


Military AI, sacred violence and war in the Middle East

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Abstract. Israel's commitment to a policy of collective punishment, disproportionate response, outright assassination and ethnic cleansing are the culmination of a long process. It has its origins in the expropriations organized by colonial powers, as does the state of Israel itself, but the proximate causes are the recent turn in politics to Biblical Jewish fundamentalism and an irrational enthusiasm for new military technologies, especially AI. These have led to important changes in official Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) policies, including a fundamental degradation of their ethical code.

Keywords: artificial intelligence targeting; ethnic cleansing; Israel Palestine; postmodern war; war crimes.

ES IA militar, violencia sagrada y guerra en Medio Oriente

ES Resumen. El empeño de Israel en una política de castigo colectivo, con una respuesta desproporcionada, el asesinato selectivo y la limpieza étnica en Gaza es el resultado de un proceso largo y complejo. Si bien sus raíces se encuentran en las expropiaciones llevadas a cabo por potencias coloniales, así como en el propio surgimiento del estado de Israel, las causas más inmediatas son el reciente giro político hacia el fundamentalismo judío bíblico y un entusiasmo desmedido por las nuevas tecnologías militares, especialmente la inteligencia artificial (IA). Estos factores han provocado cambios significativos en las políticas oficiales de las Fuerzas de Defensa de Israel (IDF), incluida una marcada degradación de su código ético.

Palabras clave: crímenes de guerra; guerra postmoderna; Israel y Palestina; limpieza étnica; selección de objetivos militares y la IA.

Summary. 1. The battle of Gaza. 2. The principle of distinction. 3. Momentum policy. 4. An AI named Gospel. 5. Disproportionate force. 6. Necrotactics such as the Hannibal Directive, domicile, urbanicide, and apartheid. 7. Postmodern terror war. 8. Fostering Hamas while mowing the grass. 9. Winning the battles, losing the war. 10. Statement on the use of LLM. 11. References.

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1. The battle of Gaza

The October 7 Hamas terror attacks unleashed a savage reaction by Israel, explained by the Defense Minister as a «complete siege» with «no electricity, no food, no fuel» because they were «fighting human animals» (October 9, 2023). On November 5, 2023 the MP Yitzhak Kroizer insisted the whole «Gaza Strip should be flattened and for all of them there is but one sentence, and that is death». Considering these sentiments, it is not surprising that Israel has killed tens of thousands of civilians in Gaza. But this is only the beginning, not just for Gaza but for the world. Israel's commitment to a

policy of collective punishment, disproportionate response, outright assassination and ethnic cleansing are the culmination of a long process. It has its origins in the expropriations organized by colonial powers, as does the state of Israel itself, but the proximate causes are the recent turn in politics to Biblical Jewish fundamentalism and an irrational enthusiasm for new military technologies, especially AI. These have led to important changes in official Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) policies, including a fundamental degradation of their ethical code.

Taken together in the context of actual 'postmodern war' (total war is precluded, information is the main force multiplier, asymmetric combat, media is another 'front'), these have contributed to the growing list of Israeli war crimes against humanity. They also guarantee Israel will lose the 'war' against the Palestinians, even as it wins battle after battle. This essay explains the IDF's new 'Power Target' policy and modified Principle of Distinction. It delves into their Momentum victory-through-technology reforms exemplified by the use of the AI targeting system called Gospel, their embrace of disproportionate force (the 'Dahiya Doctrine') and even the discredited, yet often still applied, Hannibal Directive. These are the policies behind Israel's widespread use of illegal detention and harassment, targeted assassinations, the systematic appropriation of water, the destruction of domiciles, orchards, and crops and many other specific acts that violate accepted International Law in territories that the United Nations has agreed they have no right to.

These necrotactics are part of what can be termed a policy of 'domicide' or 'urbicide', all part of an ongoing apartheid strategy. This is certainly a mistake in the context of late post-modern conflict, aka 'terrorwar'. When combined with Israel's long-term fostering of Hamas in Gaza over the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)—to prevent Palestinian unity and any hope of a Palestinian state— and the targeted assassination and repression program informally known as 'mowing the grass', aimed at leadership of any type in the occupied territories, the conditions for Israel's eventual failure are clear. Only the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, which can be argued is a form of genocide, can prevent this defeat. Even if the people of Israel acquiesce to this, the world will not. But Israel is not acting rationally, it is acting Biblically.

In the last few decades, Israel has become more and more of a theocracy. As Prof. Izhar Oplaka of Tel Aviv University noted, commenting on a number of laws put forward by the Rightwing government in 2023, including legislation to end the rule of law (Supreme Court oversight), «This is transforming Israel from a Zionist state into a Jewish religious state. A state-changing decision, pushing Israel back into the Kingdom of Judah during the Second Temple period» (Schneider, 2023, para. 1).

Already, there is a special status for special types of Jews, military veterans and Yeshiva (orthodox Jewish) students (exempted from service), for access to various social benefits and even to confiscated Palestinian land. There are more and more policies against Christians, as well as increasing harassment against Christian clergy and the vandalizing of non-Jewish religious sites. As one orthodox militant proclaimed after one attack, «No Idols in the Holy City of Jerusalem!» This goes along with ongoing attacks on secular Jews not keeping the Sabbath or offending fundamentalist sensibilities in other ways (AP, 2023, para. 17).

So here we are, mass killing of civilians with postmodern weaponry for religious priorities in the most volatile region in the world. Of particular concern are those, Israeli and Palestinian alike, whose decision making is entangled with ancient stories

of entitlement, hatred, and fear. Let us start with the ethics of killing innocents.

2. The principle of distinction

This is the Power Target (*matarot otzem*) policy. Power targets are not Hamas leaders or infrastructure. Those are different categories; power targets are not military. They are chosen to break the will of the Palestinians. If they would tell the whole world that the [Islamic Jihad] offices on the 10th floor are not important as a target, but that its existence is a justification to bring down the entire high-rise with the aim of pressuring civilian families who live in it in order to put pressure on terrorist organizations, this would itself be seen as terrorism. So, they do not say it (Abraham 2023, para. 24).

Destroying high rises is supposed to be particularly good for this. In early campaigns there was some effort to make sure civilians had left the buildings, but not since October 7. This has led to such atrocities as the destruction of the Babel building in Gaza City (10 stories, Oct. 10, ten dead); the Al-Taj residential building in Gaza City (12 stories, Oct. 25, one hundred and twenty dead, including thirty-seven members of the Sharaf family); the Al-Mohandssen apartments and offices at Nuseirat Refugee Camp (8 stories Oct. 31, one hundred and fifty dead) and many others.

Three intelligence sources admit that the policy of directly attacking Palestinian society through the indiscriminate slaughter of noncombatants is «civil pressure» on Hamas. High-rises with one suspect office are destroyed, and the homes of regular Hamas soldiers are obliterated, though they often are not there, their families usually are. Even whole neighborhoods are targeted if they are «terror nests» according to the IDF (Abraham, 2023, paras. 17-21). This is terrorism, even if called counterterrorism. Historically, this tactic has never worked to break an enemy. Terror bombing only increases civilian commitment to armed resistance, as the Blitz and later V-1 and V-2 attacks showed, as the terror bombing of Germany showed, as the failure of bombing to ever win a war shows.

The Gospel AI targeting program, discussed in more detail in its own section below with a focus on the other targeting categories, is used to come up with excuses for Power Target attacks. The big explosions and high death tolls are also assumed by the IDF to be good for their image in Israel. The IDF's Spokespersons Unit actually conducts psychological influencing operations ('psyops') aimed at Israeli citizens to 'sell' the war (Abraham, 2023, para. 23). So, is it any surprise that the IDF, which once claimed to be among the most moral militaries in the world, now has a code of ethics that violates several key principles of International Law?

Since 2005 the IDF's Ruach Tzahal (Spirit of the IDF) Ethical Code has formalized their long-held belief that Israeli lives are worth more than the lives of Palestinians and other Arabs. Specifically, that the lives of Israeli soldiers are worth more than the lives of Palestinian civilians—it is better to kill them than risk Israeli soldiers. This is a fundamental departure from International Law, which enshrines the duty to protect

noncombatants. It also explains why IDF soldiers gunned down three unarmed, shirtless October 7 Jewish hostages who had escaped, waving a white flag trying to be saved. The mistake under IDF ethics wasn't killing unarmed surrendering young men; the mistake was they were Jews, not Palestinians. The same goes for Yuval Doran Kestelman, a Jewish civilian, who had just stopped a terrorist attack at a bus stop in Jerusalem and was unarmed with his hands in the air when he was gunned down by soldiers on November 30, 2023.

The established Principle of Distinction is that military operations «at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants and between civilian objects and military objectives and accordingly shall direct their operations only against military objectives» (International Red Cross, 2023, para. 1). However, the IDF's policy is to kill civilians if there is any risk to their soldiers. Muhammad Ali Khalidi (2019), an Associate Professor of Philosophy at York University in Toronto, documents in horrifying detail IDF soldiers and officers admitting exactly that during operations in Lebanon and Gaza. He also shows how an author of the code, Asa Kasher, and General Amos Yadlin, justify the prioritizing of combatants (if Israeli) over noncombatants (if not Israeli) using the 'war on terror' and claims that Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza are not under «state control» although this is demonstrably untrue.

Seventy IDF military veterans validate Khalidi's analysis in their critique of the 2015 Israeli Gaza operation Protective Edge, in the report 'This is how we fought in Gaza' from the Tel Aviv-based Breaking the Silence organization (Opall-Rome, 2015). For example, when permission to fire heavy weapons was granted to junior commanders, they ordered soldiers to fire at everyone in the combat zone (a civilian city), replicating the Free Fire Zones of the Vietnam War. To quote from the report: «According to the 32-year-old veteran of the IDF's Nahal infantry brigade, the IDF appears to have made a deliberate shift in doctrine to what you might call zero risk to our troops at all costs» (para. 8). And, «[t]he guiding military principle of minimum risk to our forces, even at the cost of harming innocent civilians, alongside efforts to deter and intimidate innocent civilians led to massive and unprecedented harm to the population and the civilian infrastructure in the Gaza Strip» the report argues (para. 13). They add:

Another infantryman, a first sergeant operating in the north part of the strip, testified: «They told us: 'There aren't supposed to be any civilians there. If you spot someone, shoot». Whether it posed a threat or not wasn't a question, and that makes sense to me. If you shoot someone in Gaza it's cool, no big deal. First of all, because it's Gaza, and second, because that's warfare. That, too, was made clear to us; they told us, «Don't be afraid to shoot», and they made it clear that there were no uninvolved civilians (para. 16).

This is made much easier by the use of distance weapons, AI targeting, new extraordinarily powerful conventional munitions, and other technologies that perpetuate self-serving illusions about efficacy and morality.

3. Momentum policy

Tying an unreasonable faith in new military technology to changes in war-fighting doctrine is not new. For many years, led by civilians turned soldiers during the 1967 war, the IDF resisted the allure of 'silver bullet' high-tech weapons and their promise of military victory and understood that military victory against the PLO, Hamas, Hezbollah, and other such groups was impossible.

I know something about Israel's military doctrine because my work used to be part of it. In 2000 I attended the IDF-sponsored Martial Ecologies conference in Israel and the next year I visited to lecture at the IDF's Staff and Command College. For years, my book, *Postmodern War* was required reading for all Israeli officers who aspired to higher command. At the time, Israel had a vibrant Peace Movement and even in the military there were many outspoken supporters of a two-state solution. Most leaders in Israel then knew that «war is a continuation of politics» by other means, and those means are highly constrained in postmodern war. That meant there is no military solution to the problem of Palestine/Israel.

But over the years things have shifted in Israel and the IDF, including a growing faith in the ability of new weapons to solve age old problems of battle. In 2020, Israel established a new military policy linked to its modernization effort and called it the Momentum Plan. It promised the possibility of real victory through a «rapid war of maneuver, blending quick strikes and the highest technological capabilities» (Frantzman, 2020, para. 1). Part of the Momentum Plan is a New Concept of Operations called 'Intelligence-as-a-Service' (Kalo, 2021, para. 3). Considering one of its primary goals was to prevent disasters such as the October 7 Hamas attack, it cannot be considered a success. Yet since then Israel has embraced it with even more fervor.

This kind of technophilia is one of the main fallacies I argue against in *Postmodern War*, but now the IDF is committed to a wide range of cutting-edge technology, including various AI programs for logistics and even to help individual tanks fight. In 2021, the IDF proudly proclaimed its attack on Gaza «the first AI war». Of course, it wasn't a war, just a campaign, and it wasn't the first major deployment of AI in warfare. The U.S. has been using much more sophisticated AI systems for decades, including the Aegis weapon system which includes an option (never used as far as it is known) for the automatic operation of the ship-based anti-aircraft systems that use missiles and gatling machine guns. It failed in spectacular fashion when it contributed significantly to shooting down an Iranian airliner in the 1980s, killing all 290 civilians on board (Gray, 1990).

As one critic of the old doctrine, Hanan Shai (2021, para. 3) explains, it «replaced its traditional doctrine of victory, which was based on rapid physical defeat of enemy forces, with a 'psychological victory,' which does not entail enemies' physical defeat». The new Momentum policy proudly proclaimed «[a] revolution in military doctrine, which is now focused once again on winning—not by immobilizing the enemy's war-fighting capacity as in the past, but by systematic, precise, and complete (or almost complete) destruction of its resources and terrorists» (para. 7). It also promised

to do away with the IDF's traditional «decentralized, goal-oriented command» to implement a «hybrid-centralized goal-oriented command that is merged with a very tight centralistic command, in certain domains even with robotic management» (paras. 7-10). Nothing screams technophilia as loudly as fantasies about 'robotic management'. Such blind faith leads to disasters. It seems likely that in the months before October 7, the IDF's «tight centralistic command» (para. 6) allowed it to ignore the many reports from the front of the coming attack from Hamas.

To cite an expert from the Israel Democracy Institute, Tehilla Shwartz Altschuler (2023, para. 9), the faith in the 'smart' border technology was not borne out: «When technology replaces humans, it comes at the cost of dulling human intuition and research capabilities and a disconnection between human soldiers and the battlefield. All of these factors played some part in the disaster of October 7, 2023, as did the government and military's addiction to the feeling of technological superiority» (para. 10).

Irrational faith in technological superiority is a symptom of technological fanaticism. In his brilliant analysis of World War II strategic bombing, Michael Sherry (1987) argues that the political fanaticism of the Axis powers was mirrored by the technological fanaticism of the Allies. Racist political ideas justified the extermination of Romany, Jews, Slavs, Chinese and Koreans by Germany and Japan, while the technologies of strategic bombing justified the extermination of whole cities by the Allies. The allied policy was the product of

[...] two distinct but related phenomena: one – the will to destroy– ancient and recurrent, the other –the technical means of destruction– modern. Their convergence resulted in the evil of American bombing. But it was a sin of a peculiarly modern kind because it seemed so inadvertent, seemed to involve so little choice. Illusions about modern technology had made aerial holocaust seem unthinkable before it occurred and simply imperative once it began. It was the product of a slow accretion of large fears, thoughtless assumptions, and at best discrete decisions (Sherry, 1987, p. 137).

The U.S. has never abandoned 'aerial holocaust' as a policy, as the people of Vietnam, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Iraq and many other places can attest. That Israel has taken up the same policy is not surprising, especially as many people around the world will forgive killing thousands of civilians as long as it is done with missiles, bombs, and artillery.

Part of this evil farce is pretending that such killing can be precise and surgical, with little 'collateral damage' to use that profoundly deceptive term. Israel claims the mass killings in Gaza are under control. But they are not, except in the sense that killing thousands of babies, children, women and noncombatant men is the goal. Even if that were not true, more than half the bombs are dumb, and IDF fire control is profoundly flawed or consciously a war crime, often striking sites where they have sent Palestinian civilians to be safe. Technological superiority does not win many wars; it can never win a war when one doesn't even understand what victory is.

4. An AI named Gospel

Nothing exemplifies the postmodern context and immoral character of Israel's incredible assault on Gaza as the use of the AI targeting system named 'Gospel'. It is Habsora (הַבְּשׂוּרָה) in Hebrew –Happy holy messages to the Jewish tribes from God about victory over their enemies. Habsora is a targeting program designed to increase the number of potential targets. It draws on surveillance data (drones, light sats, ground cameras, body cams), intercepted communications, observed movements, human analysis and probably social media. Basically, it is an AI alibi.

As one anonymous user of the system said, it is a «mass assassination factory» with an emphasis on «quantity and not on quality» (cited in Abraham 2023, para. 6). Along with the Power Target policy, Gospel allows the IDF to target almost all of the homes of up to 40.000 Hamas members, other militants, journalists, and community leaders. This is why whole families are being killed. By the end of November, over three hundred families had lost ten or more members. Since October 7, as of this writing (February 20, 2024) Israel has killed at least 30.000 Palestinians, in Gaza and the Occupied West Bank, the majority civilians and targeted by Gospel. Even the Israeli government calls Gospel a «target factory» as can be seen in a statement on the IDF website:

It has been 27 days of combat that the IDF's target factory has been operating around the clock. From the land, from the air and from the sea - the forces attack terrorist targets of Hamas in a non-stop cooperation. So far it is about more than 12.000 targets in the Gaza Strip, besides which thousands of other terrorist targets were criminalized during the fighting (Israeli Defense Forces, 2023 – Google translation).

Aviv Kochavi, head of IDF up until January 2023, said that, thanks to Gospel, the number of targets they could acquire in Gaza went from fifty a year to one hundred a day. In the first thirty-five days of battle, The IDF struck 15.000 sites in Gaza. In all of the two thousand and fourteen attacks on Gaza, which lasted fifty-one days, the IDF hit one-third as many places. Gospel is the difference (Davies, McKernan and Sabbagh, 2023). It is no surprise Israel did not sign the declaration (weak as it is) of more than fifty other countries for the 'responsible' use of military AI (U.S. Department of State, 2023). The way Israel uses the Gospel system, for example, is clearly a war crime.

While the IDF claims Gospel is an effective system, with a nice interface that scores potential targets with a green/yellow/red light schema, the evidence is the program is not militarily effective but rather is supposed to provide political cover for targeting that is in violation of International Law. No doubt, this is exacerbated by the problems such programs always have: automation bias, scenario fulfillment, misplaced concreteness, the limits of correctness, and so on. These issues were first articulated when President Reagan proposed his 'Star Wars' (Strategic Defense Initiative) program that would have turned over control of nuclear weapons to a space-based AI. That program failed miserably, as have all other attempts to hand over responsibility

for using sophisticated weapons to kill humans. Gospel is no different. Illusions about the efficacy of the latest weapons are one-way Western powers have managed to lose postmodern conflicts again and again (Gray, 1997; 2005).

Gospel didn't just appear out of nowhere. It is based on years of cooperation between U.S. and Israeli military companies in creating sophisticated programs for helping maintain the occupation of Palestine. Gospel was no doubt «trained», in part, on data from earlier «predictive policing» programs. Notably, the 2017 operations against Palestinians were run by the Israeli company Fifth Dimension and the U.S.'s Palantir. Fifth Dimension is very much a military offshoot. It's Chairman since 2015 has been General Benny Gantz, former IDF Chief of Staff and Ram Ben-Barak, a former deputy head of Mossad, is President. The program collected social media, psychological profiles, official records and hacked cellphone data to target Palestinians who might commit attacks. Despite many false positives, often based on misunderstandings of Arabic words or simplistic assumptions, hundreds of «Facebook terrorists» were jailed without trial (Hirschauge and Shezaf, 2017).

Gospel is not alone. It could not work at all without its sister programs, The Alchemist and Depth of Wisdom, as well as the many other parts of Israel's sprawling Information-War industry. It includes the Iron Dome air defense system and a long line of military apps such as Arrow, David's Sling, Project Standoff, Rafael, and the notorious Pegasus spyware that has been sold to dictators around the world and has long been used against Palestinians and, lately, against Jewish Israelis (Melman, 2022). Pegasus was made by NSO Group Technologies, which along with SK Group, Israel Aerospace, Black Cube, Candiru, and others has produced a wide range of products, making Israel a major exporter of advanced information-weapon systems. So much so that they are a significant part of the country's economy. A major selling point is that they have been tested at length in real combat operations—against Palestinians (Loewenstein, 2023).

5. Disproportionate force

The Dahiya Doctrine advocates destroying enemy infrastructure no matter the civilian toll because the civilians are the enemy as well. Named after the Beirut neighborhood of Dahiya, almost completely destroyed by the IDF in 2006 in their attempt to eliminate Hezbollah. As the Israeli General commanding the North, Gadi Eizenkot explained, in the next war «We will wield disproportionate power against every village from which shots are fired on Israel, and cause immense damage and destruction» (Harel, 2008).

This should not be surprising, since the Supreme Court of Israel has found assassinations (targeted killings outside of combat zones) to be «proportionate» as long as one calculates correctly. Such calculations were used in the four major IDF attacks in Gaza from 2008 to 2014, resulting in 5,000 Palestinians killed (mainly civilians) versus thirty Israeli civilians and three hundred and fifty Israeli military and police dead. Israel has a long history of assassinations, eliminating over 2,700 people since 1948. Ronen

Bergman, who wrote the definitive history, showed Israel developed «the most robust, streamlined assassination machine in history». The goal was to «stop history» or at least «to change history, or to do something to reality, without resorting to all-out war». Instead, it produced «a long string of impressive tactical successes, but also disastrous strategic failures» (quoted in Horovitz, 2018, para. 2). This policy of assassination continues.

The current death toll in Gaza proves the Dahiya Doctrine of Disproportionate Force is being applied with even more savagery than before. A study of Gaza deaths during this attack by the sociologist Yagil Levy from the Open University of Israel shows that at least 61% of casualties are civilians. This compares unfavorably to the earlier Israeli attacks on Gaza (with ratios between 40% and 33%) and the average rate of civilian *versus* military casualties in the 20th century (Borger, 2023, para. 4).

It is important to note that before the invention of long-range artillery and, later, aerial bombing, killing large numbers of civilians at all was a war crime. While the terror of killing in war has often fallen on civilians, it was not inevitable. With the development of distance weapons, war expanded to direct shelling of civilians (pioneered in the American Civil War) and then later bombing, first used as a weapon of Italian and British colonialism. In WWII, this became the technological fanaticism of strategic bombing.

The refusal to see violence in all its forms, especially as mediated by technology, is not new. During World War II the Allies were eager to talk about the war crimes of the Nazis, the bombing of open cities, the death camps, and the massacres, but when allied strategies involved the indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas, the so-called strategic bombing campaigns that we now know were ineffectual militarily, that was just a sad necessity of war. These policies culminated in the atomic bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima and the worst single act of killing in human history—84,000 Japanese burned to death in a firestorm carefully created at the heart of Tokyo. The perfection of this artificial weather formation was through the firebombing of the German City of Dresden, chosen because it lacked any military significance. and so made a better experiment. Strategic bombing is a form of collective punishment.

Israel's use of Disproportionate Force is also Collective Punishment, another clear war crime. This isn't just the killing with bombs, missiles, and artillery shells of civilians, it is also cutting off millions of civilians from health care, housing, communication, food, and water. By December 6, 2023, almost half of all the people in Gaza were experiencing severe levels of hunger, according to the UN's World Food Program Food Security Assessment (2023). This is a conscious policy. On October 18, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised that food and medicines for the population there would not be allowed into Gaza «as long as our hostages are not returned» (Irwin, 2023, para. 3). Punishing the millions of people in Gaza for the actions of the terrorist group Hamas is Collective Punishment. This is a crime against humanity. But it gets worse. The Israeli Minister for Jerusalem Affairs and Heritage, Amichai Eliyahu, has even called dropping a nuclear bomb on Gaza «an option» as «there are no non-combatants in

Gaza» (Karanth, 2023, para. 15). Of course, there are still Israeli hostages in Gaza, but they are expendable, according to the Hannibal Directive.

6. Necrotactics such as the Hannibal Directive, domicide, urbanicide, and apartheid

Named after the Carthaginian General Hannibal, who committed suicide rather than be captured by the Romans, the Hannibal Directive is to use maximum force to respond to any potential capture of Israeli soldiers or civilians, including killing the captured soldiers and others through friendly fire. In large part it is aimed at preventing the need for exchanging prisoners.

In 2014, when Hamas captured IDF Lieutenant Hadar Goldin, Israel responded by indiscriminately shelling and bombing four Rafah neighborhoods, killing at least one hundred and thirty-five civilians and the Lieutenant, whom Amnesty International and many others judged a war crime. Military commanders were distressed that Hadar Goldin's fellow soldiers did not fire on him and his captors when he was first seized, so they established the Hannibal Doctrine or Protocol. Yehuda Shaul, a paratrooper and combat veteran who rose through the ranks to become a commander, explains it requires maximum force when an IDF soldier is captured, «You will open fire without constraints, in order to prevent the abduction» even at the risk of killing the captive (Jamal, 2023, para. 7). All possible routes the enemy and their prisoner might take should also be targeted.

While it was officially terminated in 2016 due to criticism from all sides, it seems to be in play in the current battle in Gaza. As Eyal Weizman, director of Forensic Architecture at Goldsmiths University, explains, «[w]ith the current indiscriminate bombing of Gaza, the government seems not only to be bringing unprecedented destruction on the people of Gaza but to be returning to the principle of preferring dead captives to a deal» (Jamal, 2023, para. 46).

Israel has rejected an 'everyone for everyone' deal- all Israeli hostages for all Palestinian prisoners proposed by Hamas. While Israel often releases prisoners or captured soldiers at a rate of hundreds to one, it calls this proposal 'psychological terror'. Yet, Netanyahu's government claims freeing the hostages is one of the primary goals of the 'ground operation' called Swords of Iron. But most of the hostages' families and many others doubt this. The Hannibal Directive seems in play. If it seems like something from the ancient times of blood feuds and massacres, that is not an accident.

Behind the latest tactics and strategies are the oldest of doctrines. Consider Amalek.

You must remember what Amalek has done to you, says our Holy Bible. And we do remember (Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, October 23, 2023).

It is forbidden to take mercy on the cruel, there's no place for any humanitarian gestures...The memory of Amalek must be erased (Likud MP Boaz Bismuth, November 15, 2023).

This is what the Lord Almighty says: I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to

Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys (Saul, 1 Samuel).

For the crime of attacking the people of Israel, their god commanded them to commit genocide. Out of tens of thousands of lessons in the Jewish holy tradition, this is what the Prime Minister of Israel quoted when he sent his soldiers into Gaza. In the 1980s, Rabbi Israel Hess used the Amalek story to justify wiping out all Palestinians. The same tale was used by Baruch Goldstein to justify murdering twenty-nine Muslims praying during Ramadan in a mosque in Hebron (Lanar, 2023). Goldstein was killed during his attack. The current National Security Minister of Israel, Itamar Ben-Gvir, called Goldstein his personal hero at a memorial speech for Goldstein on May 2, 2023 (Andrews, 2023). No wonder the targeted assassinations of Palestinian leaders are a central policy of the IDF; the dream for some Jewish leaders is to kill all Palestinians as Goldstein tried to do.

Eyal Weizman (2006) has reasoned that since the IDF aims not at controlling territory but rather at locating «members of the Palestinian resistance» and killing them. He also mentions that:

The military does not kill enemy soldiers as a means to obtain the strategic ground they occupy, but temporarily enters strategic ground in order to kill its enemies. Killing is not a by-product of military maneuver, but the very essence of the current Israeli campaign against Palestinian guerrilla and terror, and thus has become, in the absence of any legal process to support it, and since the definition of 'imminent danger' is extended to all members of the resistance and their supporters, a systematic campaign of murder (Weizman, 2006, para. 6).

The incredible levels of destruction in Gaza have been called 'domicide'. While the term is increasingly accepted (Wintour 2023) it is not a new idea. The indiscriminate night raids of the RAF against German population centers were described as 'dehousing' officially. While ineffectual in winning the war, they did kill hundreds of thousands of civilians.

The Turkish urban studies scholar, Sibel Bekiroğlu (2023) has developed a sophisticated analysis of this stage of postmodern war in her dissertation *Conceptualizing urbicide: Space, memory, war and necropolitics*. She shows how the «destruction of the urban fabric» impacts society, directly damaging culture and memory especially, killing politics with 'necropolitics' (including a version from the 'weaker' side of asymmetric war). That this is done through AI targeting, is more than ironic. It aims to degrade Palestinian culture directly and indirectly, seems to be what Israel is transitioning to from the current apartheid regime, horrific as it is (see Amnesty's 2022 report, *Israel's apartheid against Palestine*).

7. Postmodern terrorwar

War evolves. Technology is a major driver of change. In particular, Modern war's five hundred years of

developing the best killing technologies culminated in weapons that cannot be used—hence postmodern war. As I said in earlier work, «[p]ostmodern wars take place between two supposed impossibilities: apocalyptic total war and utopian peace» (Gray, 1997, p. 168). It is system framed by various cold wars, where violence is mainly inflicted outside of the First World, international communications/politics/trade knit the world together tighter than ever, and military victory is nigh near impossible.

Late postmodern war is organized around terror. Originally, terror was the appropriate response to natural disasters or being damned for all eternity. Only with the French Revolution was it politicized, and then it meant terror 'by the state'. States have worked hard to invert that, so now many people think only non-state actors can be terrorists, that states are somehow exempt. Yet state violence is wholesale, non-state violence is retail. Shooting civilians to death is only different from bombing them to death in that the bombings kill many more innocents. When you add in the state terrorism that goes by the name of 'counterterrorism' it is clear that states kill the most by far. They will use extreme violence to defend their monopoly on violence. The war on terror has naturalized terror itself. All war is terrorism now. Startling as the first seems, in retrospect it was inevitable. War has always been about terror, often mainly about terror. As Joseba Zulaika and William A. Douglas said, «The concept of 'war' itself is no longer the same when deprived of the goal military victory; the traditional meaning of war is being replaced by *terrorism* (defined as 'surrogate war') and *deterrence* (defined as 'mutual balance of terror')» (quoted in Gray, 2005, p. 6).

That both sides of such a conflict end up embracing terrorism is no surprise. While «[w]ar is always a struggle for meaning» (Gray, 2005, p. xii), terrorwar can only produce certain meanings and victory or peace are not among them. Now power for Hamas, for Netanyahu and the Right in Israel, is generated by this madness. So, it will continue.

8. Fostering Hamas while mowing the grass

Since allowing Hamas to take over Gaza, including standing aside during open fighting between it and the PLO, even granting it and other fundamentalist groups freedom to organize while persecuting their secular competitors, the government of Israel has worked hard to keep Hamas in power in Gaza (Hasan and Sayedahmed, 2018; Schenider, 2023; Zunes, 2011). At first, this is shocking. Why would they do this? Why support such a horrible enemy? But looking closer we can see that this is typical in Postmodern War. Both sides benefit from the conflict. The Netanyahu regime does not want peace at all. They want an excuse to battle Palestinians and take from them more of their land and, eventually, expel them from Greater Israel. Hamas openly calls for the reverse. Professor Stephen Zunes (2011, para. 3) of the University of San Francisco goes into detail about Israel's role in the rise of Hamas:

While supporters of the secular PLO were denied their own media or right to hold political gatherings, the Israeli occupation authorities

allowed radical Islamic groups to hold rallies, publish uncensored newspapers and even have their own radio station. For example, in the occupied Palestinian city of Gaza in 1981, Israeli soldiers — who had shown no hesitation in brutally suppressing peaceful pro-PLO demonstrations — stood by when a group of Islamic extremists attacked and burned a PLO-affiliated health clinic in Gaza for offering family-planning services for women.

At the same time, Israel allowed Sheik Ahmed Yassin, the founder of Hamas, to preach anti-Jewish hate and the liquidation of Israel openly, they forcibly exiled the Christian pacifist Palestinian activist Mubarak Awad for calling for peaceful protests against the occupation (Zunes, 2011). Removing key Palestinian leaders through arrest or assassination is a fundamental Israeli policy. It is informally referred to as 'mowing the grass' or, as one Israeli defense analyst put it, «We want to break their bones without putting them in the hospital» (Cohen et al., 2017, para. 4). Israel fears «the possibility that a more radical organization» would replace Hamas (something they are now guaranteeing), and Israel did not «want to be responsible for governing Gaza» (which they still don't, but now do not want anyone else to govern it either) (para. 3).

Yet while helping Hamas supplant the PLO in Gaza and fostering it through policies such as giving them control over Gaza residents working in Israel and allowing them to get funds from Qatar and other sources, Israel has also followed what Yuval Noah Harari (2021, para. 6) calls a 'strategy of violent coexistence'. It is Netanyahu's policy of supporting Hamas while also persecuting it through targeted assassinations (including journalists, over one hundred and six killed in Gaza, often with their whole family) and overwhelming retaliation, among other tactics. This is 'mowing the grass'—treating Hamas and others who resist Israel's domination (including nonviolent activists) as weeds that occasionally need to be hacked back. But if Palestinian activists are the weeds, the people of Gaza are the grass, and they are being eradicated at the roots (Armitage, 2023).

9. Winning the battles; losing the war

By the third month of Israel's attack on Gaza, even President Biden sensed Israel was going too far, calling the Israeli bombardment «indiscriminate» (Wendling and Plett 2023, para. 1). Recently resigned UK Minister of Defense Ben Wallace went further, «What I am saying is Israel needs to stop this crude and indiscriminate method of attack. Netanyahu's mistake was to miss the attack in the first place. But if he thinks a killing rage will rectify matters, then he is very wrong» (cited in McDonald, 2023, para. 4). The U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III echoed this analysis on December 2, 2023:

The lesson is that you can only win in urban warfare by protecting civilians. In this kind of a fight, the center of gravity is the civilian population. And if you drive them into the arms

of the enemy, you replace a tactical victory with a strategic defeat.

If Israel's true goal is to destroy Hamas and then leave Gaza they have already lost. Hamas is an idea, and you cannot destroy an idea, but trying to can certainly make it stronger, and they have. Hamas has never enjoyed the support it has now. Policies aimed at your enemy can blow back on you, making them stronger or, worse, making you like them.

In his November 7, 2023 article 'Israel Could Lose' Jon Alterman analyzes the strategy of Hamas.

Hamas sees victory not in one year or five, but from engaging with decades of struggle that increase Palestinian solidarity and increase Israel's isolation. In this scenario, Hamas rallies a besieged population in Gaza around it in anger and helps collapse the Palestinian Authority government by ensuring Palestinians see it even more as a feckless adjunct to Israeli military authority. Meanwhile, Arab states move strongly away from normalization, the Global South aligns strongly with the Palestinian cause, Europe recoils at the Israeli army's excesses, and an American debate erupts over Israel, destroying the bipartisan support Israel has enjoyed here since the early 1970s. Rumbblings of a regional war suit Hamas well, prompting global debates about the cost of an alliance with Israel. Israel's ability to sustain its own solidarity through this process is not Hamas' main concern. Rather, its goal is to estrange Israel from its international partners and turn it into the pariah that Hamas believes it to be (Alterman, 2023, para. 6).

Much of this has already been achieved. According to John Ganz (2023), 'Israel has already lost' as he argues in an article with that very title. He claims Israel has squandered much of their international support already, that it would have to commit genocide to militarily destroy Hamas, and that the only real solutions are political, not more killing, and certainly not indiscriminate attacks on civilians.

For some years, support for Israel has been weakening around the world, but it was still strong in Europe and North America. After a brief bump provoked by the brutal Hamas attack on October 7, even that has deteriorated significantly. Spain and some other European countries have become vocal critics of Israel's policies. In the UK and US, the Labor and Democratic Parties are splitting. The Islamic world is pulling back from Israel and Malaysia banned Israeli shipping on December 20, 2023. A further decline in Israel's international standing is inevitable.

Illegal Jewish settlers and the IDF have more than doubled their attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank since October 7—three hundred killed and four thousand and eight hundred arrested. This would be a major humanitarian controversy except for the tens of thousands killed, wounded, and arrested in Gaza in the same period. On December 28, the IDF raided ten West Bank cities, including Ramallah, killing several people, injuring dozens, and seizing millions of dollars from currency exchanges. More and more, many observers see Israel is being terroristic. Anne-Claire Legendre, spokesperson for the French

Foreign Ministry, declared, «Concerning the West Bank, I'd like to express the strongest condemnation by France of the violence carried out by the settlers against the Palestinians. Violence which has a clear objective of forced displacement of the Palestinians and a policy of Terror» (Irish, 2023, para. 3).

Meanwhile, on the Northern Border with Lebanon, many Israeli leaders see Hezbollah as more of a threat than Hamas, and there are growing calls in Israel, including in the government, for a preemptive attack. This will double down on the losing strategy Israel is pursuing in Gaza and the West Bank. It could also lead to a regional war. Although the leaders of Israel don't believe it, support from the U.S., and even from guilt-ridden Germany, is not infinite. As a pariah state, Israel cannot flourish.

Even if such a state could survive, probably through alliances with other authoritarian regimes, it is showing enough hatred that an attack on it with nuclear weapons, or 'the poor-man's nukes' of biological or radiological weapons, becomes increasingly likely. Compared to nuclear explosive devices, dirty bombs (radioactive material dispersed by conventional explosives) and biological weapons of mass destruction are much easier to make. This would mean a response from Israel, likely using many of their two hundred thermonuclear weapons the Samson Option. Samson murdered thirty Philistines for their clothes and was enraged when his wedding was called off because of it. So, he starts his own private war and kills one thousand men with the jawbone of an ass. Captured, he destroys a great temple, killing many more Philistines and himself. This is a role model?

Confounding the current situation with these ancient stories is profoundly dangerous. Consider the campaign to re-establish the Jewish Temple. For many Jewish and Christian fundamentalists, the Jewish Temple needs to be restored. It is not a trivial aspiration, historically or politically. Since the Romans destroyed the Second Temple thousands of years ago, the site has gone through many different incarnations. Only the Wailing Wall, remains. Legally, it is not even in the Israel mandated by multiple UN resolutions and enough treaties to make the issue a speciality in International Law.

Fundamentalist Jews often protest at the last wall—against women or Christians or Moslems, for the destruction of the Al Aska Mosque there now and the raising up of the Third Temple. Some Jews want the Third Temple because it is God's will, and he has given it to them if they can take it. Fundamentalist Christians are for it because it is a necessary step in the end of the world, which actually requires killing all but 40,000 Jews. This is Armageddon, their rapture. All these fanatics agree that a number of flawless virgins are needed to raise the new Temple, and after amazingly complicated rituals, one or more of these virgins need to be slaughtered and her blood spread by hand. Virgin red heifers, that is. Lawrence Wright (1998) describes an alliance between fundamentalists Christians and the Jewish movement to restore the Temple to breed the perfect cows necessary for the magic to happen as a form of Jerusalem syndrome.

Jerusalem syndrome is when individuals visiting the Holy City are driven mad by its long history and

powerful energy. This is no basis for military and political policy, yet it clearly is widespread in the government of Israel today and among the leaders of Hamas. The October 7 attack and massacre were named Operation Al Aqsa Flood, after all. Israelis have their own vocabulary of bloody grievance, of course. One elected official, David Azoulay of the town of Metula, calls the October 7 Hamas attack a «kind of second Holocaust» and believes the people of Gaza should be ethnically cleansed, forcibly deported to Lebanon «where there are enough refugee camps». Gaza itself, he says, would be «left empty, just like Auschwitz, a museum, so the whole world will learn what the state of Israel can do». The museum of Auschwitz called his proposal ‘shameful’ and noted terrorism does not solve terrorism, but we know it breeds it (quoted in Karanth 2023, paras. 1-17).

In Israel it is a crime to call for the ethnic cleansing or genocide of a people, but it turns out it is only calling for Jewish genocide that is prosecuted. Despite dozens of calls by elected officials for the destruction of Palestinian Gaza (even with nuclear bombs as Likud MP Tally Gotliv also did), or indeed of the very idea of Palestinians, no-one is prosecuted for it. But as of the end of November, two hundred and sixty-nine investigations and eighty-eight indictments had been lodged against Israelis, mainly Jews, for speech the authorities considered «supporting Hamas». This includes pointing out that Israel is a partner in the terror-system with Hamas or even just supporting a cease-fire (Graham-Harrison and Kierszenbaum 2024).

There is an old saying that «truth is the first casualty in war». But a close second in democracies is democracy. Israel has almost lost any semblance of democratic non-sectarian governance, but that is not the worst of it. Its long-term existence is in doubt. Led by a corrupt incompetent, the very man who fostered Hamas and fooled himself into thinking they were no real threat, Israel has recommitted to its losing strategy and now threatens Armageddon. Why? It isn't enough to say terrorist attacks have driven it mad. The terrorism not only goes both ways (with Israel killing far more innocents), it is co-dependent. More than the reprehensible attack by Hamas, what most terrifies Israel is the death of illusions of invincibility and unaccountability.

It is not enough to point out the legacy of colonialism and the needs of the current imperial system led by the U.S. Yes, we wouldn't be in this nightmare without the interventions of the European powers hundreds of years ago, in 1948, and all the way to today. Without the Holocaust (and the German guilt that still twists their policies), there would be no Israel. Without British and then U.S. imperialist decisions, there would be no Israel. The U.S. still sees the country as a key part of its system, but to control the Middle East, not destroy it.

Understanding this war today starts with realizing that for all the pretensions of rationality war-makers claim, war is always profoundly emotional. The conflicts in the Middle East prove this. The emotional resonances go back thousands of years, but the real trigger is the European antisemitism that culminated in the Nazi Holocaust. The Palestinian scholar Abdaljawad Omar (2023) has charted how that trauma shaped Zionism, which now persecutes the Palestinian people. This is not a new dynamic. Albert Einstein, Hannah Arendt and

other Jewish intellectuals warned about Jews adopting «the organization, methods, political philosophy and social appeal» of Nazism when they denounced Menachem Begin back in 1948 (Hill, 2023). Benjamin Netanyahu, his Zionist and orthodox fundamentalist backers, and Israel's current war on Palestinians is that nasty dialectic coming to fruition. It is important to remember that Palestinians are no more immune to this dynamic than Jews or anyone else.

The belief that new technologies can solve old problems in war and politics is also more emotional than logical. This applies to the Hamas as much as the IDF. As intransigent policies continue regional war becomes more likely. After that, spiraling escalations could lead to the use of bio and radiological weapons, even nuclear explosives provoking a disproportionate (Samson-like) response from Israel that would kill millions. After all, Armageddon is the holy prediction, and holy hope, of many.

10. Statement on the use of LLM

This article has not used any text generated by a LLM (ChatGPT or other) for its writing.

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