscores how difficult reaching an agreement has become.

#### Core Issues

Three core issues have consistently blocked peace efforts. Understanding them is key to grasping past failures and future possibilities:

- **Jerusalem:** Jerusalem lies at the heart of the conflict, with deep religious and national meaning for both sides. Israel sees it as its indivisible capital, rooted in 3,000 years of Jewish history. Palestinians view East Jerusalem

as the capital of a future state, home to key Muslim holy sites like the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Repeated attempts to divide or share the city have failed, as its symbolic and practical significance makes compromise especially difficult.

- **Palestinian Refugees:** The Palestinian refugee issue dates back to the 1948 and 1967 wars, when around 700,000 Arabs fled or were displaced. Palestinians demand a full “right of return” for these refugees and their descendants (now numbering in the millions), seeing it as central to national identity and justice. Israel argues that such a “return” would alter Israel’s demographic balance and endanger the Jewish and democratic character of the state. Israel has proposed alternatives such as compensation, limited return, or resettlement in a future Palestinian state or third countries, but all were rejected by Palestinian leaders as inadequate. This remains a major obstacle to any lasting agreement.
- **Israeli Settlements:** Since capturing the West Bank and Gaza in the 1967 war, Israel has built civilian settlements in these territories. While Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, settlement expansion in the West Bank has continued. Today, the West Bank is home to over 450,000 Jewish settlers and nearly 3 million Palestinians. Palestinians view the settlements as a major obstacle to peace and statehood. They argue that settlement expansion fragments the West Bank, undermines the territorial contiguity needed for a viable Palestinian state, and often involves land expropriation and restrictions on Palestinian movement. Many also see the settlements as part of a broader system of inequality and control, contributing to daily tensions and clashes. Israel disputes the “occupation” label, arguing the land was never under recognized sovereignty and that its status must be resolved through negotiation. Many Israelis view the West Bank (or in their biblical name, Judea and Samaria) as part of the Jewish ancestral homeland, or as strategically necessary for providing security and territorial depth. However, Israeli perspectives vary widely, with many acknowledging settlements complicate peace efforts.

### Lessons for Future Coexistence

Achieving peace requires addressing the core issues that have shaped the conflict. Understanding these complexities is key to learning from past failures and moving forward.

- **The Palestinian Refugee Issue:** For Palestinians, the refugee issue is not only a political demand but a core part of national identity and historical memory. Unlike other refugee populations, Palestinians have retained their refugee status across generations, shaped in part by host countries’ limited integration and the Palestinian leadership’s framing of the ‘right of return’ as a core, non-negotiable national demand. This deeply held position has sustained high expectations and complicated compromise. For many Israelis, continued insistence on full return suggests the conflict is not just about borders, but about Israel’s very existence as a Jewish and democratic state. Resolving this issue will require more than legal or demographic solutions. It will demand mutual recognition, historical acknowledgment, and a willingness to confront painful narratives on both sides.
- **Israel’s Security Imperatives and the Threat of Terrorism:** Ongoing terrorism has shaped Israeli public opinion, fueling distrust and resistance to concessions. Measures like military operations, the West Bank barrier, and strict security controls were intended to stop attacks but also deepened Palestinian grievances. Past Israeli withdrawals and concessions have often been followed by increased violence, reinforcing skepticism toward further Palestinian autonomy, let alone statehood, without strong security guarantees. For Israel, ending terrorism is a fundamental requirement for any meaningful progress. This will require sustained Palestinian efforts to dismantle terrorist infrastructure, stop incitement, and prevent violence. Without clear evidence of such commitment, Israeli support for further negotiations remains limited. At the same time, persistent insecurity and cycles of violence have contributed to growing resentment and fear toward Arabs in some sectors of Israeli society. These sentiments are increasingly visible in public discourse and have at times been reflected in acts of vigilante violence by extremist groups. Certain right-wing political parties have drawn on or amplified these attitudes, further politicizing issues of security and national identity. This trend deepens polarization within Israeli society and makes it more difficult for moderate voices to pursue compromise or coexistence as viable goals. Legitimate security needs must be balanced against the political use of fear that sustains conflict.



- **Grassroots Efforts and Coexistence:** Lasting peace will require not only political agreements but also grassroots efforts that foster trust, dialogue, and mutual recognition between Israelis and Palestinians. Such initiatives already exist through joint educational programs, economic partnerships, and dialogue programs. These efforts are fragile but essential. External actors, especially in the West, play an important role in funding such efforts and shaping the environment in which they operate. While solidarity with Palestinians might be well-intentioned, broad boycotts, anti-normalization campaigns, and attempts to delegitimize Israel frequently undermine such grassroots peacebuilding. Rather than fostering coexistence, such tactics isolate moderates and strengthen extremist narratives. A more constructive approach is to support initiatives that humanize both communities, affirm the legitimacy of both national identities, and build the foundations for reconciliation from the ground up. (See question 6.3)

## 6.2 Is the two-state solution still realistic, desirable, or fair today? What alternatives might exist?

The two-state solution envisions Israel and a Palestinian state coexisting peacefully. Though widely seen as the most practical path to resolving the conflict, it faces major historical and political obstacles.

### Historical Context and Current Realities

The concept of separate Jewish and Arab states began with the 1937 Peel Commission and gained international legitimacy with the 1947 UN Partition Plan. Jewish leaders accepted this plan despite its challenging borders. Arab leaders, however, rejected partition as unjust. In response, surrounding Arab states launched a war to prevent the establishment of a Jewish state. Israel survived and declared independence, while the Palestinian opportunity for statehood was lost in the aftermath of that defeat. In the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel captured the West Bank from Jordan and Gaza from Egypt, bringing millions of Palestinians under Israeli military rule. While Israel viewed this as a security necessity, it also created complex political and demographic challenges. The prolonged military administration fueled Palestinian resentment and led to uprisings like the First Intifada (1987–1993), which pushed both sides toward the Oslo Accords. These agreements introduced limited Palestinian autonomy and were intended as a gradual path toward a negotiated two-state solution. However, they ultimately collapsed amid continued violence and unresolved core issues.

### Is the Two-State Solution Realistic Today?

Practically, the two-state solution faces significant hurdles:

- Past diplomatic failures, particularly the breakdown of the Oslo Accords and Israel's unilateral 2005 withdrawal from Gaza (followed by Hamas's violent takeover) have eroded trust and increased skepticism among Israelis about the security risks involved in further territorial concessions. For many Palestinians, trust has been similarly undermined by continued Israeli settlement expansion, military incursions, and a peace process that has failed to deliver meaningful sovereignty.
- Geographical fragmentation due to Israeli settlements and security needs severely limits territorial contiguity and viability for a Palestinian state.
- Internal Palestinian divisions remain a major obstacle. The split between Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, along with internal PA disputes over leadership and legitimacy, undermines the PA's credibility as a unified negotiating partner and raises doubts about its ability to implement any future agreement.

### Is the Two State Paradigm Desirable?

It's easy to see why the two-state solution is broadly supported in principle, as it affirms both Jewish and Palestinian self-determination and offers Israel a secure, democratic Jewish-majority state and Palestinians sovereignty. But perceptions of fairness vary. Many Palestinians believe it fails to address key historical grievances, especially refugee rights and displacement. Many Israelis, meanwhile, are skeptical after past territorial withdrawals led to violence, not peace. These experiences have fueled fears that a future Palestinian state could become a security threat rather than a partner in coexistence.

**Support for a two-state paradigm has significantly declined among both Israelis and Palestinians.**

According to Gallup polls from October 2024, 64% of Israelis now oppose the creation of an independent Palestinian state, with only 27% in favor. This marks a substantial shift from 2012, when 61% supported a two-state paradigm. Among Jewish Israelis, support is even lower at 17%, while 75% of Arab Israelis are in favor. Similarly, in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, 64% of Palestinians oppose the two-state paradigm, with just 28% supporting it. This is a reversal from 2012 figures, where 66% were in favor. **These trends indicate a hardening of positions on both sides** and raise questions about the feasibility of the two-state paradigm.

### **Alternatives to the Two-State Paradigm**

- 1) **One-State (Binational State):** A single state encompassing all of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, granting full citizenship and equal rights to both Jews and Palestinians.
  - **Advantages:** This model promises theoretical equality under a single legal system and removes the complexities of border divisions. It appeals to some as a justice-based solution that rejects national separations and aspirations and affirms shared human rights.
  - **Challenges:** A one-state model is unlikely to work in practice. Deep distrust, historic trauma, and ongoing conflict make coexistence under a single government highly unlikely. Many Israelis oppose this model, fearing it would undermine Jewish self-determination and Israel's role as a refuge for Jews. A one-state model risks replacing that refuge with a volatile entity that is unlikely to bring peace or security.
- 2) **Confederation or Federation:** This model envisions two states with separate governments but shared functions like security, infrastructure, and access to holy sites. Variations include joint control of Jerusalem, shared economic zones, or mutual residency rights.
  - **Advantages:** A confederation allows both Israelis and Palestinians to retain national identities while promoting cooperation. It could ease territorial fragmentation through shared governance and freer movement, offering a more realistic approach given the populations' spread, ties, and overlapping histories.
  - **Challenges:** A confederation would demand trust and coordination that currently don't exist. Deep polarization and mutual fears could turn shared governance into political deadlock or renewed conflict. Security concerns are especially sensitive—Israel could face new vulnerabilities, while Palestinians might feel sovereignty remains out of reach. For many on both sides, the model may fall short of their core national aspirations.
- 3) **Managed Long-Term Israeli Control (Post-Hamas Gaza):** This model assumes Hamas is removed from power in Gaza and replaced by a more moderate authority, possibly under the PA or an international body. Instead of immediate statehood, Israel retains long-term security control while allowing limited Palestinian self-governance and supporting humanitarian recovery.
  - **Advantages:** From Israel's perspective, this model removes the Hamas threat while avoiding the risks of granting full sovereignty to an unstable Palestinian entity. It creates a controlled setting to rebuild Gaza, restore services, foster credible Palestinian leadership over time, and stabilize the area. For Gazans, ending Hamas rule could mean greater political freedom, aid, and reconstruction. Regional and international investment may follow, especially if the post-Hamas phase is seen as a fresh start.
  - **Challenges:** This model stops short of granting full Palestinian sovereignty. Israel would likely maintain military and administrative control, citing security concerns. Palestinians would have limited autonomy but no clear path to independence, reinforcing perceptions of occupation and inequality. At best, this model may reduce violence temporarily but leave core issues unresolved.

None of these alternatives present a fully viable or widely acceptable path forward. Each is constrained by deep mistrust and competing fears that now define the conflict. In the absence of a credible horizon for resolution, both Israeli and Palestinian politics have tended to harden and drift toward more maximalist, security-driven, or rejectionist positions. This dynamic reinforces a cycle where compromise appears politically costly. Still, even in the face of these constraints, it remains essential to maintain a clear-eyed understanding of the conflict's complexity and to resist simplistic narratives that obscure the responsibilities, fears, and agency on both sides.

### 6.3 How should we thoughtfully engage with discussions around the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement?

The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement has become a prominent and polarizing topic in conversations about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Supporters view it as a nonviolent stand for justice, likening it to anti-apartheid efforts, but its impact is far more complex. Engaging with it requires looking beyond slogans to consider its morality, effectiveness, and long-term consequences.

#### BDS's Broad Approach

Boycotts have historically served as effective tools for moral protest, from the U.S. civil rights movement to apartheid-era South Africa. Similarly, BDS advocates see economic pressure as nonviolent resistance to Israel's policies toward Palestinians. However, unlike targeted boycotts, **BDS broadly targets all Israeli institutions – academic, cultural, and economic – regardless of their role or position on the conflict.** This broad approach overlooks the difference between those supporting the status quo and those pushing for change. Many Israelis – Jewish and Arab, religious and secular – actively oppose government policies and/or participate in grassroots coexistence organizations, joint Israeli-Palestinian projects, and human rights initiatives. Blanket boycotts risk isolating those working for reconciliation and hinder academic and civil society exchanges vital to building trust.

#### Alienation of Allies and Reinforcement of Extremism

By treating all Israelis (or all Zionists / Jews) as complicit in oppression, **the BDS movement risks alienating potential allies rather than building coalitions.** Many Zionists support Palestinian self-determination, and countless Jews globally advocate for peace and human rights. Blanket boycotts erase these distinctions and undermine their efforts. Worse, such tactics often empower hardline voices in Israel and reinforces a siege mentality that deepens mistrust and entrench division.

#### Anti-Normalization and Missed Opportunities

A particularly damaging aspect of BDS is its anti-normalization stance, which rejects joint grassroots Israeli-Palestinian efforts unless they fully align with BDS principles. While framed as morally consistent, **this approach prioritizes ideological purity over relationship-building** and discourages the personal engagement and mutual recognition essential for building trust and opening paths to reconciliation. (See question 12 – “Lessons for Lasting Coexistence”)

#### Navigating Moral Complexity

It is possible and necessary to support Palestinian rights and dignity without diminishing Jewish history, national identity, or Israel's right to exist. Activism can be pursued without relying on tactics that risk collective blame, erase historical complexities, or deepen divisions. Constructive activism might focus instead on initiatives such as investing in Palestinian civil society, encouraging joint peacebuilding projects, or challenging specific unjust policies. Effective and pragmatic engagement recognizes the historical traumas, legitimate aspirations, and existential fears of both peoples, prioritizing dialogue and coexistence over ideological purity.