

# The Root of Western Haplessness with Israel

by Riccardo Alcaro

As Israel intensifies its bombing of Lebanon and the spectre of a generalised conflict that may involve Iran and the United States hovers ominously over the region, Western governments seem passive viewers of a decade-long drama for which they actually bear great responsibility.

Israel claims to defend itself against enemies determined to destroy it, from Hamas in Palestine to Hezbollah in Lebanon to the Islamic Republic of Iran. These are undoubtedly implacable enemies. However, it is equally true that over the decades Israel has barely missed an opportunity to foment the radicalism of its adversaries, marginalising the more pragmatic voices, and that the United States and Europe have not put up any barriers.

## *The peace process that never was*

In February 1994, a man named Baruch Goldstein fired on a group of Muslim worshippers gathered in prayer at the

Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, killing 29 Palestinians and wounding 125.<sup>1</sup> Goldstein was a naturalised American-Israeli linked to the most extreme fringes of Zionism, which pushed for the annexation of Palestinian land occupied by Israel after the June 1967 six-day war – East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip – and the forced removal of its inhabitants.<sup>2</sup>

The massacre revealed how controversial the peace process initiated in Oslo was.<sup>3</sup> The opposition front spanned extremists like Goldstein

<sup>1</sup> For basic information on the Hebron massacre, see Institute for Palestine Studies, *Hebron Massacre, 1994*, 6 November 2023, <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1652605>.

<sup>2</sup> Goldstein was a supporter of the Kach party (for more information, see Israel Democracy Institute website: *Kach*, <https://en.idi.org.il/israeli-elections-and-parties/parties/kach>).

<sup>3</sup> An explainer of the Oslo Accord can be found here: Institute for Middle East Understanding, *Explainer: The Oslo Accords*, 1 September 2023, <https://imeu.org/article/explainer-the-oslo-accords>.

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but also the centre-right Likud party, whose leader Benjamin Netanyahu was and would forever remain opposed to a Palestinian state. The assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, a main architect of Oslo, by an orthodox extremist in 1995 further consolidated Israel's internal fractures.<sup>4</sup> The last glimmers of hope were extinguished with the electoral victory in early 2001 of the new Likud leader Ariel Sharon, who had gone the extra mile to sabotage the new peace negotiations at Camp David and Taba.<sup>5</sup> Hamas, which had always denounced Oslo as a deception, launched a campaign of kamikaze attacks that resulted in the Second Intifada.

### *The delegitimisation of the Palestinian cause*

The uprising increased the credibility of Hamas as a genuine anti-occupation resistance force, in contrast to a Palestinian Authority (the embryonic state formed in Oslo) that was weak, corrupt and compromised with Israel. But for the Palestinian cause the Second Intifada was a disaster. Hamas's terrorist tactics contributed to the delegitimisation of Palestinian claims in the eyes of the United States and Europe. This perception was reinforced as the Islamist group – ousted from the West Bank after winning parliamentary elections in 2006 but in control of Gaza

<sup>4</sup> Roger Cohen, "The Incitement in Israel that Killed Yitzhak Rabin", in *The New York Times*, 4 December 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/04/opinion/incitement-movie.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Kreitner, "September 28, 2000: Ariel Sharon Visits the Temple Mount, Sparking the Second Intifada", in *The Nation*, 28 September 2015, <https://www.thenation.com/?p=188385>.

since 2007 – progressively tightened ties with Iran and its anti-American axis of resistance.<sup>6</sup>

This is the context in which the right to self-defence invoked by Israel has become all-encompassing. The presence of Hamas in Gaza has justified the almost total subordination of the Strip to Israel, which controls its air and sea space, land entrances with the exception of the border with Egypt, and its energy, water and food supply.<sup>7</sup> It has also provided cover to Israel's continuous military operations in Gaza, which according to the United Nations caused the death of more than 6,400 Palestinians (many of them civilians), compared to about three hundred Israelis killed, between 2008 and September 2023.<sup>8</sup>

Self-defence was also invoked when in August 2006 Israel once again invaded Lebanon in the attempt to destroy Hezbollah. Over 1,100 people died in the campaign, of which about 250 were militiamen.<sup>9</sup> Finally, self-defence underpinned Israel's vehement opposition to any form of diplomatic

<sup>6</sup> Edward Wastnidge and Simon Mabon, "The Resistance Axis and Regional Order in the Middle East: Nomos, Space, and Normative Alternatives", in *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 21 February 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2023.2179975>.

<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International, *Israel's Occupation: 50 Years of Dispossession*, 7 June 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/?p=68668>.

<sup>8</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) oPt website: *Data on Casualties*, <https://www.ochaopt.org/data/casualties>.

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Why They Died. Civilian Casualties in Lebanon during the 2006 War*, September 2007, <https://www.hrw.org/node/255321>.

engagement with Iran by the West, including on the nuclear front.

### *Western defence of Israel's right to defence*

The United States and Europe have largely accepted the Israeli narrative of being just defending itself. Thanks to the formidable influence of the pro-Israel lobby (a mix of Zionists of all political hues, evangelicals and neo-conservatives), no US politician can fail to declare full and unconditional support for Israel if they hope to pursue a political career of high profile, lest they suffer from the accusation of being anti-Semites.<sup>10</sup>

Most EU states have followed unquestioningly, with Germany going as far as to make Israel's security – in this overextended interpretation – a *Staatsräson*, or *raison d'état*. In so doing, the Europeans (Germans included) gave up on more than twenty years of sensible, autonomous diplomacy initiated with the Venice Declaration, which for the first time upheld the dual right of Israel to live in security and of the Palestinians to self-determination.<sup>11</sup>

Protected by the US veto in the UN Security Council and rewarded with diplomatic support, arms supplies (especially from the United States and

Germany), partnership agreements with both the United States and the EU in every field (from defence to research), Israel has acted with impunity.<sup>12</sup> The West has considered Israel an ally even though it has not aligned itself with the sanctions against Russia after the invasion of Ukraine,<sup>13</sup> continued to trade in advanced technology with China,<sup>14</sup> and relentlessly worked against the stated goals of two US administrations (Obama and Biden) and all of the EU such as the nuclear deal with Iran<sup>15</sup> and the two-state solution in Palestine.

This dynamic was repeated on a large scale after Hamas's 7 October 2023 attack on Israel, in which close to 1,200

<sup>12</sup> On the United States' use of its veto power in the Security Council, see Hope O'Dell, "How the US Has Used Its Power in the UN to Support Israel for Decades", in *Bluemarble*, last updated 22 February 2024, <https://globalaffairs.org/node/39261>; on Western weapons supplies to Israel, see David Gritten, "Gaza War: Where Does Israel Get Its Weapons?", in *BBC News*, 3 September 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68737412>; on US-Israel relations, see US Department of State, *U.S. Relations with Israel. Factsheet*, 30 January 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-israel-2>; on EU-Israel relations, see European Commission DG Near website: *Israel*, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/node/3424\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/node/3424_en).

<sup>13</sup> Merav Amir, "The Israeli Reaction to the War in Ukraine", in *IWMpost*, No. 129 (Spring/Summer 2022), p. 18, <https://www.iwm.at/node/4054>.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Figueroa, "The China-Israel Trade Deal", in *Centre for Geopolitics Commentaries*, 25 October 2022, <https://www.cfg.polis.cam.ac.uk/news/china-israel-trade-deal>.

<sup>15</sup> Shira Rubin, "Israel Opposed the Iran Nuclear Deal, But Former Israeli Officials Increasingly Say U.S. Pullout Was a Mistake", in *The Washington Post*, 9 December 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/israel-iran-nuclear-deal-sanctions/2021/12/08/ece28168-56c0-11ec-8396-5552bef55c3c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israel-iran-nuclear-deal-sanctions/2021/12/08/ece28168-56c0-11ec-8396-5552bef55c3c_story.html).

<sup>10</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy", in *HKS Faculty Research Working Papers*, No. RWP06-011 (March 2006), <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/node/178821>; see also the authors' book by the same name published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 2007.

<sup>11</sup> European Community, *Venice Declaration*, 13 June 1980, [https://eeas.europa.eu/mepp/docs/venice\\_declaration\\_1980\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/mepp/docs/venice_declaration_1980_en.pdf).

people were assassinated and 250 taken hostage. The United States and Europe have loudly invoked Israel's sacrosanct right to keep its population safe. But they are at a loss to explain how this right fits with the devastation inflicted on the two million people living in Gaza, where Israeli shelling has killed more than forty thousand – 16,500 of them children –, displaced 90 per cent of the population (nearly two-thirds of houses are damaged or destroyed), while journalists, relief staff and aid workers have reportedly been deliberately targeted.<sup>16</sup>

Equally importantly, Israel and its supporters in Washington, Berlin and elsewhere have failed to explain why Israel's security justifies the continued expansion into East Jerusalem<sup>17</sup> and the West Bank,<sup>18</sup> the expropriation of

homes, the theft of land, the decades-long systematic oppression of millions of human beings that the International Court of Justice has declared illegal in all respects.<sup>19</sup>

### *Israel from the river to the sea*

Since the 1994 Hebron massacre, Israeli expansion into Palestinian lands has never stopped. Israeli domestic politics has become radicalised, to the point that today no party with any following favours negotiations with the Palestinians. On the contrary, the Knesset, Israel's parliament, has recently passed a resolution calling a Palestinian state "west of Jordan" an "existential danger".<sup>20</sup> Israel's existence has now been made conditional on the continuous repression of the Palestinians.

Extremist parties that explicitly advocate ethnic cleansing all but drive policy towards Palestine.<sup>21</sup> Itamar Ben-Gvir, an open admirer of the mass murderer of Hebron, is a minister in the Netanyahu government. Another extremist minister, Bezalel Smotrich, is responsible for the 'security' of the West

<sup>16</sup> AJLabs, "Israel-Gaza War in Maps and Charts: Live Tracker", in *Al Jazeera*, accessed on 24 September 2024, <https://aje.io/pnauxp>; on the number of displaced persons, see UN Population Fund, *Occupied Palestinian Territory*, last updated on 3 September 2024, <https://www.unfpa.org/occupied-palestinian-territory>; on material damage, see UN Satellite Centre, *UNOSAT Gaza Strip 8th Comprehensive Damage Assessment*, July 2024, <https://unosat.org/products/3904>; on journalists killed in Gaza, see International Federation of Journalists, *War in Gaza: Israel Must Be Held Accountable*, <https://www.ifj.org/war-in-gaza>; on relief staff, see Medical Aid for Palestinians, *500 Healthcare Workers Killed during Israel's Military Assault on Gaza*, 26 June 2024, <https://www.map.org.uk/news/archive/post/1598>; on aid workers, see Human Rights Watch, *Gaza: Israelis Attacking Known Aid Worker Locations*, 14 May 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/node/388036>.

<sup>17</sup> Jason Burke, "Revealed: Israel Has Sped Up Settlement-Building in East Jerusalem since Gaza War Began", in *The Guardian*, 17 April 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/qbb7t>.

<sup>18</sup> Alison Killing et al., "How Extremist Settlers in the West Bank Became the Law", in *Financial Times*, 18 September 2024, <https://ig.ft.com/>

[west-bank.](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/16/magazine/israel-west-bank-settler-violence-impunity.html)

<sup>19</sup> International Court of Justice, *Summary of the Advisory Opinion of 19 July 2024*, <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/204176>.

<sup>20</sup> Jacob Magid, "Knesset Votes Overwhelmingly against Palestinian Statehood, Days before PM's US Trip", in *The Times of Israel*, 18 July 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/knesset-votes-overwhelmingly-against-palestinian-statehood-days-before-pms-us-trip>.

<sup>21</sup> Ronen Bergman and Mark Mazzetti, "The Unpunished: How Extremists Took Over Israel", in *The New York Times*, 16 May 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/16/magazine/israel-west-bank-settler-violence-impunity.html>.

Bank. Unsurprisingly, violence in the West Bank has increased exponentially since 7 October: over 690 Palestinians have been killed, 159 of them children.<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately, when it comes to the defence of Israel, what is at stake is not so much the security of the state on the 1967 borders (those generally accepted internationally), but a profoundly racist, ethno-supremacist expansionist project into East Jerusalem and the West Bank (and perhaps Gaza again). Netanyahu has embraced this project not only for ideology but also for practical advantages, as the coalition with Ben-Gvir and Smotrich has protected him from a number of trials for electoral fraud and more.<sup>23</sup>

It is the interplay of extremist and personal ideological interests that explains the Netanyahu government's strategy: no ceasefire in Gaza, even at the cost of the remaining hostages' lives; and the opening of the northern front against Hezbollah, an action supported by the military leadership (which would have wanted a hostage deal first, though) and which could be extended to Iran. Only war can wash away the shame of 7 October (and keep the trials at bay), as shown by recent polls showing Netanyahu again leading his political opponents.<sup>24</sup> And only war

allows Israel to continue expanding eastwards, until it controls all the land between the river and the sea.

### *Western complicities*

The United States and EU governments have established that their main goals are a ceasefire in Gaza, the liberation of the hostages and the prevention of regional escalation. They have also long supported the creation of a Palestinian state and claimed that Israeli settlement activities are an impediment to peace. As Israel has not just ignored their interests but undermined them, their expected policy course would be one of combining pressure on Israel's foes with pressure on Israel itself.

One would expect the United States and Europe to insist on a ceasefire in Gaza as the most pressing priority. The world's main superpower and its wealthy allies could back that with the halting of weapons transfers to Israel as well as diplomatic condemnation of its conduct in all Palestinian lands and Lebanon, where civilians are dying in the hundreds in the Israeli campaign against Hezbollah and the whole population has been terrorised by Israeli intelligence using booby traps in the form of pagers and walkie-talkies. The United States and Europe should also insist on re-opening the Gaza Strip to journalists, on the protection of medical facilities and aid workers, and on the resumption of humanitarian aid on a massive scale.

in *Financial Times*, 24 September 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/3ae49fb5-a1c6-4e8a-ad08-1179d766550f>.

<sup>22</sup> AJLabs, "Israel-Gaza War in Maps and Charts: Live Tracker", cit.

<sup>23</sup> Yonette Joshep and Patrick Kingsley, "Netanyahu Will Return with Corruption Charges Unresolved. Here's Where the Case Stands", in *The New York Times*, updated on 26 June 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/03/world/middleeast/netanyahu-corruption-charges-israel.html>.

<sup>24</sup> James Shotter, "Benjamin Netanyahu's Polls Rebound after Aggressive Israeli Operations",

Most importantly, one would expect US and European policymakers to delegitimise the racist, ethno-supremacist vision that is increasingly dominant in Israeli discourse on the Palestinians. Ben-Gvir and Smotrich should be sanctioned, and all government and civil society organisations active in supporting and expanding Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank targeted with visa freezes, financial sanctions and other restrictions.

The United States and Europe will do nothing of the above, and instead will allow Israel to continue working against their stated objectives. Having long internalised the narrative of Israel's all-encompassing right to self-defence, they can only hope that Hezbollah and Iran will exercise more self-restraint than Israel, to avoid the risk – at least for the United States – of being drawn into a war they have not sought.

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