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CYPRUS CENTER FOR EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
University of Nicosia

1993-2025 THIRTY-TWO YEARS OF POLICY FORMULATION AND ANALYSIS

THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST REVISITED AGAIN: PERSPECTIVES OVER TIME



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I recall when I was a student in the US in the 1980's the debate taking place in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as other issues in the broader Middle East. For the Israelis the most important issue was "the respect of Israel's right to exist." For the Palestinians "the right of return of all refugees" was a major issue.

At the time Israel considered it extremely important to be accepted in the Middle East. The Palestinians fought to create awareness about their existence and their political objectives including the right to self-determination.

At the time, Egypt was the only country in the Arab World which had established diplomatic relations with Israel. Egypt had recognized Israel in 1977 and established relations with the Jewish state. With the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 issues became more complicated in the broader area. And Israel acquired another strong enemy. Jordan was cooperating with Israel on various issues but not openly. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in October 1994.

The Oslo Agreements in 1993 created hopes for peace in the Middle East. But the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin by an Israeli extremist in 1995 proved to be a setback to the peace process. Since then there have been repeated rounds of violence between the two sides. And the gap between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) kept growing. At some point Israelis felt that the PLO was not serious about recognizing their state. And Palestinians felt that Israel was not really interested in a two-state solution. The emergence of Hamas in 1987 complicated things further.

In the 1990-s in various events organized by our Center on regional issues, a few Israeli academics – and especially Professor Moshe Maoz – would point out that in the Middle East there are/were four major powers – Israel, the Arab World, Iran and Turkey. According to Moshe Maoz, Israel could not be

isolated - it had to maintain close relations with at least one major power/block; so, at the time, Turkey was a major ally.

What is happening today? The Hamas' terrorist attack on October 7, 2023 prompted an unprecedented response by Israel which has not been limited to Gaza. Almost two years after the beginning of the new round of violence the situation is bleak. In addition to the unresolved political dimension of the conflict, there is a humanitarian crisis in Gaza of unprecedented proportions. Furthermore, Israel has seen its moral high ground seriously eroded. Not surprisingly the Israeli society is divided in relation to these developments.

In the Middle East, Israel has the enmity of Turkey and Iran. The deterioration of relations with Turkey started with the Marmara incident in 2009. Furthermore, what has been taking place since October 7, 2023 has undermined the spirit of the Abraham Accords. In other words, Israel is facing increasing isolation – something that Moshe Maoz thought that the Jewish state should avoid.

Can the military supremacy of Israel impose a new political landscape in the Middle East? Military might is important but on several issues it cannot achieve everything. It is essential to have a political process for addressing the serious issues – above all the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And both sides have to make some fundamental decisions and concessions. If Israel is not prepared to accept a two-state solution, would it be ready to offer political rights to the Palestinians of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip? And would the Palestinians be willing to live in a common state with the Israelis? Above all, is that possible?

Besides the Israel-Palestinian conflict there are other serious issues in the Middle East. The level of tolerance for religious and ethnic minorities in almost all countries of the Middle East is very limited. Developments in Syria following the overthrow of Assad are indicative. There were various serious incidents of violence against the Christians and the Druze. Indeed, no minority in the region can feel safe.

The Middle East as a whole is also facing other serious problems as well. One could raise the issue of climate change and water shortages and the impact on everyday life of peoples in the region. This situation could fuel additional migration flows to Europe. Could there be cooperation between the various states of the area to address common problems? And what about the role of the US, the EU and other major powers in shaping the dynamics of the area?

There is no doubt that the Middle East is currently the most volatile region in the world. There are very serious problems which must be addressed accordingly. Cooperation among the regional players is essential, as well as

support by outside powers. So far the record is disappointing. And if this situation continues most likely the results will be worse.

ISRAEL'S USE OF FORCE IN GAZA AND THE CASE FOR ESTABLISHING REGIONAL INTERDEPENDENCE



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The purpose of this brief analysis is to assess Israel's ongoing use of force in Gaza since October 7, 2023, and to develop the argument that Israel has behaved as a "free rider" in the wake of Hamas's mass-casualty terrorist attack. By "free rider," I mean the strategic exploitation of a shock, one that generated strong reasons and pretexts for immediate retaliation, to pursue a broader coercive campaign that advances national objectives at disproportionate humanitarian and diplomatic cost at the expense of the Palestinians in Gaza and Israel itself. The war has produced large-scale civilian harm, famine conditions in parts of Gaza, and persistent friction with international institutions. At the same time, Israel's long-term security, legitimacy, and regional economic prospects depend on re-establishing itself as an international actor embedded in frameworks like the Abraham Accords and the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). These arrangements, if revitalized, can eventually create a complex interdependence environment that can both raise the cost of unrestrained force and offer incentives to address Palestinian grievances through more cooperative policies. The core claim is twofold: international society should sustain pressure for compliance with humanitarian law and improved civilian protection, and it should also prioritize Israel's security concerns and reintegration into regional economic and diplomatic architectures that can re-arrange incentives on all sides.

On the ground, the campaign has been sustained and mutually costly. Israeli operations have expanded and contracted across Gaza since late 2023, with renewed offensives around Gaza City reported in August 2025, with the purpose of full control of the strip. The humanitarian toll is severe, with Palestinian fatalities reported in the tens of thousands and widespread displacement. UN officials and humanitarian agencies have warned for months of acute food insecurity, and by August 2025 a famine was confirmed in northern Gaza, with alerts that conditions could worsen without secure access for aid. Despite periodic inaction due to conflicting interests between permanent member states, the Security Council has acted, mainly by adopting Resolution 2735 in June 2024 backing a three-phase deal that would

combine a ceasefire, staged prisoner and hostage exchanges, Israeli withdrawal, and a multi-year reconstruction plan. In parallel, the International Court of Justice has issued binding provisional measures since January 2024 requiring Israel to prevent acts within the scope of the Genocide Convention, ensure the unhindered provision of humanitarian assistance, and, in May 2024, halt military operations in Rafah that risk inflicting destructive conditions on the protected group. These decisions, alongside repeated statements by the UN human rights chief, reflect a widening perception that the conduct of hostilities and the obstruction of aid are inconsistent with international law. The organized international response therefore points in a consistent direction, even as ceasefire and hostage talks have repeatedly stalled.

On the other hand, a holistic analysis of the conflict and peace prospects must take into consideration the structural mismatch between the UN Charter's collective security machinery and the armed groups that attack Israel. The Charter's enforcement and adjudicatory processes are built for states, and the Security Council has been frequently deadlocked on Gaza, which leaves Article 51 self-defense as the primary tool available to a state that faces ongoing armed attacks. Since 2001, many states and the Council itself have accepted that large-scale attacks by non-state actors can trigger this inherent right, although aspects remain contested, especially where hostilities originate from foreign territory. Groups like Hamas and Hezbollah are not UN members and cannot be parties before the ICJ; they are nevertheless bound by international humanitarian law, but compliance and accountability mechanisms for non-state armed groups are weak in practice. The result is that legal pathways to stop attacks or to compel compliance by these groups are limited, which strengthens the perceived logic of force for security maximization. This logic has been intensified by the material backing for these groups by the Islamic Republic of Iran, which publicly labels the destruction of Israel as a national objective, culminating into the Twelve-Day War of June 2025. This episode illustrates why Israel defaults to force, even as international law requires that any such force meet necessity, distinction, and proportionality tests and be accompanied by credible diplomatic tracks.

The structure around the establishment of the State of Israel and the vicious circles of violence that followed are the main causes of Israeli aggression, which complies with Israel's self-identity as a survivor-state surrounded by enemies. Removing security challenges that Israel perceives as existential threats is a very important condition for peace. Furthermore, rebuilding Israel's international posture is equally important. The Abraham Accords have been strained by the war, with public diplomacy muted and some new cooperation frozen, yet trade ties, particularly with the UAE, have proved surprisingly resilient. That resilience is a reminder that structured mutual gains can outlast political shocks and can be used to influence security choices over time. A critical test case lies in prospective normalization with Saudi

Arabia, which Riyadh continues to condition on a credible path to Palestinian statehood. That conditionality links Israeli security to diplomatic movement on Palestinian political rights. The IMEC corridor, launched at the G20 in September 2023 as a flagship connectivity project linking India to Europe through the Gulf and Israel, embodies the same logic of complex interdependence. Progress has been delayed by the Gaza war and broader regional instability, but India and European partners have kept it on the agenda and describe it as a vehicle for long-run stability if violence subsides. A realistic course of action, therefore, pairs hard humanitarian conditionality now with medium-term incentives. Apart from pressure for compliance with international humanitarian norms, the prospect of upgraded normalization, trade, and corridor investments can be used encourage Israeli leaders to internalize the costs of isolation and, in the long run, address Palestinian governance, mobility, and economic needs in a structured way. Complex interdependence is not a substitute for accountability, which is conditioned on a sovereign state's security imperatives and capabilities, but it can make restraint and compromise more attractive than maximalist force.

The “free rider” critique underscores how traditional security concerns can become a permissive environment for strategies that eclipse proportionality and degrade international standing in an anarchic international environment. The remedy is not to abandon Israel to isolation, which would likely entrench hardline preferences, but to couple legal and humanitarian pressure with a credible pathway back into regional cooperation that re-arranges the structure of incentives. The Abraham Accords, a potential Saudi track conditioned on meaningful steps toward addressing Palestinian concerns without compromising Israeli security, and the IMEC concept supply instruments for that re-embedding. Their activation depends on immediate measures to protect civilians, sustained access for aid at scale, and a ceasefire-hostage framework that can stick. In this vein, establishing common understanding that Hamas and other radical groups should exit the central stage, in line with the Arab League's declaration of July 30, 2025, is also of great significance. If international actors can coordinate these levers, the costs of renewed excess and the benefits of restraint will become clearer to all involved parties, opening space for a security posture that is durable, lawful, and responsive to Palestinian rights and sensitivities.

GAZA AT THE CROSSROADS: WAR, STRATEGY, AND THE GLOBAL RESPONSE



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Gaza today stands on the brink of collapse. According to *The Economist*, the scale of destruction is almost unimaginable: ninety-four percent of hospitals have been reduced to rubble, eighty-four percent of schools and universities lie in ruins, and the water network has been devastated by eighty percent. Nearly three quarters of Gaza's farmland has been destroyed, sixty-five percent of housing units have been flattened, and even sixty percent of the road system has been rendered unusable—preserved only in part where the Israeli military requires access (Economist, 2025). This is not collateral damage. It reflects a deliberate strategic objective: to make Gaza uninhabitable.

Critics of Israel's campaign argue that its plan unfolds in two distinct stages. The first is the forced concentration of 1.5 million Palestinians into a southern enclave that would amount to only a fraction of Gaza's territory. The objective is not the elimination of Hamas, which even pro-Israeli outlets admit has been operationally neutralized, but the mass displacement of around 600.000 people from Gaza City and its surroundings. The second stage would then be the gradual expulsion of Palestinians from this "humanitarian ghetto" into neighboring countries, particularly those whose governments remain dependent on Washington and its powerful pro-Israel lobby (Middle East Monitor 2025 & Marsden 2025). Such an ethnic cleansing would be framed not as expulsion but as a "temporary humanitarian measure" designed to rescue children from famine and violence. The simultaneous approval of 3.400 new illegal housing units in the West Bank underscores the wider territorial ambitions of the Israeli government (Brennan 2025).

Some commentators suggest that Israel has maneuvered itself into a strategic deadlock, but this reading is misleading. Far from being trapped, Israel is executing a slow, methodical plan of dispossession. The resilience of Palestinians—demonstrated by their refusal to abandon their land—complicates this process, yet Israel retains the advantage of time and escalation. As long as the European Union does not move decisively to suspend its Association Agreement with Israel, Tel Aviv can continue to

tighten the siege and wait for despair to erode Palestinian endurance. That suspension, however, remains unlikely given the positions of EU members such as Germany, Hungary, Italy, Greece, and Cyprus.

On the ground, the Israeli military currently controls about seventy-five percent of Gaza's territory, mainly in the north and south. Yet most of its forces are stationed in fortified positions or maintaining secure corridors rather than engaging in continuous combat with Hamas. The group retains a strong presence in central and western Gaza City as well as in the refugee camps of Deir al-Balah and Nuseirat, suggesting that complete military victory remains elusive.

Diplomatically, two main initiatives are emerging. The first is an eight-point plan put forward by the United Kingdom with backing from several Western states. It calls for an immediate end to the humanitarian catastrophe, the establishment of a formal ceasefire, and guaranteed access for the United Nations to deliver large-scale aid, with daily convoys of up to five hundred trucks. It also demands that Israel commit publicly to halting annexation in the West Bank and resuming a credible peace process aimed at a two-state solution. Hamas, for its part, would be required to release all hostages, disarm, and step away from governing Gaza. The plan includes a mechanism to evaluate progress and links diplomatic recognition to tangible steps rather than symbolic gestures (Crerar 2025). For the first time, Hamas itself has floated the idea of ceasefire and disarmament in exchange for Palestinian statehood, a demand it might have advanced years ago.

The second proposal involves mediation by Egypt, Turkey, and Qatar. This approach is essentially a re-packaged version of Cairo's earlier peace plan, though with modifications that remain undisclosed. Egypt is in a particularly delicate position. Its government has recently signed a major natural gas deal with Israel, under which exports will rise to 1,2 billion cubic feet per day, described by Israeli energy minister Eli Cohen as the largest in Israel's history (Middle East Monitor, 2025b). While this agreement may ease Egypt's domestic energy shortages, it has provoked anger in Saudi Arabia, which views the move as a betrayal of Arab solidarity and seeks to lead any regional diplomatic initiative toward Israel.

Neither of these initiatives enjoys the backing of the United States. The Trump administration is preoccupied with Ukraine and trade disputes, and Washington's only real leverage—suspension of military aid—is off the table. The risk, however, is that the collapse of the Abraham Accords, hailed as one of America's major diplomatic achievements in the region, could undermine U.S. influence more broadly.

In Europe, the tide is shifting. Pressure from civil society is mounting for divestment. Norway has announced that it will review its sovereign wealth

fund's holdings in Israeli companies implicated in the war and occupation. The fund, the largest in Europe, holds more than two billion dollars in such firms and operates under strict ethical guidelines (Reuters 2025). Meanwhile, Germany has suspended certain arms exports to Israel that could be used in Gaza. Should this policy take effect, it would represent a profound break, given that Germany is Israel's second largest weapons supplier after the United States (DW 2025).

The humanitarian imperative is stark. Sigrid Kaag, the United Nations coordinator for humanitarian aid and reconstruction in Gaza, has declared that rebuilding cannot wait. Schools, hospitals, housing, and governance mechanisms must be restored immediately, with international funding mechanisms already being mobilized. Tom Fletcher, the UN's deputy for humanitarian affairs, has emphasized that the global system is ready to act: 160.000 pallets of aid are staged and distribution networks are in place. "We have the people. We have the aid. Let us work," he insisted (Reuters 2025b).

France has also indicated its readiness to deploy both military units and development agencies to assist, with the possibility of wider European participation. Within the EU, foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas announced a multi-year program worth up to €1,6 billion aimed at Palestinian recovery and resilience. The initiative is designed to strengthen Palestinian autonomy and governance capacity while reaffirming the Union's commitment to the two-state solution as the only sustainable path to peace (The Brussels Times. 2025).

The contours of a political settlement are increasingly visible. Both Israel and Hamas must relinquish ambitions of ruling Gaza. Israel must abandon annexation and dismantle settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The Palestinian Authority, backed by the Arab League and the international community, should assume responsibility for governance. Egypt and Jordan have agreed to train Palestinian security forces, and the United Nations may deploy peacekeepers to guarantee stability. This model combines regional legitimacy with international enforcement, a combination that could finally give Palestinians both sovereignty and security while allowing Israelis to live free of perpetual conflict.

Gaza has become a humanitarian disaster zone, but it is also a geopolitical fault line. Israel's strategy of ethnic cleansing risks leaving it isolated internationally, while Hamas' violations of international law have cost it global sympathy. Civil society, regional powers, and international institutions are converging around the principle that recognition of Palestine and an end to occupation are indispensable for peace. If these steps are not taken, Gaza may remain uninhabitable not only physically but politically—a place where endless war substitutes for the future.

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THE ISRAELI PALESTINIAN CONFLICT: HISTORICAL ROOTS, COLONIAL LEGACIES, AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES



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The Israeli-Palestinian conflict stands as one of the most enduring and complex geopolitical disputes of the modern era. Despite frequent portrayals in religious or cultural terms, the conflict fundamentally concerns political questions related to land control, national identity, and state sovereignty (Smith, 2010; Khalidi, 1997). Its historical origins extend back to the late Ottoman period, during which Palestine was a province within a declining empire, characterized by a majority Arab-Muslim population alongside substantial Christian and Jewish minorities (Gelvin, 2014).

By the late nineteenth century, two parallel and competing nationalist movements emerged: Zionism, as a reaction to European antisemitism aiming to establish a Jewish national homeland in Palestine; and Arab nationalism, focused on liberation from colonial domination and the achievement of self-determination (Morris, 2001; Cleveland & Bunton, 2016). Early Jewish immigration waves (the First Aliyah, 1882–1903) intensified local Arab anxieties regarding ethnic and political marginalization (Pappe, 2004).

The conflict escalated further following World War I, when the League of Nations granted Britain the mandate to govern Palestine, entailing the contradictory mandate of supporting a “national Jewish home” per the 1917 Balfour Declaration, while safeguarding the rights of existing non-Jewish communities (Porath, 1974). This “dual promise” deepened polarization, as British colonial strategy adopted classic divide-and-rule tactics (Farsoun, 1997). The secret Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) and subsequent British administration disregarded the region’s socio-cultural and ethnic continuities, imposing artificial borders that intensified tensions (Khalidi, 1992; Ezugwu, 2023). Encouragement of Zionist immigration alongside restrictions on Arab self-governance fostered zero-sum competition. Separate governance structures for Jews, Arabs, Druze, and Bedouins exacerbated administrative fragmentation and mutual distrust. Rather than facilitating political unity, British colonialism transformed Palestine into a strategic frontier zone with two mutually exclusive national projects (Shlaim, 2000).

Following the British mandate's end, the 1947 United Nations partition plan proposed dividing Palestine into Jewish and Arab states, with Jerusalem under international administration—an externally imposed solution that bypassed local consensus (United Nations, 1947; Ezugwu, 2023). Zionist leaders accepted the plan as a pathway to statehood, while Palestinian leaders rejected it as violating majority rule and justice principles (Said, 1992). The 1948 Israeli declaration of independence, followed by an invasion by neighboring Arab states, triggered the first Arab-Israeli war and the displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians—an event remembered as the Nakba ("catastrophe") (Morris, 2004).

The entrenchment of the refugee crisis and Israel's occupation of territories following the 1967 Six-Day War further diminished Palestinian statehood prospects (Klein, 2013). Expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, despite international condemnation, reinforced territorial fragmentation, translating colonial divide-and-rule strategies into Israeli internal policy (Roy, 2007).

The Oslo Accords (1993–1995) marked the first mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), establishing a framework for peaceful coexistence (Lamin, 2021). However, continued settlement growth, political radicalization, and the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin undermined negotiations (Beinin, 2001). Failure to implement a two-state solution, the eruption of the Second Intifada (2000–2005), and Palestinian political divisions between Fatah and Hamas further entrenched the stalemate (Lamin, 2021).

Currently, the conflict endures due to structural factors including contested sovereignty over Jerusalem, the Palestinian refugee right of return, the legal and political status of Israeli settlements, Palestinian political fragmentation, and the stark asymmetry of power—Israel's overwhelming military, economic, and diplomatic superiority (Gunning, 2012).

A critical understanding of prolonged colonial intervention is essential to unpack the conflict's persistence. British imperial strategy, exemplified by the Sykes-Picot Agreement and mandate's divide-and-rule policies, prioritized geostrategic interests in preserving access to Asian colonies and suppressing anti-colonial nationalism (Cleveland & Bunton, 2016). Since the 1990s, U.S. security policy has mirrored this trajectory through doctrines of "creative chaos" and Middle East restructuring (Khalidi, 2020).

The Project for the New American Century (1997) and Condoleezza Rice's 2006 "birth of a new Middle East" speech signify a deliberate use of regional instability as a political instrument. U.S. interventions—including regime changes in Iraq and Libya, and support for non-state actors such as Kurdish and Shiite militias—aim to contain Iranian and Russian influence while

preserving Israeli strategic dominance (Blumenthal, 2013). Both British colonial and post-Cold War American strategies marginalize indigenous legitimacy in favor of external geopolitical designs. Repeated imposition of borders and governance without Palestinian sovereignty perpetuates a state of exception. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict functions as a political control mechanism and ideological symbol, entrenching cycles of violence and complicating resolution efforts (Roy, 2011).

Analytical Framework: Colonial Legacies and Settler Colonialism

This protracted struggle must be understood through the interlocking lenses of colonial legacies, settler colonial logics, and asymmetrical power relations that have shaped the region since the late Ottoman and British imperial periods. The imposition of artificial territorial boundaries and the promotion of competing nationalist projects under British colonial rule institutionalized fragmentation, fostered ethno-sectarian divisions, and paved the way for enduring structural conflict (Khalidi, 1997; Shlaim, 2000). British imperial policy—concerned less with local stability and more with broader imperial strategy—facilitated Jewish immigration while suppressing indigenous Arab political agency, creating the foundations of a settler colonial order (Farsoun, 1997). This settler colonial project privileged one group's national claims over those of the indigenous Arab majority, embedding long-term dynamics of dispossession, domination, and resistance (Veracini, 2010). Unlike classical colonialism, settler colonialism does not merely exploit the indigenous population but seeks to replace it, rendering coexistence structurally impossible and making conventional peace frameworks—based on mutual recognition or territorial compromise—fundamentally inadequate (Wolfe, 2006). The legacy of this logic is evident in the ongoing Israeli expansion of settlements and the fragmentation of Palestinian territories, which together constitute a “colonial matrix of power” operating through both material dispossession and symbolic erasure.

This matrix is sustained and intensified by a deeply entrenched asymmetry of power, wherein Israel enjoys overwhelming military, economic, and diplomatic superiority, supported by external patrons—most notably the United States—whose strategic interests have consistently shaped the parameters of the conflict and the limits of its potential resolution (Gunning, 2012). As a result, this imbalance distorts peace negotiations, transforming them into mechanisms that entrench rather than challenge the status quo (Roy, 2011).

International interventions in the post-Cold War period further exemplify a geopolitical logic that instrumentalizes the conflict for regional dominance and the containment of rival powers. The U.S. doctrine of “creative chaos” and broader strategies of Middle Eastern restructuring have leveraged instability as a means of power projection, often at the expense of indigenous political

legitimacy (Khalidi, 2020; Nazemroaya, 2006). The persistence of the conflict is further rooted in the entanglement of identity, legitimacy, and historical trauma (Frieden, 2006). Competing nationalist imaginaries—centered on mutually exclusive claims to land, sovereignty, and historical justice—have rendered compromise politically toxic and ontologically threatening for both sides (Said, 1992; Smith, 2010). The settler colonial structure intensifies this dynamic by systematically delegitimizing Palestinian presence and embedding dispossession in the lived experience and collective memory of the indigenous population (Pappe, 2004). Identity-based dimensions of the conflict contribute to its perceived intractability, as pragmatic solutions remain inadequate without symbolic and historical redress.

In parallel, political disunity and instability on both sides further obstruct meaningful progress. The long-standing rift between Fatah and Hamas undermines unified Palestinian representation, while Israeli politics oscillates between divergent ideological camps, making sustained negotiation efforts increasingly fragile (Hroub, 2006).

The fragmentation of Palestinian politics—particularly the divide between Fatah and Hamas—combined with the volatility of Israeli internal politics, where alternating coalitions vacillate between hardline and conciliatory positions, further complicates the prospects for a coherent and sustained peace process (Hroub, 2006). Given these structural dynamics, conventional conflict resolution paradigms—such as two-state or power-sharing models—prove insufficient, as they often ignore the settler colonial foundations and the structural inequalities that underlie the conflict. Peace frameworks that fail to address these foundational issues risk reinforcing the very hierarchies and exclusions they purport to resolve (Falk, 2015).

A transformative approach to conflict resolution must therefore move beyond political expediency and technocratic diplomacy. It must instead confront the structural logics of the conflict, recentring Palestinian self-determination within international legal and normative frameworks, and challenging the external hegemonic interests that have long instrumentalized the region. This entails rethinking the very categories of sovereignty, legitimacy, and justice—incorporating claims to reparations, the right of return, and historical redress into a comprehensive and decolonial vision for peace (Morris, 2004; Roy, 2011).

Conclusion: Structural Conditions and the Imperative of a Justice-Based Resolution

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, frequently misrepresented as a primarily ethnic or religious dispute, must be recontextualized within the structural frameworks of colonial legacies, settler colonial dynamics, and entrenched geopolitical interests. Its persistence is not the product of primordial hatreds,

but of historically embedded asymmetries and institutionalized injustices that originated in British imperial governance and were subsequently reinforced by regional and global power configurations—most notably through the strategic sponsorship of Israel by the United States.

At the heart of the conflict lies a settler colonial logic that prioritizes territorial exclusivity and the replacement of indigenous populations, systematically undermining Palestinian claims to self-determination and intensifying the zero-sum character of national identities. This structural condition delegitimizes Palestinian political agency while simultaneously normalizing occupation and displacement under the guise of security or negotiation. Within this prevailing structure, Palestinian resistance is often framed as destabilizing or irrational, whereas Israeli expansion is institutionalized through legal, military, and diplomatic means.

Efforts at resolution— particularly those rooted in conventional liberal peace paradigms such as the two-state solution—have consistently failed to address the foundational asymmetries of the conflict. These frameworks are premised on a false symmetry between occupier and occupied, ignoring the settler colonial matrix and the geopolitical logics that sustain systemic inequality. Furthermore, internal political fragmentation within both Israeli and Palestinian societies—marked by polarization, factionalism, and episodic escalation—further undermines the viability of diplomatic processes.

A sustainable and just resolution demands a paradigmatic shift: one that centers not merely pragmatic compromise but historical accountability, legal equity, and normative justice. This entails the recognition of Palestinian sovereignty as equal in legitimacy to Israeli statehood, the dismantling of externally imposed geopolitical constraints, and a serious reckoning with historical grievances through reparative measures—including the right of return, restitution of confiscated property, and acknowledgment of past injustices.

Ultimately, breaking the cycle of structural violence and political impasse requires a transformation of the conceptual and normative terrain upon which the conflict has been historically managed. Only through confronting the colonial foundations of the present order and articulating a future rooted in justice, equality, and decolonial internationalism can a durable peace be envisioned—not as an extension of the status quo, but as its fundamental undoing.

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SYSTEMIC, NOT EPISODIC: THE MORPHING OF MIDDLE EAST DIPLOMACY



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The Middle East has long been a theatre where diplomacy and war walk hand in hand. From Sykes–Picot (1916) to Camp David (1978) and to the Oslo accords (1993 and 1995), diplomacy shaped borders, froze conflicts and, at times, offered hope of peace.

What has been unfolding for some years now is systemic, not episodic. The region is undergoing a strategic recomposition. Old diplomatic frameworks are eroding. New forms of power projection -- military, technological, informational -- are taking their place. The question is not whether diplomacy will survive, but in what form, and whether it can adapt to realities where strategic ambiguity can no longer ensure security.

Traditional Diplomacy

In the twentieth century, diplomacy in the Middle East was recognisable, if imperfect. It was state-to-state. It was often mediated by great powers, particularly the US. Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, President Carter's Camp David Accords, and the Oslo process of the 1990s were emblematic. There were summits, handshakes, and accords -- however fragile. Dialogue, however tense, was kept alive. Even the more recent Abraham Accords, brokered by Washington, carried the outward form of classical diplomacy. But unlike Camp David or Oslo, they largely bypassed the Palestinian Question, signaling the transition from comprehensive peace frameworks to transactional alignments.

Multilateral frameworks were attempted. The Madrid Conference in 1991 brought Arabs and Israelis under one roof. The Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 sketched an ambitious vision. Even when talks failed, diplomacy provided structure, timelines, and a minimum degree of predictability.

In this era, diplomacy was slow and imperfect. But it mattered. It kept channels open between adversaries who might otherwise have opted only for force.

But those structures that once provided predictability and channels of dialogue have eroded. What emerges today is not continuity, but rupture -- a landscape where diplomacy is eclipsed by force, proxies, and transactional alignments.

The Erosion of diplomacy

Israel's Operation Rising Lion and the direct retaliation by Iran illustrate the point. What for decades was a shadow war burst into full daylight. Rules collapsed. Ceasefires, even when brokered by outside powers such as President Trump's unorthodox intervention, initially collapsed within hours or days. My article: "Israel, Iran, and the Strategic Recomposition of the Middle East" (29 June 2025) analyses the issue in greater depth:

<https://in-cyprus.philenews.com/international/op-ed-israel-iran-and-the-strategic-recomposition-of-the-middle-east/>

Yet, paradoxically, the current ceasefire has held far longer than expected, underlining both the erosion of sustained, structured mediation and the surprising resilience that even fragile diplomacy can sometimes produce. We are not witnessing another flare-up. We are witnessing the collapse of a paradigm.

Dynamics which define present-day diplomacy

In my opinion, three dynamics define diplomacy in today's Middle East.

First, deterrence through diffusion. Iran projects power not only through its own arsenal, but via a network of proxies: Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthis, and militias in Iraq and Syria. This is not diplomacy. It is coercion by decentralisation, blurring the line between state and non-state. It is the epitome of asymmetrical warfare.

Yet this network is under severe strain. Israel's military might, backed by US-NATO assets, has battered many of these groups. Arab states, pursuing their own security and strategic interests, have largely given Israel a free hand, calculating that a weakened Iran and weakened proxies also serves their stability.

But proxies alone may no longer guarantee Tehran's deterrence. They are down but not out. And this exposes the limits of the diffusion strategy of Iran. The pressure on Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis is forcing Tehran to

reassess whether proxies alone can secure its regional ambitions. In parallel, Iran is doubling down on its nuclear program as the ultimate guarantor of regime survival and leverage. This dual track -- nuclear capability combined with residual proxy networks -- may remain the preferred posture of Iran, but it also raises the stakes for regional diplomacy and global security.

Second, transactionalism. Regional diplomacy has become tactical, not strategic. The Abraham Accords, normalization initiatives, and Turkey's shifting stances are driven by immediate calculations of power and influence. Ankara in particular acts not for survival, but as a revisionist, irredentist, and expansionist power seeking leverage and regional hegemony.

These moves bypass core issues such as the Palestinian Question and are not rooted in a wider peace framework. What emerges are ad hoc alignments: useful in the moment but fragile and reversible. This is diplomacy stripped of vision and reduced to deal-making.

Third, mediation fatigue. The US, once the indispensable power in Middle Eastern diplomacy, is increasingly disengaged. The EU remains declaratory, issuing statements without leverage. The UN, paralysed by distrust and vetoes, struggles for relevance. Even when mediation occurs, as in the Trump-brokered ceasefire between Israel and Iran, it is unorthodox, fragile, and driven more by personality than by institutions. Ceasefires may hold longer than expected, but they are not structured or sustainable diplomacy. The old architecture of mediation is crumbling, and no credible replacement has yet emerged.

In such a landscape, diplomacy has not disappeared, but it has been eclipsed.

The Future: Morphing, Not Disappearance

Diplomacy will not disappear in the Middle East. But it is morphing into forms we are only beginning to understand.

Gulf states such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are stepping into roles once held by Washington or Moscow. They host talks, mediate prisoner swaps, and provide financial leverage. Their diplomacy is pragmatic, transactional, and tied to regime security. But it also carries risks, not least the covert financing of extremist actors through subterfuge and proxy channels.

Armed groups, high-tech companies, NGOs, and even individual influencers now shape negotiations, narratives, and outcomes. The Houthis negotiate shipping lanes; Hamas leverages hostages; private firms provide platforms for back-channel talks; and intelligence services exploit shadow networks to finance extremist actors.

Wars today are waged not only on the battlefield, but also in the digital sphere. Narratives are crafted, amplified, and weaponised in real time. Artificial intelligence is already shaping information operations, military planning, propaganda, and perception management. The struggle for legitimacy now unfolds online as much as in conference halls and at negotiating tables.

The risk is clear: diplomacy becomes episodic, reactive, and purely transactional. The challenge is whether it can be re-anchored in principles and trust, without which no agreement can endure.

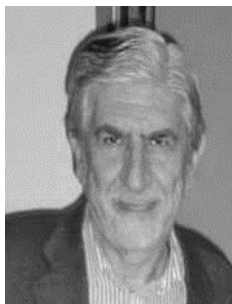
Conclusion

Diplomacy in the Middle East has changed. The old model -- summits, accords, US-brokered frameworks -- is collapsing. The new model is fragmented, digital, multipolar, and often violent. Ceasefires often collapse within hours, and even when they hold, they remain fragile. Deals are transactional. Narratives are weaponised.

Yet diplomacy has not disappeared; it has been eclipsed. To survive, it must combine hard security guarantees with soft power, leverage technology without succumbing to disinformation, and balance transactional pragmatism with long-term principles. The unresolved Palestinian Question continues to test the region's diplomacy; without progress there, any framework will remain fragile.

The Middle East remains the ultimate stress test of diplomacy. If diplomacy can evolve here, it can evolve anywhere.

THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION AFTER GAZA: SECURITY, LEGITIMACY, AND THE TWO-STATE IMPERATIVE



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Introduction

The latest escalation in Gaza, with the genocide continuing, has reaffirmed the centrality of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as the primary axis of instability in the Middle East. Despite extensive military operations, supported tacitly by Western states and explicitly by the United States under the Trump administration, Israel has not achieved its stated military objectives. Instead, the crisis has deepened humanitarian suffering, eroded Israel’s international legitimacy, and underscored the enduring relevance of the Palestinian question for regional and global security.

Military Limits and Asymmetric Conflict

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict illustrates the limits of conventional military approaches to asymmetric warfare. After two years of hostilities with Hamas, Israel’s objectives remain unmet. This reflects a broader trend: the decline of decisive interstate wars in the region and the rise of protracted asymmetric and irregular conflicts (Kaldor, 2012). Such conflicts generate cycles of resistance, where new non-state actors emerge even after the dismantling of existing organizations.

The Centrality of the Palestinian Question

The unresolved status of Palestine continues to undermine regional stability. Numerous studies have identified the conflict as a “core” or “meta-issue” in Middle Eastern geopolitics (Smith, 2010). Without addressing the Palestinian question, neither regional peace nor Israel’s long-term security can be achieved. Security, in this context, must be understood not solely in military terms but also in political legitimacy, derived from coexistence with a sovereign Palestinian state.

International Law and the Two-State Framework

The international consensus, reflected in United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), and reaffirmed in the Oslo Accords (1993), is that a two-state solution constitutes the most viable pathway to peace. Although political support has fluctuated, the normative framework remains intact. Recognition of a Palestinian state alongside Israel is therefore not only a matter of moral or historical responsibility but also a requirement of international law (Quigley, 2010).

U.S. and Western Strategic Dilemmas

While the United States has historically acted as Israel's primary supporter, long-term strategic interests may compel Washington to reconsider its stance. Scholars argue that sustained conflict undermines U.S. credibility in the Arab and Muslim world and complicates broader strategic objectives, including counterterrorism and energy security (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007). In this context, recognition of a Palestinian state may become an unavoidable component of a recalibrated U.S. Middle East policy.

Arab Societies and Political Pressures

The current acquiescence of Arab publics, constrained by authoritarian regimes often supported by Western powers, should not be interpreted as permanent. Social and political mobilization in the Arab world, as seen during the Arab uprisings of 2011, can re-emerge in response to unresolved grievances, particularly the Palestinian issue (Lynch, 2016). This factor adds a layer of long-term instability if the conflict remains unresolved.

Conclusion

The Gaza crisis has once again exposed the limits of unilateral military strategies and highlighted the indispensability of the two-state solution. Israel's legitimate right to existence and security cannot be ensured in the absence of Palestinian statehood and mutual recognition. For the United States and Western powers, supporting a negotiated settlement is no longer merely an ethical obligation but a strategic necessity for regional stability. Ultimately, sustainable peace in the Middle East depends on translating international legal principles into political reality.

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HUMANITARIAN RELIEF AS A MEDIUM FOR SETTLER COLONIAL ELIMINATION: THE CASE OF GAZA



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As of September 2025, Israel had destroyed or damaged most of Gaza's infrastructure, and erased entire towns.¹ The UN World Food Programme described Gaza's hunger crisis as reaching 'new and astonishing levels of desperation'.² reports indicate that between May and July 2025, Israeli forces killed over 1.000 Palestinians attempting to access food and water near aid sites.³ In each case, so-called 'humanitarian corridors' became kill zones, where desperation was met with lethal force. Since 7 October 2023, over 62.000 Palestinians have reportedly been killed in Gaza, most of them women, children, and the elderly. More than 160.000 have been injured, 2 million displaced, and 18.000 detained.⁴ Some NGOs estimate that the true toll may exceed 186.000, once those missing, unregistered, or killed indirectly through siege, disease and famine are counted.⁵ According to the World Food

¹ Nir Hasson, Yarden Michaeli and Avi Scharf, 'Rafah Is Gone. Razed to the Ground. And It's Not the Only City Wiped Out by the Israeli Army' (Haaretz, 12 June 2025) <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2025-06-12/ty-article-magazine/.premium/rafah-is-gone-razed-to-the-ground-its-not-the-only-city-decimated-by-the-israeli-army/00000197-6506-db73-aff7-7d4ee6bb0000> accessed 5 August 2025.

² Associated Press, 'Israeli Airstrikes and Firing on Crowds of Palestinians Trying to Reach Food Convoys Kills Dozens' (AP News, 22 July 2025) <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-gaza-war-palestinians-07-22-2025-8eb90d73c1b7499d3dbc8b8d95da65cc> accessed 31 July 2025; UN Human Rights Office, 'UN says 875 Palestinians killed near aid sites' (Reuters, 15 July 2025) <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/875-palestinians-killed-near-aid-sites-says-un-human-rights-office-2025-07-15/> accessed 31 July 2025; 'Gaza aid convoys turned into kill zones', *Al Jazeera* (15 July 2025); Drone strike kills civilians near water point, *AP News* (13 July 2025); Israeli forces open fire at Rafah food line, *The Guardian* (14 July 2025).

³ Ibid.

⁴ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Reported Impact Snapshot | Gaza Strip (6 August 2025) (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 6 August 2025) <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/reported-impact-snapshot-gaza-strip-6-august-2025> accessed 10 August 2025; Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), Statistical Abstract of Palestine 2024 (PCBS, December 2024) <https://pcbs.gov.ps/default.aspx> accessed 10 August 2025.

⁵ Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, Gaza: Death Toll Rises to 186,000 amid Starvation and Siege Conditions (Euro-Med Monitor, 1 August 2025)

Programme, every single person in Gaza ('100%') faces acute levels of food insecurity, meeting the UN's highest emergency classification.⁶ Tens of thousands more are projected to die by the end of 2025.⁷

By August 2025, reports indicated that 98,5% of Gaza's cropland was damaged or inaccessible, leaving only 1,5% (232 hectares) available for cultivation in a territory of over two million people.⁸ Such engineered famine may be understood not merely as a humanitarian failure but as potentially part of a broader strategy of elimination, the deliberate removal of civilians' means of survival.

These figures continue the long-standing patterns of violence integral to the settler colonisation of Palestine. Since 1948, over half a million Palestinians have been killed through wars, massacres, and other forms of Israeli-related violence. Today, nearly 6 million registered Palestine refugees live in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, including about 1,5 million in 58 overcrowded camps.⁹ Since Israel's inception, international law and dominant powers have both failed to protect Palestinians and actively supported their oppression through financial, military, political, cultural, and economic means.

My upbringing in Israel shaped the lens through which I understand these events. From an early age, school curricula, media, and cultural norms prepared children for military service, instilling a worldview in which Palestinians are dehumanised, portrayed as obstacles rather than fully human actors. Yet between the ages of two and six, I lived in Antigua, escaping some formative indoctrination and glimpsing life outside the pervasive settler colonial narrative. Returning to Israel, I became increasingly aware of how deeply education, media, and culture normalises dispossession and fosters complicity in structural violence. As Professor Nurit Peled-Elhanan has shown, Israeli textbooks routinely portray Palestinians as 'primitive farmers and

<https://euromedmonitor.org/en/article/6239> accessed 10 August 2025.

⁶ UN World Food Programme, Palestine (WFP, updated 2025)

<https://www.wfp.org/countries/palestine> accessed 10 August 2025.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and United Nations Satellite Centre, Gaza Strip: 98.5 Percent of Cropland Unavailable for Cultivation as Famine Looms (ReliefWeb, 11 August 2025)

<https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/gaza-strip-985-percent-cropland-unavailable-cultivation-famine-looms> accessed 11 August 2025.

⁹ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Palestine Refugees and the United Nations (UNRWA, 2024)

<https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees> accessed 10 August 2025; Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), Statistical Abstract of Palestine 2024 (PCBS, December 2024)

<https://pcbs.gov.ps/default.aspx> accessed 10 August 2025; Al-Haq, Annual Report on Human Rights Violations in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Al-Haq, 2024) <https://www.alhaq.org/publications/> accessed 10 August 2025.

terrorists', erasing their humanity and justifying their dispossession.¹⁰ Confronting these lessons, my conscience led me to refuse compulsory military service at seventeen, compelling me to dissent against what I came to understand as the violence of my own state.

I joined weekly protests in Bil'in and nearby West Bank villages, standing with Palestinians opposing the expansion of Israeli settlements and the construction of an 8-meter wall, condemned by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and B'Tselem as an instrument of apartheid.¹¹ Week after week, I was arrested, assaulted, tear-gassed, pushed into an ambulance for treatment, and pursued across fields by soldiers. Witnessing and experiencing this violence first-hand, seeing homes demolished, agricultural land confiscated, and communities confined, offered an embodied understanding of structural inequalities that statistics alone cannot convey. It revealed how law and military force operate in tandem to maintain settler colonial domination, normalising dispossession and vulnerability. In response, I committed myself to human rights advocacy, supporting Palestinians before the Israeli Supreme Court, a forum that scholars and activists have critiqued for legitimising the very structures of settler colonial domination.¹²

These experiences are central to my understanding of what the International Court of Justice has characterised as actions plausibly constituting genocide in Gaza.¹³ Most recently, the International Association of Genocide Scholars

¹⁰ Nurit Peled-Elhanan, *Palestine in Israeli School Books* (Bloomsbury 2013); Nurit Peled-Elhanan, 'Legitimation of Massacres in Israeli School History Books' (2010) 21(4) *Discourse & Society* 377; Uri Ram, 'Ways of Forgetting: Israel and the Obliterated Memory of the Palestinian Nakba' (2009) 22(3) *Journal of Historical Sociology* 366.

¹¹ B'Tselem, *Apartheid* (B'Tselem, 2025) <https://www.btselem.org/topic/apartheid> accessed 3 September 2025; Omar Shakir, 'Israeli Apartheid: "A Threshold Crossed"' (Human Rights Watch, 19 July 2021) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/19/israeli-apartheid-threshold-crossed>

accessed 3 September 2025; Amnesty International, 'Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians: A Look into Decades of Oppression and Domination' (Amnesty International, 1 February 2022)

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2022/02/israels-system-of-apartheid/>

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¹² David Kretzmer and Yael Ronen, *The Occupation of Justice: The Supreme Court of Israel and the Occupied Territories* (Oxford University Press 2021); Noura Erakat, *Justice for Some: Law and the Question of Palestine* (Stanford University Press 2019); Mia Lattanzi, 'The Role of Israeli Courts in Undermining Palestinian Rights and Consolidating Colonialism' (Arab Center Washington DC, 2023) <https://law4palestine.org/a-comment-by-researcher-mia-lattanzi-on-the-role-of-israeli-courts-in-undermining-palestinian-rights-and-consolidating-colonialism/> accessed 2 September 2025; Pietro Stefanini, 'Israeli Judicial Reforms: Bursting the Bubble of a Colonial Court System' (The Legal Agenda, 22 May 2023) <https://english.legal-agenda.com/israeli-judicial-reforms-bursting-the-bubble-of-a-colonial-court-system/> accessed 2 September 2025.

¹³ International Court of Justice, 'Proceedings instituted by South Africa against the State of Israel on 29 December 2023' (International Court of Justice, 29 December 2023)

declared with a majority of 86% of the votes, that 'Israel's policies and actions in Gaza meet the legal definition of genocide'.¹⁴ Targeting aid, collapsing food systems, and committing violence against starving civilians are not simply governance failures. They can be read as the continuation of legal and military strategies honed over decades. Humanitarian relief in Gaza has been instrumentalised not primarily to alleviate suffering, but arguably to administer, control, and systematically eliminate the indigenous population, thereby reinforcing Israeli authority. Compliance or submission offers no guarantee, as life remains persistently threatened under what settler colonial scholars describe as a 'logic of elimination'.¹⁵ Yet counting the dead is not enough. We must expose the structures and ideologies that enable it, including the mental settler colonisation that justifies it.

Breaking this cycle of impunity requires a collective reckoning with the narratives we were taught and the systems we upheld. Education must foster empathy, critical thinking, and a commitment to justice that informs practice. Around the world, the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, alongside a broad network of solidarity campaigns, illustrates ways in which civil society can challenge oppression and hold states, institutions, and individuals accountable. These efforts suggest that confronting settler colonialism extends beyond local contexts and must be understood as part of wider global struggles, while the possibilities for liberation depend on sustained international commitments to freedom, equality, and justice. Inspired by the global battle against apartheid in South Africa, many scholars and activists frame this struggle in terms of a single democratic state, in which all who live between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea would enjoy equal rights and dignity.

<https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20231228-app-01-00-en.pdf> accessed 22 June 2024.

¹⁴ Lorenzo Tondo, 'Israel Committing Genocide in Gaza, World's Top Scholars on the Crime Say' (The Guardian, 1 September 2025)

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/01/israel-committing-genocide-in-gaza-worlds-top-scholars-on-the-say> accessed 3 September 2025.

¹⁵ Lorenzo Veracini, 'The Imagined Geographies of Settler colonialism' in Tracey Banivanua Mar, *Making Settler colonial Space* (Palgrave Macmillan 2010) 179; Francesco Amoroso, Ilan Pappé and Sophie Richter-Devroe, 'Introduction: Knowledge, Power, and the "Settler colonial Turn" in Palestine Studies' (2019) 21(4) *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 451; David Lloyd and Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler colonial Logics and the Neoliberal Regime' (2016) 6(2) *Settler Colonial Studies* 109; Nadia Naser-Najjab, 'Palestinian Education and the 'Logic of Elimination'' (2020) 10(3) *Settler Colonial Studies* 311.

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SYRIA ON A KNIFE-EDGE: DECENTRALIZATION DREAMS VERSUS THE NEXT CIVIL WAR



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Abstract: This article analyzes the precarious state of Syria following its post-Baath transition, which, despite a provisional constitution, has led to further fragmentation rather than national cohesion. The interim government's recentralization of power and adherence to Islamic law has alienated minority communities like the Alawites and Druze, who face violence and reprisals, fostering local militancy and demands for autonomy. The paper further argues that external actors, specifically Israel and Turkey, exacerbate these internal divisions. Israel's occupation of a buffer zone and intervention on the pretext of minority protection, alongside Turkey's efforts to crush Kurdish entities and create a buffer zone, undermine Damascus's authority and empower rival factions. These policies, driven by their own strategic priorities, are transforming Syria's ethno-sectarian fault lines into geopolitical trenches, pushing the country toward a second civil war unless a truly pluralist constitutional settlement is achieved.

Keywords: Syria, decentralization, civil war, Alawites, Druze, Israel, Turkey, Kurdish, fragmentation, interim government

Syria's post-Baath transition was sold as a "five-year transitional period" in which a provisional constitution would "balance social stability with liberty in a fragile political environment".¹ In reality, the document recentralizes authority in Damascus—Islamic law remains "the primary source of legislation" and the presidency is still reserved for a Muslim²—while the cabinet's four token minority ministers occupy portfolios stripped of absolute power.³ Instead of generating national cohesion, this quasi-decentralized

¹ Al Jazeera, "Syria's al-Sharaa Signs Temporary Constitution", 13 March 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/13/syrias-al-sharaa-signs-five-year-temporary-constitution>

² BBC, "Syria Leader Signs Temporary Constitution for Five-Year Transition", 14 March 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c70ely2p6e4o>

³ Etana Syria, "Syria's Interim Cabinet—Between Inclusion & Power Consolidation", 21 May 2025, <https://etanasyria.org/blog-syrias-interim-cabinet-between-inclusion-power-consolidation/>

façade has widened the gap between an Islamist-leaning interim government and a mosaic of anxious communities whose survival instincts now drive local militancy.

Fragmentation beneath the constitutional veneer

The community of Syrian Alawites, the religious minority that comprised the base of the previous regime, faces tremendous challenges in the new period. The collapse of state coercion has left Bashar Al Assad's former support base exposed to mass reprisals. Between 6 and 17 March 2025, "between 1.614 and 2.388 civilians were killed...with the vast majority being Alawites," the Syrian Observatory reported.⁴ Such pogroms, conducted through "door-to-door interrogations" that targeted citizens "based solely on their response" to sectarian questions, have convinced many Alawites that the new order offers neither justice nor protection.⁵

Like Alawites, the community of Druzes is another religious minority that faces the anger of the new interim government. In Sweida (or Suwayda) province, an ostensibly local kidnapping spiraled, and by 17 July 2025, "almost 600" lay dead, including Druze fighters, Bedouin tribesmen, and regime troops.⁶ Druze spiritual leader Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri now labels Damascus' rule a "genocidal campaign," urging armed resistance.⁷ The community's Men of Dignity militia jealously guards local autonomy and refuses integration into the national army, illustrating how decentralization on paper is translating into cantonization on the ground.

A few months before the massacre in Sweida, the March 2025 deal to fold the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the military force and might of the de facto Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) into a new army was trumpeted as a breakthrough, yet Kurdish parties soon insisted on a "federal, diverse, democratic parliamentary system," a direct challenge to Interim President Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa's rejection of federalism.⁸

⁴ Wikipedia, "2025 Massacres of Syrian Alawites", accessed 12 August 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025_massacres_of_Syrian_Alawites

⁵ The Conversation, "Understanding the Violence Against Alawites and Druze in Syria After Assad", 23 July 2025, <https://theconversation.com/understanding-the-violence-against-alawites-and-druze-in-syria-after-assad-255292>

⁶ France 24, "Almost 600 Killed in Syria Clashes", 17 July 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20250717-death-toll-from-syria-clashes-rises-to-594-after-days-of-sectarian-violence>

⁷ TIMEP, "Suwayda's Aftermath and the State of Syria's Strained Transition", 8 August 2025, <https://timep.org/2025/08/08/suwaydas-aftermath-and-the-state-of-syrias-strained-transition/>

⁸ Reuters, "Kurds Say They Will Push for Federal System in Post-Assad Syria", 10 April 2025,

Ankara's relentless pressure—over 200.000 Kurds were displaced in the Turkish-backed “Operation Dawn of Freedom”⁹—convinces the AANES that disarmament would be suicidal.

External accelerants of a second civil war

Within 48 hours of Assad's fall, “over 350 aircraft” destroyed “70–80% of Syria's strategic military capabilities”, and Israel occupied the 235 km² UN-monitored buffer zone.¹⁰ Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared the 1974 disengagement agreement “collapsed” and vowed to stay “indefinitely”.¹¹ Tel Aviv frames the operation as minority protection—during the Sweida crisis, Israeli jets struck the defence ministry “to save our Druze brothers”.¹² Yet this muscular humanitarianism creates a paradox: Damascus cannot both accept Israeli tutelage over part of its territory and retain national legitimacy. Moreover, Israeli outposts on Mount Hermon give unprecedented surveillance depth toward Damascus, incentivising Syrian and allied actors to seek asymmetric responses. The risk of a northern front turning hot is therefore built into Israel's open-ended presence.

At the same time, Syria's northern neighbor, Ankara's calculus is two-fold: crush Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)-linked Kurdish entities and repatriate 3,5 million refugees. Turkish intelligence “closely monitored and supported” HTS's march on Damascus; without Turkey's “green light, the offensive would not have been possible”.¹³ While the Syrian National Army overran Tel Rifaat and Manbij, Turkish drones systematically struck water plants and dams, leaving “thousands of inhabitants without access to clean water”.¹⁴ Simultaneously, President Erdoğan is turning military occupation into

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kurds-push-federal-system-post-assad-syria-2025-04-10/>

⁹ Xinhua, “Turkish-backed forces advance on Kurdish areas in Aleppo, 200,000 face isolation: war monitor”, December 2, 2024.

<https://english.news.cn/20241202/3c8fa0a6b0804da5ad4cd6716094dab0/c.html>

¹⁰ “In historic campaign across Syria, IDF says it destroyed 80% of Assad regime's military”, The Times of Israel, December 10, 2024. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-it-has-stuck-over-320-targets-in-syria-taking-out-70-of-army-capabilities/>

¹¹ Le Monde, “Netanyahu Says Israeli Troops Will Occupy a Buffer Zone Inside Syria for the Foreseeable Future”, 17 December 2024,

https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/12/17/netanyahu-says-israeli-troops-will-occupy-a-buffer-zone-inside-syria-for-the-foreseeable-future_6736199_4.html

¹² DW, “What Are Israel's Objectives in Syria?”, 17 July 2025,

<https://www.dw.com/en/what-are-israels-interests-and-objectives-in-syria/a-73313624>

¹³ Turkish Minute, “Turkey informed about rebels' plan for major offensive in Syria 6 months ago: report”, December 9, 2024. <https://www.turkishminute.com/2024/12/09/turkey-inform-about-rebe-plan-for-major-offensive-syria-6month-ago-report/>

¹⁴ Anadolu Agency, “Opposition Syrian National Army seizes 80% of Manbij in anti-terror operation”, December 8, 2024. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/opposition-syrian-national-army-seizes-80-of-manbij-in-anti-terror-operation/3418099>

administrative annexation: Turkish lira circulation, curricula, and gendarmerie structures in an 8.200 km² belt constitute what one analyst calls "statecraft more than temporary occupation".¹⁵

Paradoxically, al-Sharaa depends on the same patron that dismembers his territory. The February 2025 talks in Ankara resulted in a "deep strategic partnership", and former SNA commanders now lead key divisions of the new Syrian army.¹⁶ The centre therefore imports security from the very power that perpetuates centrifugal dynamics in the north—hardly a recipe for balanced decentralisation.

Toward decentralisation or new war?

Israel's anti-Iran priority and Turkey's anti-Kurdish priority intersect only insofar as both erode Damascus' monopoly on force. Their spheres of influence—Israeli in the southwest and Turkish in the north—form de facto protectorates whose logics are incompatible with a unified, let alone a federal, Syria. Each external actor also empowers domestic allies: Israel's Druze partners resist conscription; Turkey's Sunni Arab proxies view the interim constitution as a license to marginalize non-Sunni rivals. Hence, every move intended to stabilize "one Syria" multiplies the armed actors who can veto that vision.

It should be noted that, due to the constraints imposed by this brief text, we have chosen to omit a host of other factors that could influence the course of events in Syria. For instance, the engagement of the Great Powers—upon whose economic and diplomatic support the transitional government relies for the country's reconstruction—has an immediate bearing on the delicate domestic equilibrium. The same may be said of Turkey's renewed endeavor to resolve the Kurdish question through peaceful means: the outcome of that process is inextricably bound up with the current crisis in relations between the AANES and Damascus.

In any case, true decentralization requires consensual re-allocation of authority downward; what Syria is witnessing is involuntary devolution under fire. The interim state is too weak to impose inclusive governance, yet too centralist—with Islamic law clauses and a restricted presidency—to win minority confidence. External patrons exploit that vacuum: Israel turns

¹⁵ Insight Turkey, "Turkey's Buffer Zone in Northern Syria and Its Impact on Irregular Migration", accessed 12 August 2025, <https://www.insightturkey.com/commentaries/turkeys-buffer-zone-in-northern-syria-and-its-impact-on-irregular-migration>

¹⁶ Anadolu Agency, "Syrian President al-Sharaa Voices Desire to Transform Ties with Türkiye into Strategic Partnership", 4 February 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/syrian-president-al-sharaa-voices-desire-to-transform-ties-with-turkiye-into-strategic-partnership/3471864>

minority anxiety into justification for occupation, while Turkey leverages Kurdish fear to cement a buffer zone. Both policies, though rational to their sponsors, transform ethno-sectarian fault lines into geopolitical trenches.

Unless a genuinely pluralist constitutional settlement—one that removes religious barriers to office, codifies regional competencies, and internationalizes security guarantees—emerges quickly, today's patchwork is likely to ossify into the frontlines of Syria's second civil war. The window for an orderly, negotiated decentralization is thus narrowing as fast as foreign bulldozers raise earth berms on Syria's borders.

DOES DISCOUNTING MIDDLE EASTERN YOUTH SUSTAIN THE REGION'S POWER CONFLICTS?



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Continuous, countless struggles numb the Middle Eastern public and oppress the ability to react. The consequential belief that trying is hopeless because nothing will change enables a reverse laissez-faire attitude where power conflicts persist from a lack of public accountability. Resignation spreads across the region, circulating by systemic oppression and manifesting through public withdrawal, inevitably resulting in a slow death by dissociation.

This is said neither to discount public difficulty, nor its perpetuation by those in power. However, dissociation is particularly concerning because it systematically disarms resistance. The inclination to endure the system, rather than challenge it, stifles opposition and preserves a harmful status quo, ultimately making the public contributors to the problems causing harm.

Power dynamics change when the public resorts to survivalism in response to a life devoid of peace. History shows that such tipping points emerge from collective action grounded in solidarity. Monumental transformations have come from passionately oppressed individuals who reached their breaking point amidst a dissociated public. In the French Revolution or the American Civil Rights Movement, for example, a small group of leaders were empowered by the sense of responsibility to their peers, speaking for those who were numb.

These changemakers are often young, educated, and resourceful. The Middle East does not lack these individuals or the potential to transform power conflicts. A quick examination into the region's history highlights that the tipping point is approached quite often, but ultimately curtailed when needed the most, saving the status quo.

A major factor compromising this potential is the generational manifestation of disunity that drives emerging leaders to emigrate. Harmony is absent in the Middle East with no shared identity. Rather, a rich history has empowered an impressive number of religious, ethnic, cultural, tribal, and racial

differences and sowed deep divides amongst the populace. With such a fragmented past comes a diluted sense of collective responsibility.

This is observable on levels as small as the family unit. Conflict-defined decades have left generations segmented by a lack of shared experience. The youth learn about disruptions to their parents' lives and hope to avoid a similar suffering. Yet, older generations often dismiss them as naive, arguing that they have been spared. Neglected perspectives cause newer generations to further dissociate and channel ambitions into different arenas.

Globalization motivates the youth to look elsewhere for an independent alternative, rather than internally for a collective solution. Those frustrated with the systems that arrest them become educated in other languages, work for other economies, and pay taxes to other governments, frequently building their life and settling down in self-protecting avoidance.

Potential leaders go opportunistically to more progressive nations and contribute to the development of another region. Their responsibility back home becomes financial, sending remittances that ironically uphold unsustainable Middle Eastern economies. Across the region, increasing dependence on these payments reduces public demand for reforms and eliminates incentives for elites to enact them. Those remaining then withdraw collectively to survive the system, and the tipping point remains unreachable.

It should be noted that this dissociation is found in an admirable level of resilience. Though distinct in nature, persistence and resignation often blend into a coping mechanism for survival. This form of self-protective detachment can turn into denial, ironically slowing the very change it seeks to endure.

There is also a large hesitation rooted in the fear of civil war, doubting when the public will shift from accustomed survival to possible peace from plausible violence. It remains to be seen if confronting the power conflicts in the region will eventually become more desirable than surviving them. The key lies in understanding whether public dissociation signals a society's failure to empower those at their pivotal moment.

Ultimately reaching this tipping point requires empowering the youth, not contributing to their withdrawal. It's undeniable that emigration has fueled power conflicts in every Middle Eastern country. Those in power have consolidated domination over the resources needed to spark change. Education, the media, and political participation are controlled by money, which is inequitably dispersed across society.

Resolution depends on acknowledging the two groups that shape this environment. One has power, commonly families with generational control benefiting from an unchanged status quo. The other has the potential for

change, a network of educated and resourceful individuals, whose youth can challenge existing power dynamics. Success depends on transforming current handicaps to gradually spur change and lay the foundation for an irrepressible tipping point.

Diverse views, experiences, and wisdom can be blended to create a common identity defined by overlapping values. Similarity is capable of positively fostering a sense of equality and shared responsibility amongst the youth. Through collaboration, harmony will be both recognized and actively strengthened. Gradually, resemblances can halt division and begin to slowly repair deep fractures.

Remittances can be invested in talent retention, and global connections can be leveraged to provide resources and new ideas for a more competitive environment. Facilitating skills transfer and supporting local innovation will strengthen human and social capital. Overtime, national and regional development will catalyze empowerment as benefits become realized, fostering sustainable growth and greater opportunity.

Each new generation represents a chance to productively shift power dynamics. Though dissociation dilutes momentum, it also creates harnessable circumstances. Emigrant leaders can leverage their situations to innovatively instigate change. Achievement requires a unified desire to improve the region and provide the resources to young individuals before they leave. Progressively transforming existing barriers into resourceful opportunities that support the youth in the ability to both endure the system and successfully confront it will ultimately determine if a shift in regional power dynamics can be accomplished.

RAPE IN WAR: THE EMBODIMENT OF GENOCIDE



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[In the Rwandan war between the Hutus and Tutsis], rape was systematic and was used as a “weapon” by the perpetrators of the massacres. ... [M]any women were raped; **rape was the rule and its absence the exception.**

United Nations, **Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Rwanda**, 29 January 1996.¹

Evidence indicates that rape crimes are increasingly committed systematically and strategically, such that **sexual violence forms a central and fundamental part of the attack against an opposing group.**

Kelly D. Askin, “Prosecuting Wartime Rape and Other Gender-related Crimes under International Law,” **Berkeley Journal of International Law** (January 2003): 298, n. 48.²

Médecins Sans Frontières [= Doctors without borders] says it first came across *rape as a weapon* in the 1990s [in the civil wars in ex-Yugoslavia]. ... The strategic use of rape in war is not a new phenomenon, but only recently has it begun to be documented.

Laura Smith-Spark, “How Did Rape Become a Weapon of War?” **BBC News**, 8 December 2004.³

¹ United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Rwanda, E/CN.4/1996/68, 29 January 1996, page 7, submitted by Mr. René Degni-Ségui, Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights. Emphasis added.

² Kelly D. Askin, “Prosecuting Wartime Rape and Other Gender-related Crimes under International Law: Extraordinary Advances, Enduring Obstacles,” *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 21, no. 2. (January 2003): 297.

³ Laura Smith-Spark, “How Did Rape Become a Weapon of War?” *BBC News*, 8 December 2004.

It is a myth that rape is an inevitable part of conflict. There's nothing inevitable about it. It is a **weapon of war** aimed at civilians. It has nothing to do with sex, everything to do with power.

Angelina Jolie, actor, Special Envoy for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, "The Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict," **CNN**, 11 June 2014.⁴

The Israel – Hamas war gives an excellent opportunity to right wing European populists [who object to Muslim immigration] to present themselves as the safe-shore for Jews and Christians.

David Issacharoff, "The extreme right sides with Israel against Muslims", **Ha'aretz**, 16 November 2023, p. 6 (Hebrew). Issacharoff is *an editor and writer at Ha'aretz English edition*.

1.

Rape - mainly of women but also among growing numbers of men - is nowadays perceived as a weapon and pre-planned strategy, with documented evidence, and with specified and orderly listed stages, costs, results, profits, implications, etc. It is not, anymore, an "inevitable," "collateral" result of "unfortunate" coincidental encounters between men fighters and enemy civil populations. Rape in war is not a new phenomenon; neither is using rape as a weapon and strategy. It happened in ancient times and was prevalent in the twentieth and still now in the twenty-first century.

Sadly, the twentieth century's criminal record is indeed long. It will be incomplete here: only a few cases will be mentioned. At least 200.000 "comfort women" sexually enslaved and raped by the Japanese from 1928 until the end of World War II (WWII). As Kelly Askin explained, "[I]t was

2004 (emphases added), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4078677.stm> (accessed 10 February 2018). Medecins Sans Frontieres (= MSF; English: Doctors without Borders) is a humanitarian medical NGO of French origin founded 1971. MSF is active in war and conflict zones and in countries struck by natural disasters. Most of the staff are volunteers (doctors, nurses, medical professionals, water and sanitation engineers, etc.). The organization grants medical help over national boundaries irrespective of political affiliation, race, religion or gender.

⁴ Laura Smith-Spark, "Angelina Jolie: Rape in War is Not Inevitable, Shame is on the Aggressor," Interview, CNN, 11 June 2014 (emphasis added), <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/06/10/world/violence-against-women-summit/index.html> (accessed 10 February 2018). Jolie was a Special Envoy of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. She and the British Foreign Secretary William Hague co-chaired the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict. London, 10–13 June 2010.

considered essential to the military image to not have their soldiers randomly raping local women, and it was important to the military structure to have women readily accessible for 'safe' sex for the weary soldier."⁵ Thousands of Chinese women suffered rape in 1937, during the Japanese occupation of Nanking. A similar fate fell upon an estimated 200.000 Bangladeshi women in the 1971 war between Pakistan and Bangladesh. In the 1990s' civil wars that erupted in ex-Yugoslavia, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the numbers of raped and sexually abused women (particularly of Bosnian Muslims), ranged between 20.000 and 58.000. During the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, an estimated 250.000 to 500.000 women experienced rape. The twenty-first century does not look any better: thousands of women were raped, and thousands butchered in the 2010s ISIS wars in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria; also known as IS, Islamic State; ISIL, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant; and by its Arabic acronym Daesh or Da'esh). Thousands of others were sexually abused in the 2016–2020 genocide campaigns against the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar (Burma). In 2022, the invading Russian forces have brutally and sexually abused, raped, killed and, allegedly even castrated yet unknown numbers of Ukrainian women, men, and soldiers.⁶

What are the explanations for these phenomena and incredible numbers of victims that experienced sexual violence during armed conflicts? In what ways will the future of ethnic and national communities be affected by the sexual harassment and rape of their women and men? What has **genocide** to do with rape and war, given the fact that many sexually harassed and defiled women and men had not been killed? What are the reactions of the members of the international community, its main organ the United Nations, and of international legal bodies to the growing numbers of sexually abused people who are caught up in armed conflicts? What is the contribution of recent Middle East turmoil, upheavals, civil wars, the abortive "Arab Spring" and 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and rape of Israeli women to these and other questions raised by the growing phenomenon of rape in war and the growing global attention it is receiving? These and other issues are constantly encountered by researchers of war, rape and other forms of sexually abused women and men in times of conflict. In our composition we'll refer to several of these issues.

⁵ For the full citation, see Kelly D Askin, "Prosecuting Wartime," 298, n. 48, op. cit.

⁶ Laura Smith-Spark, "Angelina Jolie: Rape in War Is Not Inevitable, Shame Is on the Aggressor," op. cit.; Bethan McKernan, "Rape as a Weapon: Huge Scale of Sexual Violence Inflicted in Ukraine Emerges. Women and Girls Have Recounted the Abuse They Have Suffered at the Hands of Russian Soldiers," The Guardian, 4 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/03/all-wars-are-like-this-used-as-a-weapon-of-war-in-ukraine> (accessed 10 April 2022); Tim Lister, Gul Tuysuz and Kostan Nechyporenko, "'Appalling' Videos Alleged to Show Russian Soldiers Castrating a Ukrainian Soldier," CNN, 30 July 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/30/world/videos-allegedly-show-russians-castrating-ukrainian/index.html> (accessed 7 August 2022).

Wartime rape is the bullseye of a wide range of abusive sexual crimes committed against women, men and children in armed conflicts. The outer rings of this violence include sexual slavery, sex trafficking, forced impregnation, unwanted maternity and children, abortion, sterilization, coerced marriage, prostitution, nudity, sexual molestation, mutilation and humiliation.⁷ **The Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict Dataset** (SVAC) furnishes us with several definitions, descriptions and elements when referring to sexually violating human bodies during armed conflicts:

[T]he case where the perpetrator invaded the body of a person by conduct resulting in penetration, however slight, of any part of the body of the victim or of the perpetrator with a sexual organ, or of the anal or genital opening of the victim with any object or any other part of the body. The invasion was committed by force, or by threat of force or coercion, such as that caused by fear of violence, duress, detention, psychological oppression or abuse of power, against such person or another person, or by taking advantage of a coercive environment, or the invasion was committed against a person incapable of giving genuine consent.⁸

The United Nations definition of “conflict-related sexual violence” refers to rape, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys that is directly or indirectly linked (temporally, geographically or causally) to a conflict.⁹

Populations have a number of reasons for their decrease as a result of rape in war: associating the children born of rape with the community of their rapist enemy fathers; escape and hasty search for refuge of people from fear of recurring rape waves; mass suicides of raped women and their next of kin,

⁷ Kelly D. Askin, “Prosecuting Wartime,” 305, 347.

⁸ Dara Kay Cohen and Ragnhild Nordås. “Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) Dataset Codebook and User Instruction Guide,” 7, n. 3. <http://www.sexualviolencedata.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/SVAC-coding-manual-10-25-13.pdf> (accessed 29 April 2020). See also Dara Kay Cohen and Ragnhild Nordås, “Sexual Violence” (SVAC), 1989–2015, 2.0, update 1, “Codebook and Instruction Guide,” November 2019, <http://www.sexualviolencedata.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/SVAC-coding-manual-10-25-13.pdf> (accessed 29 Apr 2020). Since 1989, SVAC project measures reports of conflict related sexual violence committed by armed actors (government/state/military, pro-government militias, and rebel/insurgent forces) against non-combatants (both women and men) by all major armed groups involved in wars and armed conflicts. The Dataset includes information about the prevalence, perpetrators and forms of reported sexual violence. SVAC used three main sources to cull information and encode the data – annual reports issued by the U.S. State Department, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reports. See Cohen and Nordås, “Sexual Violence,” 5, <http://www.sexualviolencedata.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/SVAC-coding-manual-10-25-13.pdf> (accessed 29 April 2020).

⁹ United Nations, Security Council, Distribution, United Nations. Report of the UN Secretary-General on Conflict-related Sexual Violence – I, S/2016/361, 20 April 2016.

and of those who dread a similar fate; suicides of men who can't bear the stigma of being rape victims, and/or failing to protect their women and daughters; as well as other reasons for this population decline. The result of the above is death, murder and extermination that reduce the population in times of conflict and war. The damage and disaster are even greater because rape in conflict detrimentally affects the survivors of it - - women and men who will no longer contribute to the demography of their community (see below) or flee for their life lest once more rape and its implications will prevail.

The disaster further worsens because of the deep failure of community leaders, clerics, official agents, government officials, legislators, and more. In other words, **a failure of state and nationalism** in states, societies and communities where victims of rape in war are excluded from the future cycle of marriage and parenthood, thus reducing the size of the community. At a time when the state and its agents call **NOT** to ostracize rape victims, explicitly call to marry them and bring them back to the circle of parenthood and demography - - there are traditions, customs and taboos that prevent members of the community from getting married with rape victims. Thus, ethnicity and tradition are stronger than any law, or state, or national agents and elements that instructed or preached for the opposite. **Ethnicity, thus, is stronger than nationalism.** Incidentally, this prevalence of ethnicity is particularly valid in FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) that is still done in 27 African countries. In 2022 about 93 percent of African women underwent FGM (98 percent in Somalia). Yet, in almost all the African countries where FGM is done, there are specific state laws that **prohibit** it.

2.

The 21st century Arab Spring, The Syrian civil war: a community of people whose women were raped tends towards ignoring restraints

Non-violent resistance, compromise, peaceful solutions and hopes for co-existence sharply **decrease** following the rape of a community's women; rape may lead to fewer less-aggressive options and less-lethal weapons to solve a conflict. The possibility of their wives, mothers, sisters and daughters being raped or impregnated by their enemies may cause a community's men to instigate harsh counter-reactions and vicious acts of revenge, often committed by the younger people.

Incredibly, feminine rape and bodily mutilations are directly linked to **cannibalism** - - another form of violating and mutilating human bodies. In the Syrian civil war of the 2010s such things happened by penetration of dead female bodies. Cannibalism avenged this invasion. Covering the Syrian civil war, **Time Magazine** reported the following justification for the televised **eating** [!] of a Syrian soldier's lungs and liver by an anti-President Assad rebel:

[H]e [the rebel] claims to have found a video in the dead soldier's cell phone showing "a woman and her two daughters, fully naked, and he [the dead cannibalized soldier] was humiliating them and sticking a stick here and there."¹⁰

Rape in war creates extreme emotions and reactions and no less extreme calls for vengeance. Sometimes using rape is a planned strategy designated to elicit extreme and highly hostile reactions of the opposing group. These extreme reactions will relieve the planners and strategists of any inhibitions when using their military superiority and cruel counterattacks on their enemies. Enemy responses become an excuse to turn a non-violent clash into a vicious all-out war. Conducting rape in war guarantees that whoever planned a non-violent protest will eventually resort to armed struggle if faced by the rape of their women. In many cases, the interest and the strategy of the stronger side with superior weaponry and determination is not only to defeat the enemy, but even to exterminate its people. But lacking the excuse to do this, the enemy must be provoked into eventually abandoning its non-violent strategy. This downward spiral is often achieved when the rival sides employ rape against each other's women. War then erupts and weapons of mass destruction and strategies are freely deployed. In many societies, certainly in conservative or traditional ones, defiling women is intolerable. Men whose women are raped, even those who initially opted for non-violence, turn to the use of extreme aggression against their women's attackers. Blood must be countered and avenged only by blood, particularly that of virgins. Death is inevitable because forbidden codes and taboos have been infringed:

It is [rape which is] the most dreadfully silent crime currently perpetrated in Syria. A mass crime ... that relies on the most deep-rooted taboos of traditional Syrian society – and on the silence of the victims, convinced they will be rejected by their own family, or even sentenced to death.¹¹

Indeed, world media and Syrian human rights organizations reported in March 2021 of rampant and unchecked cases of rape committed in Syrian prisons, interrogation centers, and at roadblocks and checkpoints manned by Syrian soldiers and pro-Assad militias. "You have to choose between two options: to refuse being used sexually, thus remaining a refugee in the country to which you had come; or paying with your body and hope to get permission to move to the country in which your spouse or family had moved."¹² Women prisoners

¹⁰ Aryn Baker, "The Youtube War," TIME Magazine, 27 May 2013, 16–17.

¹¹ Annick Cojean, "Syria's Silent War Crime: Systematic Mass Rape. Evidence is piling up that the Damascus regime has used rape - of daughters in front of fathers, wives in front of husbands - as a targeted weapon", *Worldcrunch*, 11 March 2014 (Emphases added), <http://www.worldcrunch.com/syria-crisis/syria-039-s-silent-war-crime-systematic-mass-rape/human-rights-prison-torture-assad-free-syrian-army/c13s15245/#.U4WE0vk0WFw> (accessed: 25 SEPT 2016).

¹² Zvi Barel, "Remnants' of war", Haaretz, 7 June 2021, page 11, reporting of a Syrian

are raped in front of other prisoners; the latter are threatened with receiving the same treatment if they refuse to give information about their husbands' whereabouts or to reveal other intelligence. Human rights organizations reported 11,500 (considered a minimum number) sexually tortured women during the first decade of the Syrian civil war (2011–2021). Fear of rape is given as the primary reason for **600.000 women fleeing Syria**. Family members' honor killings of Syrian women victims are also rampant; if allowed to live these women are no longer eligible for marriage.¹³

Professor Burhan Ghalioun, the first President of the Syrian Opposition Transitional National Council (August 2011–May 2012), and a prominent member of the Syrian resistance against President Assad's regime, clearly described the consequences of female rape by the Syrian regime's soldiers. Rape is depicted as the ultimate weapon, propelling the extreme violence perpetrated in the Syrian civil war:

International attention should be focused on the mass rape carried out by the regime. "This is this weapon that made our revolution, which aimed to be peaceful, turn so violent: Daughters were raped in front of their fathers, wives in front of their husbands. **Men became crazy with anger and yelled that they would defend themselves and avenge their honor.** I used to think we had to do everything we could to avoid getting into a militarized phase, and that arming the revolution would multiply the number of dead by 100 ... But the use of rape [against our women] decided otherwise. And I think [the enemy] wanted it this way. Once the revolutionaries were armed, [the enemy] could easily justify the massacres of those he already called 'terrorists'."¹⁴

3.

Hamas Attack on Israel, 7 October 2023 (Part 1)

The spirit of above-described extreme reactions (cannibalism) to sexual attacks in the Syrian civil war, apparently repeated in Israeli extreme feelings and reactions to Palestinian and Hamas terrorists' raids on Israeli kibbutzim, towns and civil settlements around the Gaza Strip on 7 October 2023, and invasion of Israeli military bases, kidnapping and defiling Israeli women and female civilians and soldiers. Altogether, close to 1.200 Israelis were murdered on 7 October 2023: Eight hundred civilians and 400 soldiers. The attack, certainly its genocidal implications, was perceived in Israel as the most extreme violent act that the country has ever experienced:

women who looked for a shelter country during the Syrian civil war of 2011 – 2021.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Professor Burhan Ghalioun, quoted in Annick Cojean, "Syria's Silent War Crime", op. cit. Burhan Ghalioun was born in Syria (1945) and is a professor of sociology at the Université de Paris III, the Sorbonne.

By attacking sexuality, one of the primary sources of life and a symbol of humanity's existential continuity, CRSV [= Conflict Related Sexual Violence] **sends a message of death and destruction to all.**

Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, Nava Ben-Or, Sharon Zagagi_Pinhas, **The Dinah Project Report, A Quest for Justice, October 7 and Beyond** Jerusalem, June 2025, p.12.

https://thedinahproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-Dinah-Project-full-report-A4-pages_web.pdf (Accessed 3 September 2025, emphasis added).

Interestingly, the 7 October 2023 Israeli anxiety regarding gender violence was compared to the fear from black peril among white people in African colonies and in the south of the U.S. (Ilana S. Hairston-Lotan, "The rape of the other", **Ha'aretz**, 18 March 2024). The primordial fear of white men from the cunning and lustful black man who plans to rape white women is an inherent element in these white people's identity. Resulting from this racial distress, white men reacted savagely and violently, massacred and lynched black men when suspecting or preempting a forced sex by a black person against white women. (As from 7 October 2023, Israel responded by launching a military campaign in Gaza, during which more than 60,000 people have been killed, according to the Gaza's Hamas-run Health Ministry).

According to Hairston-Lotan, during the years of the Israeli – Palestinian conflict there were Israelis who developed similar feelings: they have become deeply concerned by the danger of sexual attacks on Israeli women and girls by Arab men. In 2023, even before the attack of October 7, the Knesset (the Israeli parliament) adopted a motion that called for the imposition of heavier (double) punishment for sexual offences that were nationalistically motivated. (Hairston-Lotan, **Ha'aretz**, 18 March 2024).

The 7 October 2023 rape of Israeli women continues to shake and shock Israeli society, as well supporters and antagonists of Israel and the Palestinians around the world. The evidence assembled of these rape cases was culled from eyewitnesses and survivors of the massacre committed against Israelis on that day; from interrogation of Hamas suspects caught by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF); from oral, written and recorded military intelligence culled from Palestinians sources, including body cameras (GoPro cameras) found on corpses of Hamas terrorists; and more. This intelligence

described the rape of Israeli women who were captured by Hamas terrorists in the Nova open-air music festival that took place on 7 October 2023 in kibbutz Re'im, near the border between Israel and Gaza. Testimonies and intelligence sources showed that these women underwent gang-rape, were executed, their body and genitalia brutalized, victims decapitated, suffered from broken pelvis owing to recurring rape, their body mutilated often beyond recognition, then set on fire.

Forensic evidence was hardly found because bodies were located after several days, even a week after they were killed, without fluids that could testify to the presence of foreign DNA. (These fluids could not have been of any value after 48 hours of the rape.) No firsthand evidence was available because not a single woman survived the gang-rape. Women victims were murdered during or after the assault by a bullet to their heads. The exceptional ones that survived rape remain too traumatized to talk. Evidence exists even of continuous sexual assault after the victims were no longer alive. However, forensic evidence was not collected from almost 75 percent of the victims: only five forensic pathologists examined the corpses of the Israelis who had been murdered on October 7th, meaning examination of 300 corpses. The rest - - about 900 - - were buried without professional forensic examination. (Lisa Rosowsky, "This is the evidence", **Mussaf Ha'aretz** [**Ha'aretz** weekend edition], 19 April 2024, p. 28). Also, it is difficult to obtain forensic evidence in crime scenes that remained war zones, let alone that bodies were deliberately burned to erase forensic findings. (**Dinah Project Report**, pp. 13, 15, 37, 59). The main target of the civil and the Israeli military burial units was to find the corpses of the murdered Israelis, identify them, and bury them as quick as possible according to Jewish burial rites. (Jake Tapper and Kirsten Appleton, **CNN**, 17 November 2023). The result is:

What breaks my heart is that Israel made it so easy for people to deny [rape]. ... It breaks my heart that Israel, Israel Police, and the Government made it so easy to deny that rape ever happened.

Allison Kaplan Sommer, **Ha'aretz**,
Gallery, 21 May 2024

Hamas totally denies that its members perpetrated any of the above. However, on 4 March 2024, the **United Nations Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict**, Ms. Pramila Patten, issued a report based on a visit of her and her team to Israel from January 29 to February 14, 2024.

Unlike visits conducted by her office in other places, on this visit Ms. Patten was accompanied by an expanded technical team of nine highly qualified experts from various UN entities, including staff from her office and specialists trained in safe and ethical interviewing of survivors/victims and witnesses of sexual-violence crimes; a forensic pathologist; and a digital and open-source information analyst. (**Dinah Project Report**. p. 26). Its findings and

conclusions are clear as regards murdered raped Israeli victims, and concerning Israeli hostages kidnapped to Gaza who, while in captivity, suffered from sexual violence including rape and sexualized torture:

Information received by the mission team indicates that on the morning of 7 October 2023, at about 6:30 AM and under the cover of an unprecedented barrage of rockets, a coordinated attack by Hamas joined by other armed groups ... breached the Gaza perimeter fence at multiple points, entered the Gaza periphery and attacked military and civilian targets, including surrounding villages and towns, music festivals and adjacent roads. The attacks resulted in approximately 1,200 fatalities and thousands of injuries, predominantly among civilians.

Based on the information gathered by the mission team from multiple and independent sources, **there are reasonable grounds to believe that conflict-related sexual violence occurred during the 7 October attacks in multiple locations across Gaza periphery, including rape and gang-rape ...**

Across the various locations of the 7 October attacks, the mission team found that **several fully naked or partially naked bodies from the waist down were recovered – mostly women – with hands tied and shot multiple times, often in the head. Although circumstantial, such a pattern of undressing and restraining of victims may be indicative of some forms of sexual violence.**

At the Nova music festival and its surroundings, there are reasonable grounds to believe that **multiple incidents of sexual violence took place with victims being subjected to rape and/or gang-rape and then killed or killed while being raped.** Credible sources described finding murdered individuals, mostly women, whose bodies were naked from their waist down – and some totally naked – tied with their hands behind their backs, many of whom were shot in the head.

The mission team also found a pattern of bound naked or partially naked bodies from the waist down, in some cases tied to structures including trees and poles.

Mission Report. Official visit of the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations on Sexual Violence in Conflict to Israel and the occupied West Bank 29 January – 14 February 2024 (emphases added).

4.**Hamas Attack on Israel, 7 October 2023 (Part 2)**

Many of the reported cases of sexual violence on 7 October 2023 happened at the Nova music festival in which 378 people were murdered and 44 were kidnapped to Gaza. (David Gritten, "'Hamas used sexual violence as part of 'genocidal strategy', Israeli experts say", **BBC News**, 8 July 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1mz8gxzg82o> [accessed 9 July 2025]; **Ha'aretz**, 2 September 2025, p. 5). Hamas used sexual violence as "part of a deliberate genocidal strategy" during the 7 October 2023 attack on Israel, insists the **Dinah Project Report** (published in July 2025). The **Report** is based on review of large volume of evidence including social media posts, forensic evidence, visual and audio evidence, first-hand testimony from a survivor of an attempted rape and 15 former hostages held in Gaza, as well as accounts from witnesses to sexual assaults. David Gritten from the **BBC** furnishes us with high-resolution details culled from the **Dinah Project Report** pertaining to widespread and systematic Hamas sexual harassment against Israeli victims during the 7 October 2023 war:

The **Report** - which does not identify the victims but cites reports that do name some of them - says a female survivor of the attack on the Nova music festival on 7 October told members of the **Dinah Project** that she was subjected to an attempted rape and sexual assault. According to the Report, one of the 15 former hostages said she was forced to perform a sexual act, which was preceded by sexual abuse and verbal and physical sexual harassment. She also said she endured **forced nudity** - an experience which was reported by six other hostages as well. Almost all the hostages reported verbal and some physical harassment, including "unwanted physical contact in private parts", the **Report** says, while six said they also faced threats of forced marriage. Two men among the hostages said they were subjected to forced nudity and physical abuse when naked, with one also recounting the shaving of all his body hair, according to the report.

According to the **Report**, five witnesses reported at least four separate cases of gang-rape; seven reported at least eight other separate cases of rape or severe sexual assaults, some of them in captivity; five reported at least three separate cases of sexual assaults, some in captivity; and three reported three separate cases of mutilation. Nine of those cases related to the Nova music festival, two to the Nahal Oz military base, one to Route 232 road, and four to incidents occurring in captivity in Gaza, the **Report** says. Twenty-seven first responders meanwhile described dozens of cases which showed "clear signs of sexual violence across six locations", the **Report** says - the Nova festival, Route 232, and the kibbutzim of Be'eri, Alumim, Nahal Oz and Re'im. The **Report** also says that

"most victims were permanently silenced", because they were either killed on 7 October or left too traumatized to talk.

David Gritten, **BBC**

News, op. cit.

5. Epilogue

Two quotations conclude our work. In March 2024 a **New York Times** thorough research unequivocally supported the argument that on October 7 Hamas committed heavy sexual crimes against Israelis. The **NYT** vehemently rejected the claims that doubted the authenticity of its findings. Concerning the **NYT** clear conviction about Hamas, but in face of the support that this terror organization gets from people in the West "who call themselves progressive":

From where is the reluctance to believe that Hamas - - that massacred children in their beds; took women as hostages; and burned families - - would not be able also to commit such sexual atrocities? ...

Women that could have told us what happened are dead, from the simple reason that every Israeli who was close enough to a terrorist to be raped, was close enough to be murdered. ... It seems that among the anti - Israel left, a testimony of an Israeli worth less than half a testimony. How quickly the radical left moves from 'we believe women' to 'we believe Hamas' when the identity of the victim changes.

Bert Stevens, quoted in Ido David Cohen, "The New York Times" rejects claims against its conclusion about sexual attacks committed by Hamas", **Ha'aretz**, 7 March 2024.

The second quotation refers to my fields of research since the early 2000s. Muslim immigration to Europe and gendered violence in armed conflicts (particularly rape and sexual violence in war) have been my subjects of academic research since the early 2000s. Whenever I am sure that I have seen every possible atrocity and wickedness and nothing more could surprise me, I find myself being surprised by new evil. Hence, I chose to finish this brief article with a quotation that combines the two subjects. Occasionally they coincide and leave their impact on the European continent:

Presently, the [European] extreme right is not sure whom they hate more: Muslims or Jews. In the extreme right's

channels the discourse on Jews and Muslims is about “Semitic peoples that import wars into Europe”.

David Issacharoff, “The extreme right sides with Israel against Muslims”, **Ha’aretz**, 16 November 2023, p. 6 [Hebrew].

LEBANON'S GAMBLE OF DISARMAMENT OF HEZBOLLAH



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At the beginning of August 2025 the current government of Lebanon, led by President Aoun and Prime-Minister Salam, has embarked on a very difficult and potentially explosive effort of directing the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to draft and subsequently implement a plan to strip any non-governmental group of arms it may have. This move, which has gained the approval of the Cabinet of Ministers of Lebanon, aims to restore the monopoly of the state's armed forces and police to possess weapons, boosting the security of the citizens and contributing to a de-escalation of a volatile situation within the country. However, it is essential to note that such a governmental move has already caused a high degree of friction within the Cabinet, as well as fervent opposition by Hezbollah.

On the one hand, such a priority of Salam's Cabinet seems to be in line of the general policy pursued currently by Lebanon, aimed at restoring the functionality of the state institutions of Lebanon after a long period of civil unrest and instability, which has resulted in the formation of several armed groups outside the control of the government, most notably Hezbollah, backed by Iran, which has even taken upon some of the legitimate government's functions and engaged in military strikes against Israel following the attack of Hamas on October, 7 2023. So, a plan to disarm Hezbollah would be a massive step in restoring the credibility of Lebanon regionally and globally, as well as would contribute to international efforts to pacify the region. It is also important to mention that the government of Israel, in the light of the plans of disarmament announced by Lebanon, has committed itself to reducing its military presence in the Southern Lebanon, leaving the territories it has controlled previously to counter the recurrent threat posed by Hezbollah. Last, but not the least, the decision of the United Nations to cease the operations of its peacekeeping military contingent in Lebanon beginning 2026 leaves the LAF as the only force responsible for the maintenance of state security, which might also explain this move taken by the Cabinet.

However, the planned disarmament has been met with fervent opposition by the Hezbollah and Amal ministers, who have even left the Cabinet meeting in

protest during the debate and vote on the approval of the policy. The leadership of Hezbollah, backed by Iranian officials, have questioned the legitimacy of the steps taken by the Salam's government and have warned that an attempt of Hezbollah's disarmament might lead to an open military confrontation of LAF with the group, thus resulting in a civil war in Lebanon. Hezbollah has also denounced the legitimacy of this measure, accusing the Cabinet as being subordinate to the pressures put forward by Israel and the West, thus being illegitimate.

Another point of concern to be addressed in the light of an announcement of such a policy, combined with the upcoming withdrawal of the UN forces from Lebanon, is the preparedness of the LAF itself to be able to successfully maintain public order in Lebanon and implement the disarmament policy. During the years of the preceding crisis in Lebanon, the effectiveness of the military has significantly decreased, so its actual capacity of fulfilling the tasks to be assigned to it remains questionable. It is also important not to forget the sectarian and fractured nature of the Lebanese state and society, resulting into different degrees of allegiance to a person's own ethnic and/or religious community and the central government, the former often being the decisive one and superseding the latter.

To conclude, Lebanon's current disarmament initiative is undeniably historic, marking the first substantive government-led effort to wrest monopoly over violence from non-state actors since the civil war era. If it succeeds, Lebanon could reclaim full sovereignty, achieve internal stability, and reengage internationally with renewed authority. However, the stakes are existential: failure could precipitate state fragmentation, sectarian violence, or civil war. As the LAF finalizes its plan by early September, Lebanon stands poised at a crossroads—balancing between reclaiming power for the Salams Cabinet and the President and navigating the dangerous shoals of internal and external backlash. This step signals the significant attempt of the Salam's Cabinet and President Aoun to alter a post-civil war status quo that tolerated armed militias. It remains to be seen whether it can be executed, or whether Lebanon's turbulence will once again curtail its potentially fragile claim on sovereignty and strong central government.

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