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Israel-Hamas War: The Significance of the Holocaust

By Luca Farrow

SYNOPSIS

As the Israel-Hamas war continues and the death toll of peaceful Palestinians continues to rise, there is an important drive to raise awareness of the history and plight of the Palestinian people. However, for a proper understanding of the conflict, there is also the need to explain the history of persecution of Jews, including the Holocaust, and how this has affected Israel and its allies.

COMMENTARY

On 29 December 2023, South Africa commenced [proceedings](#) against Israel in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) alleging violations of the United Nations [Convention](#) on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Genocide Convention) in relation to its extensive military operation in Gaza. South Africa alleged that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza.

On 26 January 2024, in its provisional measures [order](#) handed down before the case is finally decided (potentially years later), the ICJ did not accede to South Africa's request that it order Israel to cease its military operations in Gaza. However, rather damningly, it did note that it saw a plausible risk to Palestinians in Gaza under the Genocide Convention. The ICJ ordered Israel to take all measures to prevent genocide, including to prevent and punish statements of incitement to genocide, which certain Israeli politicians had been accused of, and to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza.

The term [genocide](#) was coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1944 in response to "Nazi policies of systemic murder of Jewish people during the Holocaust" and other instances where groups of people were targeted for destruction. The Nazis' "Final Solution" was a horrendous plan to murder all of the Jews of Europe simply because

they were Jews. Most estimates suggest that somewhere between five and six million Jews were killed during the Holocaust, although Jews were [not the only group](#) that was targeted during that dark chapter of history.

The unprecedented horrors of the Holocaust are difficult to fully comprehend but they are a relatively recent historical reality. This human tragedy was the catalyst for the establishment of the Genocide Convention which Israel, a state comprising mostly of Jews whose forebears had suffered centuries of persecution and then genocide, is now accused of breaching.

Relevance of the Holocaust

The fact that Jews have been the victims of the largest genocide in history does not mean that a Jewish state cannot be guilty of committing genocide. It does not justify committing genocide, provides no defence to charges of genocide, and no reduction in culpability. The point of discussing the Holocaust here is not to make any normative claim as to what the various stakeholders in the Israeli-Hamas conflict should do but rather to use historical context to help offer explanations as to why the various actors behave as they do.

On 7 October 2023, when hundreds of Hamas militants attacked more than a dozen locations in south-western Israel, accompanied by the launch of thousands of rockets into Israel, killing hundreds of Jewish civilians, the Holocaust was brought prominently back to the minds of Jews in Israel and elsewhere. The [brutality](#) (including the [sexual violence](#) that was reportedly inflicted) is consistent with the dehumanisation of Jews that also characterised the Holocaust.

One-sided Historical Awareness

In understanding why Hamas became popular in Gaza and beyond, and in fully appreciating why and how the attacks on 7 October 2023 were carried out, one must take into account the immense suffering of the Palestinian people since the establishment of Israel in 1948. This includes the dehumanising actions of the Israeli state in the form of military brutality, forcible land seizure and apartheid-like policies. As the Israeli military operation in Gaza and beyond continues and the horrific number of [casualties](#) – so many of them peaceful men, women and children – continues to rise, this history of the oppression of the Palestinian people is becoming increasingly prominent in discussions of the war, and rightly so.

But there seems to be a sense in Singapore and the region that the long history of Jewish persecution and the *raison d'être* of the Israeli state for many Israelis – to provide a place of safety from attacks such as October 7 – are less noteworthy. Attempts to help explain the historical background to the conflict exist – and “October 7 didn’t happen in a vacuum” is a common response – but these currently tend to consist only of Palestinian perspectives on history. A feature of these one-sided accounts is a minimisation of the history of Jews in Israel-Palestine prior to the [Balfour Declaration](#).

This may be a function of the demographic reality of the Muslim-majority region, with a significant number of Muslims who are concerned about the plight of the

Palestinians, and an insignificant number of Jews. It could also reflect the fact that the Holocaust was simply not as proximate as the Japanese occupation, which is the more central chapter of the Second World War. Of course, as noted above, it is natural to focus on raising awareness for the Palestinian people given the current state of the Israel-Hamas conflict and the high Palestinian death toll.

Ongoing Significance of the Holocaust

The persecution of Jews throughout history does not excuse Israeli military excesses or any dehumanising rhetoric toward the Palestinians. As for how much Israeli leaders might be motivated by considerations of defence against mass killings of Jews, this will attract debate given that the Israeli far-right, which desires further land annexations on [religious grounds](#), has influence in the present Israeli government.

The fact that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's policy of trying to contain Hamas has [failed](#) and that he is now domestically unpopular and likely more concerned about his political [legacy](#), raises a question of whether his motivations exceed defensive pragmatism.

Crucially, there are legitimate arguments to be had about whether Israel's military campaign will make Israelis safer. There has been an apparent lack of senior Hamas casualties so far, while the wanton destruction of Palestinian lives is such as to encourage, on an unprecedented scale, the further radicalisation of Palestinians against Israel.

Nevertheless, to understand why the Israeli public remains [in favour](#) of a strong military response, and why the United States, United Kingdom, and German governments, among others, remain steadfast supporters of Israel, one needs to appreciate the impact of the persecution of Jews and the Holocaust in particular. There are, of course, economic and geopolitical drivers at play, but the support offered by Israel's allies is not to a decisive degree the result of powerful Jewish lobby groups in these states. To believe that such lobbying provides critical support for Israel and its current conduct is to have embarked on the path towards [antisemitic conspiracy theory](#). Indeed, the support of Israel's allies reflects – not exclusively, but significantly – the role that the Holocaust has played in their national psyches.

Journalists and academics should strive to explain the historical context of the current conflict from both the Palestinian and Israeli perspectives. Too often, the Israeli interest is glossed over or caricatured as an unreasonable [Zionism](#), which conveniently ignores their historical trauma and existing unease. Such commentaries provide neither empathy nor understanding, making it even more difficult to find a solution to the intractable conflict.

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