

OUR GENOCIDE

Executive Summary

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B'TSELEM
بتسيلم

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Since October 2023, Israel has fundamentally changed its policy toward the Palestinians. Following the Hamas-led attack on 7 October 2023, Israel launched an intensive military campaign in the Gaza Strip, which is still underway more than 21 months later. Israel's onslaught on Gaza includes mass killing, both in direct attacks and through creating catastrophic conditions that increase the massive death toll; serious bodily or mental harm to the entire population of the Strip; large-scale destruction of infrastructure and living conditions; destruction of the social fabric, including Palestinian educational institutions and cultural sites; mass arrests and abuse of detainees in Israeli prisons, which have effectively become torture camps for thousands of Palestinians held without trial; mass forced displacement, including attempts at ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in Gaza and making the latter an official war goal; and an assault on Palestinian identity through the deliberate destruction of refugee camps and attempts to undermine the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). The outcome of this comprehensive assault on the Gaza Strip is severe, and at least in part, irreparable harm to more than 2 million people living in the Gaza Strip, as part of the Palestinian people.

An examination of Israel's policy in the Gaza Strip and its horrific outcomes, together with statements by senior Israeli politicians and military commanders about the goals of the attack, leads to the unequivocal conclusion that Israel is taking coordinated, deliberate action to destroy Palestinian society in the Gaza Strip. In other words: Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

The term genocide refers to a socio-historical and political phenomenon that has occurred throughout human history. Since the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was signed in 1948 (and came into force in 1951), genocide has also been recognized as one of the gravest crimes in international law, involving acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group. Genocide is carried out through multiple and parallel practices over time, with mass physical killing being only one of them. Destroying living conditions, sometimes in concentration zones or camps, systemically trying to prevent births, widespread sexual violence against group members or their mass expulsion, can all be – and have been throughout history – among the means used by states or ruling authorities to destroy ethnic, national, racial, religious and other groups. Accordingly, genocidal acts are various actions intended to bring about the destruction of a distinct group, as part of a deliberate, coordinated effort by a ruling authority. Both morally and legally, genocide cannot be justified under any circumstance, including as an act of self-defense.

Genocide always occurs within a context: there are conditions that enable it, triggering events, and a guiding ideology. The current onslaught on the Palestinian people, including in the Gaza Strip, must be understood in the context of more than seventy years in which Israel has imposed a violent and discriminatory regime on the Palestinians, taking its most extreme form against those living in the Gaza Strip. Since the State of Israel was established, the apartheid and occupation regime has institutionalized and systematically employed mechanisms of violent control, demographic engineering, discrimination, and fragmentation of the Palestinian collective. These foundations laid by the regime are what made it possible to launch a genocidal attack on the Palestinians immediately after the Hamas-led attack on 7 October 2023. This report emphasizes three of these foundations in particular: life under an apartheid regime that imposes separation, demographic engineering, and ethnic cleansing; systematic and institutionalized use of violence against Palestinians, while the perpetrators enjoy impunity; and institutionalized mechanisms of dehumanization and framing Palestinians as an existential threat.

Such conditions can exist over time without developing into a genocidal assault. Often, a violent event that creates a sense of existential threat among the perpetrating group is the trigger for the ruling system to carry out genocide. The attack by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups on 7 October 2023 was a catalyst of this kind. The atrocious attack, aimed mostly at civilians, included many war crimes and likely also crimes against humanity. It took the lives of 1,218 Israelis and foreign nationals, 882 of them civilians, involved extensive and severe acts of violence, including sexual violence, and resulted in tens of thousands of people wounded and the abduction of 252 people to the Gaza Strip – most of them civilians, including women, elderly people and children. The youngest child abducted was a nine-month-old baby who was killed, along with his three-year-old brother and their mother, while held in Gaza. For Israelis, the very fact of the attack, its scope and its outcomes, generated anxiety and a feeling of existential threat to a degree that led to profound social and political changes in Israeli society. These instigated a shift in Israeli policy toward Palestinians in the Gaza Strip: from repression and control to destruction and annihilation.

The assault on Gaza cannot be separated from the escalating violence being inflicted, at varying levels and in different forms, on Palestinians in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and within Israel. In these areas, as in Gaza, lethal crimes are being committed against Palestinians with no accountability for the perpetrators. The violence

and destruction in these areas is intensifying over time, with no effective domestic or international mechanism acting to halt them. As a result, these crimes are becoming normalized in the eyes of soldiers, commanders, politicians, media figures and Israelis in general. We warn of the clear and present danger that the genocide will not remain confined to the Gaza Strip, and that the actions and underlying mindset driving it may be extended to other areas as well.

B'Tselem is an Israeli human rights organization that documents and researches harm caused to Palestinians under Israel's apartheid and occupation regime. In the name of the duty to protect human beings, their lives, dignity, and individual and collective rights, B'Tselem has worked for over 35 years to expose Israel's systematic violations of Palestinians' human rights.

As a human rights organization working to stop and prevent systemic and widespread state violence against Palestinians, it is our duty to analyze human rights violations on the ground in the context of the regime carrying them out and its underlying political logic.

Since October 2023, we have gathered eyewitness testimonies and documented hundreds of incidents involving unprecedented and extreme violence against Palestinian civilians throughout the territory Israel controls, while key politicians and military commanders have openly declared the policies being implemented on the ground. Countless evidence of the consequences of these policies reflects the horrifying transformation of the entire Israeli system in its treatment of Palestinians.

At B'Tselem, Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Israel work side by side, guided by the shared view that defending human rights is a basic human and moral obligation. We all live under a discriminatory apartheid regime that classifies some of us as privileged subjects simply because we are Jewish, and others as undeserving of any protection simply because we are Palestinian. Together, we fight for the right we all have to live between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River without discrimination, violent oppression and annihilation.

Even as we write, Israel is intensifying its brutal, merciless assault on the Palestinians. The routine killing and destruction in the Gaza Strip, as well as the growing violence and forced displacement of tens of thousands in the West Bank, would not have been possible

without international inaction in the face of the incomprehensible scale and severity of these crimes. Many state leaders, particularly in Europe and the United States, have not only refrained from effective action to stop the annihilation and violence but have enabled it to continue – whether through statements affirming Israel's "right to self-defense" or through active support, including the shipment of weapons and ammunition.

As people of this land and as human rights activists, it is our duty to bear witness to the state of affairs we and many others have documented and investigated. It is our duty to name the reality we are witnessing and living through, to recount it, and to stand with the victims.

The recognition that the Israeli regime is committing genocide in the Gaza Strip, and the deep concern that it may expand to other areas where Palestinians live under Israeli rule, demand urgent and unequivocal action from both Israeli society and the international community, and use of every means available under international law to stop Israel's genocide against the Palestinian people.