



## Weaponizing Language: Misuses of Holocaust Memory and the Never Again Syndrome

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## **Weaponizing Language:**

### **Misuses of Holocaust Memory and the Never Again Syndrome**

*Omer Bartov*

#### **Introduction**

Recently, the Holocaust has again become common currency. Eight decades after the end of World War II, the memory of the extermination of the Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators is repeatedly invoked. Antisemitism, gradually delegitimized in public discourse in the wake of the “final solution,” seems to be on the rise. The well-meant, possibly sincere vows of “never again,” which became a staple of postwar pronouncements and ethics, seem now to have been brushed aside and forgotten, as violent rhetoric and actions against Jews have gained new adherents.

This is how many Jews around the world, as well as most Israelis, understand the present moment. This is the context in which it has become legitimate to speak about Hamas not only as the equivalent of ISIS or al-Qaeda, but also as Nazis. The context in which pro-Palestinian demonstrations are labeled antisemitic. The context in which Jewish and Israeli critics of occupation policies in the West Bank and the destruction of Gaza are called anti-Zionist self-hating Jews and accused of being in the pay of Hamas.

This is also the context in which a desire to turn the tables on those who repeatedly invoke the Holocaust to legitimize indiscriminate violence, produces a counter-discourse of Zionism as a racist colonial ideology, and of Israel as a Nazi-like genocidal state, an entity that must be wiped off the map. From one side we hear extremist Jewish calls to establish a halachic state from the Jordan to the sea—a religious version of secular Zionism’s goal of Jewish rule over all historic (i.e., mandatory) Palestine. From the other side come demands by pro-Palestinian

protestors to free Palestine from the Jordan to the sea—echoing the extremist platform of Hamas, which seeks the establishment of an Islamic state in that very same territory. In other words, allegations of genocidal intent by one side appear to legitimize genocidal intent by the other, all in the name of liberation, self-determination, justice and dignity.

In what follows, I will attempt to briefly discuss some fundamental questions regarding the use and abuse of the Holocaust as a historical event, a traumatic memory, and a warning to future generations. I will ask: Was the Holocaust unique, and if so, what can we learn from it? Was the pledge to prevent genocide from happening again kept, and if not, why? Can the mass murder of the Jews serve as a guide to the nations of the world, and in what ways? And, most importantly perhaps for the current moment: If the Holocaust was the clearest justification for the need to create a Jewish state, what role has it played in Israel's history for the last seven decades? Finally, I would like to suggest how a better understanding of the misuse of the terminology of Holocaust, antisemitism, and genocide, can help us not only perceive the current crisis in Israel and Gaza more clearly, but also imagine and work toward a new path of reconciliation and justice for all.

## **Legacies of Trauma**

Before launching into the heart of the matter, and not least because we are concerned here Holocaust memory, it may be useful to briefly note the long-term impact of personal, familial, and collective trauma. As we know, the effects of traumatic events can travel from one generation to another, leaving deep scars on those who had not directly endured the original violence. It is therefore important to understand that past trauma can mold the perception of reality and modes of behavior of individuals and groups living under profoundly different political and social circumstances from those that existed at the time of the original traumatic events. Especially under conditions of shock and stress, individual and collective perceptions and modes of behavior may compulsively return to that original trauma, allowing it to anachronistically insert itself into the present and affect personal and group envisioning of the future. Consequently, the very response to catastrophe with

such slogans as “never again”—the presumed healing effects of which are based on the avowal of catastrophe-prevention—may end up with precisely the opposite result, namely, a fixation on the very thing one wishes to prevent. That fixation can be paralyzing and debilitating, and at the same time can provide license and incentive to unrestrained violence.

I recently gained some insight into the complexities and effects of transgenerational trauma while researching the book I am currently writing, provisionally titled “The Broken Promise: A Personal Political History of Israel and Palestine.” My goal in this book is to investigate how the first generation of Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel understand their link to the place. To that end, during the fall of 2022 I conducted scores of in-depth interviews with Jews and Palestinians born in the first decade or so after the establishment of the state. Because these conversations traced people’s changing perceptions over their entire lifetime, a fair amount of them focused on the interviewees’ parental home. It was there that the impact of the profound traumas experienced by the parents and grandparents—survivors of the Holocaust and survivors of the Nakba—became starkly visible. This indicated a certain experiential similarity between the two groups, in that they both were often raised in traumatized families. It was that very, so to speak “inherited” trauma, that deeply affected the way they felt attached to the land of Israel/Palestine, becoming a prism through which they perceive reality, articulate their fears, and express their hopes for a better future.

### **Holocaust Uniqueness**

As a historical event, I would contend that by now the scholarly consensus puts the Nazi mass murder of the Jews within the context of a series of modern genocides starting perhaps as early as the extermination of the Herero and Nama populations of German Southwest Africa—present-day Namibia—in 1904. Other contexts would include imperial and colonial violence—such as the 1915 genocide of the Armenians by the Ottoman Empire and the mass murder in Belgian King Leopold’s Congo prior to World War I. Some scholars would argue that the Holocaust was an instance of “population policies,” starting with the Balkan Wars in 1912-1913; others would

associate it with genocidal totalitarian expansionist policies, such as those implemented by Nazi Germany and Stalinist Soviet Russia in the “bloodlands” of Eastern Europe. Finally, within Jewish historiography, the Holocaust has been contextualized as part or as the culmination of a long history of anti-Jewish violence, whose most immediate previous manifestation were the mass pogroms during the Russian civil war of 1918-1921.

For historians, the claim of historical uniqueness is both a truism and a contradiction in terms. It is a truism because no historical event is precisely the same as any other. It is a contradiction in terms because no historical event occurs outside of a context and can therefore not be understood other than by tracing its roots, comparing it to related events, and evaluating its relationship to other simultaneous developments. Thus, for instance, barring Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union, the “final solution” would have been very different, and might not have even happened at all. To put it differently, historical uniqueness implies extracting an event from history and propelling it into metaphysics, which is not an area in which historians feel at home.

All this means that by and large, most historians today would argue that while the Holocaust, like all other events in history, had unique features, such as the extermination camps, it was at the same time part of a particular historical trajectory, outside of which it cannot be understood. What, then, is at stake in asserting the uniqueness of the Holocaust? As we can see when observing contemporary politics, the Holocaust has remained, at least rhetorically, unique to both Israel—and by extension, many Jews around the world—and to Germany.

### ***The Case of Germany***

This is not the place to closely analyze the stakes of insisting on the uniqueness of the Holocaust in Germany. Here I will simply point out that the current German political and intellectual elite’s justified pride in “coming to terms” with the Nazi past has had both a foreign and domestic policy price. As far as foreign policy is concerned, it has greatly limited Germany’s ability to recognize and respond to

present-day wrongs by other actors because of Germany's own past crimes. Thus, the German reluctance to help Ukraine defend itself against Russian aggression was justified by evoking the crimes of the Wehrmacht in the Soviet Union (including Ukraine) in World War II. That is, as the argument goes, how can Germany supply arms against the Russian army in view of the devastation caused by German-made arms 80 years ago? Ironically, this means that Germany is helping Putin's Russia implement the kind of expansionist imperial policies in Europe today that the Third Reich implemented on the eve of World War II.

But German attitudes toward Israel are far more telling and resonate much more passionately in the public sphere. Even before the events of October 7, Germany insisted on being among Israel's staunchest defenders and found it almost impossible to voice any criticism of Israeli policies, to the extent that government appointed "antisemitism czars" accused Jewish and Israeli critics of Israel of being antisemitic. Germany's insistence on defending the memory of the Holocaust, or as former Chancellor Angela Merkel phrased it, its recognition that responsibility for the Holocaust was "part of our national identity," and that Israel's security was Germany's *raison d'état* (*Staatsraison*), has also had domestic implications. According to figures issued by the Federal Statistical Office in 2021, over 14 million people, or 17% of the population, had immigrated to Germany since 1950, with almost 5 million additional people (almost 6%) being direct descendants of parents who had both immigrated since 1950.

This implies that a fifth of Germany's population traces itself back to an entirely different history, many coming from Southeastern Europe, Turkey, and Syria, including 5 million Muslims. Yet part of Germany's policy of integrating newcomers into their new society is accepting that cardinal aspect of post-1945 national identity, that is, responsibility for the Holocaust. And, as some have argued, one result of Germany's pride in facing up to the Holocaust is the sense that this relieves the state of the need to tolerate its multiple new "others." As Germany's face changes, its adherence to a national identity based on the Holocaust may become a hindrance to social solidarity rather than an instrument for creating a post-Nazi nation.

One other matter is well-worth mentioning in this context. In late December 2023 South Africa brought a genocide case against Israel to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). After several weeks of deliberations, the court ordered Israel to take “all measures within its power” to prevent acts of genocide in Gaza and issued a series of provisional measures based on the plausibility of genocide occurring or about to occur in Gaza. In early March 2024, responding to the worsening humanitarian situation in Gaza, South Africa filed another urgent request to the ICJ for additional provisional measures. Pushing in precisely the opposite direction, on January 12, Germany rejected South Africa’s allegations of genocide, warned against “instrumentalization” of the charge, and announced that it would intervene as a third party before the ICJ on Israel’s behalf.

The following day, Namibia denounced Germany for hypocrisy, citing the genocide that German troops perpetrated in that country over a century earlier, a crime for which “the German Government is yet to fully atone.” Indeed, Germany acknowledged its responsibility for that genocide only in 2021, and the issue of reparations has not yet been fully resolved. Additionally, on March 2, Nicaragua sued Germany at the ICJ for both providing Israel with military equipment and, at the same time, defunding UNRWA, the United Nations agency charged with assisting Palestinian refugees, several of whose members were denounced by Israel as having participated in the October 7 massacre. While Israel has yet to provide proof of this allegation to UN investigators, the crucial role of UNRWA as the largest agency engaged in alleviating the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza caused by Israel is widely recognized.

In other words, Germany’s commitment to the uniqueness of the Holocaust, from which it also derives its unique commitment to Israel, has arguably put it in a morally highly dubious position of both long denying its own past colonial crimes and of denying Israel’s culpability in the present destruction of Gaza, including the killing and starvation of tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians.

### ***The Case of Israel***

In the case of Israel, as several scholars have shown, early public and educational attitudes toward the Holocaust tended to marginalize it as a shameful and embarrassing part of Jewish history and an obstacle to creating a new generation of proud and brave “new Jews” in the promised land. Hence the focus remained for long only on the ghetto fighters as the exception to the rule, represented by the Jewish masses who went “like sheep to the slaughter.” Despite the impact of the Eichmann Trial in the early 1960s, this attitude began to change only in the 1980s, not least in response to the war of 1973 and the rise of Menahem Begin’s Likud Party to power. The new approach, which has since become dominant, has made identification and association with the Holocaust into a mechanism of integration and social solidarity between the secular and the religious, the Ashkenazi and the Mizrahi communities, the old and the young.

The recentralization of the Holocaust as the cardinal moment of modern Jewish history has had the effect of both insisting on its singularity and of interpreting it not as a past event but rather as a clear and present danger of abandonment and destruction. From this perspective, the Holocaust is seen in Israel not only as the event that made the creation of the state an undeniable and urgent necessity, but also as making Israel itself into a unique entity that operates according to its own rules and logic. In other words, the Holocaust liberates Israel from the constraints imposed on all other nations, not least because “they,” as the saying goes, stood by while the Jews were slaughtered. At the same time, the centrality of the Holocaust in Israeli education and in political and public life makes national solidarity into one based on fear and trepidation, rather than on security and improvement of individual and collective life. Hence the ease with which Israeli society can switch between an obsession with traveling to other countries as liberation from the constraints of a small and threatened country to a phobia that “the whole world is against us,” dictating that we rely only on ourselves; between the insistence on Israeli society as being open-minded and tolerant, to a view of Palestinians and other Arabs, but also of domestic political and social opponents, as worthy of utter destruction; and,



between the assertion that the IDF is “the most moral army in the world,” to a view of the military as the remorseless tool of destruction with a license to do “all that it takes” to wipe out the enemy.

### **The “Never Again” Syndrome**

And so, Holocaust uniqueness has a price, quite apart from being historically at best inaccurate. This brings us to that ubiquitous pledge that went up everywhere in Europe after the end of the war— “never again.” The meaning of this pledge depends, of course, on what we are talking about. If it meant “never again the Holocaust,” then this was not a difficult pledge to keep, since the Holocaust as a historical event, though certainly not as a personal and collective trauma, was over by then. And since history does not, in fact, repeat itself, there was no danger of that particular Holocaust ever happening again. But obviously there were other ways of interpreting this pledge. If, as many Jews, and certainly as the state of Israel understood it, the pledge meant “never again another genocide of the Jews,” then we can also say that it was kept, just as the fear that it might happen, as I noted, had various political repercussions. Indeed, the founding of the state of Israel was supposed to serve as the best insurance policy against a Jewish genocide ever happening again. That was one reason why, so soon after the Holocaust, the international community largely supported its creation. Ironically, as many have pointed out, Israel turned out to be the least safe place for Jews since 1945, as well as the one most fixated with another Holocaust happening to it, a fixation that has become a motive and a tool of policy, as well as an instrument for shaping its citizens’ minds.

However, if the pledge meant, as many others believed—including some prominent voices among the survivors—“never again genocide,” a mass murder of any particular population because of the identity ascribed to it by the perpetrators, then of course this pledge proved to be worthless. We have seen numerous genocides and other crimes against humanity since 1945, and for decades the pledge was never even invoked.

Interestingly, it was this pledge, the pledge to never again allow genocide, that was inscribed in law. In 1948, the United Nations passed the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which came into force after a sufficient number of nations signed it in 1951. But that resolution was not invoked for decades thereafter, not least because its adjudication and enforcement depend on an international consensus that was prevented by the division of the world into two opposing camps during the Cold War. Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union—which was supposed to have heralded the “end of history”—and the two major genocides that followed swiftly thereafter, did the Genocide Convention make a first appearance.

The International Criminal Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and for Rwanda (ICTR), which deliberated the mass crimes committed in those countries in the 1990s, followed in the wake of the legal framework created in 1945 by the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, the Genocide Convention of 1948, and the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and subsequent protocols. The ICJ, created in 1945 as part of the United Nations structure, whose role is to adjudicate disputes between states, as well as to legally advise the UN, similarly took a long time before it turned to the all-important issue of genocide. In 2019, it began proceedings against Myanmar on the alleged genocide of the Rohingya as requested by The Gambia; in 2022, it issued provisional measures against Russia following a filing by Ukraine; and in 2024, as noted above, it issued provisional measures concerning Israel’s war in Gaza in response to allegations by South Africa.

Finally, there is the International Criminal Court (ICC), whose establishment was recommended in the 1948 Genocide Convention. The ICC was finally created only in 2002, based on the 1998 Rome Statute, against which Israel voted, not least because the statute defines “the action of transferring population into occupied territory” as a war crime. Currently, four signatory states—Israel, the United States, Sudan, and Russia have given notice that they no longer intend to become states parties and thus have no legal obligations arising from their signature of the Statute. This, however, does not liberate individuals in these countries—as UN members—from being charged with the crimes listed on the statute, which include

genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and crimes of aggression, if their own domestic courts are unable or unwilling to take legal action against them.

What does all this tell us about that famous “never again” pledge? The international record is poor, but not meaningless. An entire edifice of international humanitarian law was created in the aftermath of World War II, which has since been greatly expanded and interpreted through international negotiations and case law. As is the nature of international law, its enforcement is the function of political circumstances as well as of course the respective power of the states involved. Nonetheless, this edifice has become a major player in the affairs between states and has set certain limits on their conduct toward other states and to a lesser extent toward their own populations. Although the origins of this system date back to the nineteenth century, much of the impetus for its vast expansion must be traced back to the mass crimes of World War II, and most especially to the Holocaust.

In retrospect, this was both a blessing and a curse. Even if we accept that the “never again” pledge referred to future genocides rather than to the specific case of the Holocaust, the particular nature of the “final solution” created such an extreme and singular image of genocide that future genocidal events could be said to not entirely match it. In other words, the Holocaust triggered the Genocide Convention but also set a very high bar to identifying genocide as only an event of similar scope, ideological clarity, and bureaucratic efficiency. This also created a gap between how genocide is defined in the convention, which leaves much greater room for interpretation, and the legal, political, and popular imaginary of genocide having to resemble the Holocaust in order to merit that title.

### **The Holocaust as Guide**

This, then raises the question of whether the mass murder of the Jews serves as a guide to the nations of the world, and if so, in what ways? It can be said that over time, and especially since the 1990s, the Holocaust came to symbolize the epitome of evil in much of the world. This was a long and uneven process, but it culminated, for instance, in the 2005 United Nations resolution, on the 60th anniversary of the

liberation of Auschwitz, designating January 27 as “International Holocaust Remembrance Day.” Similarly, in 1995, the European Parliament adopted resolutions drawing attention to the obligation to remember the genocide of the Jews both through commemorations and by means of education. Somewhat more problematically, as I note below, in November 2018 the EU became a permanent international partner of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

To be sure, the belated recognition of the Holocaust as an important event in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century must be seen within multiple historical and political contexts. Thus, for instance, East European countries seeking to join the EU following the collapse of their communist regimes had to accept the commemoration of the Holocaust. This meant exposing dark episodes in their own pasts, just as they were in the process of asserting their national identity after decades of communist defamation of their newly discovered national heroes and obfuscation about collaboration in the Holocaust. The result was what has been called a competition of victimhood, or rhetoric about a so-called “double genocide,” one by the Nazis of the Jews, and one of “our own people” by the communists, often identified as Jewish or supported by the Jews.

The growing focus on the victimhood of the Jews has had all kinds of unexpected deleterious consequences. I have already alluded to the case of Germany in terms of its effect on integrating immigrant populations and on international engagement. Another effect has been a growing impatience among young generations of non-immigrant Germans with the constant harping on the duty to remember, which brings with it also attributions of generational guilt, or at least responsibility. The rise of antisemitism in the German right, which has of course also other socioeconomic causes, cannot be entirely divorced from this sense among younger German cohorts of imposed guilt. The tendency in Germany, France, and Britain, as well as the United States, to associate antisemitism with immigrants, especially from Arab and Muslim countries, often misses the mark by dismissing the deeper local roots of an anti-Jewish sentiment.

This sentiment has a complex relationship with the expansion of Holocaust commemoration and education, related to the visible presence of well-integrated

Jews within political, economic, and educational elites in those countries. It is also related to the role Israel plays in the life of the Jewish diaspora, the policies of these major Western powers toward Israel, and the impact of Israeli occupation policies on Muslim, Arab, and liberal constituencies, especially among the young. Here, the tension between the proliferation of Holocaust remembrance throughout the West on the one hand, and the proliferation of images of Israeli oppression of Palestinians, on the other, has been most palpable, and has reached a moment of crisis since the Hamas massacre of October 7 and the subsequent destructive Israeli assault on Gaza.

Can the mass murder of the Jews serve as a guide in this instance? The answer to this depends on the beholder. Most Israelis perceive the war in Gaza as a just response to, and an attempt to prevent another instance of, the massacre of a thousand Israeli civilians (not all of them Jews). Since the Hamas massacre is constantly portrayed as genocidal, and Hamas is described in the Israeli media as a Nazi organization, the obvious conclusion is that the war in Gaza must be guided by the lessons learned from the Holocaust and thus be implemented as a robust but unavoidable measure to prevent the repetition of another Jewish genocide.

Conversely, most supporters of the Palestinians and other critics of Israeli policies see what they describe as a brutal and indiscriminate destruction of lives and property in Gaza as genocidal. Thus they turn to the core lesson of the Holocaust, the 1948 Genocide Convention, to argue for an immediate halt to the Israeli assault as an obligation of the international community, pledged to prevent, stop, and punish the crime of genocide. To say that one lesson of the Holocaust is to bring Israel before the ICJ on charges of genocide, appears to many as appalling and is generally portrayed in Israel as a cynical action motivated by antisemitism. Conversely, others argue that silence and inaction by the international community will expose the impotence of the very edifice of international humanitarian law that was put into place in the wake of the Holocaust.

## Israel and the Holocaust

This conundrum leads me to the following question: if the Holocaust was the clearest justification for the need to create a Jewish state, what role has it played in Israel's history for the last seven decades? For most Jews around the world, the establishment of a Jewish state as a haven for the remains of world Jewry seemed the only logical conclusion of the Holocaust. But what appeared as an act of supreme justice became entangled in an act of injustice from its very inception. Because the injustice of the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from what became the state of Israel, and of the refusal to let them return, came so soon after the Holocaust; and because that displacement of most of the Arab inhabitants of Palestine was carried out by Jews only recently displaced from Europe, these two events, the Shoah and the Nakba, became inextricably entangled. And yet, the respective victims of these two events, precisely because they perceived their own catastrophe as constitutive of their individual and collective identity, have insistently rejected the stark reality of this entanglement.

Since that time, the Holocaust has played an increasing role in Israeli self-perception and political rhetoric. Ironically, just as the numbers of those who survived the Nazi hell progressively diminished, so the importance of the Shoah in Israeli public life grew. By now, the conflict with the Palestinians, or rather the various forms of rule by 7 million Jews over 7 million Palestinians, can only be seen through the distorting lens of a historical event that has little connection to the reality of occupation and oppression. And yet, the Holocaust continues to play a major role both in excusing the occupation as an essential bulwark against another Holocaust, and—as was the reality in Israel for several decades until October 7—in keeping the occupation hidden from sight behind a complex of separation walls, fences, checkpoints and bypass roads. In this manner, undemocratic and oppressive rule over the other half of the population was repressed as unrelated to progressive, wealthy, western-oriented Jewish Israel.

Eventually, the clarifying catastrophe of the Holocaust became, for most Israelis, a vast and ugly fig leaf, whose combined effect was a lamentable combination of self-victimization and self-pity with self-righteousness, hubris, and

euphoria of power, whereby one side of the equation justified the other. Ethical concerns and moral qualms were brushed aside as either marginal or distracting in the face of the ultimate cataclysm that is the genocide of the Jews. What had been for long the “never again” syndrome, thus became its exact opposite, the “again and again” syndrome—an internalized, irrational, and misleading terror of another Holocaust, always lurking behind the corner, from which one can liberate oneself only by lashing out, pressing down, breaking in, and blowing up, both one’s own doubts and unease, and any real or perceived external threat. This is not a mental condition, or a historical understanding, conducive to tolerance, understanding, moderation, or reconciliation.

To be sure, there were always other forces in Israeli society that worked against this so-called Holocaust-ism, or Shoah-tiyut, arguing that the growing prevalence of Holocaust paranoia and fears of universal antisemitism were bringing about precisely what they sought to forestall, namely, growing resistance from the occupied and growing disenchantment with Israel by its greatest foreign supporters. But even those more liberal forces in Israel never entirely liberated themselves from that constitutive Holocaust mentality, as can be seen these days, with what has been called the “sobering up” of the Israeli left. Thus, we repeatedly hear about the left’s “realization” that contrary to its hopes, it has turned out that the Palestinians really do want to perpetrate another Holocaust on Israel. As the Israeli writer Zeev Smilanski, son of the iconic author S. Yizhar, who wrote one of the earliest accounts of Nakba, recently [said](#) to Haaretz: “I have no room in my heart for the children of Gaza, however shocking and terrifying that is and despite knowing that war is no solution... I do not find the strength for that in my heart, with all my leftism and humanism, I cannot.” Consequently, Israelis have no choice but to do all it takes to protect themselves, no matter what the rest of the world says.

This mentality has been cultivated by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his successive governments now for decades. It was under his guidance that the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism was pushed by Israeli representatives around the world, making criticism of Israeli policies tantamount to antisemitism, antisemitism tantamount to genocidal intent, and both part and parcel of the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli occupation. The

aggressively critical responses we hear today in Germany, France, Britain, and the United States, to those calling to put an end not only to the slaughter in Gaza but also to the entire apparatus of occupation, testify to the success of Netanyahu's rhetoric, which presents resistance to occupation as genocidal, and illegal settlement as a just Jewish response to past and future Holocausts.

## **Terminology and Its Abuse**

The abuse of terminology has therefore become a tool of policy and an instrument of obfuscation and propaganda. It is for this reason that we, as scholars dedicated to truth, justice, and transparency, must insist on what we mean when we use such terms, and expose those who intentionally, or out of ignorance, misuse them. Indeed, only by clarifying our terms can we begin moving toward resolving the crisis and opening the path for political reconciliation and justice for all. Yet this is far more difficult than one might think. Here is one recent example.

On February 14, 2024, the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem hosted a symposium titled "[The Hague: Gaza, Us, and the World](#)." The keynote speech was delivered by Professor Eyal Benvenisti, the Whewell Professor of International law in Cambridge University and Director of the Lauterpacht Centre for International Law. Hersch Lauterpacht had defined the term "crimes against humanity" as the extermination of civilian populations as individual human beings. At around the same time, Raphael Lemkin, who came from a similar East European Jewish background, had coined the term genocide as the intent to destroy ethnic, national, or religious groups, as such. Since that time, much of international jurisprudence on mass crimes revolves around these two very different yet closely related definitions. The discussion at the Van Leer Institute focused on the implications of South Africa's referral of Israel to the ICJ on allegations of perpetrating genocide.

Interestingly, despite his scholarly credentials, Benvenisti made rather loose use of the terms genocide and antisemitism. As he put it, South Africa's action was not motivated by a desire to stop the war in Gaza but rather intended "to exploit the international stage in order to deny the legitimacy of the Jewish state" and to



“undermine the deep connection between the existence of the state as [national] resurrection following the attempt to exterminate its people.” For that reason, he agreed with the Israeli defense team’s description of South Africa’s filing as a “blood libel,” thereby linking it directly to the deepest wells of European antisemitism. Indeed, Benvenisti stated unambiguously that “the criticism against us... is partly driven by antisemitic motivation.”

Conversely, in Benvenisti’s view, the “terrible massacre, the genocide carried out by Hamas on the Black Sabbath [the Israeli term for October 7] and the crimes it committed... indeed fit the definition of genocide.” Asked about this statement in the discussion, Benvenisti reiterated that to his mind “people had been killed and slaughtered in a terrible manner because they were members of a group and only for that reason. This is the definition of genocide according to the convention.”

I cite Benvenisti’s statements because they demonstrate that even among experts of the very terms in question other factors tend to intervene when discussing issues close to their own worldview and sentiments. Benvenisti provided no proof whatsoever that either South Africa or the ICJ was motivated by antisemitism, but simply asserted the fact, to the general agreement of his almost exclusively Jewish Israeli audience. To those present, apart from the Palestinian professor of law Raef Zreik, who raised some questions about these assertions, this was obvious. Similarly, Benvenisti’s assertion that the Hamas attack was genocidal was stated without any perceived need for proof. The fact, for instance, that Hamas militants also massacred Bedouin and Filipino workers, who clearly pointed out to them that they were not Jews, was not considered. Nor did Benvenisti entertain the possibility of categorizing the Hamas attack as a war crime or a crime against humanity. Simultaneously, he insisted that those who describe Israel’s actions in Gaza—which have cost over 30,000 lives by now, including over 12,000 children—as criminal, are clearly motivated by antisemitism.

I could similarly cite endless statements around the world accusing Israel of genocide even before the IDF operation in Gaza began, indicating both an expectation of mass violence—which was not unwarranted—and in some cases an understanding of Israeli policies against Palestinians as a priori genocidal. There is

also no need here to retrace the multiple groundless allegations of antisemitism against university presidents and professors, the vicious attacks against both Muslims and Jews on campuses and elsewhere, and the deafening silence by so many mainstream and knowledgeable experts and public figures, who for fear of being labeled one way or another are leaving the field open to the extremists and thereby contributing to the polarization they oppose.

### **Conclusion: An Urgent Need for Clarity and Purpose**

As I see it, what we need now is clarity and purpose. Terminology should be applied precisely, as a tool to understanding and defining events rather than as an instrument of politics. The purpose of such clarity must be finding a way out of the chaos. Elaborating on this issue calls for a separate essay. But the cardinal issues can be briefly summarized. First, it must be clear by now that violence cannot resolve the conflict. Second, it is just as obvious that the notion of Israel managing the Palestinian issue by shoving it under the rug can no longer be entertained. The 14 million people living between the river and the sea must be offered a way to coexist in peace, justice, equality and dignity. Third, there can be no doubt that the political leaders of both sides, and their policies, have been deeply discredited and must be replaced. Fourth, because of the absence of an alternative local leadership, it must be recognized that only massive international intervention and commitment, especially but not exclusively by the United States, can begin pushing the sides toward changing the political paradigm of the last few decades and seeking reconciliation. Providing a political horizon of sharing the land will change the current reality as well.

Finally, if we are to take seriously that postwar slogan of “never again,” this is the moment to do so. It is already too late for tens of thousands of innocents. It is time to pull back from the abyss and do all in our powers as scholars, students, and citizens, to convince our governments to compel the warring sides to stop the killing and bring peace to their peoples.

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## About the Author:

[Omer Bartov](#) is the Samuel Pizar Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Brown University. He serves as the Co-Chair to the vertex of Genocide, Holocaust and Disaster Studies and is a member of the Board of Governors of the Council for Global Cooperation. His award-winning publications include *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz* (2018), *Tales from the Borderlands: Making and Unmaking the Galician Past* (2022), and *Genocide, the Holocaust and Israel-Palestine: First-Person History in Times of Crisis* (2023). He is the author of the novel, *The Butterfly and The Axe* (2023) and is currently writing a book provisionally titled “The Broken Promise: A Personal-Political History of Israel and Palestine.”