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FORUM: ISRAEL-PALESTINE: ATROCITY CRIMES AND THE CRISIS OF
HOLOCAUST AND GENOCIDE STUDIES



Genocidal Mirroring in Israel/Palestine

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Rather than marking the onset of a new type of violence, rooted in the fantasy of the disappearance of the “other,” the 7 October war signifies the peak of a once-marginalized pattern of genocidal mirroring. In motion since the late 1980s, the ultra-messianic faction of the Jewish settler movement, emphasizing Jewish supremacy, redemption politics, sacrificial martyrdom, and purifying violence of land and soul, has been entangled with a similar political theology espoused by the Palestinian movement, Hamas. Aware of and constantly reacting to one another, both imagine the disappearance of the other via extermination or expulsion as a form of salvation and take concrete actions to that effect. In this way they are openly engaging in an ever-escalating process of genocidal mirroring.

What was once a marginal dynamic, opposed by most Palestinians and Israelis, including by the Israeli state itself, has increasingly become the prevailing truth of many. The past year have highlighted the full force of this lethal dynamic and the visible lack of opposition to it. In this piece, I aim to outline in broad strokes the formation and intensification of genocidal mirroring, adding nuance to the dominant perspective which considers violence solely as a top-down state-lead vertical affair.

To be clear, turning our attention to the synchronous formation of genocidal imagination does not negate the existence of structural vertical violence, whereby the state of Israel leverages its overwhelming administrative and military power to suppress Palestinian life. Over the years, numerous forms of such violence have been thoroughly documented, thus showing how virtually every aspect of Palestinian life, from freedom of movement to comprehensive digital surveillance, indefinite administrative detentions, land seizures, extrajudicial killings, random killing, and the pervasive degradation of human dignity, is affected. Though the vertical approach to violence as a unidirectional force inflicted from above against a totally incapacitated and passive subject, has its truth, ethics, and theology, it does not account for the many ways in which the violent effect reverberates, metamorphoses, internalized and projected back. It also does not account for the standardization of violence toward the other as an article of faith and a mainstream cultural trait.

Thus, especially in the context of our current reality, verticality alone does not assist us in understanding what appears to be a decisive genocidal turn. Acutely attuned to psychoanalytic undercurrents, Feminist critic Jaqueline Rose recently wrote that “From

playground to killing fields, violence always originates from somebody or somewhere else.”¹ Exploring a dynamic of mirroring is one limited methodological response to this problem. Another reason to focus on a mirroring dynamic amidst overwhelming state-inflicted violence against Gazans is that out of all parties to the conflict, presently as well as historically, only Hamas and messianic Jewish settlers articulated and sustained genocidal political theologies that are clearly recognizable as such.²

As a rule, indiscriminate killings, atrocities, and similar forms of violence including full-fledged genocides, always have established narratives that seek to rationalize, justify and explain indefensible brutalities. Such narratives, often written from within a deep sense of victimization, are very common in Israel/Palestine, including as official state-sanctioned culture. However, powerful as they are, these narratives should not be confused with established political theologies whereby serious legal and doctrinal religious work is mobilized over many years not just to rationalize and justify atrocities, but also to sacralize them. This type of work forms the core of the genocidal imagination as mindset, creed and, ultimately, as everyday politics.

In juxtaposing the only genocidal political theologies in Israel/Palestine, I employ the concept of mirroring with nuance to highlight the relational nature through which both groups perceive themselves vis-à-vis the other. This perception shapes their self-understanding and consequently influences the escalation of their violent *modus operandi*. Within this intricate interplay, some actions are conscious and deliberate, while others are subconscious, abstract, and purely theoretical. Concurrently, the genocidal dynamic under examination here has transcended its marginal status from the 1990s. Intriguingly, it lacks a name that adequately captures the centrality of murderous violence as a form of faith. What terminology, then, should we use to denote it? Despite its problematic nature, in the concluding section of this essay, I propose a potential designation. However, before delving into the gradual formation of this interlocked dynamic, let us first sketch a brief politico-theological profile of the two mirroring parties.

The Slow Making of Genocidal Judaism

Conditions for the emergence of a Jewish genocidal mindset in Israel evolved gradually since the 1970s, particularly within the second and third generations of Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. The initial wave of settlers arrived following the 1967 victory, perceiving it as a divine opening to settle the biblical land. Influenced by the burgeoning post-1967 Messianic fervour, they viewed settlement as the dawn of redemption (*athalta de geula*) of which mainstream Zionism and its secular liberal culture *must* be a part.³ Indeed, originating within the broader context of European Zionism, Jewish-nationalist settlers maintained a very close relationship with.

In contrast, subsequent generations of settlers, educated in isolation from mainland Israel, struggled to both contain their messianic zeal and keep their relationship to Israel's European-styled liberalism. They came to see their parents' attempted merger of liberal Zionism and religion as inherently contradictory and hence futile. This realization

¹ Jaqueline Rose, “You Made Me Do It,” *London Review of Books* 45, no. 23 (30 November 2023).

² The Palestinian organization the *Islamic Jihad* also espouses a similar ideology.

³ For a new history of the first-generation settler and their religious worldview see: Immanuel Atkes, *Meshihiyut, Politika, ve Halacha: Ha Tziyunut Ha-Dait ve Hashtahim, 1967–1982* (Jerusalem: Karmel, 2023).

was amplified during in the early 1980s when a right-wing Israeli government dismantled the Israeli settlements in Sinai and handed the territory back to Egypt in return for peace. In response, a new messianic movement took off. Known by its acronym, *Hardal*, it can be loosely translated as ultra-orthodox Zionist nationalists.⁴

A succinct way to profile *Hardal* is by accounting for it in terms of a transition from the established generation of religious-Zionists to that of creating a new Zionist religion, whereby the protocols of Judaism in the legal, theological, cultural, and behavioural realms are radically altered along distinct metaphysical lines. Unlike the original religious-Zionists who navigate alongside Israeli liberalism's universalist ideals, albeit constrained by the occupation of Palestinians and unequal treatment of Arab citizens, *Hardal* proponents prioritize ethnocentric redemption and theocracy, largely sidelining universalist values.

Led by marginal, yet influential, Rabbis like Tzvi Tau, Dov Lior, Yitzhaq Ginsburg and also Yigal Levinstein and Eli Sadan, and comprising no more than two per cent of the Jewish population in Israel, those identifying themselves as *Hardal* call for a stricter adherence to Jewish Law (*Halacha*), aiming to reframe Judaism both theologically and politically toward the creation of a new, and more pious, Jewish self and a corresponding communal identity whose sole compass is the *Halacha*. Seeking to strengthen patriarchal gender-relations, they call for the segregation of the sexes, and for limiting, if not altogether banning, the consumption of Western culture. Correspondingly, they divest from general scientific and humanistic education toward deeper engagement with religious learning with the goal being that of hastening, rather than just waiting for, messianic redemption (*Geula*). Insisting on cultural isolationism and separatism toward inward purity that is behaviourally marked by modesty and chastity, their overall habitus evoke that of religious fundamentalism in other contexts, including that of Islam.⁵

In addition, befitting their eventual encounter with *Hamas*, a key article of faith of the *Hardal* current is the obligation to retrieve the biblical land of Israel in its entirety as a prerequisite for collective redemption which heralds the arrival of the Messiah. In that, the *Hardal* movement reconfigured the political and theological dimensions of Judaism into a Messianic amalgam that considers Jews to be superior to other gentiles but especially to Palestinians. These, indeed, are deemed not only to be inferior human beings but also a physical barrier to territorial purity and *Geula*.⁶ Hence, enter the mirroring dynamic, the internalized image of a Palestinian "other" as an obstacle for redemption must be destroyed both internally, inside the Jewish self, as well as externally in the real world. This imagined destruction takes on a spatial dimension.

For *Hardal* adherents, any territorial compromise is viewed as a violation of a divine covenant, representing a metaphysical peril and the possible extinction of the self. Importantly, they often conflate genuine security concerns with metaphysical threats, perceiving existence as a zero-sum struggle where Palestinians, irrespective of demographics or beliefs, are seen as a menace to Jewish survival. The analogy to biblical Amalek,

⁴ For the slow development of a new and triumphant radical right, see Ami Pedahzur, *The Triumph of Israel's Radical Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), Chapters 1–3.

⁵ For the formation of *Hardal* and their creed, see Yair Sheleg, *Ha-Hardalim: Historia, Idiologia, Nohechut* (Jerusalem: The Israeli Democracy Institute, 2020), 15–44.

⁶ *Ibid.*

advocating for their eradication, is commonplace among settler communities and has been echoed by Prime Minister Netanyahu, a political captive of *Hardal*. That underscores the pervasiveness of this genocidal mindset.⁷

Rejecting liberal democratic Zionism and its European legal framework for not aligning exclusively with their interpretation of Jewish *Halacha*, *Hardal* adherents not only distance themselves from mainstream secular Israeli norms but also seek to reshape Israel from within, by deepening the occupation of Palestinian land, exporting their “lessons” to Israel proper, and by resorting to violence if deemed necessary. Despite their antagonistic stance towards democratic politics, the movement benefits from a well-funded and segregated state-sponsored education system, including various theological seminaries (*yes-hivot*). The curriculum emphasizes traditional fundamentalist themes such as Jewish sovereignty, sacrifice, purity, a nostalgic longing for an idealized past, imminent redemption, vengeance, and the inevitability of divinely-sanctioned violence.⁸ These aspects collectively aim towards a radical overhaul of creed, ritual, and culture, signifying a profound revision of Jewish faith.

Emerging in the occupied territories amid justified Palestinian resistance to it, the *Hardal* movement draws from radical sources, including the 1980s movement led by the Brooklyn-born Rabbi Meir Kahane. Kahane’s *Kach* party, openly racist and advocating for Jewish racial purity and supremacy through violence, found support particularly in impoverished areas like south Jerusalem. Despite winning a single seat in the 1984 elections, *Kach* was banned from subsequent elections due to its extreme racism. Kahane’s legacy of Jewish supremacy and violence persisted through the slogan “Kahane Was Right” (*Kahane Tzdak*) even after his assassination in 1990.⁹ While lacking legal and rabbinical authority constrained its political influence, the new *Hardal* rabbis are poised to surpass this limitation effortlessly.

Undoubtedly, the creed of *Hardal* thrives within numerous settlements across the occupied territories. Yet, beyond conventional settlements and theological seminaries, *Hardal* members are characterized by the establishment of hill-top rural settlements (*ma’ahazim*). These settlements, not officially endorsed by the state, are forged through violent appropriation of Palestinian land, counter to state plans. Despite their unofficial status, nearly thirty of these settlements have been “legalized” and recognized by the Israeli government, granting them full services and military protection. Positioned at the core of rural Palestinian life, these settlements serve as intellectual incubators and experimental laboratories of genocidal politics, chief of which is ethnic cleansing.

Undoubtedly, within these settlements, the most extreme forms of genocidal violence are not only theorized but also practiced as a routine by a demographic known as the Top Hill Youth. As detailed further, the rabbis of this movement openly advocate for the Hill-Top Youth to partake in ethnic cleansing, euphemistically termed “transfer” in Israeli political discourse, aimed at purging the land to pave the way for constructing a Third

⁷ Noah Lanard, “The Dangerous History Behind Netanyahu’s Amalek Rhetoric,” *Mother Jones*, 3 November 2023, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2023/11/benjamin-netanyahu-amalek-israel-palestine-gaza-saul-samuel-old-testament/>.

⁸ Sheleg, *Ha-Hardalim*, 15–44.

⁹ Shaul Magid is especially attentive to the American context under which Kahane articulated his racist ideas, infatuation with violence and overall political platform. Shaul Magid, *Meir Kahane: The Public Life and Political Thought of an American Jewish Radical* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021); Pedahzur, *The Triumph of Israel’s Radical Right*, Chapters 1–3.

Temple to replace the Islamic Dome of the Rock, which is seen as both a travesty and a potent symbol of unfinished Jewish objectives. In the context of this current war, this past January, *Hardal* held an official “transfer conference” in which they openly called for the destruction of Palestinian society as a necessary step toward redemption.¹⁰

Hardal adherents may not represent a majority within the nationalist-religious Jewish community, but their significant parliamentary presence affords them considerable political influence. Close to ten per cent of the Israeli Knesset aligns with their ideology, and as of December 2022, members of this movement hold key governmental positions, such as the Ministry of National Security led by Itamar Ben Gvir, and the Treasury overseen by Bezalel Smotrich. This grants them unprecedented ministerial control over all aspects of life in the Occupied Territories, including the authority to authorize lethal force and expulsion.

Hamas’s Islamic Genocidal Imagination

On the other side of the divide is the multifaced and constantly changing movement of Hamas which, unlike its Jewish counterpart, never benefited from continuity of institutions and leadership. Constantly under deadly Israeli pressure, over the decades it adopted a modular structure that brought scholars to argue that, historically speaking, “There is no single Hamas.”¹¹ And still, notwithstanding Hamas’s many vicissitudes, its political theology remained quite consistent, and it too is genocidal.

Hamas has its institutional origins in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Formed in 1928, shortly after the devastating abolition of the Caliphate, the Muslim Brotherhood focused on the moral reconstruction of self and society via popular piety, righteous lifestyle, social welfare, and communal self-help. Known as *Da`wa*, this institutional makeup became the very core of Hamas too and its precursor organization *al-Majam` al-Islami* (The Islamic Center). Founded in Gaza in 1978 by the quadriplegic Palestinian refugee Shaykh Ahmad Yassin, it focused on Islamic-based grassroots community building and established *Da`wa* practices of winning the hearts and minds of ordinary people. The emphasis on strong community building and self-constitution pushed armed resistance to Israel to a lower, practically non-existent, priority especially in comparison to *Fatah* movement and other secular nationalist resistance organizations.¹²

As they refrained from engaging in Jihad for as long as possible and restricted its meaning to a form of cultural war, the Islamic Center’s exclusive focus on civic matters became outdated during the first Intifada (1987–91), when the entire community was actively involved in a violent struggle for liberation. In response to these new circumstances, Shaykh Yasin metamorphized his network into the fighting organization of Hamas which he envisioned as a dual-purpose moral cum military resistance movement. Given its institutional and cultural origins, Hamas distinguished itself from other left-wing and nationalist resistance groups such as *Fath*, by calling for the strict application of

¹⁰ Anshel Pfeffer, “Avur Mishtatfev Kenes ha-Transfer,” *Haaretz*, 29 January 2024.

¹¹ Tareq Baconi, *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), XX.

¹² Mati Steinberg, *Omdim le-Goralam: Ha-Todaa ha-Leumit ha-Falestinait, 1967–2000* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2008), 222–6.

Islamic law, or *Shari`a*. In that, the making of an Islamic self and the liberation of Palestine became inextricably linked.¹³

Correspondingly, Hamas set for itself the goal of establishing an independent Islamic polity on the entire land of historic Palestine thus vying to destroy Israel. This unrealistic goal necessitated a new method of liberation in the form of Jihad. However, since Hamas lacked the necessary intellectual resources and theological and juridical gravitas for the development of an Islamic-minded culture of warfare, it relied heavily on the flourishing ecosystem of 1980s regional Jihadism. Among other things, Hamas activists read the many books of the slain Palestinian thinker and activist `Abdallah `Azm (1941–89), who pioneered a brand of transnational Jihad which eventually settled in Afghanistan.¹⁴ One of `Azm's many innovations was adopting the consequential writing of the Egyptian born-again Islamist Sayyid Qutb, to the Palestinian context as the main political and theological mode of Jihadi action.

This body of work was further developed by the late 1970s call of Muhammad `Abd al-Salam Farraj (1952–82), who, in his treatise *The Neglected Duty* (al-Farida al-Gha'iba), introduced the revolutionary idea of Jihad as an individual religious obligation rather than a collective one, as it has always been in Islamic thought and practice.¹⁵ Fashioned as a fundamental individual duty, like the basics of praying and pilgrimage which every believing Muslim must follow, Hamas embraced this doctrinal development.

Indeed, its 1988 founding document states: "The day that enemies usurp part of Muslim land, Jihad becomes *the individual duty* (my emphasis) of every Muslim. In face of the Jews' usurpation of Palestine, it is compulsory that the banner of Jihad be raised."¹⁶ The privatization of Jihad opened new politico-theological avenues with relation to the primacy of sacrifice and martyrdom bringing the organization to instruct that "... death for the sake of Allah is the loftiest of its wishes."¹⁷ Becoming a central article of faith and the prime mode for personal and collective emancipation, the universal goal of this newly formed notion of Jihad, unprecedented as it was in Islamic history, was to liberate all of Palestine.

By calling "... to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine,"¹⁸ Hamas, as *Hardal* settlers before them, also considers sovereignty over the combined complex of the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque as the ultimate measure of its success in the world and hence as a sacred duty worthy of the highest form of individual and collective sacrifice. Indeed, by the 1990s, Hamas has subscribed to the belief that the Day of Judgment or the Day of Resurrection (*Yawm al-Qiyama*), which is the final reckoning and culmination of human existence, will arrive only when Jerusalem and the entire land of Palestine will be liberated. In that, Hamas turned al-Aqsa, and the cause of Palestine more broadly, into the linchpin of a renewed Islamic theology.¹⁹ Entering the

¹³ Ibid., 222–6, 262.

¹⁴ `Azm was eventually killed by al-Qaida for offering an alternative political vision. Thomas Hegghammer, *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹⁵ Mark Juergensmeyer and Margo Kitts, "Abd al-Salam Faraj," in *Princeton Readings in Religion and Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 62–8.

¹⁶ For "The Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement" of 1988, see https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/doctrine-hamas>.

¹⁹ Stenberg, *Omdim le-Gorlam*, 229.

genocidal dynamic, Hamas's vision will materialize only when the internalized image of the settler Jew will be destroyed in the self as well as in the real world. The practice of suicide bombing is perfectly suited for this goal.

Though emerging organically from within the ranks of the people and in opposition to both the Israeli occupation and the secular nationalism of other Palestinian liberation organizations, due to the efforts of the Israeli authorities to destroy it, Hamas was unable to develop freely and linearly. Outlawed in 1989, a mere year after its formation, it went underground and developed a bifurcated political, spiritual, and military structure, part of which was in Gaza, another in the West Bank and, yet another, mostly its political wing, in Jordan, Syria and, more recently Qatar. Since 2006, when it took control of the Gaza strip and assumed responsibility for its two million strong population, it also developed considerable civic governing capacity, thus returning to its institutional origins as a project of radical morality and *Da'wa*. At the same time, the 2017 rise to power of Yihya Sinwar as the sole ruler of Gaza, marks a decisive turn toward a new form of genocidal violence in which holy war and deliberate acts of cruelty take precedence over all other civic considerations.

Genocidal Mirroring and Emulation

Though both Hamas' and *Hardal's* spiritual leaders committed many violent words to paper, doing so is only the first stage in the establishment of an entrenched genocidal culture. For that to take root and for people to act, enormous pedagogical resources will still need to be developed and deployed. By the early 1990s, both groups took decisive steps toward the creation of such a culture by committing to the annihilation of the other as a project of religious self-constitution. A central aspect of that evolution was the vehement opposition to any attempts to physically partition the land, as was gradually occurring with the Oslo Peace deal, albeit unevenly and problematically. Indeed, these two groups were the only ones to take violent measures to stop the division by any means possible, including the issuing of a rabbinical permission to kill then Prime Minister Yizhaq Rabin and the appalling execution of this edict in November 1995.²⁰ On the part of Hamas, as we shall see, opposition to the peace process included a rampant campaign of suicide bombing against Israeli civilians everywhere. Thus, viewed as a whole, both groups began to develop a genocidal dialectic based in a fantasy of extermination of the other, a phenomenon I term genocidal mirroring.

Against this backdrop, the first significant marker in the process of genocidal emulation was the February 1994 Cave of the Patriarchs Massacre in Hebron. Perpetrated by the American-born Jewish settler Baruch Goldstein during the Purim holiday, a narrative

²⁰ Rabin's commitment to turn sacred land over to Palestinians triggered fierce Rabbinical debates over *Din Rodef* and *Din Moser*. "A *moser* is a Jew who informs on his fellow Jews to gentile authorities, hands Jews over to gentile authorities, or gives Jewish land away to gentiles. A *rodef* is someone who is in immediate pursuit of another individual with the intent of killing that individual ... What made these allegations so serious was that according to Jewish law, one was permitted to kill a *moser* or *rodef*. The implication here was that Rabin deserved to die." There were also juridical debates about the biblical act of Phinehas who took the law into his own hands. Robert Eisen, *The Peace and Violence of Judaism: From the Bible to Modern Zionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 157–8. The fact that the issue was deemed contested and that main voiced of the settler movement actively participated in the delegitimization of Rabin ("the dictator"), was enough to push the killer to challenge the norm and the law into his own hands as Pinhas did. On the murder and its implications as "state killing" see: Yoram Peri, *Yad Ish be Akhiv: Retzah Rabin ve Milhemet ha-Tarbut be Israel* (Tel Aviv: Bavel, 2005), especially Chapter 2.

that depicted ill-intentioned individuals seeking to exterminate Jews inspired Goldstein to massacre 29 Muslim worshipers and wound over 125 others. The act of killing Palestinians as they prayed was a horrendous development, yet it found approval among extremist factions within the settler movement. Immediately, these *Hardal* circles embraced Goldstein as a martyr (he was killed during the attack) and lauded his exemplary sacrifice through extensive writings and speeches.

The short book *Baruch Ha-Gever* (Baruch “The Man” 1994), authored by one of the “best minds” of this virulent movement, the American-born Rabbi Yitzhaq Ginsburg, theorized Goldstein’s massacre as a desired step toward the extermination and/or expulsion of all Palestinians. To quote: “(Baruch’s) act underscored five fundamental elements: sanctification of the name of God (*kiddush Hashem*); saving Jewish souls at the expense of spilling non-Jewish blood (*hatzalat nefashot*); blood feud (*ge’ulat dam ve-nekamah*); extermination of Amalek and extermination of evil (*hashmadat Amalek u-veur ha-ra*); and (holy) war for the Promised Land (*milchamah le-kibush ha-’aretz*).”²¹ In one way or another, all five elements valorized the legal, political, moral and even spiritual virtues of the massacre thus serving a key religious components of an emerging genocidal culture. And though the book was banned and those associated with it were dragged to court, Rabbi Ginsburg soon followed with another book, *Tzav Ha Sha’ah: Tipul Shoreshe* (An Urgent Plea for A Comprehensive Treatment), which called to ethnically cleanse Israel proper form all its Arab citizens.

Hamas’ reaction to the massacre was equally transformative. Regardless of its aspiration to liberate all of Palestine, up until that point, Hamas restricted its resistance to the Occupied Territories and, mostly, to the kidnapping and killing of Israeli soldiers. In that, Hamas’ Jihad did not differ very much from the mode of resistance that characterized other Palestinian organizations that were now divesting from violence to negotiate the division of the land. Confronting Israel on its own and working against the grain of history, the massacre exposed the naivety of Hamas’ conventional mode of resistance and rendered it obsolete. In its place, Hamas began to theorize, justify and carry and indiscriminate campaign of suicide bombing whose theological core is martyrdom (*Istishhad*).

Though already in 1992 Hamas imported the practice of suicide bombing from the Shi’i political culture practiced by Hizballah, it never fully embraced this foreign and controversial innovation.²² That is because, from a Sunni Islamic standpoint, the killing innocent people including the death of the Muslim bomber in the process was deemed religiously forbidden. Indeed, the justification of suicide bombing necessitated significant legal and theological work. During the 1990s, Muslim clerics were bitterly torn over the legality of suicide bombing with leading Saudi clerics rejecting it and others, like the prominent Egyptian jurist in exile Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, permitting and even lionizing it. As 500 clerics pushed to legalize suicide bombing and the Grand Mufti of Egypt selectively permitting the practice, specifically in the Palestinian context, Hamas was ready to deploy this new mode of resistance indiscriminately.²³

Escalating accordingly, Goldstein’s massacre pushed Hamas to normalize, valorize and canonize indiscriminate death through the quest for martyrdom. This glorified sacrificial

²¹ Yitzhaq Ginsburg, *Baruch Ha-Gever* (N.P., 1994), 20, <https://www.inn.co.il/forum/t652883>.

²² Meir Hatina, *Martyrdom in Modern Islam: Piety, Power, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 117. Baconi, *Hamas Contained*, 44–7.

²³ Steinberg, *Omdim le-Goralam*, 279–89.

culture in which both the “other” and its internalized image are singlehandedly destroyed, found its pedagogical path into elementary schools, where “Songs of the Martyr” were recited. Here is one: “Better my death than my stolen right and homeland; the sound of the explosion is pleasant to me and the flow of the bold cheers me.”²⁴ Though Hamas never considered itself to be only a Jihadi organization, for the next two decades, and especially during the *Second Intifada* (2000–05), Hamas and like-minded organizations such as the Islamic Jihad, and even *Fatah*’s secular *tanzim* organization, carried out dozens of such operations killing hundreds and injuring thousands of Israeli citizens. The longstanding cultural legacy of suicide bombing is the entrenchment of genocidal culture.

Redemptive Revenge

In this new context and given the monopoly of the Israeli state over the usage of force and its difficulty to quell the Second Intifada, the settlers began to feel that the state is not protecting them against what they perceived to be a clear existential danger. Unable to tell actual security threat from metaphysical danger, they took matters into their own violent hands in unprecedented ways. The most ubiquitous form of violence was geared toward ethnically cleansing vulnerable rural and semi-sedentary Palestinians communities. The method of doing so consisted of the construction of Jewish rural farms (Hill-tops) on Palestinian land and systematically harm the Palestinians while pushing them off the land.

In the early 2000s, the most encroached upon communities of Palestinians were in the southern slopes of mount Hebron and toward the Judea Desert. In 2005 I volunteered for a year in one of these rural communities, in the village of al-Tuwayni, where I witnessed the systematic killing and poisoning of animals (including wildlife), the poisoning of fields and water sources, violent attacks against Palestinian children on their way to school and the Israeli, but especially the foreign, read *Goyim*, volunteers who escorted them. These daily measures were amplified by administrative harassment of Israel’s Military Administration which, on many occasions, collaborated with the settlers by bulldozing private homes and civil infrastructure. In fact, already back then, the demolitions illustrated something of an emerging symbiotic relationship between *Hardal* settlers and state administration.²⁵ It is therefore not surprising to learn that since 7th October alone, additional eighteen rural communities have been violently displaced.²⁶

The intensification of this type of vertical and synchronic violence, took place against the 2005 failure of the settler leadership and its significant political lobby to prevent the Israeli eviction of the Gaza Strip and its Jewish settlements and settlers. Experienced as a deep crisis of faith and abandonment that was further augmented by the 2009 decision to freeze the construction of new settlements, it intensified a generational split whereby a significant number of young settlers became disillusioned with both their parents’ political orientation as well as with the state of Israel which betrayed its sacred duty to God. This

²⁴ Quoted in Hatina, *Martyrdom in Modern Islam*, 120.

²⁵ On settler in this particular area, including the village of al-Tuwayni, see David Shulman, *Freedom and Despair: Notes from the South Hebron Hills* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). See also Shulman’s recent article about the continuation and intensification of cleansing today. David Shulman, “Israel the Way Out,” *New York Review of Books*, April 2024.

²⁶ Hagar Sheyaf, “Ein `Atid: Ze Hasof,” *Haaretz*, 30 April 2024.

double alienation, further fuelled the rise of the Hill-Top youth and its *Ma'ahazim* movement, resulting, eventually, in another genocidal theological innovation. It too came in the form of a new book. It too, like much of their writing, was never translated to English.

Torat Ha-Melech (The King's Torah), a new juristic interpretation of the Jewish laws of war, the treatment of non-Jews and the obligations of the ruler toward the Jewish people, was by far the most intense response to the forced (and quite violent) evacuation of Gaza. Written by two of Rabbi Ginsburg's disciples, the first volume was published in 2008 with another following suit in 2016. *Torat Ha-Melech* went far beyond, and in much greater juridical depth, into the concerns and iterations of Ginsburg's previous gem, *Baruch Ha-Gever*. Constituting an exhaustive piece of jurisprudence, it focused on two interrelated issues, namely, the killing of non-Jews by Jews, whether combatants or innocents, and the responsibility of the Jewish ruler and the Jewish state towards the Jewish people. A classic text of political theology, it was designed not only to justify violence and reformulate its relation to the sovereign but also to "... challenge the basic hesitance of modern *poskim* (jurors) to adjudicate in state matters."²⁷ Indeed, just like the Islamic writings of Qutb, Farraj, 'Azm and score of other marginal Islamist theoreticians, *Torat Ha-Melech* pushed for a reformulation of normative Jewish political culture and its law toward genocide.

Severing the bond to the nuanced and moderate existing juridical tradition, *Torat Ha-Melech* grounded the link between Jewish racial supremacy and the right to practice extreme violence against non-Jews combatants and innocents, including the killing of their children. "It is the right of non-Jews to life that is called into question and ultimately negated by these texts, either conditionally or overall," opined one strong critic of the text.²⁸ Causing a shock in normative rabbinical circles, *Torat Ha-Melech* was understood as a "... break with both the state apparatus and the Jewish majority's public opinion as sources of authority and legitimacy. Contemporary hard-right *poskim* ... highlight the importance of individual initiative and show total disregard to notions of popular consensus or the rule of law. That is why *revenge* and *feud* become so prominent in their adjudication: they signify an extralegal principle that enables one to bypass normative law."²⁹ It appears that no other work captures the juridical making of this specific tradition where the Sixth Commandment "Thou Shalt Not Murder" applies only to Jews killing each other. Though strongly resisted by other settler Rabbis of the older generation as a book that openly calls for genocide, the book's found an eager audience in amongst the young.³⁰ In the name of divine revenge, this generation was set to destroy, harm, and kill Palestinians only for who they were.

Probably the best manifestation of the virtue of divine revenge along what *Torat ha-Melech* proposes and justifies, is the exponential spread of vigilantism and the "Price Tag" (*Tag Mehiv*) movement, in particular, by disciples of Rabbi Ginsburg. Price Tagging is a misleading phenomenon. Though in Hebrew it sounds like a violent response to Palestinian violent acts along the lines of self-defense or retribution, in reality, it is motivated by

²⁷ Hillel Ben-Sasson, "Yitzhak Shapira and Yosef Elitzur, *Torat HaMelekh*," in *The New Jewish Canon*, ed. Yehuda Kurtzer and Claire E. Sufrin (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020), 100.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁰ For a juridical refutation of *Torat Ha-Melech* as a consciously anti-genocidal text see: Finkelstein Ariel, *Derech Ha-Melech: Alternative Hilchatit ve meta-Hilchatit la sefer torat ha-Melech* (Jerusalem, 2011).

extreme hatred and dehumanizing redemptive revenge in a fashion that further engenders a genocidal cycle. Indeed, settler vigilantes began by destroying in random Palestinian property and quickly graduated to taking life at random.³¹

The most horrific example of that murderous practice was the 2015 Duma Arson Attack when an entire Palestinian family was set ablaze while asleep. Though normally excused or explained away as spontaneous inter-communal violence, settlers' violence, as in the February 2023 programme in Hawara and the public calls to wipe it out, is organized, planned, and nourished by a significant body of theological work that calls for, and justifies, the constant killing and expulsion of Palestinians from their land. In that, it marks the actualization and normalization of genocidal Judaism like never before.³²

Genocidal Liberation

The Israeli withdrawal from Gaza was also a watershed moment in Hamas's attitude toward governance and violence. After years of suicide bombing, this time around, it planned to deploy political means as a path to power and set its military options aside albeit without losing sight of its eventual goal of liberating all of Palestine. After boycotting previous Palestinian elections cycles, in the 2006 elections Hamas won squarely and fairly, thus strengthening its political office on the expense of its Jihadi wing. However, given the opposition of the US, Israel and Europeans to the inclusion of Hamas in a Palestinian unity government without recognizing Israel and accepting the legal framework of the Oslo Process, the Palestinians soon split. Thereafter, an internal Palestinian conflict resulted in Hamas taking over control of the Gaza Strip from Fatah controlled Palestinian Authority in its entirety via a violent coup during which many atrocities have been committed.³³

Ruling over a liberated Palestinian territory for the first time in its history, Hamas's prevailing argument was that one summer of military resistance produced for Palestinians more free land than a decade of peace negotiations. Following Hamas's takeover of Gaza, Israel (and Egypt) placed a total economic blockade and refused to engage Hamas diplomatically. That refusal pushed Hamas's military wing back into the centre thus further decreasing Hamas's political faction on the expanse of its military one.³⁴ Pushed out of inter-state politics it became locked in something of a violent equilibrium with Israel during which it suffered heavily in multiple military campaigns (2008, 2012, 2014) that killed thousands of civilians. Once again responding politically, in 2017 Hamas officially amended its founding 1988 document, accepted a two-state solution along the 1967 border as a long-term truce (*hudna*) and offered a distinction between Jews and Zionists in a way that was seen as a divestment from antisemitism. Though Hamas offered a truce, it nonetheless refused to reconsider its view of the "other" and

³¹ While in 2014 "Demographically and organizationally, price taggers stand on 'the fringe of the fringe' of the settler world. Estimates suggest they number in the mere hundreds," a decade later, this is no longer the case. Tessa Satherley, "'The Simple Jew': The 'Price Tag' Phenomenon, Vigilantism, and Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh's Political Kabbalah," *Melilah: Manchester Journal of Jewish Studies* 10, no. 1 (2014): 57–91.

³² See recent *Haaretz* editorial which highlights the triumph of organized Jewish violence: for instance: Editorial, "Mif al Alimut Meurgenet," *Haaretz*, 28 April 2024.

³³ Baconi, *Hamas Contained*, Chapter 3.

³⁴ Being an Islamic sovereign, Hamas applied *Shari'a* laws to all aspects of life including a crackdown against moral deviants such as prostitutes, criminals, drug dealers and gay people who compromise the moral purity of the community as well as exposing themselves to extraction by Israeli intelligence.

give up the fantasy of Israel's destruction.³⁵ Since that revised strategy did not change the dynamic on the ground toward the removal of the senseless Israeli embargo on Gaza, it paved the way for the rise of Yihya Sinwar, a former prisoner in Israel and now the omnipotent ruler of Gaza.

Under his leadership, the most violent in Hamas's entire history, the organization invested considerable energy in the creation of military infrastructure and developed significant missile capacity, tunnelling, marine commandoes and rapid assault units. By 2023 it boasted a robust military force, totalling around 30,000 fighters, and an established capacity to inflict serious pain on Israelis. Correspondingly, Hamas continued to develop its eliminationist Jihadi doctrine which was in sharp contradiction to its revised 2017 covenant. It will take time to fully understand how Sinwar transformed Hamas in Gaza (but not in the West Bank) into a new type of Jihadi force. As of today, existing evidence for this transformation is not so much juridical as in the Jewish side, as much as declarative, political, organizational and circumstantial per its murderous actions in October 2023. Benefitting for the first time from total hegemony over the population of Gaza, Hamas invested heavily in pedagogical resources that were used, among other things, to cultivate a new generation of sacrificial fighters whose declared goal was the utter destruction of Jewish existence in Israel as a form of self-liberation.

This agenda, popular also in school textbooks, was officially instituted in a September 2021 Gaza conference for planning the ethnic cleansing of all Jews in Palestine as an expression of the Koranic "last promise" regarding the ultimate reward of the believers and the fulfilment of God's divine plan (*al-Wa'd al-Akhira*).³⁶ Specifically, the concept of "the last promise" emphasizes the finality and completeness of the Prophet's message thus underscoring the belief that Islam is the final and universal religion for all of humanity until the Day of Judgment. Publicly endorsed by Sinwar, the conference cemented the link between genocide and redemption as key doctrinal elements of Hamas in Gaza.

This "last promise" conference mirrors in full the 2017 "Decisive Plan" of current minister Bezalel Smotrich and might have convened as a response to it. In his plan, Smotrich argues that "Essentially, the so-called Palestinian People, is nothing but a countermove to Zionism." Being the mere mirror image that it is, Smotrich conceived of the conflict as a zero-sum existential battle in which the original image of Zionism must prevail over its faked counter-image. In that, he rejected "... the fantasy that one can maintain two national aspirations ... " in same land. It is due to this fantasy, he argues, that the Palestinians were never subjugated, and the conflict was never settled. In that, he called for a complete takeover of historic Palestine by means of ethnically cleansing or killing those who will resist full Jewish sovereignty.³⁷ Though understanding Palestinian nationalism in relation to Zionism, Smotrich is blind to the fact that he is actively engaging in a process of mirroring, that is in a relationship. Doing so not only in writing, already in 2005 the Internal Israeli Security services arrested Smotrich with

³⁵ Baconi, *Hamas Contained*, 245–9.

³⁶ "Tawsiyat Mu'atamer Wa'd al-Akhira: Filastin ba'd al-Tahrir," *Markaz al-I'lam al-Islami*, 30 September 2021, <https://palinfo.com/news/2021/09/30/60902/>. "Ve'ida be 'Aza," *Memri*, 5 October 2021, <https://www.memri.org/il/cgi-webxxy/item?5482>.

³⁷ Bezalel Smotrich, "The Decisive Plan: The Key to Peace is on the Right," *Hashiloach – An Israeli Journal for Thought and Policy* 6 (2017), <https://shorturl.at/dylP7>. Shlomi Eldar, "Be Hamas Hashvu Shehem Yichbeshu et Israel," *Haaretz*, 4 April 2024, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/2024-04-04/ty-article-magazine/highlight/0000018e-a379-d315-ab9f-aff98d4b0000>.

hundreds of gallons of petroleum in his car on the way to Tel Aviv to commit a crime with the hope of stopping the Israeli withdraw from Gaza.³⁸ This is yet another example of the ongoing mirroring cycle.

In yet another cycle of this dynamic, Sinwar's tenure in Gaza ushers in a qualitative difference in Jihadi violence. Unlike the old 1990s notion of *Istishad* whose main expression was sacrificial suicide bombing, Sinwar's Jihad is not just a manifestation of power but also of deliberate cruelty. This doctrinal development can be traced back to Abu Bakr Naji's 2004 book *Idarat al-Tawahush (The Management of Savagery)* in which he outlined a violent strategy of war-making that centred, among other things, on cruelty as the ultimate means of destroying the other. Eventually serving as a major inspiration for ISIS, the bearers of this notion of Jihad in Gaza were Hamas's *Nukhba* elite force. They also endorsed elements of Iran's established sacrificial culture and, in particular, the legacy of Iran's legendary slain General Qasem Soleimani, whom the US assassinated in 2020. Though it will take time to understand what theological properties and traditions of violence Hamas imported to Gaza, many members of this force have been reportedly trained in Iran.

Though Iran and ISIS are mortal enemies of each other, the paradoxical infusion of their practices and theologies is not yet entirely clear. And still, on 7 October Jihadis were instructed not just to kill anyone they met but to do so cruelly, cutting limbs and killing children in front of their parents while, on many occasions, documenting their own actions and even posting them to social media platforms in real time for all to see.³⁹ A genocidal massacre par excellence, 7th October was not meant to end on that day but to continue on to 8th and 9th October and so forth toward the total destruction of the mirror image of the other which is imagined, spatially, in terms of the liberation of Palestine.

To continue this horrific cycle, by putting its genocidal culture to work, Hamas's premeditated massacre now serves as the prime catalyst for the implementation of Smotrich's genocidal plan. Indeed, in his capacity as minister of Treasury with responsibilities over Palestinians as a Deputy Minister of Defense as well, Smotrich actively implements whatever he can from his plan and openly hopes for the total ethnic cleansing and destruction of Gaza toward the restoration of Jewish sovereignty in it.⁴⁰ The destruction of the above-mentioned eighteen communities since 7th October must be understood in this context. Though born in the Occupied Territories, this genocidal agenda is by no means ideologically confined to it and can be found in Jewish communities outside Israel too. Seeking revenge and redemption, during the past decade, several Israeli observers and scholars like Yagil Levi flagged efforts to alter the secular nationalist nature of the Israeli Defense Forces by theocratizing it.

By and large, though the IDF avoids drafting the most radical and violent members of *Hardal*, given the growing size of this demographic within the army, including among the officers' corps and the growing number of soldiers who sympathize or directly belong to these genocidal circles especially on the field level, their influence is growing. That was true well before the current war, for instance in 2014, when a senior commander

³⁸ "Smotrich Mehabel Yehudi," *Ma'ariv*, 17 March 2019, <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/israel/Article-689947>.

³⁹ There are also reports on extensive usage of the amphetamine Capatagon which was first used and produced by ISIS: Nir Tavori, "Nimtza 'al Guful Mehablīm," *N12*, 19 October 2023, <https://www.mako.co.il/news-military/6361323ddea5a810/Article-8a78e9c58574b81027.htm?Partner=searchResults>. <https://www.fdd.org/about-fdd/>.

⁴⁰ Shalom Yerushalmi, "Smotrich Menatzel et Hamilhama," *Zman Israel*, 11 March 2023, <https://www.zman.co.il/434732/popup/>.

framed the war as a campaign to redeem God's name and army Rabbis followed suit with a similar message about a holy war.⁴¹ Another area of friction is *Hardal's* efforts to alter the army judicial system and its adherence to international law. That project came into focus during the 2016 El-or Azaria Affair, when a Israeli soldier executed a wounded Palestinian and was legally defended via the above-mentioned logic of racial/blood inferiority. A decade later, and in the context of the current war in Gaza, the rhetoric of a genocidal Jewish Holy War is being pushed into the mainstream like never before and is featured in many of its ground operations, especially among the ranks of the more popular infantry and armoured divisions.⁴²

What is Next?

Sketched here only in very general terms that call for a more substantial scholarly engagement, these synchronous traditions, clearly illustrate the presence of two inter-locked genocidal political theologies. Motivated by a deep sense of victimization, both traditions systematically dehumanize an "other," whom they consider the source of metaphysical evil. It is only when this evil is utterly purged and destroyed that the respective divine missions can be accomplished. Engaged in multiple forms of symbolic violence as well, it is very likely that, eventually, elements within *Hardal* will attempt to destroy the Dome of the Rock and/or the al-Aqsa mosque as their predecessors have planned to do in the early 1980s. And while this synchronous dynamic does not undermine the more familiar cases in which genocide is a one-sided to-down affair, the process of genocidal mirroring as a long-standing day-to-day culture and politics is a force we must recognize.⁴³

The first step in recognizing this dynamic is to name its moving parts. Problematic for a variety of reasons, I propose considering the mirroring phenomenon discussed here as an interplay between a Palestinized version of Jihad and its mirror image which I call *Jewhad*. I recognize that while Jihad is internal to Hamas's Islam, *Jewhad* is an external imposition. However, it is enough read Rabbai Yigal Levinstein's new book about the current war which he describes as a purifying and sublime ritual of blood, sacrifice and redamation, to realize that he is writing not about a new phenomenon of Jewish Jihad, or *Jewhad*.⁴⁴

Shifting to this forum's concern with Genocide Studies, as an intellectual historian of the Arab world, I have no standing in this established field of study. I understand perfectly well why the legal norm of genocide and its corresponding human rights tradition and scholarly field, all of which emerged as a response to the Holocaust and in its context, will be thrown into serious epistemological crisis, especially when dealing with Palestine, where the collective ontological concerns of the Global South neatly come into focus against a Holocaust-inspired

⁴¹ For the 2014 text see: Gili Cohen, "Mahat Giv'ati la Hayalim," *Haaretz*, 11 July 2014.

⁴² Political Scientist Yagil Levi is the most systematic and sophisticated critic of IDF's theocratization: Yagil Levi, *Ha-Mefaked ha-Elyon: Ha-te'okratizatsyah shel ha-Tsava be-Yisra'el* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved 2015). See Yagil Levi's critique of the current theocratization of the war: "Ha'im ha-Milhama hi Milhemet Dat?" 21 November 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQyU6L_U-t0.

⁴³ See a similar argument in this forum by Martin Shaw, "Inescapably Genocidal," *Journal of Genocide Research* (3 January 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2023.2300555>.

⁴⁴ Yigal Levinstein, *Ke-Ari Yitnase: 'Al Romemut ha-ruh ve Madrekat Ha-Hayim ha-Meyuhedet be Zman Milhama* (NP: Bet Midrash le-Sfarim, 2024).

tradition that negates or marginalizes them.⁴⁵ But does that make Genocide Studies futile as Abdelwahab El-Affendi suggests?⁴⁶ Not at all. On the contrary. From the narrow standpoint of the history Middle East, it is my sense that our long overdue conversation with Genocide Studies (and scholars of violence more generally), is just beginning. It will help us replacing superficial and totalizing language with the capacity to read through the mythological universe that justifies, sustains, and erases mass killings of which there are many. Indeed, historians of the Middle East rarely engage the history of violence conceptually, seldom articulated protocols for the interpretation of violence and rarely write about violence, including possible genocides, in any holistic fashion (A notable exception to this is the strong scholarship on the Armenian genocide). The investigative endeavour should also prompt us to examine today's devastation of Gaza and its people, along with traditions of violence not discussed here, such as the dominant current of liberal Zionism and the way it interfaces Sinwar's Hamas.

As many contributors to this forum and journal have pointed out, there is a substantial body of evidence indicating that Israel's campaign exhibits unmistakable genocidal characteristics. Israeli Holocaust scholar Amos Goldberg is arguably the first to convey this view to Israelis in their own language.⁴⁷ However, it is important to note that genocide as understood in international law may not necessarily align with genocide as a cultural phenomenon. As a historian, I am particularly interested in the latter domain. Therefore, in addition to the imperative of advocating for an immediate halt to the war, there exists a corresponding intellectual responsibility to uncover and scrutinize the deep-seated intellectual frameworks that translate the fantasy of genocide into actual politics regardless of the eventuality of a legal ruling.

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⁴⁵ For the crux of this critique see Zoé Samudzi, "We are Fighting Nazis: Genocidal Fashionings of Gaza(ns) After 7 October," *Journal of Genocide Research* (18 January 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2024.2305524>.

⁴⁶ Abdelwahab El-Affendi, "The Futility of Genocide Studies After Gaza," *Journal of Genocide Research* (18 January 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2024.2305525>.

⁴⁷ Amos Goldberg, "Ken ze Retzah `Am," *Siha Mekomit*, 17 April 2024, <https://www.mekomit.co.il/ps/134005/>.