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Masthead & Mission

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EDITORIAL

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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

The Journal for Humanitarian Conflict Resolution is a quarterly publication of the **Institute for Humanitarian Conflict Resolution**, founded by Dr. Alon Ben-Meir to advance peace, reconciliation, and human dignity in regions affected by violent conflict.

Each quarterly issue gathers insightful analysis from contributors, including scholars, diplomats, humanitarian practitioners, and frontline advocates. Subject areas span children's rights, climate change, criminal justice, discrimination, free speech, gun violence, healthcare, LGBTQ+ rights, migration and refugees, poverty, war crimes, and women's rights.

MISSION

“The Institute embraces a philosophy of peace and reconciliation to ensure that men, women, and especially children in conflict-ridden countries have hope for a better and more promising future.”

Silence is the oxygen of impunity.



Dr. Alon Ben-Meir
FOUNDER, IHCR

For much of my adult life, human rights have not been a subject I merely studied; they have been a matter that occupied my heart and mind. I could never treat a violation as an abstraction, because behind every violation stands a human being — the pain, the agony, the fear of millions upon millions of people on every continent. Democracies, authoritarian regimes, and everything in between commit or tolerate some form of abuse: crimes against humanity, genocide, ethnic cleansing, the persecution of minorities, online violence, sexual violence in conflict zones, and the mounting suffering that climate change inflicts on ordinary people who did nothing to cause it.

I am profoundly sorrowful that these violations occur nearly everywhere with impunity. Such horrors have recurred throughout history. What is different now is that we watch them in real time; atrocities unfold day in and day out before our eyes. How is it possible that we, as human beings, have lost our moral compass so com-

pletely — descending to this new nadir where we see everything and still allow the perpetrators to walk free?

That is why I established the Institute for Humanitarian Conflict Resolution. Its purpose is to carry the truth through every available form of communication, to convey the intensity and scale of human rights violations in their many places and many forms, and above all to demand action. We can no longer afford complacency. We can no longer afford to turn our backs. Hundreds of millions of people are affected, and many endure suffering that is simply unimaginable to those of us who are safe.

Having established the Institute, launching its journal was essential to me. I invited leading academic and professional scholars to write on human rights in their many forms, and I am extraordinarily honored that so many responded with enthusiasm. For this first edition, eleven distinguished contributors have given us their work alongside my own.

These essays span continents, disciplines, and forms of abuse, yet they converge on a single conviction: none of this suffering is inevitable, and none of it is irreversible. Each author names not only a wound but a remedy. That is the purpose of this journal — to name what is being done to human beings, to insist on accountability, and to prove that action is not merely possible but obligatory. I invite you to read, to share, and to act.

The violations documented here persist because too few people know, and too many are permit-

ted to look away without cost. Silence is the oxygen of impunity; coverage takes that oxygen away. Help these findings reach as many people as possible, here and abroad, in the conviction that awareness is where activism begins: knowledge unsettles, and unsettled people act. Cruelty tolerated in one place licenses cruelty everywhere. A world indifferent to atrocity abroad will not long protect its own at home.

The voices in these pages have no advocate but our attention. Do not let them pass unnoticed.

With respect,

Dr. Alon Ben-Meir

FOUNDER, IHCR

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Michael Bedenbaugh is a respected voice in historic preservation, community development, and constitutional governance. He is the author of *Reviving Our Republic: 95 Theses for the Future of America*, a bold blueprint for restoring America's founding principles through practical reforms—ranging from ending omnibus bills and curbing corporate influence in politics to restoring the Senate's original constitutional role and returning taxing authority to the states.

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EVI SARANTEA · PETROLEUM WARS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate Chaos: Planetary Dangers and Humanitarian Emergency

Deforestation, fossil fuels, and war have weaponized the planet's temperature. The humanitarian consequences are already here.



Evaggelos Vallianatos

HISTORIAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGIST

Prologue

Human activities such as deforestation, forest fires, mining, industrialized agriculture, the burning of fossil fuels (petroleum, natural gas, coal), and wars have been threatening nature, civilization, and humans. Those threats weaponize the planet's temperature. Scientists describe that effect as climate change/climate chaos.

Climate change/chaos is global and anthropogenic/artificial. It has been affecting the lives of billions of people and the planet's survival. Pope Francis was angry with the failing international political system, which is at the expense of humanity and Mother Earth. In his October 4, 2023, encyclical, *Laudate Deum / Praise God*, he said: "I have realized that our responses [to climate crisis] have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point."¹

This realization highlights the immense humanitarian dimensions of climate chaos. They are gigantic. All people in the world are potential victims and humanitarians, both separately and simultaneously. In both difficult times and times of peace, humans are humanitarians, that is, instinctively feel solidarity with suffering fellow humans. Sympathy, solidarity, cooperation, and mutual assistance increase in times of common and national threats and dangers.

The burning of fossil fuels in the US is responsible for about 74 percent of the country's warming.² The burning of petroleum, for instance, releases gases like carbon dioxide (CO₂) and methane (CH₄). These gases grab chunks of solar energy, which they eventually release.

This additional energy/heat slowly increases global temperature. It becomes a warm coat around the planet.

If urgent and decisive steps are not taken to eliminate fossil fuel use, the future will not merely be warmer—it will be harsher, more unequal, and profoundly destabilized.

EVAGGELOS VALLIANATOS

Human intervention in the natural world has increased considerably since the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. The 20th century spread the industrialization model to most countries. World War I, 1914-1918, and World War II, 1939-1945, added vast amounts of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere. Then, the Cold War/militarization of international relations, 1945-1989, increased global climate pollution. And since the 1970s, one of the largest and most populous countries in the world, China, has entered the age of industrialization, mechanizing its economy, industry, agriculture, and armed forces, considerably boosting the planet's greenhouse burden. In the 21st century, **China** is "the world's biggest emitter of carbon dioxide, produc[ing] **12.7 billion metric tons** of emissions annually. That dwarfs U.S. emissions, currently [in 2024] about **5.9 billion tons** annually."³ In general, China is the largest climate polluter, and the US is the second-largest.

This means global temperatures keep increasing, with foreseeable and unforeseeable adverse

effects: storms, forest fires, city fires, hurricanes, bomb rains, flooding, heatwaves on land and at sea, drought, the potential melting of ice in Greenland and Antarctica, and the thawing of permafrost in Alaska and Siberia. These real and potential disasters significantly magnify the need for humanitarian assistance.

Climate chaos

Every human-caused natural phenomenon is a symptom of planetary warming. They have been causing upheavals in the natural world and human societies. Forest fires, for example, are catastrophic for countless animal and plant species living in the forest. Such ecosystem damage disrupts fresh drinking water supplies and affects the survival of endangered species, leading to their extinction. Burnt trees also release the carbon dioxide they had absorbed from the atmosphere, thereby increasing atmospheric carbon dioxide and, in turn, the planet's temperature.

Forest fires sometimes spill over into nearby cities, with dramatic and often catastrophic effects. In January 2025, fires burned towns in southern California, such as Altadena, and neighborhoods in the Los Angeles megalopolis. The temptation to rebuild is enormous. However, burnt towns become toxic, with heavy metal contamination threatening human health.

The melting of Arctic sea ice is threatening the survival of polar bears, for example. And the continued melting of ice in Antarctica and Greenland threatens islands like Tuvalu in the Pacific Ocean. This is a humanitarian and philosophical issue of the highest order. Do humans have the right to continue with activities (the

burning of fossil fuels) that endanger the survival of other humans, in this case, the survival of nations and countries like Tuvalu? I don't think so. Continuing with the fossil fuels becomes an undeclared war, in which case we need to ask, why kill the people of Tuvalu? Isn't such killing genocidal? What did they do to become our enemies? And also, Tuvaluans have had a minor impact on the world's temperature compared to people in industrialized countries like the US. As humans living in North America and Europe, China, Russia, and the Middle East, don't we have the moral and political responsibility to protect them from our own actions? Humanitarianism becomes or should become the highest virtue.

Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty

Wars over oil continue. Their effects are global and, in combination with climate change, which they fuel, are threatening to increase the screaming dead to billions.

Kausea Natano, the former Prime Minister of Tuvalu, a tiny Pacific island nation, is one of those screaming. He must have had similar thoughts about oil and wars. He proposed a treaty to stop the expansion of fossil fuels, which he treated like weapons of mass destruction:

The longer we remain addicted to fossil fuels, the longer we commit ourselves to mutual decline.... A negotiated Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty would complement the Paris Agreement and ensure a global just transition. We've proven we can mobilize our collective ambition at the multilateral level. The scale of the challenge we face can now only be met with an even greater level of ambition and

*cooperation. I traveled thousands of miles over four days to be here today, because I believe in international cooperation and multilateralism. I have faith in our collective humanity and our ability to foster global solidarity to undertake what needs to be done.*⁴

Kausea Natano's treaty proposal began at the 27th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP27) in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, November 2022. He announced he had the support of "a hundred Nobel laureates and thousands of scientists worldwide to urge world leaders to join the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty to manage a just transition away from fossil fuels. The time has come to make peace with the planet.... if we can save our islands, we can save the world."⁵

The following year, at the high-level segment of the UN Secretary-General's Climate Ambition Summit in September 2023, Secretary-General, António Guterres, the President of Colombia, Gustavo Petro, and the governor of California, Gavin Newsom, expressed similar views: they favored the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty to phase out fossil fuels.

António Guterres said that "Climate action is dwarfed by the scale of the challenge.... the future is not fixed, it is for leaders like you to write it.... The move from fossil fuels to renewables is happening – but we are decades behind." Then Gustavo Petro explained why we need to abandon fossil fuels. He said: "The real goal that all countries should have is aiming for zero production and supply of carbon gas and oil. If we don't make that our overarching goal, lives will not be saved. If we keep on our current track, it will be suicide.... Fossil fuel

subsidies need to be completely eliminated worldwide."

Finally, Gavin Newsom spoke. He said: "This climate crisis is a fossil fuel crisis. It's not complicated. It's the burning of oil. It's the burning of gas. It's the burning of coal. And we need to call that out. For decades and decades, the fossil fuel industry has been playing each and every one of us in this room for fools."⁶

Exactly. Natano, Guterres, Petro, and Newsom expressed the virtues of knowledge, wisdom, and humanitarianism at work. The Greeks would say Freedom or Death. The courage and vision of these world leaders are paradigmatic and necessary to stop the fossil fuel looters of the planet. And Prime Minister Natano's proposal to stop the ceaseless rise in global temperature with a Fossil Fuels Non-Proliferation Treaty is original, timely and humanitarian. It also captured the imagination of a few important world leaders.

Al Gore

In his own quiet way, former Vice President Al Gore shared Natano's vision. He is well aware of the planetary grip of the carbon heating gases. His Climate TRACE Coalition can reveal the hitherto secret emissions of carbon dioxide, methane, and other greenhouse gases that are warming the planet. On November 9, 2022, the UN's Guterres honored Gore at Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt. He said:

Climate TRACE and its data show that because of underreporting of methane leaks, flaring, and other activities associated with oil and gas production, emissions are many times higher than previously reported. This should be a

wake-up call for Governments and the financial sector, especially those that continue to invest in and underwrite fossil fuel pollution. The problem is even greater than we were led to believe and that means we must work even harder to accelerate the phase out of all fossil fuels.⁷

The potential revelations from Gore's climate initiative will probably confirm Guterres' fear that the danger of the unleashed climate Medusa is much greater than we have speculated from incomplete, nay, misleading data.

It turns out satellites track down more than 72,000 carbon polluters on the planet. One of the largest is a steel plant in Zhangjiagang, China, belonging to the Shagang Group. This steel plant has been churning out millions of tons of steel per year. Climate Trace estimated that this plant is the most carbon-polluting factory on the planet. Climate Trace boasts it can monitor carbon pollution from entire countries, industries, individual factories, cargo ships, animal farms, steel, cement, and fertilizer factories, as well as gas and oil extraction facilities. Overall, Trace Climate is giving us a compendium of more than 72,612 polluters – “a hyperlocal **atlas** of the human activities that are altering the planet's chemistry.”⁸

Antonio Guterres is right, enough with treating civilization and Mother Earth like a toilet. The fossil fuel companies are pushing us to a hellish future. We must ban them – before 2030. We certainly don't want a global temperature of 2.7 degrees Celsius. Take science seriously. Act now to defend the Earth and civilization. Take seriously Kausea Natano's proposal to phase out fossil fuels with a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty.

America is warming faster than other countries

In the US, however, climate policy science is on-and-off, depending on the administration. President Joe Biden was not a model of putting human and environmental health above fossil fuels. But he was responsible enough to admit the country was suffering from the burning of fossil fuels. He encouraged the experts working in the federal government to study global warming. They did. On November 14, 2023, they published *The Fifth National Climate Assessment*. This comprehensive study painted a real, though dangerous, picture of America awash in fossil fuels and rising temperatures, especially over the last 50 years.

We should have known that war has always been an explosive charge to climate chaos. It accelerates planetary warming by boosting the production and burning of fossil fuels. Some US politicians probably understand this lethal connection between war and higher global temperatures. But many politicians, especially Republicans, ignore climate change altogether, exactly like President Trump. They take advantage of the wars in Ukraine, the October 7, 2023, war in Israel, and the war between the US and Israel against Iran, which started in February 2026. These wars increase the military budget and the immense profits of the munitions companies that fund their reelection.

Add to the military-generated warming of America, the vast industrialized agriculture of the country, its thousands of unregulated animal farms, factories of greenhouse gases, disease and annual slaughter of about 10 billion animals, the equally vast numbers of

petroleum-powered cars, trucks, airplanes, ships, yachts, and the fossil fuel-powered production of electricity, cement, fertilizers, and pesticides, you get an idea of the colossal fossil fuel energy used daily in America. To add insult to injury, cities light up their skyscrapers, hotels, and theaters at night. This light pollution is an additional, thoroughly unnecessary blow to the planet.

We know that the land warms faster than the ocean, that higher latitudes have been warming faster than lower latitudes and that “the Arctic has warmed fastest of all.” In addition, some eight disasters, each causing on average about a billion dollars in damage, have struck the US every year in the past forty years. However, climate change has been multiplying these calamities to eighteen per year over the past five years. As I said, the Biden White House published the **Fifth National Climate Assessment** (November 14, 2023). The Report said that the more greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, the worse it is for us now and for our children. And we experience the worst effects by far (in thousands of years).

The global warming observed over the industrial era is unequivocally caused by greenhouse gas emissions from human activities—primarily burning fossil fuels. Atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide (CO₂)—the primary greenhouse gas produced by human activities—and other greenhouse gases continue to rise due to ongoing global emissions. Stopping global warming would require both reducing emissions of CO₂ to net zero and rapid and deep reductions in other greenhouse gases. Net-zero

CO₂ emissions means that CO₂ emissions decline to zero.⁹

But the most startling and devastating conclusion of the Fifth Climate Report is that the US is beyond the charts. Its obsession with the profits of petroleum companies, and petroleum-powered machines (cars, trucks, buses, ships, yachts, airplanes, industrialized agriculture and especially animal farms, leaf blowers, military fleets of airplanes and navies) has made the country extremely vulnerable to private greed, and to the forces of nature. Ceaseless dumping of unfathomable amounts of planet-warming gases into the atmosphere is threatening the country with thermal death. “The things Americans value most are at risk,” says the Fifth National Climate Assessment. “More intense extreme events and long-term climate changes make it harder to maintain safe homes and healthy families, reliable public services, a sustainable economy, thriving ecosystems and strong communities... The United States has warmed 68 percent faster than Earth as a whole over the past 50 years.”

Epilogue

Humanitarianism, compassion for the plight or misfortunes striking Americans from climate chaos, may well be the greatest political and ethical virtue and power to slow down and stop our suicidal burning of fossil fuels. Humanity’s connection to oil, gas, and coal has become addictive and very difficult to oppose with scientific evidence. An example of this is President Trump and the Republican politicians in Congress and their followers all over the country.

The evidence of the destructive effects of climate chaos is everywhere. The country is warming faster than any other place on Earth. America and the world have been suffering almost daily, weekly and monthly. But those hooked on the profits of oil and gas are governing America and the planet, or are agents of the fossil fuel industry. Not merely America but the entire planet is warming faster than the **last ice age**: “The rate of warming from the end of the last ice age was about 7 degrees Celsius over a period of 18,000 years, or 0.04 degrees Celsius per century. In contrast, the rate of warming over the past 100 years was roughly 1.3 degrees Celsius per century. That’s about 32 times faster than the rate coming out of the Last Glacial Maximum.”¹⁰

Facts, however, don’t seem to matter. Oil and gas supporters ignore evidence and support what’s profitable to them. Like religious beliefs, superstition rejecting the climate chaos-fossil fuels connection has become metaphysics, blocking reason and science.

The alternative to this catastrophic ideology and policy is to bring humanitarians together to change the prevailing oil politics into one that celebrates life/civilization/Sun/wind, and human solidarity. I would add to this mixture the ideas, passion, and leadership of Al Gore, Gavin Newsom, Gustavo Petro, Antonio Guterres, and Kausea Natano. These leaders initiated the first international conference to phase out oil, gas, and coal through the April 2026 Santa Marta Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty. The Santa Marta, Colombia, conference reached this **conclusion**:

The Fossil Fuel Treaty is the essential tool to make this happen – a binding international framework to drive a global just transition to decentralized, accessible renewable energy for all by stopping the expansion of fossil fuels and managing an equitable phase-out... Accelerating a global just transition away from fossil fuels is the most urgent act of courage of our time, and a foundation for lasting peace, security, and the protection of all peoples and the planet we share.”¹¹

Humanitarians in America and other countries need to join hands and embrace the Fossil Fuel Treaty and those leaders who made it possible. The context is a global coalition open to nation states, “subnational governments, Indigenous peoples, scientists and civil society.”

The continued burning of fossil fuels is not an abstract threat but a gathering catastrophe already disfiguring human life across generations. Heatwaves now suffocate cities, turning homes into ovens for the elderly and the poor, while children grow up breathing thick air with toxins that scar their lungs and shorten their futures. Storms no longer arrive as seasonal disturbances but as violent, recurring assaults—flattening communities, drowning coastlines, and leaving behind toxic wastelands where rebuilding becomes both perilous and unjust. Forests that once sustained life erupt into infernos, releasing not only carbon but entire ecosystems into oblivion, destabilizing water supplies and food systems on which millions depend.

If urgent and decisive steps are not taken to eliminate fossil fuel use, the future will not merely be warmer—it will be harsher, more

unequal, and profoundly destabilized. Rising seas will erase nations and create millions of climate refugees, while prolonged droughts and crop failures ignite conflicts over dwindling resources. Diseases will spread into new regions, and entire populations will be trapped in cycles of displacement and despair. What is at stake is not only environmental balance but the survival of humane society itself; a failure to act now condemns future generations to inherit a planet where suffering is normalized and hope is rationed.

The virtue of humanitarianism lies in sharing the same vision of the future. Humanitarianism is powerful because it is inclusive and just. It brings out the best in human beings: mutual assistance, compassion, and solidarity for a better society and, definitely, a better world to live in.

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READ THE COMPLETE ARTICLE

ihcr.institute/writing/climate-chaos-planetary-dangers-and-humanitarian-emergency/



CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Israel and Lebanon: The Diplomatic Path to End an Endemic Conflict

A year inside an unofficial diplomatic effort to end seventy-eight years of hostility between two neighbors.



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For the past year, the author of this article has, with a Canadian colleague, been deeply involved in an unofficial (“Track II”) diplomatic effort to create a solid foundation for successful Israel-Lebanon direct talks. We are doing our best to facilitate negotiations aimed at permanently ending 78 years of hostilities and instituting close, bilateral security cooperation between the two militaries, cooperation ultimately reconciling Israeli security with Lebanese sovereignty and ending combat operations whose effects have fallen disproportionately on civilians.

We deliberately defined our mission in terms of foundation-building. Through discussions with senior, experienced, and well-connected non-officials on both sides (and occasionally senior officials when invited), we hoped to deliver to both parties and their American mediator practical ideas of what a sustainable security agreement – something short of a peace treaty but a major step in that direction – would look like.

After sensing that we were making substantial progress, we began to lose hope in our prospects for success starting on March 2, 2026, when Iran directed its Lebanese proxy (Hezbollah) to launch missiles toward Israel. Israel’s military response was devastating, killing over 4,000 Lebanese, injuring some three times that number, displacing over a million Lebanese civilians, and razing to the ground dozens of abandoned Lebanese towns and villages south of the Litani River. Bilateral security cooperation and peaceful relations began to seem to be remote possibilities.

Then, on June 26, Lebanon, Israel, and the U.S. signed a Trilateral Framework agreement

designed to set in motion a process whereby units of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) would gradually replace units of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) until the IDF is gone from Lebanese territory. Implementation would be difficult at best, requiring a robust American third-party intermediary presence, consolidation of a genuine ceasefire, a measure of Iran-Hezbollah cooperation, the ability of the LAF to secure areas to be repopulated from armed Hezbollah elements, and Israel’s willingness to take “Yes” for an answer if the LAF performs well. In any event, my colleague and I permitted ourselves a bit of optimism, as it appeared that the Framework reflected elements of what had been recommended to our Israeli, Lebanese, and American contacts.

It will be vitally important for Israelis to understand that Lebanese Shiites – perhaps 40 percent of Lebanon’s population – are not the enemy.

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In general, however, the prevailing conditions on the ground have not been conducive to building a foundation for successful direct talks between Israel and Lebanon. Indeed, they may not be so now. Still, a foundation of sorts was built and contributed, in some measure, to the Framework. The key to building it has been my colleague and me listening carefully to the Lebanese and Israelis with whom we have interacted.

Before traveling to the region in July of last year, we composed lists of people with whom we

would try to consult; people who were reasonably open-minded, well-informed, and well-connected to official decision-makers. Track II diplomacy is, in the end, useless unless it informs and influences the deliberations and decisions of officials residing in what is sometimes referred to as “Track I.”

On the Lebanese side, our list featured retired senior military officers and former senior officials. We included people of differing political views drawn from Lebanon’s main sectarian groups. We decided, however, not to try to engage Hezbollah. This was because we considered members of Hezbollah’s leadership cadre to be proxies for Iran – not independent Lebanese actors willing or able to put Lebanon first. We think our decision was justified by what happened on March 2 this year, when Iran ordered its proxy to rocket Israel from Lebanese territory, and Iranian officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) exercised direct command of Hezbollah’s military operations.

On the Israeli side, the contacts we selected had profiles very similar to their Lebanese counterparts. Just as we decided in Lebanon to forego conversations with Hezbollah personnel, so in Israel we opted to avoid dead-end conversations with those publicly advocating the annexation of Lebanese territory and the installation of Jewish settlements in Lebanon.

Unfortunately, we had from the beginning to shuttle between Lebanon and Israel for separate conversations with each set of contacts. Track II diplomacy aims to bring two sides into the same room for moderated, direct conversations. Yet Lebanese laws prohibit Lebanese citizens from

being in contact with Israelis. Ideally, these laws will soon disappear.

In both countries, we selected contacts we believed capable of engaging us in sustained conversations about the Lebanon-Israel-Hezbollah situation and ready to communicate with and even influence their respective governments. We listened carefully, took notes, and went to great pains to tell each side what we were hearing from the other side. And, while protecting the identities of our contacts, we made sure that the U.S. Government and other governments trying to end the violence knew what we were hearing. So: what was it that we were being told by the two sides?

In Israel, one point was driven home relentlessly. After the horrific events of October 7, 2023, when Hamas militants crossed from Gaza into Israel, murdering, raping, and taking hostages, Israel will no longer tolerate threats from non-state actors on any of its borders. Instead, it will act militarily and preemptively to neutralize those threats and to protect Israeli citizens.

We were told that Israelis remain deeply and perhaps permanently traumatized by the events of October 2023, including Iran’s decision to permit Hezbollah to open fire on northern Israel the day after the Hamas atrocities.

We were told that support for preemptive military strikes on non-state threats transcends political party lines and the political spectrum in Israel, and that opposition to them is politically negligible. Indeed, the attempt by the U.S. on April 9 of this year to impose a new ceasefire in Lebanon was, according to public opinion polls, opposed by between 70 and 80 percent of Israeli

voters. Another ceasefire was announced in the wake of the June 17 signing of the U.S.-Iran Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), and it too attracted strong opposition from Israel's government and public. Indeed, widespread Israeli skepticism about the new Framework is inevitable, which accounts for Prime Minister Netanyahu and others proclaiming that Israel will never depart from Lebanese territory until Hezbollah is completely disarmed in the entire country.

Yet we were also told that Israelis have no faith at all in the willingness or the ability of the Lebanese government and military to disarm and demobilize Hezbollah. Although we attracted considerable cooperation from our Israeli contacts in defining the essential contents of a potential security agreement with Lebanon, no Israeli with whom we spoke believed that Lebanese leaders had the appetite or the means to confront Hezbollah militarily in a decisive manner; that Israel would have to persist with armed violence until the threat was removed.

Finally, we were asked by our Israeli contacts to visit some communities on Israel's side of the "Blue Line" border to speak with residents about the terror they have endured at the hands of a violent, non-state entity operating within a handful of meters from their homes. We did so. We asked those residents what it was they ultimately wanted to see on the Lebanese side of the Blue Line. Often, we received an answer that deeply surprised us: "The Lebanese Army."

In Lebanon, our contacts told us that they comprehended Israel's Hamas-induced trauma and Israel's new security doctrine of preemptively

striking out at non-state threats. Some indicated they saw not much to distinguish the "new security doctrine" from past Israeli practices in Lebanon.

They told us, however, that most Lebanese – even most Shiite Muslims, many of whom support Hezbollah – want the permanent end to hostilities with Israel. But almost without exception our contacts decried what they described as Israel's ignorance of Lebanese political realities, ignorance they claimed was driving military operations producing huge amounts of civilian suffering and enabling Hezbollah to rally support among Lebanese Shiites, support it seemed to be losing by acting militarily on behalf of Iran. Some indicated the belief that IDF-induced civilian suffering was neither driven by ignorance nor accidental.

All our Lebanese contacts told us they want Hezbollah disarmed and demobilized. They said that Lebanon has no prospect of economic recovery until state monopolies over weapons of war and war-and-peace decisions are established. They understood the reluctance of investors and donors to inject any resources into Lebanon so long as arms and key decisions were in the hands of Iran and Hezbollah. But they insisted on proceeding cautiously, noting the chicken-and-egg dilemma of a bankrupt state being denied aid and investment while trying to compete with Iran and Hezbollah for the loyalty of Shiite citizens.

They pointed out that an armed Hezbollah represents Iran in Lebanon, and that it will not be easy for a Lebanese Army unable even to meet its payroll to oust Iran from Lebanon, much less violently neutralize its armed proxy. They

pointed out that for decades Hezbollah, with Iranian financial support, had built a state-within-a-state in Lebanon, providing social welfare and political influence to an otherwise neglected Shiite community.

They said that Israeli attacks, producing great civilian suffering, were having the perverse effect of convincing Lebanese Shiites that they – not just Hezbollah – are Israel’s designated enemy. They argued it would take time and resources to make Hezbollah politically and militarily irrelevant in Lebanon. They feared that a Lebanese Army unleashed on Hezbollah would result in widespread sectarian clashes, possibly even a civil war.

Finally, they pointed out that the most powerful military in the region – the IDF – was proving unable to destroy Hezbollah. If the IDF could not militarily neutralize Hezbollah, what were the chances of the LAF doing so?

By September 2025, my colleague and I, after listening intently to both sides, drafted a potential “Agreement on Permanent Termination of Hostilities” and shared it with our Israeli and Lebanese contacts for their comments and suggestions. They had plenty, but we were able to reach broad consensus on a text. We shared an amended version with both sides and with the relevant governments when we submitted what we thought was our final report last November.

But in December of 2025, Israel and Lebanon conducted two sets of direct talks under U.S. auspices. We found support on both sides for the idea that we continue our efforts into the New Year, and we did so.

Yet the decision on February 28 by the U.S. and Israel to attack Iran complicated our efforts significantly. Among other things, it obligated us to revise our draft agreement considerably, which we did.

But more than anything else, it led Iran to use its Hezbollah weapon, which, combined with Israel’s response, once again brought widespread death, destruction, displacement, terror, and trauma to the Shiites of Lebanon. Between November 2024 – when the first “ceasefire” was announced – and March 2, 2026, Israel attacked Hezbollah-related targets almost daily, and Hezbollah did not respond. Since March 2, however, when Iran ordered Hezbollah to open fire, Israel has responded with intensified bombings, expanded occupation of southern Lebanon, and the systematic demolition of villages evacuated by Lebanese Shiites.

My colleague and I were not surprised by the intensity of Israel’s military response to Iran’s Lebanon-based aggression. Nevertheless, we were deeply disappointed by the tactics employed.

Having written extensively in other contexts about the requirement to minimize, to the extent possible, civilian casualties and damage to civilian property during combat operations, we were not at all persuaded that the IDF was doing all it could to apply the principle of “proportionality” in its targeting of Hezbollah fighters and facilities. Indeed, even President Donald Trump has publicly criticized Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for dropping entire apartment buildings without regard to civilian protection. In the contest between the GOL and Iran/Hezbollah for political dominance in Lebanon, the large Shiite

community will have the decisive “vote.” Yet the heavy civilian casualties produced, and the gratuitous demolitions of abandoned villages seemed, in a perverse way, to be making the case for Iran and Hezbollah.

It was difficult, under these circumstances, to see what Lebanon-Israel negotiations could accomplish. Until late February, when the U.S. and Israel launched surprise attacks on Iran, the Lebanese Army was making some progress in establishing its hold on southern Lebanon – something that hadn’t existed for nearly 60 years. That is now gone. Replacing it was a greatly enlarged Israeli occupation, with Hezbollah fighters firing drones at Israeli soldiers and Israel expanding its ground and air campaigns against Hezbollah targets, often in heavily populated areas.

President Aoun and Prime Minister Salam of Lebanon nevertheless committed themselves to negotiations with Israel, notwithstanding opposition and threats from Hezbollah. Aoun and Salam see negotiations as a way for the Lebanese State to assert that it, and no one else, oversees Lebanon’s foreign policy. Their insistence was decisive in the recent Framework Agreement being reached.

Still, Israel and Iran either remain very much at war in Lebanon or on the precipice of renewed armed violence, with Lebanese Shiite civilians bearing the brunt of death and destruction while the Lebanese government and army look on helplessly, and northern Israelis fear where the next Hezbollah missile, rocket, or armed drone might land.

My colleague and I urged both sides, for months, to devise a plan to take effect if a real

ceasefire were to take hold, ideally with American assistance. The plan we recommended would, on a step-by-step basis, enable Lebanese Army units to replace their Israeli counterparts until there were no more Israeli soldiers left in Lebanon. It would institute a comprehensive structure for the two armies to communicate, coordinate, and cooperate so that northern Israelis and southern Lebanese could rebuild their lives and live in peace. Many of the elements we recommended have been incorporated into the June 26, 2026 Framework.

It is not clear what my colleague and I might be able to do in an ongoing Track II project. Our original mission – establish a solid foundation for Israel and Lebanon to negotiate an agreement that would permanently end the state of hostilities existing since 1948 and implement security measures enabling Lebanese and Israeli civilians to co-exist in peace – appears to have been accomplished. Clearly the Framework Agreement could prove to be a strong precursor to what, based on our discussions with Israelis and Lebanese, we have been recommending.

One thing we can do is continue and deepen the exchange of information between the two sides, ideally in a traditional Track II format involving people speaking and listening in the same room. It will be vitally important for Lebanese to understand that there is no viable alternative to full cooperation with Israel on security matters and no viable alternative to a Lebanese state that fully controls weapons of war and war-and-peace decisions. It will be vitally important for Israelis to understand that Lebanese Shiites – perhaps 40 percent of Lebanon’s population – are not the enemy. On the contrary: their loyalty and support – whether to the

Government of Lebanon or to Hezbollah – is the center of gravity in the current conflict, the prize to be won or the opportunity to be lost. My colleague and I think it's vitally important that Israelis and Lebanese hear these things from one another, not from us.

In the end, for Track II to work, there must be engaged and interested Track I customers. In this case, my colleague and I have experienced mixed results.

At one end of the spectrum, we have interacted indirectly and sometimes directly with senior Lebanese officials. Perhaps owing to that government's position of being trapped between Iran and Israel, it has been open to the ideas surfaced in the process we have overseen.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is a Government of Israel not much interested in our work. Many of our Israeli contacts have told us that Prime Minister Netanyahu sees his prospects for getting reelected this October as depending in part on his ability to continue waging war in Lebanon, whether Hezbollah stops shooting or not. Indeed, most Israelis want the war on Hezbollah to continue, and few appear to be concerned about the costs to Lebanese civilians. Israelis, for understandable reasons, consider themselves to be the principal victims of nonstate actors in neighboring countries. And it is likely that far too many Lebanese regret attacks on Israeli civilians by Hezbollah not for the evil they represent, but for the responses they elicit.

And in the middle, there is the United States. My colleagues and I have shared everything we have learned and done with American officials. We have seen words we have written replicated

in official American statements. We consider effective American mediation between Lebanon and Israel and effective American diplomacy toward Iran to be essential. There is no point to my colleague and I investing time and energy in this project without the United States taking full advantage of it. Yet American leadership in producing the new Framework is encouraging, provided it is implemented.

But implementation of this latest agreement will be tough and will require, among other things, a very robust and persistent American intermediary role. Is the U.S. prepared to do the proverbial "long patrol" in Lebanon? Is it willing to help Lebanon end Iran's semi-suzerainty? Is it ready to compel Israel to fight differently in Lebanon if Hezbollah, acting (under Iranian instructions), renews its attacks to undermine the Framework Agreement? Is it committed to demand a clear GOL plan to establish the requisite state monopolies over weapons of war and war-and-peace decisions, and will it act to secure for Lebanon the resources it needs to compete successfully with Iran and Hezbollah in undertaking reconstruction and providing governmental services?

I would like nothing more than to conclude my professional life by facilitating peace between two countries I deeply like and admire. Indeed, peace between Israel and Syria is also something to which I've devoted significant effort, something I'd very much like to live long enough to see. Israel and Lebanon, however, have rarely engaged in military confrontation on a state-to-state basis despite being in a state of war for over 77 years. The pathway to peace begins with ending armed violence and permanently terminating that state of war, thereby

reconciling Israeli security with Lebanese sovereignty. With a modicum of mutual Israel-Lebanon respect and with an end to Iran's deadly intervention in internal Lebanese affairs, the first steps on that pathway can be taken now. Ideally, the new Framework and ongoing Track II efforts represent those first steps.

Although my Canadian colleague and I have tried to employ unofficial diplomacy to facilitate written agreements between two parties, we have been profoundly affected by the impact of armed violence on civilians. The Framework signed on June 26, 2026, will ideally serve as the precursor to the agreement we drafted, to a treaty of peace. But truly best efforts to protect civilians in combat operations require something transcending diplomatic agreements. It requires the mitigation of and an end to mutual dehumanization.

For the leaders of Hezbollah, the dehumanization of Israeli Jews and targeting of civilian populations comes as naturally as money laundering, drug smuggling, and assassination. Disarming Hezbollah must be part of a broader process that ends Iran's partial suzerainty in Lebanon and secures the loyalty of all Lebanese to the Lebanese state. In the meantime, however, we were profoundly moved by the fear and suffering of northern Israelis subjected to attacks by a party for which inflicting civilian terror is a matter of military doctrine.

For Israel, and particularly for a military that possesses a highly refined code of ethics, the challenge is to see maximum protection of civilians in combat operations not as an inconvenience to be avoided when targeting Hezbollah personnel and weaponry in populated areas,

but as an opportunity to help the Lebanese state make the argument that Iran and its proxy are the ones placing the country on a pathway to total collapse. Yes, the mission of the IDF is to close with and kill the enemy. But victory in Lebanon will, in large measure, be defined in terms of what Lebanese Shiites decide: support the state, or support Hezbollah. Civilian protection is an essential element of fighting smarter. Dehumanization will take time to unwind. Assigning a higher priority to protecting civilians and their property should begin now.

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WOMEN'S RIGHTS

A Digital Conflict Is Escalating: Technology-Facilitated Violence Against Women

Digital violence against women is one of the fastest-growing forms of abuse, and it is narrowing their engagement in public and political life.



Cemre Ulker

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Humanity stands at a crossroads where technological advancements are rigorously used as a tool to escalate violence against women and suppress their civic, political, and social empowerment. While AI-ridden developments are surely closing many disparities in terms of citizens' access to resources, including access to quality education, health, and financial services, we must acknowledge the chilling rise of technology-facilitated violence against women and its impediments to women's democratic participation.

The annual 16 Days of Activism to End Gender-based Violence, led by UN Women, from 25 November to 10 December, marked a prime time for women's rights movements across the world and regional grassroots initiatives. Women's empowerment advocates join efforts and build momentum to call for action targeting a specific working theme each year. The topic under the lens is no surprise, as it is one of the fastest-growing forms of abuse: digital violence against women and girls.¹

The swift progress of digital technologies has revolutionized societies worldwide, providing immense opportunities to empower women and girls, close structural disparities, and promote gender equality. Nonetheless, this digital revolution also brings notable challenges that could jeopardize women's rights and well-being. The trends also show that violence in virtual spaces frequently transitions to real life if online harassment is not monitored, reported, and criminalized. The connection between online and offline violence highlights the importance of implementing comprehensive measures to address gender-based violence across all areas. Therefore, 16 Days of Activism (also known as

the UNITE campaign) advocated for #NoExcuse for online violence last year.

Digital platform governance often overlooks women's safety and rights, reinforcing gender stereotypes and hindering women's engagement in public and political spheres.

CEMRE ULKER

Digital technologies should promote democratic governance, foster gender-sensitive public discourse, and create opportunities for women to actively participate in civic, economic, and political life. While digitalization provides valuable opportunities to advance women's rights, it also requires holistic strategies to manage the associated risks and challenges. Ensuring women's meaningful involvement in the digital space, protecting their rights, and bridging the digital gap are crucial steps toward achieving a fair and inclusive digital future for everyone.

To better understand the urgency of addressing technology-facilitated gender-based violence, let's look at the global figures presented by UN Women. Across Arab States, 60% of women who use the internet have encountered online violence. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, research conducted in 12 countries revealed that over half of women aged 18 and older have faced some form of technology-enabled abuse during their lifetime. The status quo is no different in Sub-Saharan Africa too: a study covering five countries indicated that 28 percent of women have experienced online violence. In

Europe and the USA, a survey of women aged 18 to 55 in Denmark, Italy, New Zealand, Poland, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and the USA found that 23 percent reported experiencing at least one incident of online abuse or harassment.²

Women human rights defenders and journalists who are on the frontline are targeted through this virtual form of a battlefield. As we recently concluded World Press Freedom Day 2026 on May 3rd, Reporters Without Borders revealed an alarming conclusion in its World Press Freedom Index: over the last 25 years, press freedom has never been lower, as journalism is increasingly criminalized on a global scale. Regrettably, UN Women's chilling statistics complement this reality from a gender specific lens at the rate of violence media professionals face in these turbulent times. "70% of women human rights defenders, activists, journalists, and media workers have experienced violence in the course of their work".³ What is further striking is that 42% of the survey participants also acknowledged that they have been subject to offline attacks, physical abuse, and harassment in connection with the systemic online violence. This rate is shocking, having doubled compared to UNESCO's 2022 rankings.

Moreover, there is increasing hesitancy to report abuse to press freedom organizations due to concerns that publicizing such cases might trigger even more hostility. The authorities' and social media platforms' insufficient responses have further deterred journalists from speaking out. Additionally, many journalists have migrated to better regulated online media platforms, leaving behind X and Facebook, where abuse remains prevalent, in search of safer, more controlled spaces. The limited presence of

women in the leadership roles involved in the conception, design, development, and utilization of digital technologies leads to biases embedded in algorithms, which can cause inaccuracies and reinforce damaging stereotypes. This underrepresentation of women in decision-making processes sustains gender inequalities and obstructs the development of inclusive digital tools.

Multilateral Actions to Combat Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV)

Tackling emerging gender-related risks and challenges is essential as technology can sometimes trigger or worsen discrimination, with online platforms enabling the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and misogynistic content. Digital platform governance often overlooks women's safety and rights, reinforcing gender stereotypes and hindering women's engagement in public and political spheres.

It is a distressing reality that the pace of diplomacy to tackle digital violence does not meet the super-fast evolving rate of technology, and thus it brings new forms of violence for women and girls. That said, TFGBV is surely at the top of the agenda of many UN bodies. At the 69th Session of the United Nations General Assembly's Third Committee, there was a strong call to intensify efforts to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls in digital environments.

UN Women works closely with governments and international bodies to develop and support frameworks such as the recently adopted Global Digital Compact, the UN Office on Drugs and

Crime's Cybercrime Convention, and the EU Directive on combating violence against women. UN Women connects gender justice with digital rights advocacy by amplifying the voices of women's rights groups and fem-tech activists, providing them with the tools, expertise, and networks needed to combat digital exclusion and advocate for stronger protections for women and girls, including collaborative actions such as Generation Equality Action Coalition and Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse.

Legislative Actions to Set Standards and Stop Impunity

Effective legislative and policy frameworks are fundamental to safeguarding women's rights in digital environments. Many countries lack comprehensive laws that specifically address online violence, digital harassment, and abuse, leaving women vulnerable with limited recourse. State policies must promote the responsible governance of digital platforms, requiring them to implement safety features, reporting mechanisms, and content moderation policies that prevent abuse. International cooperation is vital to harmonize legal standards and facilitate cross-border enforcement. Building legal and institutional capacity to respond promptly and effectively to digital violence is essential to creating safer online spaces conducive to women's full participation.

Increasing Access to Digital Resources for Women in Underdeveloped Communities

Despite the transformative potential of digital technologies, women and girls in marginalized

and underdeveloped communities often face severe access barriers—limited infrastructure, affordability issues, lack of digital literacy, and sociocultural constraints. These disparities deepen existing inequalities, preventing women from benefiting fully from digital opportunities such as education, healthcare, economic participation, and civic engagement. International organizations must endorse strategies to bridge this digital divide, including expanding affordable internet connectivity, establishing community-based digital centers, and designing culturally sensitive digital literacy programs. Enhancing access to digital resources empowers women in underserved areas, enabling them to improve their socio-economic status, participate in decision-making and realize their full potential.

Women's Empowerment Through Digital Literacy Skills

Digital literacy is a cornerstone for economic empowerment, enabling women and girls to access new markets, entrepreneurship opportunities, remote work, and financial services. In a rapidly digitizing economy, a lack of digital skills limits women's ability to participate fully in economic activities, perpetuating gender disparities. As a local force for action, civil society organizations must be financially empowered to lead more initiatives that provide training in digital literacy, coding, financial technology, and online safety, tailored to women's needs and contexts.

Equipping women with these skills not only enhance their employability but also fosters innovation and entrepreneurship, contributing to broader economic growth. Furthermore, digital

empowerment can challenge traditional gender roles, increase women's decision-making power, and support their leadership in various sectors. Investing in women's digital skills is thus a strategic priority for advancing gender equality and sustainable development.

In conclusion, safeguarding women's rights in the digital realm is an urgent, multifaceted challenge that requires concerted efforts from governments, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector. Addressing online violence, closing digital gaps, and promoting inclusive digital leadership are essential steps toward creating safe, equitable, and empowering online spaces for women and girls worldwide.

By implementing robust legislation, fostering digital literacy, and ensuring meaningful participation in digital governance, we can turn the promise of technological progress into a reality that truly benefits all women. Only through sustained, collaborative action can we ensure that digital transformation becomes a force for gender justice and equality.

Notes

1. "UNITE to End Violence against Women Campaign," UN Women, accessed May 5, 2026, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/unite>.
2. "FAQs: Digital abuse, trolling, stalking, and other forms of technology-facilitated violence against women and girls," UN Women, November 13, 2025, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/faqs/digital-abuse-trolling-stalking-and-other-forms-of-technology-facilitated-violence-against-women>.
3. Julie Posetti, Kaylee Williams, Lea Hellmueller, Pauline Renaud, Nabeelah Shabbir, and Nermien Aboulez, "Tipping Point: Online Violence Impacts, Manifestations and Redress in the AI Age," UN Women, April 2026, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2026-04/tipping-point-online-violence-impacts-manifestations-and-redress-en.pdf>.

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MIGRATION AND REFUGEES

Recognition, Right, and the Stateless: A Fichtean Critique of the Plight of the Rohingya

Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law made the Rohingya the limit case of the modern moral order.



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In a world that proclaims human rights as universal, what does it mean that entire peoples are rendered legally nonexistent—human beings for whom, as Hannah Arendt put it, “no law exists”? This essay turns to Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s philosophy of recognition to argue that the Rohingya are not only victims of a humanitarian disaster, but the site of a deeper metaphysical crisis: a systematic refusal of juridical personhood that exposes statelessness as a negation of the very conditions of moral agency. By reading Fichte alongside Arendt’s “right to have rights,” the article reveals how Myanmar’s 1982 Citizenship Law transforms the Rohingya into the limit case of the modern moral world order and contends that recognizing their rights is not mere charity but a transcendental demand of reason itself.

I. Introduction: The Moral and Philosophical Scandal of Statelessness

Few conditions so starkly expose the limits of our moral and political order as those of the *stateless person*. For Hannah Arendt, the refugee or stateless individual—deprived of citizenship and stripped of political belonging—reveals “the right to have rights” as the first and most fundamental of all rights.¹ The case of the Rohingya, denied citizenship under Myanmar’s 1982 Nationality Law and persecuted as an “alien” presence within their own homeland, exemplifies the deepest contradiction of modern politics: the existence of persons whom the law has rendered invisible.

To address this contradiction philosophically, we may turn to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, whose conception of *right* (*Recht*) as the condition of reciprocal recognition among free beings provides a powerful framework for understanding the moral catastrophe of statelessness. Though writing in the late eighteenth century, Fichte’s

Foundations of Natural Right anticipates the central insight of Arendt’s political thought: that human dignity depends not merely on biological existence, but on the *political and juridical* recognition of one’s personhood.²

This imperative entails that political communities cannot rest content with partial justice.

SAM BEN-MEIR

Through Fichte, we can understand statelessness not only as a humanitarian tragedy but as a transcendental violation—a negation of the very conditions that make moral agency possible. This essay develops that argument in three movements: first, Fichte’s conception of recognition and right; second, the function of the state as the realization of moral freedom; and third, the resonance of these ideas with Arendt’s account of the refugee as the paradigmatic figure of modern disenfranchisement.

II. Recognition and the Conditions of Selfhood

In the *Foundations of Natural Right*, Fichte establishes recognition (*Anerkennung*) as the ground of both self-consciousness and right. The *I*, he insists, does not first exist in isolation and then encounter others; rather, the very possibility of self-consciousness presupposes the existence of another rational being who summons me to recognize their freedom as I demand recognition for my own.³

“The concept of a finite rational being,” Fichte writes, “implies the existence of other such

beings outside it, with whom it stands in a relation of reciprocal efficacy.”⁴

This reciprocal relation is not empirical but transcendental—it is a necessary condition of moral personality. A being who is not recognized, or who cannot recognize others as free, is denied the possibility of selfhood. In this sense, recognition is not simply social esteem; it is the ontological ground of freedom.

When a people, such as the Rohingya, are stripped of legal personhood and excluded from the political community, they are denied precisely this condition of recognition. They become, in the Fichtean sense, *unrealized persons*—not because they lack reason or will, but because the juridical world refuses to acknowledge their agency. Their plight, then, is not merely political but metaphysical: they are deprived of the intersubjective medium through which self-consciousness achieves actuality.

Fichte’s notion of right follows directly: Right is the relation of reciprocal freedom between rational beings.⁵ It is the form of coexistence that allows each to pursue self-determination without negating the freedom of others. For this reason, right cannot be the privilege of some; it is, by definition, universal. To exclude even one rational being from the sphere of right is to negate the very concept of law.

III. The State as the Realization of Freedom

In Fichte’s political philosophy, the state arises as the institutional embodiment of reciprocal recognition. The state is not primarily an apparatus of coercion, nor a mere social contract; it is the *organ of rights*, whose purpose is to secure

for each member the conditions of autonomous action.

“Right,” Fichte maintains, “is possible only in a community of free beings who mutually limit their freedom according to a law they all recognize.”⁶ The state’s legitimacy therefore depends entirely on its function as the *realization of freedom*. A government that ceases to guarantee the equality of recognition among its members forfeits its moral standing.

In this sense, the stateless person represents an ethical contradiction: a human being without access to the community that alone can make freedom effective. The refugee exists in a liminal space where law withdraws, a zone of what Giorgio Agamben later called *bare life*—but the roots of that concept are already implicit in Fichte’s moral ontology.

When the state expels or refuses recognition to a group—declaring, as Myanmar has of the Rohingya, that they “do not belong”—it destroys the moral ground of its own existence. It becomes, in Fichte’s words, a “system of compulsion without right.”⁷ The expulsion of the Rohingya is thus not only a crime against a people; it is the suicide of right itself.

IV. The Moral World-Order and the Universality of Duty

Fichte’s *System of Ethics* deepens this argument by locating the moral imperative in the idea of an infinite moral world-order (*sittliche Weltordnung*). Every rational being, he writes, bears the duty to act so as to realize this moral world in the sphere of appearance.⁸ This duty transcends national boundaries; it is the obligation to treat

every rational being as an end capable of freedom.

The *sittliche Weltordnung* thus entails a form of proto-cosmopolitanism. While Fichte is not a cosmopolitan in the Kantian sense, his ethics nonetheless points toward a universal moral community grounded in the autonomy of reason. To tolerate statelessness, therefore, is to participate in the *destruction of the moral world-order*. The existence of refugees is not a natural misfortune but a collective moral failure—a symptom of humanity’s inability to universalize the very principle it professes: that all rational beings are free and equal.

In Fichte’s system, moral action is the realization of freedom in the world. The ethical subject must seek to transform empirical reality until it accords with the idea of right. This imperative entails that political communities cannot rest content with partial justice. As long as there exist persons who are legally invisible, the moral task remains unfinished. The duty to the stateless is therefore not humanitarian but transcendental: it arises from the very structure of reason.

V. Arendt and the “Right to Have Rights”

Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* offers a twentieth-century counterpart to Fichte’s analysis. In her chapter on “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man,” Arendt observes that the refugees of the interwar period—Jews, Armenians, and others—revealed a profound truth: human rights, when divorced from political membership, are empty.

The stateless person, she writes, lost “not the right to freedom, but the right to action; not the right to think, but the right to opinion.”⁹ For Arendt, this loss demonstrates that rights depend on belonging to a *political community*—on being recognized as part of a world where one’s words and actions count. The refugee is the being “from whom the world has withdrawn.”¹⁰

This insight converges with Fichte’s: for both, the human person exists only within a structure of reciprocal recognition. Arendt’s “right to have rights” is, in effect, the modern translation of Fichte’s doctrine that selfhood requires acknowledgment within a lawful community. The moral crisis of statelessness thus appears as a philosophical catastrophe: a regression to a pre-juridical state where persons are reduced to biological existence.

For Arendt, the totalitarian state begins precisely when it creates populations outside the law—when it produces *superfluous men*, human beings without a polity.¹¹ The Rohingya, confined to camps and stripped of citizenship, embody this superfluity. Their condition is not accidental but structural, the consequence of a world order that still defines rights in terms of the nation-state.

VI. The Fichtean Critique of Nationalism

Fichte’s own political thought oscillates between cosmopolitan moralism and national particularism, especially in the *Addresses to the German Nation*. Yet even here, his nationalism is moral, not ethnic. Fichte conceives the nation as an *educative community* whose purpose is to cultivate universal freedom.¹²

A nation that defines itself through exclusion or racial purity, he would argue, betrays its own vocation. “Every people,” Fichte writes, “is destined to form itself into a complete and harmonious whole, a member of humanity which acts in freedom.”¹³ The nation’s legitimacy, then, depends on its service to humanity, not its withdrawal from it.

From this standpoint, the ethnic nationalism of Myanmar represents the perversion of the very idea of the state. A government that denies recognition to a segment of its population ceases to be a member of the moral world-order. It becomes, in Fichtean terms, a mechanism of domination devoid of right.

Indeed, Fichte’s insistence that right cannot exist for some without existing for all leads inexorably toward a universalist politics. If recognition is the ground of selfhood, and if right is the relation of mutual recognition among rational beings, then the full realization of right requires a *cosmopolitan order*. The plight of the Rohingya thus discloses not merely the failure of a state, but the incompleteness of the global moral order itself.

VII. The Stateless as the Limit of the Moral World

In both Fichte and Arendt, the stateless person occupies a *liminal zone* between humanity and non-being. For Fichte, the absence of recognition means that the individual cannot appear as a free agent in the world; for Arendt, it means the loss of a common world altogether.

The refugee, then, becomes the symptom of a deeper metaphysical disorder: the disjunction between the universality of reason and the

particularity of political forms. Fichte’s philosophy helps us see that this disorder is not contingent but intrinsic to the modern system of states, which continues to define belonging in terms of national identity rather than universal right.

Yet Fichte also offers a path toward transcendence. His ethics of the moral world-order demands that we act to overcome every empirical limitation that contradicts the idea of universal freedom. This imperative entails the creation of political institutions capable of guaranteeing recognition to all persons, irrespective of national origin. In this sense, Fichte prefigures what we might call a *transcendental cosmopolitanism*: not an empirical federation of states, but a moral duty to construct a world in which the concept of right truly becomes universal.

VIII. Conclusion: Recognition as the Measure of Humanity

In the end, Fichte’s philosophy enables a radical critique of statelessness as both a moral and metaphysical affront. To deny recognition to a human being is to negate the very possibility of a moral world. The Rohingya, like the countless stateless peoples before them, are not merely victims of political exclusion; they are witnesses to the fragility of the moral order itself.

Through Arendt’s eyes, we see that the modern state, when it creates human beings without rights, approaches the threshold of totalitarianism. Through Fichte’s eyes, we see why: because it has severed the bond of recognition that makes freedom real.

To affirm the rights of the stateless is not an act of charity but of philosophical consistency. If

reason and freedom are universal, then the conditions that make them effective—the juridical and political forms of recognition—must also be universal. The moral world-order demands no less.

Until the day when every rational being is recognized as such within a lawful community, the task of right remains unfinished. The plight of the Rohingya stands as a call to realize what Fichte named the highest vocation of humanity: *to transform the empirical world until it reflects the idea of freedom itself.*

Notes

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951), 296.
2. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, trans. Frederick Neuhouser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 35–38.
3. *Ibid.*, 37.
4. *Ibid.*, 42.
5. *Ibid.*, 45–46.
6. *Ibid.*, 47.
7. *Ibid.*, 50.
8. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *System of Ethics*, trans. Daniel Breazeale and Günter Zöllner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 110–115.
9. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 295.
10. *Ibid.*, 297.
11. *Ibid.*, 300.
12. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation*, trans. Gregory Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 26–28.
13. *Ibid.*, 49.

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WAR CRIMES · WOMEN'S RIGHTS

“I Am Because We Are”: Practical Justice and Survivor Participation in Eastern DRC

Survivors in eastern Congo describe what rehabilitation looks like when they are the ones who define it.



Dr. Wioletta Rebecka & Alain Bayongwa

FOUNDER, RAPE: A HISTORY OF SHAME PROJECT · WORLD HOPE GIVERS (WHG)

WITH

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Abstract

Survivor participation has increasingly been recognized as a core principle of ethical rehabilitation for survivors of torture and conflict-related sexual violence. Article 3 of the Global Charter of Survivors of Torture calls for survivors to participate meaningfully in the design, implementation, and evaluation of services that affect their lives. Despite this commitment, rehabilitation models continue to emphasize individual recovery, while offering limited theoretical guidance on how survivors become active contributors to rebuilding their communities in specific socio-cultural context.

This article introduces **Practical Justice**, a survivor-centered framework developed through participatory collaboration with World Hope Givers (WHG) in Goma, Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Drawing upon documented life histories of conflict-related sexual violence survivors and war-displaced young women, together with participatory interpretation involving survivors, local practitioners, and researchers, the study examines rehabilitation as a relational and community-based process. The methodological approach is informed by non-extractive qualitative research principles in which survivors participated not only as narrators of lived experience but also as co-authors and contributors to the interpretation of findings.

The findings demonstrate that armed conflict and sexual violence disrupt social belonging alongside physical and psychological integrity. Rehabilitation within the WHG model unfolds through interconnected stages that include

community recognition, collective storytelling, shared witnessing, vocational learning, economic participation, and opportunities to contribute to others. Tailoring and sewing function as mechanisms for rebuilding daily structure, competence, economic independence, and social identity, while reciprocal contribution restores dignity through meaningful participation in community life.

At the first level, the survivor gives back to herself by reclaiming dignity and refusing the identity imposed by violence.

DR. WIOLETTA REBECKA & ALAIN BAYONGWA

Grounded in Bantu understandings of personhood expressed through the principle "*I am because we are*," Practical Justice conceptualizes rehabilitation as a process of restoring reciprocal social relationships, agency, and collective responsibility independent of formal judicial outcomes. The framework expands current interpretations of survivor participation by demonstrating that sustainable rehabilitation emerges when survivors regain opportunities to shape their communities as contributors, mentors, workers, and co-creators of social recovery. This culturally grounded model offers a transferable framework for rehabilitation programs seeking to integrate survivor leadership, community participation, and locally rooted understandings of justice into post-conflict recovery.

Introduction

Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) remains one of the most devastating consequences of protracted armed conflict in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Beyond immediate physical injuries, sexual violence disrupts family structures, destroys livelihoods, fragments communities, and forces thousands of women and girls into prolonged displacement, poverty, and social exclusion. Many survivors experience rejection by partners and relatives, loss of economic security, interrupted education, forced motherhood, and continuing exposure to insecurity long after the original act of violence has ended (Kelly et al., 2011; Mukwege 2021; World Health Organization [WHO], 2020).

For many decades, humanitarian organizations have expanded access to medical treatment, psychosocial support, legal assistance, and economic recovery programs for survivors of CRSV throughout eastern DRC. These interventions have substantially improved access to emergency care and protection. Nevertheless, rehabilitation continues to be evaluated primarily through individual outcomes, including symptom reduction, service utilization, legal redress, or economic assistance. Such indicators are essential, yet they do not fully explain how survivors recover their social position within communities that have themselves been profoundly disrupted by war, displacement, and collective insecurity (WHO, 2020; United Nations, 2014).

Recent international developments have increasingly emphasized that survivors should occupy a central position in rehabilitation and justice processes. The Charter of Rights of Victims

and Survivors of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims [IRCT], 2026), particularly Article 3 on survivor participation, argues that survivors should actively influence the development, implementation, and evaluation of rehabilitation services. This principle represents an important shift from viewing survivors solely as recipients of professional interventions toward recognizing them as partners whose lived experience constitutes indispensable knowledge for rehabilitation systems. Yet practical models demonstrating how meaningful participation can be translated into everyday rehabilitation remain limited, particularly within conflict-affected African communities.

This article argues that survivor participation extends beyond consultation, representation, or advisory roles. Participation becomes transformative when survivors regain opportunities to contribute to the reconstruction of social life itself. In eastern DRC, rehabilitation unfolds within communities whose cultural traditions have long understood personhood as fundamentally relational. Across many Bantu societies, human identity is constituted through reciprocal relationships, mutual responsibility, and collective belonging. The philosophy commonly expressed through the Ubuntu principle —*"I am because we are"*—describes personhood as emerging through participation in community rather than existing independently of it (Ramose, 1999; Letseka, 2012; Marovah & Mutanga, 2024). Contemporary African scholars further argue that Ubuntu provides an important epistemological foundation for participatory research, social justice, and locally

grounded knowledge production because it recognizes communities as active producers of knowledge instead of passive objects of investigation.

Although Ubuntu has frequently been discussed within restorative justice, transitional justice, and reconciliation scholarship, considerably less attention has been devoted to its relevance for the rehabilitation of survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in contemporary humanitarian settings. Existing rehabilitation frameworks often separate psychological recovery, economic empowerment, and community reintegration into distinct intervention domains. The experiences documented through World Hope Givers (WHG) suggest that these dimensions are inseparable. Survivors consistently describe recognition by others, opportunities to tell their stories, vocational learning, economic participation, and the ability to support others as interconnected processes that gradually restore dignity, belonging, and social identity. The documented life histories collected by WHG illustrate recurring trajectories of displacement, rejection, community recognition, vocational engagement, and renewed participation in collective life.

Building upon these experiences, this article introduces the concept of **Practical Justice**. Practical Justice refers to the everyday social practices through which dignity, belonging, agency, and reciprocal contribution are restored following conflict-related sexual violence, independent of formal judicial outcomes. The concept does not replace criminal accountability or transitional justice mechanisms. Instead, it addresses a complementary dimension of justice that emerges through

relationships, shared recognition, meaningful work, and opportunities to contribute to community recovery.

Drawing upon participatory collaboration between World Hope Givers, survivors of conflict-related sexual violence and forced displacement, and local practitioners in Goma, this article demonstrates how survivor participation can be operationalized through culturally grounded rehabilitation practices. In doing so, it proposes Practical Justice as a theoretical framework that connects Article 3 of the Global Charter of Survivors of Torture with Bantu understandings of personhood, offering a model of rehabilitation in which survivors become co-creators of individual and collective recovery rather than beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance alone.

2. Article 3 of the Global Charter of Survivors of Torture: Survivor Participation as Co-Creation of Rehabilitation

The **Global Charter of Survivors of Torture** identifies meaningful survivor participation as one of the fundamental principles of rehabilitation. Article 3 recognizes that survivors should actively participate in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of services affecting their lives, acknowledging their lived experience as an essential source of knowledge rather than solely an object of professional intervention (Global Charter of Survivors of Torture, 2026).

This principle represents an important shift in international rehabilitation practice. Historically, survivors of torture and conflict-related sexual violence have frequently been positioned as recipients of humanitarian assistance,

clinical interventions, or legal protection. Although these services remain indispensable, survivor participation requires a deeper transformation of professional relationships. Participation is not fulfilled through consultation alone. It requires that survivors possess genuine influence over rehabilitation processes, contribute to knowledge production, and participate in decisions concerning their own recovery and the development of services intended for future survivors (International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims [IRCT], 2026; United Nations, 2014).

Within African contexts, this understanding resonates strongly with relational concepts of personhood embedded in Bantu philosophical traditions. Knowledge is understood as emerging through relationships, reciprocity, and collective responsibility rather than through the actions of isolated individuals (Ramose, 1999; Letseka, 2012; Marovah & Mutanga, 2024). Rehabilitation therefore becomes a shared social process in which survivors, practitioners, families, and communities jointly participate in rebuilding the social conditions that violence has disrupted.

The rehabilitation model developed by **World Hope Givers (WHG)** with Dr Wioletta Rebecka, clinical advisor, operationalizes this principle through everyday practice. Women entering the program are not approached as passive beneficiaries awaiting assistance. From the beginning of their engagement, they participate in activities that strengthen their capacity to shape their own recovery while contributing to the rehabilitation environment of others. Storytelling, collective discussions, vocational learning, peer support, and community engagement are

organized as participatory processes through which survivors gradually assume increasingly active roles within the program. The documented life histories demonstrate that rehabilitation extends beyond receiving psychosocial support to include rebuilding social relationships, acquiring vocational competence, supporting peers, and preparing for independent participation in community life.

This article extends Article 3 by proposing that meaningful participation can be understood across four interconnected dimensions. First, survivors participate as **knowledge holders**, contributing experiential knowledge that shapes rehabilitation practices. Second, they participate as **learners**, acquiring vocational, social, and practical competencies that strengthen long-term independence. Third, they become **future contributors**, using newly acquired skills and lived experience to support families, peers, and communities affected by conflict. Finally, within the participatory methodology adopted in this study, survivors also become **co-authors and co-producers of knowledge**, participating in the interpretation of findings, reviewing thematic analyses, and determining how their experiences are represented within the research process.

This approach reflects broader developments within African participatory research methodologies, which increasingly challenge extractive models of knowledge production by recognizing communities as intellectual partners whose experiences generate theoretical insight (Chilisa, 2020; Marovah & Mutanga, 2024). Survivor participation therefore extends beyond improving research ethics. It transforms the relationship between researchers,

practitioners, and survivors by redistributing epistemic authority and recognizing survivors as contributors to both scientific knowledge and rehabilitation practice.

Within the WHG model, participation also serves as the foundation for rebuilding social identity. As women move from displacement and social exclusion toward vocational competence, economic participation, and reciprocal contribution, they recover positions of social usefulness that conflict and sexual violence had disrupted. Rehabilitation consequently becomes a collective process of restoring belonging alongside individual recovery. This understanding forms the conceptual basis of the **Practical Justice** framework developed in the following sections, where justice is understood not only through legal accountability but also through everyday practices that restore dignity, reciprocal responsibility, and community membership.

3. Theoretical Background: From Relational Personhood to Practical Justice

The rehabilitation of survivors of conflict-related sexual violence has traditionally been examined through the complementary frameworks of transitional justice, trauma recovery, and psychosocial rehabilitation. Transitional justice scholarship has significantly expanded understanding of criminal accountability, truth commissions, reparations, institutional reform, and victims' rights following mass atrocities (Teitel, 2000; de Greiff, 2006). Similarly, trauma scholarship has demonstrated that recovery requires safety, recognition, reconnection, and the restoration of interpersonal relationships

following experiences of overwhelming violence (Herman, 1992). These contributions have fundamentally shaped international responses to torture and conflict-related sexual violence.

Despite these important developments, the relationship between justice and rehabilitation remains only partially theorized. Criminal justice frameworks primarily focus on accountability for perpetrators, while rehabilitation frameworks frequently emphasize psychological treatment, medical care, social services, or economic assistance for survivors. These approaches remain indispensable. However, they offer less theoretical attention to a central question confronting communities affected by prolonged armed conflict: **how is justice experienced in everyday life when formal legal accountability remains delayed, inaccessible, or impossible?**

This question has particular relevance in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where decades of armed conflict, repeated displacement, institutional fragility, and continuing insecurity have limited survivors' access to formal judicial mechanisms. Although international criminal law recognizes conflict-related sexual violence as a war crime, a crime against humanity, and under certain circumstances an act of genocide, judicial proceedings frequently occur years after the violence, reach relatively few perpetrators, or never take place (Mukwege, 2021; Baaz & Stern, 2013). Consequently, legal accountability alone cannot explain how survivors rebuild dignity, social identity, and community belonging while continuing to live within the aftermath of violence.

Scholars examining collective trauma have similarly emphasized that violence extends beyond individual psychological injury. Erikson (1976) described collective trauma as damage to the social fabric that binds communities together. Das (2007) further demonstrated that the aftermath of mass violence unfolds through ordinary everyday life, where individuals gradually reconstruct meaning within disrupted social worlds. Kleinman, Das, and Lock (1997) conceptualized such experiences as **social suffering**, highlighting the inseparable relationship between political violence, structural inequality, and everyday human experience. These perspectives suggest that recovery cannot be understood exclusively through individual psychological adaptation because violence simultaneously disrupts social relationships, communal identities, and collective systems of meaning.

African philosophical traditions have long approached these questions from a different epistemological foundation. Across Bantu societies extending through Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa, personhood is understood as fundamentally relational. Human beings become persons through reciprocal relationships with family, community, ancestors, and future generations rather than through autonomous individuality (Mbiti, 1969; Kagame, 1956; Bujo, 2001). The well-known Ubuntu expression, "**I am because we are,**" reflects one articulation of this broader Bantu ontology of relational existence (Ramose, 1999; Metz, 2011).

Within this philosophical tradition, justice is not confined to formal legal institutions. Community well-being depends upon reciprocal responsibility, restoration of disrupted relationships, collective participation, and the

maintenance of social harmony (Bujo, 2001; Shutte, 2001; Eze, 2010). Harm therefore affects not only individuals but the moral fabric of the community itself. Restoring justice requires repairing relationships, rebuilding belonging, and re-establishing mutual obligations alongside any formal legal response. Justice consequently functions as both an institutional responsibility and a communal practice embedded within everyday social life.

This relational understanding differs substantially from dominant Western legal traditions. Modern Western justice systems largely delegate responsibility for justice to specialized institutions, including judges, prosecutors, police authorities, and courts. Survivors primarily participate as witnesses within procedures designed to establish criminal responsibility and determine legal sanctions. By contrast, Bantu traditions recognize community members themselves as active participants in restoring social equilibrium following collective harm. Responsibility extends beyond punishment toward rebuilding the conditions necessary for communal life.

These distinctions become particularly significant within contexts of prolonged armed conflict, where institutional justice frequently remains inaccessible. Communities nevertheless continue living together. Families continue raising children. Survivors continue negotiating everyday relationships. Questions concerning dignity, belonging, trust, economic participation, and social identity therefore require responses that extend beyond formal legal systems.

These observations closely correspond with the concept of **Dislocation of Meaning**, introduced

by Rebecka (2026). Dislocation of Meaning describes the process through which the political, historical, and communal meaning of organized violence becomes detached from survivors' lived experience and translated into individualized psychological, medical, or administrative categories. Violence directed against families, communities, and collective identities is gradually reinterpreted as individual pathology, while responsibility for recovery becomes concentrated within the survivor instead of the broader social and political structures that produced the violence (Rebecka, 2026).

The present study argues that dislocation of meaning also occurs when justice itself becomes understood almost exclusively as an institutional process. Although legal accountability remains essential, an exclusive emphasis on courts, prosecutions, and judicial outcomes risks separating justice from the everyday social relationships through which survivors reconstruct their lives. In conflict settings where judicial processes are delayed or absent, this separation leaves important dimensions of rehabilitation insufficiently conceptualized.

Longitudinal participatory collaboration with **World Hope Givers (WHG)** in Goma provided an opportunity to observe rehabilitation from a different perspective. Across the documented life histories, survivors consistently described recovery through interconnected experiences of community recognition, collective storytelling, shared witnessing, vocational learning, economic participation, and reciprocal contribution. Rehabilitation was experienced not simply through receiving services but through gradually recovering meaningful social roles within community life. Women entered the

program as survivors of violence and displacement, yet progressively became learners, workers, mentors, contributors, and, within the present study, co-authors and co-producers of knowledge. These recurring trajectories are reflected throughout the documented narratives collected through WHG.

These empirical observations provided the foundation for the development of **Practical Justice**, introduced in this article as an original theoretical framework emerging from participatory collaboration among World Hope Givers, survivor co-authors, local practitioners, and researchers working in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Practical Justice refers to **the everyday community practices through which dignity, belonging, agency, reciprocal responsibility, and meaningful social participation are restored following torture and conflict-related sexual violence, independently of formal judicial outcomes.**

Practical Justice does not replace criminal accountability or transitional justice. Legal prosecution remains indispensable for establishing responsibility, documenting international crimes, and combating impunity. Practical Justice addresses a complementary dimension of justice operating within everyday community life. Recognition restores visibility. Storytelling restores narrative authority. Shared witnessing restores collective memory. Vocational learning restores competence and agency. Economic participation restores independence. Reciprocal contribution restores social value. Together, these interconnected practices rebuild the relational conditions necessary

for survivors to regain meaningful participation within their communities.

Within this framework, **Practical Justice functions as the mechanism through which the dislocation of meaning begins to be repaired.** If Dislocation of Meaning explains how organized violence separates survivors from the political, historical, and communal contexts that originally gave meaning to their suffering (Rebecka, 2026), Practical Justice explains how those disrupted relationships may gradually be reconstructed through culturally grounded practices of recognition, participation, reciprocal responsibility, and collective restoration.

Accordingly, this article proposes Practical Justice as a conceptual bridge between African relational philosophies of personhood, contemporary rehabilitation, and Article 3 of the **Global Charter of Survivors of Torture**. Survivor participation is therefore understood not only as consultation during rehabilitation but as active participation in rebuilding the social fabric disrupted by conflict-related sexual violence. Through this perspective, rehabilitation becomes simultaneously an individual, communal, ethical, and political process, grounded in the understanding that restoring justice also requires restoring the relationships through which human beings become persons.

4. Methods

Ubuntu-Informed Participatory Co-authorship Methodology

This study employed an **Ubuntu-informed participatory co-authorship methodology**, integrating oral history, non-extractive qualitative research, and collaborative knowledge

production within the rehabilitation program implemented by **World Hope Givers (WHG)** in Goma, Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. The methodological framework was developed in partnership with WHG, local practitioners, and survivor co-authors to ensure that the research process reflected the same principles of dignity, reciprocity, participation, and community responsibility that underpin the rehabilitation program itself.

The methodology was informed by decolonial approaches to research that recognize communities as producers of knowledge rather than sources of data (Chilisa, 2020; Smith, 2021). It was further grounded in Bantu understandings of relational personhood, where knowledge emerges through dialogue, collective responsibility, and shared experience (Mbiti, 1969; Bujo, 2001; Ramose, 1999). These principles are consistent with Article 3 of the **Global Charter of Survivors of Torture (2026)**, which recognizes survivors as active participants in the design, implementation, and evaluation of rehabilitation processes.

Rehabilitation Context

The research was embedded within the **World Hope Givers Practical Justice Framework** (Figure 1), which served simultaneously as the operational model of rehabilitation and the analytical framework for the present study. Women entering the program typically experienced severe social disruption resulting from armed conflict, including conflict-related sexual violence, forced displacement, family rejection, homelessness, economic deprivation, and prolonged insecurity.

Rehabilitation followed an integrated community pathway consisting of eleven interconnected stages: **violence, displacement, recognition by World Hope Givers, community acceptance, storytelling, shared witnessing, vocational learning, economic independence, reciprocal contribution, community restoration, and Practical Justice** (Figure 1). Each stage builds upon the previous one, gradually restoring dignity, agency, belonging, and opportunities for meaningful participation within community life. The recurring observation of these rehabilitation trajectories across participants formed the empirical foundation for the development of the concept of **Practical Justice**.

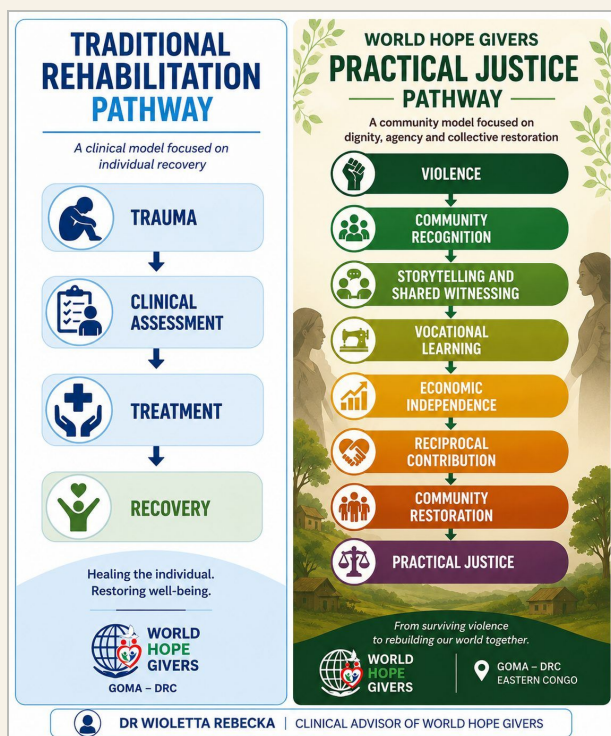


Figure 1

Participants

The study included **22 young women** participating in the World Hope Givers rehabilitation

program in Goma, North Kivu. Participants ranged in age from **17 to 27 years**. All had experienced profound consequences of prolonged armed conflict, including forced displacement, conflict-related sexual violence, orphanhood, family separation, severe poverty, or prolonged street-connected living.

Participants originated from multiple conflict-affected territories across North and South Kivu, including **Masisi, Rutshuru, Walikale, Kabare, Minova, Nyabyondo, and surrounding communities**, before arriving in Goma through repeated displacement. Several participants were single mothers caring for children born during conflict or subsequent exploitation, while others had experienced abandonment, interrupted education, or prolonged economic dependence. All women were enrolled in the WHG vocational rehabilitation program at the time of the study.

Participants were identified through WHG community outreach activities and humanitarian case management. Inclusion reflected documented vulnerability associated with armed conflict and participation in the rehabilitation program rather than statistical representativeness.

Oral History and Collaborative Knowledge Production

Life histories were documented using an oral history approach that recognized survivors as custodians of historical and community knowledge. The interviews explored experiences before, during, and after displacement, including violence, survival strategies, family relationships, motherhood, community participation, vocational learning, and future aspirations.

Oral history was selected because it preserves the continuity between individual biography and collective history. Participants narrated their experiences within the broader social, political, and cultural realities of Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, allowing rehabilitation to be understood as a community process rather than solely an individual experience.

Knowledge production continued beyond the interview itself. Throughout analysis and manuscript preparation, survivor co-authors participated in reviewing thematic interpretations, discussing culturally appropriate language, clarifying contextual meanings, and confirming the representation of their experiences. Their contributions directly informed the analytical framework presented in this article.

Participatory Co-authorship

Participation did not conclude with the documentation of testimony. Women contributing to this study remained actively involved throughout the interpretation and dissemination phases of the project. Survivors reviewed preliminary themes, discussed emerging interpretations with the research team and WHG practitioners, suggested modifications to analytical language, and confirmed that the final manuscript accurately reflected their lived experiences and community realities.

In recognition of these intellectual contributions, participating women are included as **co-authors** of this article. Co-authorship acknowledges their role as contributors to conceptual development and interpretation, consistent with Article 3 of the **Global Charter of Survivors of Torture**, which emphasizes

meaningful survivor participation throughout rehabilitation and knowledge production.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using participatory thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Initial coding identified recurring experiences across the oral histories, including violence, displacement, recognition, storytelling, shared witnessing, vocational learning, economic participation, reciprocal contribution, and community restoration.

Themes were subsequently refined through collaborative interpretation involving survivor co-authors, World Hope Givers practitioners, and the research team. This iterative analytical process ensured that conceptual categories reflected local understandings of rehabilitation and community life rather than externally imposed classifications.

The final analytical framework demonstrated that these experiences formed a coherent relational sequence corresponding to the operational stages of the WHG rehabilitation program. This empirical pattern subsequently informed the development of the concept of

Practical Justice.

Ethical Framework

The study was conducted in accordance with principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and trauma-informed practice. Participation in both research and publication was based upon informed consent to collaborate, including consent to review narratives, contribute to interpretation, and participate as co-authors where appropriate.

Ethical responsibility was understood as an ongoing relational commitment rather than a single procedural event. Decisions concerning participation, interpretation, authorship, and publication remained collaborative throughout the project.

The methodological framework also sought to avoid the **dislocation of meaning** described by Rebecka (2026), whereby survivors' experiences become detached from their historical, political, and community contexts through extractive research practices. Instead, the research process itself reflected the principles of **Practical Justice** by recognizing survivors as collaborators, knowledge holders, and contributors to scientific theory. Through this approach, research became part of the rehabilitation process, supporting the restoration of dignity, agency, reciprocal responsibility, and community participation while generating knowledge grounded in local experience.

5. Findings

The findings are organized around four interconnected themes. The analysis does not present the women's histories as separate biographies. It identifies recurring patterns across narratives and shows how the WHG model transforms experiences of violence, displacement, rejection, and survival into recognition, learning, contribution, and community restoration. Initials are used in the analytical text to protect dignity while preserving the specificity of each story.

Theme 1. Violence Destroys Relational Identity

Across the narratives, conflict-related sexual violence, displacement, poverty, and street survival appear as processes that break the social relationships through which personhood is sustained. The harm described by participants is not limited to bodily violation. Violence repeatedly destroys family protection, community recognition, economic security, and the possibility of being seen as a valued person. In this sense, violence attacks relational identity.

B.B.B., an 18-year-old displaced survivor from Kabare, entered Goma in conditions of extreme insecurity and poverty. Her narrative describes how displacement made her dependent on minimal financial support from a man in the neighborhood. This dependency became a context of exploitation, pregnancy, abandonment, and family pressure. After the abuse was disclosed, the alleged perpetrator disappeared, while her own family accepted an informal payment without securing assistance for her. The result was not only sexual violence but a collapse of protection by family and community. WHG later identified her as being in urgent need of support and enrolled her in tailoring and sewing training for socio-economic reintegration.

A.A., a 22-year-old displaced survivor from Rutshuru, also experienced violence through the combined forces of war, displacement, dependency, pregnancy, and abandonment. After fleeing clashes between M23 and FARDC supported by Wazalendo, she became vulnerable to manipulation by a married man. When pregnancy followed and the man refused responsibility, her parents rejected and threatened her,

forcing her to leave the family home. Her story shows how conflict-related vulnerability continues after the original displacement. The body survives the conflict, but belonging is broken.

N.S.E., an 18-year-old street-connected young woman, experienced another form of relational collapse. Her family's economic stability disappeared after bombardments in Goma forced the closure of her mother's workplace. With basic survival threatened, she left home and moved to the streets, where she was exposed to begging, theft, sexual exploitation, and detention during the "Zero Children on the Streets" operation. Her pathway shows how war destroys the economic and social conditions that keep children and young women connected to family life. Street survival becomes a symptom of broken community protection.

S.C.S. and S.C.B., two sisters, also illustrate the collapse of family protection under extreme poverty. Their mother was absent, their parents' alcoholism destabilized the household, and schooling was interrupted. They moved to the streets seeking survival, where they faced rape, begging, theft, hard labor, arrest, and detention before being referred to WHG-supported care. Their narratives demonstrate that street-connected life is not a personal failure. It is the social outcome of abandonment, poverty, insecurity, and the disappearance of protective adult networks.

P.M.M., an 18-year-old motherless young woman, fled mistreatment by her father's second wife. Her search for safety led her to street life, where she encountered insecurity, hunger, forced labor, sexual exploitation, and theft as survival strategies. Her story shows that the

"street" is not only a place. It is a condition produced when family relationships become violent and community systems fail to offer protection. WHG's identification of her case became the first step toward re-entering a social environment organized around care, food assistance, medical support, psychosocial support, and vocational learning.

D.K.F., a 27-year-old survivor from Masisi, fled after an armed group member attempted to force her into marriage. Her narrative links displacement to the attempted seizure of bodily and marital autonomy. Since leaving her home area, she lived in economic insecurity without stable support. N.A., a 22-year-old survivor from Walikale, became pregnant following a relationship with a man who later joined Wazalendo and was killed during clashes with M23. She was left alone with a child, facing poverty, social rejection, and psychosocial distress. S.S., a 19-year-old from Masisi, was raped by two armed men while going to farm work near Kalake and the Nyiragongo area. She became pregnant and faced rejection by peers and family, with damaged self-esteem and loss of confidence in the future.

F.J., a 20-year-old displaced survivor from Masisi, was raped by armed bandits while traveling to buy sweet potatoes in Nyakagina, an area marked by armed groups including Mai-Mai, FDLR, and Nyatura. After the assault, she developed intense fear of returning to the area, restricted mobility, and family rejection. Her narrative shows the layered character of conflict-related sexual violence: armed insecurity, bodily violation, fear, loss of movement, family rejection, and isolation are part of one continuum of harm.

Across these narratives, violence destroys more than safety. It destroys the relational conditions through which a girl or woman remains a daughter, sister, mother, learner, neighbor, and community member. The repeated pattern is clear: rape leads to pregnancy and rejection; displacement leads to dependency and exploitation; poverty leads to street survival; family breakdown leads to homelessness; armed conflict leads to social invisibility. Violence breaks belonging.

Theme 2. Storytelling as Collective Restoration

The second theme concerns storytelling as a form of collective restoration. In the WHG model, storytelling does not function as individual psychotherapy in a Western clinical sense. It functions as community witnessing. The women's histories are heard, organized, believed, and connected to a rehabilitation pathway. This process restores voice because it places the survivor back inside a listening community.

The WHG document itself is part of this witnessing practice. Each woman's history is recorded not as a diagnostic file but as a social and humanitarian narrative. The text documents age, origin, displacement, family situation, violence, vulnerability, and the pathway into WHG support. This format gives the women's experiences a public and relational meaning: the story explains why care is needed, what social conditions produced vulnerability, and how reintegration can begin.

For B.B.B., storytelling begins when she "found the courage to report the abuse." This moment is crucial because it marks a movement from

silence to speech. Yet the first response failed her: the alleged perpetrator fled, and her family accepted an informal payment without ensuring her protection. WHG's later recognition gives the story a different social meaning. Her experience is no longer handled only as a private family matter or informal settlement. It becomes evidence of vulnerability requiring collective response, vocational support, and restoration of dignity.

A.A.'s story similarly demonstrates how telling and being recognized interrupt isolation. After pregnancy and abandonment, she was rejected by her parents and forced to leave home. Her referral to WHG transformed her situation from family expulsion into community-recognized vulnerability. The story became the basis for her inclusion in a socio-economic reintegration program. The significance is not simply that WHG provided services. WHG listened to the social meaning of her situation: displacement, manipulation, pregnancy, abandonment, rejection, and precarious refuge with a sister formed a coherent pattern of harm requiring restoration.

For N.S.E., S.C.S., S.C.B., P.M.M., and A.B.E., storytelling also counters the stigma attached to street life. Street-connected girls are often perceived through moralizing categories: delinquency, theft, sex slavery, disorder, or family disobedience. Their oral histories show a different reality. Their street survival emerged from bombardment, parental incapacity, orphanhood, abandonment, mistreatment, food insecurity, and the collapse of care. The act of documenting their stories therefore restores social meaning. It replaces blame with context. It shows that the street was not chosen freely; it

became a survival space after the breakdown of protective relationships.

This is especially important in relation to girls who were arrested or detained during the “Zero Children on the Streets” operation. N.S.E. was detained for one month; S.C.S. and S.C.B. were detained for three weeks; A.B.E. was detained for two weeks. Their stories reveal that state removal from the streets did not address the social conditions that produced homelessness. WHG’s role became significant because referral to care allowed their stories to be heard within a rehabilitation framework instead of a punitive framework.

Storytelling also restores identity by placing suffering inside a collective structure. When F.J. described rape during displacement and subsequent family rejection, her experience could have remained an isolated story of shame. Within WHG, it became part of a shared pattern of survival among women exposed to armed groups, sexual violence, and displacement. When S.S. described rape by armed men while going to farm work and subsequent rejection by peers and family, her story also entered a shared space where the harm was recognized as part of the conflict environment and not as her personal failure.

This theme is central to Practical Justice. Recognition begins when the community agrees to hear what violence has done. Shared witnessing transforms stories of shame into stories of survival, responsibility, and restoration. In this model, being believed is not only emotional support. It is the first social repair. The survivor’s voice returns to the community, and the

community becomes responsible for responding.

Theme 3. Learning Sewing as Restoration of Agency

The third theme concerns vocational learning, especially tailoring and sewing, as a mechanism for restoring agency. The WHG narratives repeatedly describe tailoring and sewing not only as income-generating activity but as a structured path toward dignity, competence, self-reliance, and future planning. Sewing becomes symbolic because it reverses the social position created by violence.

Before entering WHG, many participants were described through conditions of dependency: no means of subsistence, pregnancy without support, family rejection, street survival, interrupted schooling, and lack of stable shelter. The sewing program introduces a different daily structure. It creates routine, skill acquisition, peer contact, bodily engagement, and future orientation. A woman who was treated as a burden begins to become a learner. A learner becomes a worker. A worker can become a provider. A provider can re-enter community life as someone with value.

For B.B.B., tailoring and sewing were explicitly identified as the route toward socio-economic reintegration, empowerment, and improved living conditions. The significance is that her pathway after abuse did not end with pregnancy, threats, and family pressure. WHG connected her to a skill-based future. Sewing becomes a form of agency because it creates practical capacity where violence produced dependency.

A.A.'s enrollment in tailoring and sewing similarly aimed to strengthen economic independence and sustainably improve living conditions. Her life history had been marked by displacement from Rutshuru, manipulation, pregnancy, abandonment, parental rejection, and insecure refuge. Sewing introduces the possibility of independence from the relationships that exploited or rejected her. In this context, economic independence is not only financial. It is relational protection.

C.K., a 22-year-old displaced woman from Bweremana in Masisi territory, carried responsibility for a family of six because her chronically ill mother could not work. Her vulnerability was linked to the burden of care and lack of income. WHG enrolled her in psychosocial support and socio-economic reintegration at the ORLA STRAZ/WHG center, with the stated aim of promoting women's empowerment and the restoration of human dignity within the community. This narrative makes clear that tailoring is not an isolated technical skill. It is tied to family survival, dignity, and the ability to fulfill responsibility within the household.

S.A.M., a 21-year-old displaced woman from Kabare, arrived in Goma after armed conflict. Her family was initially received by relatives, but this support collapsed when income was lost. WHG's identification campaign led to her inclusion in tailoring and sewing training intended to strengthen economic independence. Her story shows that the program responds not only to sexual violence but also to the economic destruction created by war and displacement. Sewing becomes a response to the loss of livelihood and the instability of dependent hospitality.

For street-connected participants, sewing carries an even stronger symbolic meaning. N.S.E., S.C.S., S.C.B., P.M.M., and A.B.E. had survived through begging, theft, sexual exploitation, forced labor, and exposure to violence. WHG-supported care connected them to food, medical assistance, clothing, psychosocial support, and socio-economic reintegration through tailoring and sewing. This transition matters because it replaces survival economies with structured learning. The hand that begged, stole, or labored under coercion becomes the hand that makes, repairs, produces, and earns.

D.K.F. was selected for income-generating activities after displacement and forced marriage threats. N.A. entered training after being left alone with a child and facing social rejection. N.S., a 26-year-old mother of one, lived under threats from her father after an unstable union and dowry-related exploitation; WHG enrolled her in tailoring, sewing, and psychosocial support to strengthen resilience and independence. M.K.C., a 23-year-old displaced mother of two, had been manipulated through small financial assistance and left without support from the children's father; her narrative describes social isolation, loss of self-confidence, and discouragement about the future. For these participants, vocational training addresses the social meaning of economic dependency. It creates a path out of relationships organized around exploitation.

F.J.'s narrative gives the clearest direct evidence of the psychological meaning of vocational training. After rape, fear, restricted mobility, and family rejection, she entered WHG's socio-economic reintegration program. The document records that she expressed satisfaction

and hope, stating that the program strengthened her confidence in the future and her ability to build a better life. This statement links sewing directly to future orientation. It is not only learning a trade. It is recovering the ability to imagine a life after violence.

S.S., after rape by two armed men, pregnancy, rejection, loss of self-esteem, and diminished confidence, was enrolled in tailoring and sewing with psychosocial support to promote empowerment and personal recovery. Her case reinforces the same pattern: vocational learning repairs agency where sexual violence and rejection damaged self-worth.

Across the narratives, sewing is practical and symbolic at the same time. Practically, it offers income. Symbolically, it reorders identity. The repeated movement can be summarized as:

This movement is the heart of Practical Justice. Justice is experienced through restored capacity: the capacity to act, to learn, to earn, to support children, to plan, to participate, and to be recognized as socially useful.

Theme 4. Giving Back to the Community

The fourth theme is the most original because it shows that the final goal of the WHG model is not employment alone. The deeper goal is the restoration of social usefulness. In Ubuntu and broader Bantu relational ethics, the person is not restored only by receiving support. The person is restored by becoming able to contribute again. Practical Justice becomes visible when survivors move from being cared for to caring for others.

The available narratives are still mostly written at the point of enrollment or early rehabilitation, so the “giving back” theme appears as an emerging trajectory rather than a fully completed outcome for every participant. Still, the pattern is clear. WHG does not define recovery only as symptom reduction. The program links psychosocial support, vocational training, economic independence, and community restoration. Its purpose is to allow women to become active participants in community life.

C.K.’s case illustrates this clearly. Her life history shows that she carried responsibility for a family of six while her mother was chronically ill. Her enrollment in WHG was not only for her own recovery. By strengthening her capacity for work, the program potentially strengthens an entire household. Her restored agency becomes family support. Her learning becomes community responsibility.

N.S.E., S.C.S., S.C.B., P.M.M., and A.B.E. show another pathway into giving back. Their previous street survival placed them outside ordinary community roles. They were exposed to exploitation, arrest, hunger, and stigma. WHG-supported care repositions them inside a community of learning and support. The long-term significance is that girls who had been treated as problems in public space are recognized as young women with futures, capacities, and potential responsibilities. This is a major shift from social exclusion to social participation.

For young mothers, giving back begins with the ability to care for children with dignity. B.B.B. was a single mother responsible for a child. A.A. gave birth after abandonment by the father. N.A. was left alone with one child after the

father joined an armed group and was killed. M.K.C. cared for two children without support from their father. E.F., a 20-year-old displaced woman from Minova, carried responsibility for three children after the death of her father and family breakdown. For these women, economic independence is directly connected to the capacity to provide care. Supporting a child becomes one form of community restoration because it interrupts the transmission of abandonment, poverty, and shame to the next generation.

F.J.'s statement that the program strengthened her confidence in the future and her ability to build a better life is especially important for this theme. The phrase "build a better life" implies more than personal survival. It suggests reconstruction. It suggests the possibility of becoming a person who makes, supports, plans, and participates. In the Practical Justice framework, this is the beginning of reciprocal contribution: support received from WHG becomes capacity that can later be returned to family, peers, children, and community.

S.S.'s narrative also shows why giving back is central. After rape, pregnancy, peer rejection, family neglect, loss of self-esteem, and diminished confidence, WHG enrolled her in tailoring and sewing with psychosocial support. The program aimed at empowerment and personal recovery. Yet empowerment in this context is relational. A woman who regains confidence and a practical skill becomes less dependent on those who rejected or exploited her. She becomes able to participate in the social world with a new role.

Giving back should therefore be understood as a gradual process with several levels. At the first level, the survivor gives back to herself by reclaiming dignity and refusing the identity imposed by violence. At the second level, she gives back to her children or household by becoming able to provide. At the third level, she gives back to peers by participating in a community of shared learning and witnessing. At the fourth level, she gives back to the wider community by becoming visible as a worker, contributor, and bearer of knowledge.

This theme is where Practical Justice becomes most distinct from conventional rehabilitation. A standard rehabilitation model might end at stabilization, skill acquisition, or income generation. The WHG model continues toward reciprocal contribution. The central question becomes: how can a survivor who received support become someone who supports others?

This movement reflects the Ubuntu/Bantu ethical logic of relational personhood: "I am because we are." The survivor is restored through community, and the community is restored through the survivor's return as a valued participant. Practical Justice is therefore not an abstract theory. It is enacted when the women who were displaced, rejected, abandoned, exploited, or silenced become learners, workers, mothers, mentors, contributors, and co-authors of knowledge.

Taken together, the four themes show a coherent rehabilitation pathway. Violence destroys relational identity. Storytelling restores voice and recognition. Sewing restores agency and future orientation. Giving back restores social usefulness and reciprocal belonging. This

pathway demonstrates that justice in the WHG model is lived through community restoration. It is not limited to the courtroom. It appears in everyday practices through which women recover dignity, rebuild capacity, and return to community life as active contributors.

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that rehabilitation following conflict-related sexual violence extends beyond the reduction of psychological distress or the provision of humanitarian assistance. The experiences documented through WHG indicate that sustainable rehabilitation develops through the restoration of social relationships, meaningful participation, economic agency, and reciprocal contribution within community life. These interconnected processes form the basis of **Practical Justice**, a concept proposed in this article to explain how justice becomes embedded in everyday social practices following organized violence.

Contemporary rehabilitation frameworks have significantly advanced the care of survivors of torture and conflict-related sexual violence through multidisciplinary approaches integrating medical care, psychological treatment, legal assistance, and social services (International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims [IRCT], 2026; World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). These interventions remain fundamental to protecting dignity and addressing the immediate consequences of violence. The present findings suggest, however, that rehabilitation continues beyond the completion of clinical interventions. Recovery evolves through rebuilding the social conditions that allow survivors to resume meaningful participation

within their families, communities, and local economies.

Within many Western rehabilitation models, the primary sequence of intervention begins with traumatic exposure, followed by assessment, treatment, symptom reduction, and functional recovery. This model reflects substantial evidence supporting trauma-informed clinical care and has contributed significantly to international standards for rehabilitation (Herman, 1992; WHO, 2020). Nevertheless, the narratives analyzed in this study illustrate that many survivors continued to describe themselves through disrupted relationships, family rejection, displacement, economic dependency, and loss of community identity long after the immediate traumatic event. Clinical recovery alone could not fully restore the relational dimensions of life that conflict had destroyed.

The WHG rehabilitation model follows a different trajectory. Rehabilitation begins with community recognition of vulnerability and proceeds through collective acceptance, storytelling, shared witnessing, vocational learning, economic participation, reciprocal contribution, and community restoration. These stages do not function as isolated interventions. They represent interconnected social processes through which women gradually reconstruct identity, dignity, and belonging. The Practical Justice Framework developed from these observations conceptualizes rehabilitation as a relational continuum extending from violence to renewed participation in community life.

This distinction reflects different understandings of justice. Within international legal frameworks, justice is generally measured through

accountability, prosecution, reparations, and institutional protection of rights (de Greiff, 2006; United Nations, 2014). These mechanisms remain indispensable for addressing conflict-related sexual violence and combating impunity. The findings presented here identify an additional dimension of justice that emerges independently of judicial outcomes. Women consistently described meaningful change through being recognized by others, sharing their stories, learning vocational skills, supporting their children, rebuilding livelihoods, and recovering valued positions within their communities. Justice therefore became visible through restored social participation as well as legal accountability.

This interpretation is consistent with Bantu philosophies of relational personhood, where human dignity develops through reciprocal relationships and shared responsibility (Mbiti, 1969; Bujo, 2001; Ramose, 1999). Violence disrupted these relationships through displacement, family rejection, exploitation, and social exclusion. Rehabilitation gradually reconstructed them through collective participation in the WHG program. Community members, practitioners, vocational instructors, and survivors collectively participated in rebuilding the social fabric damaged by armed conflict. Rehabilitation therefore operated simultaneously at individual, family, and community levels.

The findings also extend current interpretations of **Article 3 of the Global Charter of Survivors of Torture**, which emphasizes meaningful survivor participation throughout rehabilitation (IRCT, 2026). Participation within WHG was expressed through multiple interconnected roles.

Women entered the program as survivors requiring support. During rehabilitation they became learners, skilled workers, mothers rebuilding family stability, peer supporters, contributors to local economic life, and, within this study, co-authors participating in knowledge production. Survivor participation therefore became an evolving social process rather than a single opportunity to provide consultation.

This participatory pathway corresponds closely with the concept of **agency**. Trauma literature frequently describes agency as recovering control over one's life following experiences of overwhelming violence (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014). The present findings suggest that agency develops through everyday practices embedded within community life. Learning tailoring, producing clothing, earning income, supporting children, planning for the future, and assisting other women represented repeated expressions of agency across participant narratives. These activities strengthened confidence because they altered survivors' social position. Women who had previously depended upon humanitarian assistance gradually acquired the capacity to contribute to their households and communities.

Economic empowerment occupied a particularly important position within this process. Vocational learning functioned as considerably more than technical skills training. Sewing introduced routine, responsibility, competence, future planning, and economic identity. It altered how participants perceived themselves and how they were perceived within their communities. Financial independence reduced vulnerability to exploitation while simultaneously creating opportunities to fulfil family

responsibilities. The ability to provide for children, support relatives, or establish small businesses became expressions of restored dignity as well as economic recovery.

These observations also contribute to current scholarship concerning collective trauma. Erikson (1976) argued that collective trauma damages the social tissues binding communities together, while Das (2007) demonstrated that recovery unfolds within ordinary everyday life. The WHG program illustrates how rehabilitation actively reconstructs these damaged social relationships through community participation. Storytelling, shared witnessing, vocational learning, and reciprocal contribution collectively rebuild the relational environment necessary for long-term recovery. Healing therefore occurs through participation in community life as much as through individual psychological adaptation.

The findings additionally strengthen the theoretical relationship between **Dislocation of Meaning** (Rebecka, 2026) and **Practical Justice**. Dislocation of Meaning explains how organized violence separates survivors from the political, historical, and communal contexts that originally gave meaning to their experiences. Practical Justice explains how those disrupted meanings may be reconstructed through recognition, participation, reciprocal responsibility, and community engagement. The two concepts therefore describe complementary stages of rehabilitation. One explains the fragmentation produced by organized violence; the other explains the relational processes through which meaning gradually returns.

Perhaps the most distinctive contribution emerging from the WHG model concerns the understanding of justice itself. Justice is commonly associated with institutions, legal decisions, criminal accountability, and punishment. The present findings suggest that survivors also experience justice through everyday opportunities to regain social value. Justice becomes visible when a woman rejected by her family is welcomed into a learning community. Justice appears when a survivor acquires the capacity to support her children independently. Justice develops when stories previously silenced are heard and believed. Justice expands as survivors become contributors to the well-being of others. These experiences do not replace legal accountability. They demonstrate that rehabilitation and justice develop simultaneously through community life.

The comparison between rehabilitation models may therefore be summarized conceptually.



Figure 2

The second pathway broadens rehabilitation from an individual clinical process to a community process grounded in relational participation. Recovery becomes inseparable from belonging. Identity develops through contribution. Agency expands through meaningful work. Dignity grows through reciprocal relationships. Justice is experienced through rebuilding the social fabric that organized violence sought to destroy.

These findings suggest that rehabilitation programs operating in contexts of conflict-related sexual violence may benefit from integrating survivor participation, community recognition, vocational learning, and reciprocal

contribution as interconnected components of long-term recovery. Such an approach remains fully compatible with multidisciplinary rehabilitation standards while incorporating culturally grounded understandings of relational personhood derived from Bantu philosophy. Practical Justice therefore provides a conceptual framework capable of connecting clinical rehabilitation, humanitarian practice, survivor participation, and community restoration within a coherent model of post-conflict recovery.

7. Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the research was conducted within a single community-based rehabilitation programs implemented by **World Hope Givers (WHG)** in Goma, Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. The findings therefore reflect one organizational context and one conflict-affected region. Rehabilitation programs operating within different cultural, political, or institutional environments may develop alternative pathways toward community restoration. The purpose of this study was not to establish universal effectiveness but to develop a conceptual framework grounded in empirical observation and participatory collaboration.

Second, the study employed purposive qualitative sampling involving twenty-two young women participating in the WHG program. The participants represented diverse experiences of conflict-related sexual violence, forced displacement, family rejection, street-connected living, and extreme socioeconomic vulnerability. Although the narratives revealed consistent patterns across individual life histories, the

findings should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or other conflict settings. Their value lies in analytical depth, contextual understanding, and theory generation.

Third, the research focused exclusively on women participating in an active rehabilitation program. Women who remained inaccessible because of continuing insecurity, severe psychological distress, geographic isolation, disability, or ongoing control by armed groups were not represented within the present study. Future research should explore whether the Practical Justice framework is similarly applicable among survivors who have not yet entered community-based rehabilitation.

The collaborative methodology adopted in this study also presents methodological considerations. Survivor participation through co-authorship, collaborative interpretation, and review of analytical themes intentionally challenges conventional distinctions between researcher and participant. This approach reflects the principles of Article 3 of the **Global Charter of Survivors of Torture** and Ubuntu-informed knowledge production while simultaneously requiring researchers to remain attentive to issues of shared authority, representation, and ongoing informed consent throughout the research process (Chilisa, 2020; Smith, 2021). These characteristics should be understood as methodological commitments rather than methodological weaknesses.

The concept of **Practical Justice** emerged inductively through prolonged field observations, participatory collaboration, and analysis of

survivor narratives within one rehabilitation program. Although the framework is theoretically informed by Bantu philosophies of relational personhood and by the concept of **Dislocation of Meaning** (Rebecka, 2026), further research is required to examine its applicability within other cultural settings, rehabilitation centers, and post-conflict societies. Comparative studies involving different regions, survivor populations, and humanitarian organizations would contribute to refining the theoretical boundaries and practical implementation of the framework.

Finally, this study focused primarily on rehabilitation after conflict-related sexual violence. Practical Justice may also have relevance for survivors of torture, trafficking, forced displacement, and other forms of organized violence. The transferability of the framework to these contexts remains an important direction for future interdisciplinary research.

8. Conclusion

This article introduced **Practical Justice** as a culturally grounded framework for understanding rehabilitation following conflict-related sexual violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Developed through participatory collaboration with **World Hope Givers (WHG)**, survivor co-authors, and local practitioners, the framework expands contemporary rehabilitation theory by demonstrating that recovery unfolds through the restoration of relationships, community participation, meaningful work, and reciprocal contribution alongside medical, psychological, and legal interventions.

The findings demonstrate that organized violence disrupts more than physical integrity or

psychological well-being. Conflict-related sexual violence fractures the relational foundations through which personhood is sustained, including family relationships, community belonging, economic participation, and social identity. The rehabilitation pathway observed within WHG responds to these interconnected forms of disruption through community recognition, collective storytelling, shared witnessing, vocational learning, economic independence, reciprocal contribution, and community restoration. Together, these processes create conditions in which survivors gradually recover dignity, agency, and meaningful participation in collective life.

Grounded in Bantu understandings of relational personhood, the study demonstrates that rehabilitation is inseparable from community life. The principle commonly expressed through the Ubuntu philosophy—"I am because we are"—is reflected throughout the WHG model, where recovery is sustained through reciprocal relationships and shared responsibility. Within this perspective, survivors are recognized not only as recipients of humanitarian assistance but also as learners, workers, parents, community members, contributors, and co-producers of knowledge. Their participation extends from rehabilitation to the reconstruction of the social fabric affected by armed conflict.

The study also contributes to the growing international emphasis on survivor participation articulated in **Article 3 of the Global Charter of Survivors of Torture**. Survivor participation is conceptualized as an ongoing process that includes collaboration in rehabilitation, interpretation of lived experience, knowledge production, and community rebuilding. This

understanding moves beyond consultation by recognizing survivors as active partners in shaping rehabilitation practices and future responses to organized violence.

The concept of **Practical Justice** represents the principal theoretical contribution of this article. Building upon the concept of **Dislocation of Meaning** (Rebecka, 2026), Practical Justice explains how meaning, dignity, and social identity are reconstructed through everyday community practices following organized violence. While criminal accountability remains essential for addressing violations of international law, the findings demonstrate that justice is also experienced through recognition, restored relationships, meaningful work, economic participation, and opportunities to contribute to others. Community restoration therefore becomes an essential dimension of rehabilitation and an expression of justice in contexts where formal judicial processes may remain inaccessible for prolonged periods.

The WHG model illustrates that rehabilitation and justice are not separate processes. They develop together through community participation. A woman who regains the confidence to tell her story, acquires vocational skills, supports her children, contributes economically, and becomes recognized within her community experiences a form of justice that is lived in everyday social life. This understanding does not diminish the importance of legal accountability. It broadens the concept of justice by acknowledging the relational processes through which survivors reclaim their place within society.

The implications extend beyond Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. The

Practical Justice framework offers rehabilitation centers, humanitarian organizations, clinicians, researchers, and policymakers a transferable conceptual model for integrating survivor participation, community responsibility, vocational empowerment, and culturally grounded understandings of personhood into post-conflict rehabilitation. Although its practical implementation will necessarily reflect local histories and cultural traditions, the central principle remains consistent: **sustainable rehabilitation emerges when survivors regain opportunities not only to survive violence but also to strengthen the communities that sustain human dignity.**

By integrating African relational philosophy, survivor co-authorship, non-extractive methodology, and empirical observations from World Hope Givers, this article proposes that **Practical Justice** constitutes a new theoretical framework for post-conflict rehabilitation. It demonstrates that justice is not experienced exclusively through courtrooms or legal judgments. Justice is also created through everyday acts of recognition, shared responsibility, restored agency, and reciprocal contribution that enable survivors to move from violence toward belonging, from exclusion toward participation, and from surviving toward rebuilding the collective future.

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FREE SPEECH

From Prisons to Algorithms: Vietnam and the Evolution of Political Control in the Digital Age

A Vietnamese journalist traces political control as it migrates from the prison cell to the algorithm.



Nguyễn Ngọc Như Quỳnh

FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WEHEAR (WOMEN EMPOWER, HUMAN RIGHTS, EXILE
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In 2009, I was arrested for the first time after participating in protests against the bauxite mining project in Vietnam's Central Highlands and speaking out about Vietnam's sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Seven years later, I was arrested again and sentenced to ten years in prison for my writings and advocacy on behalf of human rights and freedom of expression.

When I walked out of prison in 2018 and was forced to leave Vietnam to begin a life in exile in the United States, I believed that imprisonment was the government's most effective tool of repression. Looking back over the past two decades, however, I have come to understand that what has changed is not the state's objective, but the methods it uses to achieve it.

The Communist Party of Vietnam has not remained passive in the face of a growing human rights movement and an emerging civil society. Instead, it has continuously adapted, learned, and modernized its instruments of control as Vietnamese society has become increasingly connected to the outside world. From the imprisonment of independent bloggers to the containment of civil society organizations and, more recently, the use of legislation, technology, and digital platforms to restrict public discourse, Vietnam has become a striking example of the transition from traditional repression to digital authoritarianism.

From Independent Bloggers to the Emergence of Civil Society

The development of contemporary civil society in Vietnam is closely tied to the rise of the internet. In the early 2000s, online access opened a new public sphere beyond the complete control

of state-run media. For the first time, ordinary citizens could exchange information, discuss social and political issues, and connect with one another without relying exclusively on official channels.

When the right to speak the truth is taken away, a society loses more than freedom.

NGUYỄN NGỌC NHƯ QUỲNH

Concerns about national sovereignty amid China's growing influence in the South China Sea fueled many of the first public discussions and civic initiatives on the internet. The establishment of the Free Journalists Club marked an important milestone in the history of citizen journalism in Vietnam. The government's response, however, was swift. Leading members of the club, along with many independent bloggers, were subjected to harassment, arrest, and imprisonment.

For many families, an arrest meant far more than the loss of an individual's freedom. Relatives often faced financial hardship, social stigma, psychological pressure, and years of disruption to their education, employment, and daily lives. These consequences rarely appear in court verdicts, yet they represent some of the most painful and enduring effects of political repression.

Human Stories Behind the Statistics

International reports often describe Vietnam's human rights situation through numbers: the number of arrests, the number of prisoners of

conscience, or the number of bloggers sentenced to prison. Behind every statistic, however, is a human being, a family, and a community whose lives have been profoundly affected.

Journalist Nguyen Van Hai, better known by his pen name Dieu Cay, was imprisoned after speaking out about national sovereignty and freedom of expression.¹ Journalist Ta Phong Tan lost her mother while she was in prison; her mother set herself on fire in protest of the treatment her daughter endured.² Human rights lawyer Nguyen Van Dai spent years behind bars before ultimately being forced into exile.³

I witnessed similar consequences within my own family. During my imprisonment, my daughter required psychological support after witnessing my arrest in handcuffs. For seven months before my trial in 2017, I was held in solitary confinement and received almost no information about my family. I was denied access to legal counsel throughout the investigation. At trial, the proceedings were so perfunctory that many observers questioned whether the right to a meaningful defense had truly been respected.

For many political prisoners in Vietnam, punishment does not begin with a verdict. It begins during the months of isolation before trial, when families often have little or no information about where their loved ones are being held or what condition they are in.

This is why freedom of expression in Vietnam is not simply about the right to speak. It is also about the right to live an ordinary life without sacrificing one's freedom, one's family, or one's future for expressing peaceful opinions.

Internationalizing the Human Rights Struggle

The period between 2009 and 2013 marked an important turning point as domestic activists began connecting with international human rights mechanisms.

The emergence of Statement 258 and the Vietnamese Bloggers Network created some of the first bridges between Vietnam's domestic civil society movement and international human rights organizations, democratic embassies, and United Nations institutions.⁴

When Vietnam campaigned for a seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2013, activists sought to use the government's own international commitments to advance demands for freedom of expression, freedom of association, and broader civil rights. For the first time, issues that had long been dismissed as Vietnam's "internal affairs" became part of international conversations about human rights and democratic accountability.

Reshaping Civic Space

As independent networks expanded and strengthened their international connections, the Vietnamese government began to adjust its strategy.

On one hand, independent political activists were increasingly isolated through surveillance, travel restrictions, administrative harassment, and criminal prosecutions. On the other hand, the state allowed certain social organizations to work in areas such as environmental protection, gender equality, community development, and public welfare—provided that

they operated within carefully defined political boundaries.

This approach helped create the image of a developing civil society while ensuring that issues related to political power, freedom of expression, and freedom of association remained outside acceptable public debate.

For a time, this strategy appeared successful. International donors and development agencies found local partners with whom they could work, while the government maintained strict control over political discourse. Yet beneath the surface, the space for genuinely independent civic participation remained extremely limited.

Eventually, even this restricted space began to shrink.

When Even Environmental Advocacy Becomes a Target

For many years, environmental organizations were regarded as one of the few relatively safe components of Vietnamese civil society. Groups working on climate change, renewable energy, sustainable development, and environmental protection often collaborated with international organizations and development agencies.

In recent years, however, the arrests of environmental advocates such as Hoang Thi Minh Hong and Dang Dinh Bach demonstrated how quickly even this limited civic space could disappear.⁵

What made these cases particularly significant was that neither individual was advocating for political regime change. Their work focused on environmental sustainability, public policy, and social responsibility, which are issues that

the international community broadly supports and encourages.

These arrests took place at a time when Vietnam was receiving significant international support through climate initiatives and energy-transition programs. As a result, they raised important questions about the ability of independent civil society to participate meaningfully in internationally funded programs when individuals promoting transparency and accountability themselves became targets of prosecution.

For many international observers, the prosecution of environmental advocates while Vietnam simultaneously sought global climate financing raised serious concerns about transparency, accountability, and civic participation in the country's energy transition.

The consequences extended far beyond the individuals involved. Following these cases, many organizations reduced their activities, avoided sensitive topics, or imposed new limits on research and policy advocacy. As a result, society lost independent voices capable of providing early warnings about environmental risks, public health concerns, and unsustainable development policies.

The weakening of civil society ultimately affects not only activists but also ordinary citizens whose ability to protect their communities, their rights, and their environment becomes increasingly constrained.

The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism

After significantly reducing independent civic activity in physical spaces, the Vietnamese state shifted its attention to the digital sphere.

Unlike China, Vietnam did not seek to build a completely separate internet isolated from the rest of the world. Instead, it adopted a different model—one that allows global technology platforms to operate while subjecting them to increasing legal, political, and economic pressure.

The adoption of the Cybersecurity Law in 2018 marked a major turning point in this process.⁶ Through requirements related to data management, content moderation, and corporate compliance, the government acquired new tools capable of influencing how information is distributed and controlled online.

At the same time, state-supported online networks and cyber units expanded their activities. Independent journalists, activists, and ordinary social media users increasingly found themselves subjected to coordinated reporting campaigns, online harassment, disinformation efforts, and attacks on their personal reputations.

If prison once symbolized the state's power to silence dissent, algorithms, data systems, and digital platforms have increasingly become the new instruments of control.

The challenge posed by digital authoritarianism is fundamentally different from traditional repression. It is often less visible. Content may disappear without explanation. Accounts may be restricted without transparency. Public conversations may be shaped not only through direct censorship, but also through pressure, intimidation, and the manipulation of digital spaces.

As a result, many citizens begin to censor themselves long before the state needs to intervene directly.

The shrinking of digital civic space is therefore not merely a technological issue. It is a human rights issue that affects freedom of expression, access to information, and citizens' ability to participate meaningfully in public life.

Exile Does Not Mean Complete Freedom

When I arrived in the United States in 2018 after being released from prison and forced to leave Vietnam, many people assumed that the story of repression had ended.

In the digital age, however, exile no longer guarantees freedom from control.

Vietnamese activists living abroad frequently face online smear campaigns, attacks on their reputations, and efforts to isolate them from audiences inside Vietnam. Social media accounts may be targeted through coordinated reporting campaigns, online communities may be disrupted by organized disinformation efforts, and independent voices may find their reach restricted in ways that are often difficult to detect or challenge.

In recent years, some Vietnamese journalists, bloggers, and commentators living in North America have also faced cross-border legal disputes related to their reporting or investigations involving influential Vietnamese corporations, including cases connected to Vingroup and VinFast.⁷ Such cases have sparked broader debates about the potential “chilling effect” these actions may have on freedom of expression within the Vietnamese diaspora.

For many Vietnamese living in exile, the greatest challenge is no longer avoiding arrest. It is

maintaining meaningful connections with audiences inside Vietnam while navigating an increasingly controlled digital environment.

This reflects a broader reality of the twenty-first century: repression no longer stops at national borders. In a world connected by technology, efforts to silence dissent can extend far beyond the territory of the state itself.

International Responses and Their Limitations

The international community has repeatedly expressed concern about Vietnam's human rights record. Organizations such as the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and numerous democratic governments have documented arrests of dissidents, restrictions on freedom of expression, and the shrinking space available to independent civil society.

At the same time, Vietnam has become an increasingly important economic and strategic partner for many countries. It plays a growing role in global supply chains, regional security arrangements, and international climate initiatives.

This reality creates a persistent contradiction. While democratic governments regularly voice concerns about human rights, economic, commercial, and geopolitical interests often make it difficult for those concerns to translate into sustained and effective pressure.

The gap between international commitments and practical action remains one of the greatest obstacles to improving human rights conditions in Vietnam today.

Recommendations

Protecting civic space and fundamental freedoms in Vietnam requires sustained engagement from both domestic and international actors.

The international community should:

- Continue calling for the release of prisoners of conscience and detained human rights defenders.
- Encourage legal reforms that bring Vietnamese laws into compliance with international standards on freedom of expression, freedom of association, and peaceful assembly.
- Support independent environmental advocates, journalists, and civil society organizations.
- Require greater transparency from global technology companies regarding government requests to remove content or restrict online activity.
- Integrate digital rights and freedom of expression into trade negotiations, diplomatic dialogues, and development partnerships with Vietnam.
- Expand support networks for independent journalists, civil society actors, and members of the Vietnamese diaspora who continue to advocate for democratic values and human rights.

Meaningful progress will not come from isolation, but from sustained accountability, international solidarity, and the protection of independent civic participation.

I have experienced interrogation rooms, prison cells, and life in exile. Yet what concerns me most is not what happened to me personally.

What concerns me more is that a new generation of Vietnamese citizens is growing up in an environment where censorship is becoming increasingly invisible. What was once achieved through prison walls and physical coercion can now be accomplished through algorithms, data control, and the manipulation of online public spaces.

The struggle for freedom of expression in Vietnam is no longer solely a struggle against imprisonment. It is increasingly a struggle to protect the right to speak, to be heard, and to exist within the public sphere of the twenty-first century.

If the international community is committed to protecting human dignity, preventing conflict, and promoting sustainable peace, then safeguarding space for independent voices must be an essential part of that effort.

When the right to speak the truth is taken away, a society loses more than freedom. It loses its ability to recognize mistakes, correct injustices, and resolve conflicts peacefully.

This is not only Vietnam's challenge. In a world increasingly shaped by data, algorithms, and digital platforms, every society must confront the same question: Will technology expand human freedom, or will it become a tool for refining ever more sophisticated forms of control?

The answer will help determine not only the future of freedom in Vietnam, but also the future of human dignity in the digital age.

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WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Gendered Authoritarianism, Social Death, and State Violence in Post-2016 Türkiye

After the failed coup of July 2016, repression in Türkiye was engineered differently for women.



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Introduction: Gendered Governance under Authoritarianism

Authoritarian regimes do not affect men and women in the same way. Rather than governing solely through coercion, they frequently exploit existing patriarchal structures to transform women's social roles, motherhood, professional identities, and citizenship into mechanisms of political control. Using the aftermath of the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, in Türkiye as a case study, this article argues that the post-2016 purge should be understood not merely as a political crackdown but as the consolidation of a system of **gendered governance**. It demonstrates how authoritarian rule extended beyond imprisonment and prosecution to produce social death, weaponized motherhood, and authoritarian citizenship, reshaping women's participation in public life, family relationships, and political belonging.

The aftermath of the failed coup attempt of July 2016 has significantly intensified pre-existing patterns of gendered violence, discrimination, and oppression in Türkiye.

First, even before the coup attempt, the government had already begun reframing women's rights within the framework of family policy. Independent women's organizations were increasingly sidelined, while conservative narratives promoted women primarily as mothers and wives.

Second, the coup attempt itself became a gendered turning point. Emergency decrees led to the closure of women's shelters, advocacy centers, and civil society organizations. Women who challenged traditional gender norms were

increasingly portrayed as threats to social order. Thousands were dismissed from public employment, imprisoned, including pregnant women and mothers with infants, and subjected to strip searches, sexual violence, and degrading treatment.

The state thus emerges not merely as a passive failure to protect rights but, in many cases, as an active producer of gendered violence.

HAFZA GIRDAP

Third, gendered political discourse and hate speech further legitimized repression. Feminism was increasingly portrayed as a "Western" and "anti-family" ideology, while LGBTQ+ identities were openly demonized. In some cases, government officials and religious clerics referred to women associated with the Gülen Movement (a faith-based civil society movement inspired by the late Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen that developed into a global educational and interfaith dialogue network beginning in the early 1990s) as "spoils of war," reinforcing an atmosphere of misogyny and gender-based violence.

Fourth, repression forced thousands of women into exile, many risking their lives while crossing rivers and seas in search of safety. The cases of Birgül Kocal, imprisoned together with her young son before fleeing, only to discover that he had leukemia, and Esma Uludağ, who died after escaping Türkiye with her three children, illustrate the compounded trauma of persecution, displacement, and forced migration.

Finally, Türkiye's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 marked a significant roll-back of protections against gender-based violence. Today, legal loopholes continue to facilitate child marriage, perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence have benefited from early-release measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and women continue to face systemic impunity amid rising rates of femicide.

On that account, the post-2016 purge should be understood not only as a political crackdown but also as a gendered process of authoritarian governance and a broader social phenomenon of inclusion and exclusion. The experiences of women affected by emergency decrees reveal how authoritarian systems rely upon existing patriarchal structures to deepen punishment, extend state control into private life, and produce long-term forms of social marginalization.

Constructing Gendered Authoritarianism in Türkiye

Authoritarian regimes govern through more than arrests and imprisonment. They combine legal, economic, social, and symbolic forms of punishment that intersect with existing gender inequalities, making women particularly vulnerable to political repression. Rather than being targeted solely as political actors, women frequently experience repression through their roles as mothers, caregivers, wives, and professionals. Consequently, authoritarian governance extends beyond individuals into families and communities, where employment loss, social stigmatization, mobility restrictions, and caregiving responsibilities become interconnected mechanisms of patriarchal control and political exclusion.

The gendered repression that intensified after the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, did not emerge in isolation. Rather, it reflected a broader authoritarian transformation that had been unfolding since 2011 through increasingly restrictive policies and political discourses that reinforced patriarchal norms while narrowing the space for women's rights and civic participation.

One of the earliest institutional manifestations of this shift was the replacement of the **Ministry of Women and Family** with the **Ministry of Family and Social Policies**, symbolizing a transition from a rights-based understanding of women toward a family-centered approach. At the same time, feminist and Kurdish women's organizations were progressively marginalized, while conservative narratives increasingly defined women primarily as mothers and wives. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's statement that *"You cannot put women and men on equal footing; it is against nature"*¹ became emblematic of this ideological orientation.

This transformation reflected a broader pattern of **anti-gender politics**, through which gender equality, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights were increasingly portrayed as threats to national identity, religious values, and the traditional family. Women's rights organizations were delegitimized, while independent civic space gradually contracted. Rather than rejecting women's rights outright, the state redefined them through the language of family protection, morality, and social order.

Following the failed coup attempt, these ideological developments became institutionalized through emergency rule. Women increasingly

came to be portrayed not only as mothers and caregivers but also as potential threats to national security when they challenged officially sanctioned gender roles or were associated with political opposition. Ethnographic evidence illustrates this transformation:

"Women have duties assigned to them. If they do something other than these assigned roles, the state says, 'Let her do what she wants, but limit it within the familial sphere.' ... He knows that if something changes in the country, it is women who change it. He is terrified of women's solidarity."

Political rhetoric further normalizes gender-based hostility. Women associated with the Gülen movement were publicly described as “spoils of war,” while pro-government religious figures openly endorsed violence against perceived opponents. Simultaneously, emergency decrees restricted accountability for torture and abuse, creating conditions in which gender-based violence and impunity could flourish.

The Turkish experience therefore, demonstrates that the post-2016 purge should not be understood simply as a security response to an attempted coup. Rather, it represented the institutional consolidation of a broader authoritarian project in which anti-gender ideology, patriarchal governance, and emergency legislation became mutually reinforcing mechanisms of political control.

Governing Through Exclusion: Gendered State Violence After July 15

The state of emergency declared after July 15, 2016, transformed emergency rule into a durable system of authoritarian governance.

Through emergency decrees, the government implemented mass dismissals, institutional closures, criminal prosecutions, and sweeping restrictions on civil society. Although these measures affected broad segments of Turkish society, their consequences were distinctly gendered.

Women experienced political repression not only as individuals accused of political offenses but also through their roles as mothers, caregivers, professionals, and family members. Independent women's organizations were closed, freedom of movement was restricted through passport cancellations and travel bans, and women frequently became targets of collective punishment because of their husbands' or relatives' alleged political affiliations. Official statistics illustrate the scale of this transformation: more than **633,000 women** were investigated, nearly **150,000** were imprisoned, and approximately **40,500** were dismissed from public employment through emergency decrees.

For many women, dismissal marked the beginning rather than the end of political persecution. Professional careers disappeared overnight, economic independence eroded, and social stigmatization extended beyond formal legal proceedings. Women who had spent years overcoming educational and social barriers to establish professional identities frequently found themselves excluded not only from public employment but also from broader social and economic life.

The post-2016 purge also marked a decisive turning point in the gendered nature of state violence. Women increasingly experienced arbitrary detention, torture, sexual violence, and

economic marginalization, while existing patriarchal norms were incorporated into authoritarian governance. Even in the absence of individualized criminal accusations, women became targets because of their identities as wives, mothers, daughters, or relatives of politically persecuted individuals.

Social Death: Beyond Legal Punishment

Perhaps the most significant consequence of the post-2016 purge has been **social death**, a condition in which individuals remain physically alive while being systematically excluded from meaningful participation in professional, social, and civic life. Beyond legal sanctions, women experienced the erasure of professional identities, restrictions on mobility and financial autonomy, and persistent stigmatization that fundamentally reshaped their sense of belonging.

For many women, dismissal represented far more than the loss of employment. It meant the loss of economic independence, professional recognition, and social identity. The case of nurse **Sevgi Balcı**, dismissed while eight months pregnant, illustrates these cumulative effects. Following her dismissal, she experienced prolonged unemployment, social isolation, and severe psychological distress before taking her own life, demonstrating that authoritarian repression often extends far beyond formal legal punishment.

Social death also affected families. Political exclusion frequently became intergenerational as children grew up in households marked by imprisonment, unemployment, surveillance, and social stigma. Hundreds continue to live in

prison with their mothers, while many others have experienced prolonged separation from one or both parents. The consequences of authoritarian governance, therefore, cannot be measured solely through arrests or convictions but also through their long-term effects on family life, childhood development, and social cohesion.

Motherhood itself became a mechanism of political punishment. Pregnant women and mothers with young children were imprisoned despite international legal protections, some immediately after childbirth or while caring for infants. One mother remained incarcerated while her five-year-old child underwent cancer treatment outside prison, illustrating how authoritarian punishment extended beyond individuals to entire families. Rather than protecting maternal roles, the state transformed motherhood into a source of political vulnerability.

The Turkish experience demonstrates that social death is not merely an individual consequence of authoritarian rule but one of its governing strategies. By dismantling professional identities, weakening social relationships, and extending punishment to families, authoritarian governance reproduces exclusion long after legal proceedings have ended.

The Istanbul Convention and the Politics of Gender

Türkiye's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in **2021** represented one of the most significant symbolic and institutional setbacks for women's rights during the post-coup period. Although the Convention had originally been ratified by the AKP government in 2011 under President Erdoğan's leadership, it was later

portrayed by government officials and pro-government organizations as a threat to family values and national identity.

This political reframing fundamentally distorted the Convention's actual purpose. Rather than undermining the family, the Istanbul Convention seeks to prevent violence against women and domestic violence while promoting equality, non-discrimination, victim protection, and education against gender stereotypes. Nevertheless, populist political discourse increasingly portrayed the Convention as promoting "deviant" family structures and LGBTQ+ identities, reflecting broader anti-gender movements observed in several contemporary authoritarian regimes.

The withdrawal therefore, represented far more than the abandonment of an international treaty. It became a symbolic rejection of gender equality itself.

Although implementation of the Convention had long remained inadequate, women's organizations regarded it as an essential legal framework that could still be strengthened through political commitment and institutional reform. Instead, its withdrawal further weakened already fragile protections.

Institutionalizing Conservative Gender Ideology

President Erdoğan repeatedly reinforced this perspective, stating:

You cannot put women and men on equal footing. It is against nature. Our religion regards motherhood very highly. Feminists do not understand that; they reject motherhood.

Simultaneously, institutions increasingly promoted conservative understandings of gender. Organizations such as **KADEM**, co-founded by President Erdoğan's daughter, initially supported the Istanbul Convention before later endorsing its withdrawal, illustrating the institutionalization of pro-government gender ideology.

Although universities were not subjected to direct prohibitions on gender studies, increasing governmental control over higher education and civil society significantly reduced space for critical scholarship on gender equality.

Continuing Consequences

The consequences of these policies continue to shape women's everyday lives. Legal loopholes continue to facilitate child marriage. During the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals convicted of domestic violence, sexual assault, and femicide benefited from early-release legislation, while many political prisoners, including mothers with young children, remained incarcerated.

Following Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, women's rights organizations and legal practitioners reported increasing judicial reluctance to issue and renew protection orders under Law No. 6284. At the same time, failures to enforce restraining orders became a persistent concern, contributing to a broader weakening of institutional protection against domestic violence and femicide.

Recent data indicate:

- **294 confirmed killings of women in 2025**
- continuing increases in suspicious female deaths

— persistent failures of accountability

Gendered Violence Beyond the Purge

The experiences documented after 2016 reveal that women encountered multiple and overlapping forms of violence.

These included:

- arbitrary detention
- imprisonment during pregnancy and the postpartum period
- strip searches
- giving birth under surveillance
- separation from newborn children
- sexual assault
- rape
- psychological torture

The case of **Garibe Gezer**, an imprisoned Kurdish woman who died after reporting rape and torture in prison, illustrates the intersection of political repression, gender-based violence, and ethnic discrimination.

Similarly, **transgender women** experienced intensified police violence, house raids, and social exclusion, demonstrating that authoritarian repression targeted multiple marginalized identities simultaneously.

Women dismissed under emergency decrees, regardless of ethnic, religious, or political background, frequently experienced multiple layers of marginalization from both state institutions and broader society.

Many described living under constant fear of arrest and violence, a condition some characterized as a form of collective social insanity. Additional practices, including forced virginity testing, restrictions on reproductive rights, and increasing state intervention in women's bodily autonomy, demonstrate how legal institutions themselves became instruments of gendered violence.

Authoritarian Citizenship, Displacement, and Justice

The post-2016 purge fundamentally reshaped citizenship by making rights increasingly conditional upon political loyalty. Women affected by emergency decrees frequently experienced a transformation from full citizens into politically suspect individuals. Teachers, academics, healthcare professionals, judges, lawyers, and civil servants who had once served public institutions became socially stigmatized and excluded from meaningful participation in public life. Authoritarian governance thus redefined not only who could participate in the political community but also who was considered worthy of belonging.

The erosion of judicial independence reinforced this transformation. According to reports by Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, the U.S. Department of State, Advocates of Silenced Turkey, and my own ethnographic research, many women underwent a judicial process in which punishment often preceded the opportunity to establish their innocence. Family members also became targets of collective punishment. One journalist's wife, for example, lost her employment solely because of her husband's professional activities, illustrating

how political responsibility increasingly extended beyond the individual.

Ethnographic evidence further reveals how authoritarianism reshaped everyday language itself. During one trial, a mother concluded her defense by stating, "*We are innocent.*" She immediately corrected herself: "*We, that is, my daughters and I, are innocent*", fearing that the pronoun *we* might be interpreted as evidence of organizational affiliation. This seemingly minor correction illustrates the extent to which authoritarian governance produces self-censorship, reaching even the grammar of everyday speech.

For many women, displacement ultimately became a strategy of survival rather than migration by choice. Thousands fled political persecution through dangerous crossings of the Evros River and the Aegean Sea, placing Türkiye within the broader phenomenon of **transnational repression**, whereby the consequences of authoritarian rule extend beyond national borders. The experiences of women such as Birgül Kocal and Esmâ Uludağ demonstrate that exile rarely ends persecution; rather, trauma, family separation, and psychological harm frequently accompany displacement long after individuals have escaped authoritarian institutions.

Nearly a decade later, the consequences of the purge remain visible. Many women continue to face barriers to employment, mobility, and social participation, while recent judgments of the European Court of Human Rights have raised significant concerns regarding convictions imposed for conduct that did not constitute criminal activity under international legal standards. For many women, justice therefore means more

than legal rehabilitation—it represents the possibility of restoring dignity, rebuilding lives, and reclaiming citizenship after years of exclusion.

Conclusion

The experience of women following the July 15 purge demonstrates that authoritarian repression is fundamentally gendered. Its consequences extend far beyond courtrooms and prisons into workplaces, families, communities, educational institutions, and private life. Women often bear the heaviest burdens of authoritarian governance, not only as direct targets of political repression but also as caregivers, providers, educators, professionals, and protectors of family stability.

The Turkish case illustrates a broader lesson regarding women under authoritarian regimes. Authoritarian governments frequently exploit existing gender inequalities in order to deepen political control, reinforce social exclusion, and institutionalize obedience. Economic marginalization, social stigmatization, family disruption, forced displacement, and intergenerational trauma become integral components of authoritarian governance rather than unintended consequences.

Furthermore, the Turkish experience demonstrates that gendered violence intersects with ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, and sexual identity. Kurdish women, women associated with the Gülen movement, Alevis, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalized communities have experienced overlapping forms of discrimination and repression. The state thus emerges not merely as a passive failure to protect rights but, in many cases, as an active producer of

gendered violence. Women increasingly find themselves labeled as "terrorists," "traitors," or even "spoils of war," resulting in exclusion from both political and social life. Consequently, migration itself becomes transformed. Women no longer migrate primarily in search of opportunity. They migrate in search of safety.

Ultimately, the stories presented throughout this article are not only stories of suffering. They are also stories of resilience, survival, resistance, and an enduring demand for justice. They remind us that the true cost of authoritarianism cannot be measured solely through arrests, convictions, or prison sentences. It must also be measured through the lives interrupted, the families fragmented, the children traumatized, and the futures denied.

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VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Digital Malevolence: The Dark Psychology of Online Manipulation, Exploitation, and Violence

A recurring pattern of antisocial online behavior, rewarded with attention, status, and social validation, is reshaping how violence begins.



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Introduction

The rapid evolution of online extremist ecosystems has vastly shifted our understanding of radicalization and violence, particularly as contemporary movements increasingly transcend coherent political, religious, or ideological boundaries. This paper introduces the concept of Digital Malevolence, a behavioral framework for understanding how the maladaptive behaviors associated with socially malevolent personality traits manifest, spread, and are reinforced within digital environments. Drawing upon the Dark Tetrad of narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism, we examine the recurring patterns of manipulation, exploitation, cruelty, humiliation, and notoriety-seeking across the emerging and elusive Nihilistic Violent Extremist (NVE) ecosystems.

We argue that these behaviors are not simply features of these communities, but central behavioral and psychological mechanisms through which vulnerable individuals are exploited, status and influence are established, and increasingly harmful behavior is normalized and encouraged. We are particularly concerned with the grooming, sextortion, coercive control, sadistic violence, and the use of violence and transgression as forms of identity construction and social currency. Moving beyond ideological classification alone, we propose Digital Malevolence as a complementary behavioral threat assessment framework for identifying alarming patterns that have been followed by the exponential growth of these NVE networks.

Finally, we introduce a three-tier approach to prevention and intervention centered on behavioral detection, threat and escalation assessment, and prevention and disruption. By shifting our focus away from static ideological categories and focusing on observable patterns of behavior, the Digital Malevolence framework offers a more adaptive approach to understanding and addressing the complex relationship among online extremism, exploitation, criminality, and victimization.

Certain aspects of human nature remain elusive, with the concept of “evil” presenting as one of the most difficult phenomena for us to define and explain.

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The Psychology of Digital Malevolence

Throughout history, many questions have resulted from our seemingly innate desire to understand who we are, how we exist in our world, and why we behave the way we do. Centuries ago, these questions fell within the realms of philosophy and religion, but with the emergence of fields such as psychology, neuroscience, and sociology, we now have new lenses through which we can approach these questions. However, certain aspects of human nature remain elusive, with the concept of “evil” presenting as one of the most difficult phenomena for us to define and explain. Countless scholars have proposed various conceptualizations of evil, yet it remains what has been

referred to as “a thick rope of many complex, twisted, and intertwined strands” (Simon, 2000, p. 24). Despite the varying definitions of evil, for the purpose of this discussion, we will refer to Otto Kernberg’s (2009) conceptualization of evil as “...the shocking expression of primitive aggression, destructive behavior towards others that, in its violence, evinces a wildly excessive quality, a radical callousness, and a lack of compassion that seem to defy the basic nature of humanity” (p. 357). Today, manifestations of evil remain evident across both structural institutions and interpersonal relationships, shaping behaviors that range from everyday acts of exploitation and cruelty to large-scale acts of violence. While historically framed as sin, depravity, and moral corruption viewed from the lens of the victim (Baumeister & Clark, 2015), modern psychology has shifted these conversations to those that implicate personality, behavior, cognition, and environmental influence in the darkness that we call human evil.

Over the years, numerous attempts to study evil have relied on varying approaches, including research examining the neurobiological correlates of antisocial behavior (Raine, 2013), genetic influences on aggression (Caspi et al., 2022) and, as we will focus on in this paper, the character of so-called “socially malevolent” personalities (Book et al., 2015; Lee & Ashton, 2005; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Central to our discussion is the Dark Tetrad, formerly known as the Dark Triad, that is a constellation of four distinct but overlapping traits that are associated with aversive behavior, including narcissism, Machiavellianism, sadism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Spain et al., 2014; Charbol et al., 2009). Despite varying behavioral

manifestations across these traits, they all share a common tendency toward manipulation, exploitation, callousness, domination, and the intentional infliction of harm upon others.

While these traits have traditionally been conceptualized within offline contexts, the emergence of digitally mediated environments has fundamentally shifted how socially malevolent behavior is expressed, reinforced, disseminated and, in some cases, cultivated in individuals who may not have had access to outlets to engage in this behavior prior to the advent of the Internet. Many of the features of online spaces, such as anonymity, algorithmic amplification, online disinhibition, and virality, all create conditions in which behaviors associated with the Dark Tetrad can flourish, often without immediate consequence. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, our interest is in the emergence and growing manifestation of these Dark Tetrad traits within digitally mediated environments as Digital Malevolence, a new behavioral label which we explore herein and define as a recurring pattern of antisocial online behavior that is rewarded through attention, status, influence, and social validation (Figure 1). These concepts shown in Figure 1 are elucidated in the subsequent sections of this paper.

DIGITAL MALEVOLENCE: DARK TETRAD TRAITS AND THEIR BEHAVIORAL EXPRESSIONS		
DEFINITION: Digital malevolence refers to the tendency to intentionally cause, facilitate, or derive satisfaction from harm to others through digital means. It is characterized by patterns of manipulation, exploitation, cruelty, and notoriety-seeking behavior enacted within online environments.		
DARK TETRAD TRAIT	CORE MOTIVATIONS	BEHAVIORAL EXPRESSIONS IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS (Contributing to Digital Malevolence)
 NARCISSISM Need for admiration, superiority, and attention	• Seek status, recognition, and validation • Desire to be seen as powerful or fearless • Entitlement and lack of empathy	• Pursuit of notoriety, influence, and ego reinforcement • Posting or creating provocative content for attention • Seeking clout through extreme or transgressive acts • Self-promotion within harmful communities • Curating a fearsome or dominant online persona
 MACHIAVELLIANISM Strategic manipulation, deception, and control of others	• Manipulate others for personal gain • Deceive to maintain power or advantage • Emotionally detached and calculating	• Manipulation, deception, and exploitation of others • Grooming and building false trust to exploit or recruit • Spreading disinformation or using deceptive narratives • Orchestrating scams, sextortion, or extortion schemes • Manipulating group dynamics to incite or radicalize
 PSYCHOPATHY Impulsivity, lack of empathy, and thrill-seeking	• Seek stimulation and excitement • Disregard for rules, norms, and others' well-being • Callousness and lack of remorse	• Cruelty, harassment, and enjoyment of others' distress • Engaging in or encouraging online harassment and abuse • Sharing or celebrating violent, graphic, or dehumanizing content • Daring, threats, and intimidation for amusement or control • Deriving satisfaction from causing fear or suffering
 EVERYDAY SADISM Enjoyment of others' suffering and humiliation	• Derive pleasure from inflicting pain • Humiliate, degrade, or dominate others • Power through others' suffering	• Humiliation, degradation, and dehumanization • Coordinated humiliation and pile-on attacks • Sharing intimate images or information to shame victims • Encouraging self-harm or glorifying suffering • Dehumanizing language and memes that normalize cruelty
INTEGRATED IMPACT: When these traits co-occur and are enabled by anonymity, scale, and platform affordances, they create conditions in which harm can be planned, amplified, and normalized—contributing to the emergence and persistence of harmful online communities and escalating real-world consequences.		WHY IT MATTERS: Focusing on these behavioral expressions—rather than ideology alone—enables detection, threat assessment, and the design of effective prevention and mitigation strategies.

Figure 1

Our conceptualization of Digital Malevolence is particularly useful when examining the growing threat of the rapidly evolving form of Nihilistic Violent Extremism (NVE). Until recently, extremist movements were defined by their organization around coherent ideological, political, social, or religious objectives (See Moskalenko & McCauley, 2020; Moghaddam, 2005; Yakub, 2023). NVE, on the other hand, is characterized by its ideological fluidity, decentralized online networks, and the glorification of violence, suffering, and social destabilization not as a means to an ideological end, but as ends in themselves (Argentino, 2025a; Ware, 2025). However, although many scholars have argued that nihilistic violent movements lack a coherent ideology, we contend that these movements operate through a psychosocial-based ideological framework that appeals to deep vulnerability, feelings of powerlessness, lack of purpose, significance and belonging and diverts this pain into expressions of power, rage and hatred directed into the destruction of self, others, and society at large.

Nihilistic violent extremists, as defined by the FBI, are individuals who engage in extremist actions due to “a hatred of society at large and a

desire to bring about its collapse by sowing indiscriminate chaos, destruction, and social instability,” (FBI, 2025; Ware, 2025). Although, across these online NVE spaces, the specific narratives may vary, many of these communities mirror each other’s behavioral patterns, particularly through tactics such as coercion, grooming, humiliation, performative violence, and the pursuit of notoriety. Thus, these behaviors typically transcend politically defined ideological boundaries, suggesting that the NVE ecosystem is not defined by shared coherent political beliefs, but shared behavioral dynamics and psychopathologies.

Within these communities, individuals possessing elevated subclinical levels of Dark Tetrad traits are uniquely positioned to thrive in environments that reward manipulation, domination, cruelty, and transgression, while also being vulnerable to individuals who seek to exploit their psychological tendencies. In fact, a growing body of research supports the relationship between Dark Tetrad traits and multiple antisocial online behaviors, such as trolling (Buckels et al., 2018), cyberbullying (Brown et al., 2019), and online sexual violence (Shim et al., 2007). Across the NVE ecosystem, the structure of these platforms both amplifies and reinforces these behaviors through mechanisms such as anonymity, group validation, and social reward systems. Here, these individuals find themselves in a symbiotic relationship with digital environments wherein their proclivities are normalized, rewarded, and escalated over time (Argentino, 2025).

Thus, we argue that the Dark Tetrad and our conceptualization of Digital Malevolence offer a useful framework for understanding the

behavioral dynamics that characterize contemporary NVE ecosystems. By shifting from a solely political ideology-based framework that is largely absent in the NVE ecosystem to one that focuses on the observable manifestations of Digital Malevolence and its psycho-sociological underpinnings, researchers, practitioners, and law enforcement may be better equipped to identify behavioral warning signs, assess risk, and develop intervention strategies that are capable of addressing the ever-evolving nature of online extremism.

Digital Malevolence in NVE Ecosystems

As we have discussed, our conceptualization of Digital Malevolence provides a useful framework for understanding how socially malevolent personality traits manifest within online environments. While the Dark Tetrad traits are conceptually distinct, their frequent convergence in their patterns of manipulation, exploitation, humiliation, and notoriety-seeking make their presence particularly visible within NVE ecosystems. Rather than appearing as isolated expressions of individual personality traits, these behaviors function as interconnected components of a broader ecosystem in which this cruelty is normalized and socially reinforced. As such, the following sections will examine several of the primary manifestations of digital malevolence and the Dark Tetrad traits that contribute to their emergence in NVE online spaces.

Manipulation, Grooming, and Exploitative Control

One of the most prominent manifestations of digital malevolence within the NVE ecosystem is the strategic manipulation and exploitation of vulnerable individuals. Through systematic grooming, coercion, emotional manipulation, and deception, offenders are able to establish control over their victims while simultaneously reinforcing their own status and influence within the community (Argentino, Gay & Bastin, 2024; Argentino, 2024a; Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2025). Within the context of the Dark Tetrad, these behaviors reflect the characteristics associated with individuals with high sub-clinical levels of Machiavellianism and psychopathy and their tendency to view interpersonal relationships as instruments for achieving personal objectives at the cost of their victims (Kharaja et al., 2025; O'Boyle et al., 2012).

Research consistently demonstrates that individuals high in Machiavellianism possess strong manipulative tendencies and are particularly skilled at accurately identifying and effectively exploiting the vulnerabilities of others. For example, O'Boyle and colleagues (2012) described such individuals as "social chameleons" who are capable of adapting to and mimicking the behaviors and attitudes of others to gain their trust, establish rapport, and ultimately influence others for personal gain. Within NVE ecosystems, these abilities are especially valuable, as recruitment, victimization, and social control are often a function of an offender's capacity to seemingly naturally detect and exploit users' emotional, psychological, and developmental vulnerabilities.

Perhaps the most concerning manifestation of Digital Malevolence within the NVE ecosystem is the pervasive use of sextortion tactics. Defined by the FBI as “a form of exploitation in which offenders threaten to distribute sexually explicit material [of their victim] to coerce them into providing additional images, money or engaging in sexual acts and other forms of compliance,” sextortion has become a rapidly growing form of victimization within prominent NVE communities such as 764, CVLT, and the broader Com online ecosystem. Here, perpetrators exploit victims’ psychological vulnerabilities by cultivating trust, emotional dependence, and perceived intimacy before weaponizing sexually explicit material to compel continued compliance. For example, in 2023 alone, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) reported receiving 26,718 reports of financial sextortion, a nearly 149% increase from their 2022 report (NCMEC, 2024). Importantly, sextortion is implicated in several severe consequences for victims, such as extreme emotional distress, academic and professional disruption and, in some cases, self-harm and suicide (Ray & Henry, 2024; Wolak, 2016; FBI, 2024).

Within NVE communities, sextortion functions as more than a simple online criminal enterprise (Argentino, Gay & Bastin, 2024; Argentino, 2025a, 2024a). Rather, it serves as a mechanism of coercive control through which offenders establish dominance, recruit vulnerable users, and reinforce status hierarchies within the group. In fact, this act has become so pervasive among certain networks, like 764, that when members acquire sexually explicit content from their victims, they compile this content and

create so-called “LoreBooks” to systematically blackmail their victims (Argentino, 2025a) and manipulate them into committing further heinous acts. Through strategic use of fear, humiliation, and blackmail, users are compelled to produce increasingly graphic and extreme content, including videos of themselves engaging in self-harm, bestiality, and acts of incest (Argentino, 2024a, 2025a; Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2024). It is clear that these dynamics highlight a central feature of digital malevolence, that lies in the transformation of interpersonal manipulation into a socially reinforced mechanism for acquiring power, influence, and status within online communities.

Humiliation, Cruelty, and Sadistic Reinforcement

Another defining manifestation of Digital Malevolence involves the normalization and reinforcement of cruelty. Across NVE networks, the suffering of others is not solely a byproduct of exploitation, but a source of the entertainment, social validation, and group cohesion that underly the somewhat hidden NVE ideology of moving from prey in the real world to predator in the toxic online world they have created for themselves. (Ewing & Speckhard, 2026). Here, behaviors such as harassment, humiliation, coercive self-harm, and degradation rituals are not only required, but celebrated.

Within the context of the Dark Tetrad, psychopathy and sadism provide a useful framework through which these dynamics can be understood. Psychopathy, as described by Porter and colleagues (2006), is a construct that characterizes those who are “manipulative, callous, remorseless, impulsive, irresponsible, and

antisocial individuals with an emotionally barren disposition” (p. 611). On the other hand, sadism reflects individuals with “a passion for unrestricted power over another sentient being,” (Fromm, 1973, p. 6) who “derive pleasure from the control, domination, and suffering of others,” (Meloy, 1997, p. 630). Put simply, within the context of inflicting cruelty upon others, psychopathy may help explain the absence of remorse, while sadism provides insight into the presence of enjoyment. Further, multiple studies have implicated psychopathy and sadism in antisocial online behaviors. For example, March and Steele (2020) examined trolling behavior and found that higher psychopathy and sadism scores were associated with higher trolling tendencies. Similarly, when presented with different social scenarios, Lee (2025) found that psychopathy and sadism both significantly predicted the participants’ choice of the socially painful option in the presented scenario.

Digital environments are particularly conducive to the expression of these traits, as features such as anonymity, online disinhibition, and algorithmic amplification reduce social restraints, while rewarding transgressive behavior (Buckels et al., 2014; Smoker & March, 2017; Kircaburun & Griffiths, 2018; Argentino, 2024a). Within NVE ecosystems, these sadistic and psychopathic tendencies frequently manifest through coercive self-harm, humiliation rituals, graphic content sharing, and the public degradation of victims (Argentino, 2024a, 2024b; Dortkardesler & Magnus, 2025).

Importantly, these behaviors often extend beyond instrumental goals. Manifestos, community narratives, and group norms that frequently celebrate domination, suffering, and

violence are critical components of the psychosocial ideology that underlies the NVE movement (Ewing & Speckhard, 2026). Through language such as “execute without mercy,” and “pain is power,” violence and cruelty are further positioned as sacred and virtuous actions (Dortkardesler & Magnus, 2025). Thus, their prevalence across ideologically diverse NVE communities suggests that cruelty itself may function as a unifying behavioral norm, independent of any coherent political ideological commitment other than avoiding being predated upon by becoming the predator.

Notoriety, Identity, and Performative Violence

A third manifestation of digital malevolence involves the transformation of the aforementioned cruelty, exploitation, and transgression into a means for acquiring status and recognition. A substantial body of research examining narcissism and social media has consistently demonstrated that online environments provide especially fertile grounds for the status-seeking, self-presentation, and pursuit of validation that is attributed to narcissism (McCain & Campbell, 2016; Casale & Banchi, 2020; Alloway et al., 2014). For example, in a cross-sectional sample of 23,532 Norwegians, Andreassen and colleagues (2017) found that social media addiction was significantly associated with narcissism, while negatively associated with self-esteem. Further, Brailockskia and colleagues (2020) found in a sample of Facebook users that narcissism significantly predicted Facebook addiction. Simply put, through engagement metrics, audience visibility, and social feedback mechanisms, digital platforms transform attention into a valuable resource

that rewards individuals with influence, recognition, and social standing.

Within many NVE communities, these dynamics take on a particularly concerning form, as visibility functions as a form of social currency (Bhatt & Mantua, 2023; Steltenpohl et al., 2018). Through mechanisms such as leaderboards, manifesto dissemination, and livestreaming, members of these communities are able to spread their content to a massive audience, adhering to Hobson's (2023) conceptualization of the "theater of terrorism," wherein terrorism is fundamentally performative and leveraged not only for chaos and destruction, but also media amplification and symbolic impact (see also Speckhard, 2006).

Here, the performance of violence and cruelty is a fundamental pillar in the NVE milieu wherein spectacle, as opposed to ideological devotion, underlies the perpetuation of violence (Argentino, 2024a, 2024b; Ewing & Speckhard, 2026; Smith et al., 2026). As users become further entrenched in these communities, psychological barriers to violence erode and distinctions increasingly blur between symbolic violence, and the operationalization of this violence (Ewing & Speckhard, 2026). Thus, violence is a mechanism through which users cultivate their reputations and construct identities.

Although these manifestations of digital malevolence have been discussed as separate constructs, they rarely occur in isolation. Acts of sextortion, coercive self-harm, humiliation rituals, and performative violence frequently overlap with elements of manipulation, domination, cruelty, and notoriety-seeking behavior. The recurring presence of these behaviors across

ideologically fluid communities suggests that understanding how individuals behave within these ecosystems will ultimately provide greater insight into participation, escalation, and risk, rather than ideology alone. Consequently, the value of the Dark Tetrad lies less in its ability to explain a single behavior and more in its role in illuminating the broader constellation of digitally malevolent dynamics that emerge across NVE ecosystems.

Digital Malevolence as a Behavioral Threat Assessment Framework

As we have discussed, traditional counter-extremism frameworks have largely focused on ideology, grievance narratives, and movement affiliation when assessing risk. While these approaches remain valuable in many contexts, the emergence of ideologically fluid ecosystems, such as NVE, presents challenges for models that primarily rely on ideology as an indicator of threat. Thus, we propose the concept of Digital Malevolence as a complementary behavioral framework through which this form of extremism may be identified and assessed. Consequently, integrating behavioral indicators of Digital Malevolence into threat assessment frameworks may enhance practitioners' ability to identify emerging risks within decentralized and online environments where ideology is fragmented, fluid, or entirely absent.

It is important to note that this framework (Figure 2) is not intended to replace ideological analyses, but to supplement them with a psychosociological analysis that is much needed when examining the NVE online ecosystem. By examining these behavioral dynamics in combination with ideological factors, researchers,

practitioners, and trust and safety professionals may be better positioned to identify escalation pathways, disrupt recruitment processes, and intervene before online behaviors translate into offline harm.

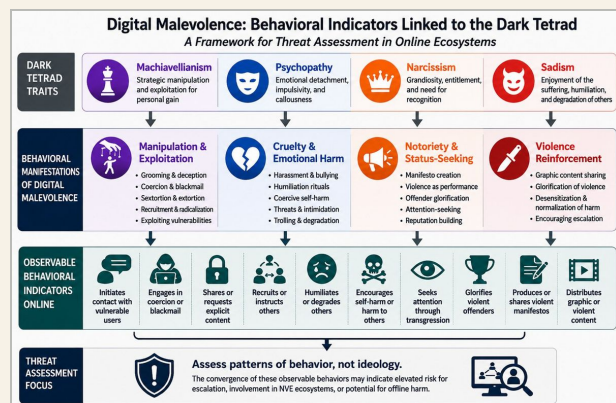


Figure 2

Trust and Safety Implications for NVE Prevention

The practical significance of our discussion regarding Digital Malevolence extends well beyond purely theoretical discussions of online behavior. In recent years, law enforcement agencies and technology companies have increasingly identified NVE-associated networks as emerging threats to public safety, particularly due to their involvement in the exploitation and victimization of minors (FBI, 2025; Argentino, 2025a). For example, in the United States, the FBI, across all 56 field offices, has identified over 450 subjects associated with NVE networks nationwide (Setera, 2026). Further, between 2020 and 2025, across 29 countries there were 194 individual arrests involving crimes tied to NVE communities that resulted in the harm, victimization, or killing of roughly 5,040 individuals (Ahmed, 2026). These trends are particularly concerning due to the

disproportionate engagement of minors within these networks. For example, in a qualitative analysis of 174 NVE incidents captured on the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab's NVE Tracker, 71.8% of the incidents involved individuals with at least one youth-facing indicator (Landress, 2026). Similarly, although the average age at the time of arrest is 20.4 years old, arrest records reveal the scope of minor involvement in NVE, with the youngest arrest involving an 11-year-old, and the youngest known victim at 8-years-old (Ahmed, 2026).

Researchers, law enforcement agencies, and trust and safety teams have documented the role of mainstream online platforms in facilitating interactions between perpetrators and vulnerable users through social networking, gaming, and communication services (Argentino et al., 2024; Argentino, 2025a; Ware, 2025). The presence of offenders on platforms such as Discord, Telegram, Roblox, and other online services illustrates the extent to which these behaviors transcend all corners of the technological environment. These digitally malevolent behaviors appear to migrate across digital spaces, adapting to the affordances and moderation practices of individual platforms and increasing exposure to youths who are vulnerable to the influences of these behaviors. Thus, if these behaviors represent recurring manifestations of Digital Malevolence, the question becomes how platforms can identify people with these traits and disrupt their radicalization efforts by intervening before they escalate and are able to recruit others.

Building upon our conceptualization of Digital Malevolence, we propose a three-tier (Figure 3)

approach that emphasizes the identification, assessment, and disruption of behaviors associated with manipulation, exploitation, violence reinforcement, and social domination. This is especially relevant for technology companies and trust and safety teams who are often tasked with addressing harmful conduct that occurs across fragmented and rapidly evolving online environments. Here, we emphasize the implementation of strategies that focus on early detection, behavioral risk assessment, and targeted intervention.

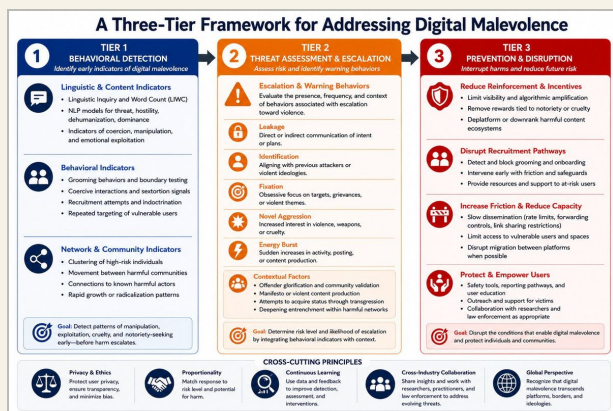


Figure 3

Tier 1: Behavioral Detection

While traditional models tend to focus on content, keywords, and ideological affiliation, one of the most critical components of any prevention and intervention strategy involves the identification of behavioral patterns associated with Digital Malevolence before they escalate into more serious forms of harm. Thus, trust and safety teams may benefit from supplementing content-based approaches with methods designed to identify patterns of manipulation, exploitation, coercion, and notoriety-seeking behavior

regardless of the narratives accompanying them.

A growing body of research has already demonstrated the utility of existing computational approaches for identifying concerning behavioral and linguistic patterns online (Pennebaker et al., 2001; Pennebaker et al., 2003; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). For example, Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) has been widely utilized to detect and identify psychological constructs through language, including those that are indicative of hostility, dominance, and interpersonal orientation. Here, the relative frequencies of words are counted and divided into psychologically meaningful categories to assess individuals' personality, drives, cognition, and emotion (Pennebaker et al., 2003; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Similarly, natural language processing (NLP) models have been employed to identify threats, harassment, extremist rhetoric and coercive communication patterns (Ni et al., 2020; Grenier et al., 2026). When combined with behavioral indicators, such as repeated outreach to vulnerable users, recruitment attempts, and sextortion-related activities, these approaches, especially when combined with machine learning technology and AI-based tools, may provide an important early layer of detection.

Tier 2: Threat Assessment and Escalation

Detection alone is insufficient without a framework for evaluating risk and determining which behaviors warrant intervention. Thus, threat assessment, defined by Borum and colleagues (1999) as “a set of investigative and operational activities to identify, assess, and manage

persons who may pose a threat of violence,” (p. 327), is a necessary next step in this prevention and intervention process. One particularly useful approach requires the recognition of warning behaviors, defined simply as “factors which constitute change, and which are evidence of increasing or accelerating risk,” (Meloy et al., 2012, p. 260) and indicate the manifestation of “toxic changes in patterns of behavior which require an operational response,” (Meloy et al., 2012, . 260). Existing literature has identified specific warning behaviors, such as leakage, fixation, novel aggression, and energy bursts that provide insight into an individual’s progression from harmful online conduct toward real-world violence (Kaati et al., 2016; Almond et al., 2026).

For example, in their discussion on fame-seeking mass shooters (Lankford, 2016), Allwinn and colleagues (2024) explored the behavioral indicators of mass shooters who demonstrated notoriety-motivated warning behaviors. Although NVE is not strictly associated with mass shootings, some of the features associated with fame-seeking mass shooters, such as direct statements about becoming famous, mentioning famous or fictional role models with a history of violence, and posting on platforms both before and during the incident (Silva & Greene-Colozzi, 2021), mirror the narcissistic behavioral patterns seen on NVE networks. Similarly, the dissemination of manifestos, expressions of intent, and increasing preoccupation with violence may signal escalating risk when observed alongside patterns of manipulation, exploitation, or cruelty. Thus, we argue that it is critical for practitioners to assess behavioral clusters and trajectories over time, rather than evaluating isolated incidents, to allow for

a more nuanced understanding of individual risk.

Tier 3: Prevention and Disruption

The final tier focuses on disrupting the conditions that allow Digital Malevolence to flourish within online environments. Throughout our discussion, we have emphasized that NVE ecosystems derive strength not only from their increasing membership, but also from the mechanisms through which manipulation, cruelty, and notoriety are social reinforced. As such, prevention and intervention efforts should extend beyond the removal of harmful content and instead focus on addressing the opportunities, incentives, and rewards that sustain these transgressive behaviors and implement strategies to encourage prosocial behavior.

This approach most closely resembles the principles of Clarke’s (2009) Situational Crime Prevention model that leverages techniques such as the reduction of anonymity, reduction of emotional arousal, neutralization of peer pressure, and the strengthening of formal surveillance (Ho et al., 2022; Cornish & Clarke, 2003; Clarke, 2009). Within the context of trust and safety, one promising approach involves disrupting the social reinforcement mechanisms that contribute to escalation. Through interventions that reduce visibility, limit algorithmic amplification, and restrict opportunities for offender glorification, platforms may reduce the social rewards associated with digitally malevolent behavior.

A second opportunity for intervention involves disrupting recruitment and exploitation pathways before significant harm occurs. For example, several technology companies have

implemented measures designed to identify potentially coercive interactions, provide safety warnings when users may be at heightened risk of exploitation, and restrict contact between vulnerable users and suspected offenders (Stephenson et al., 2025; Gillett et al., 2022). Although these interventions were developed primarily to address sextortion, human trafficking, and child safety concerns, they illustrate how behavioral indicators can be leveraged to identify and disrupt harmful interactions.

Finally, prevention efforts should focus on increasing friction within high-risk environments and reducing the capacity of harmful networks to expand. For example, Safety-by-Design approaches emphasize the importance of intentionally embedding protective measures directly into platform architecture through features such as reporting mechanisms, user safeguards, and age-appropriate protections (Agha et al., 2023; Leiser & Murray, 2025; Zhang et al., 2026). Similarly, the disruption of coordinated networks and community infrastructure may prove more effective than repeatedly targeting individual accounts or localized content in isolation.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the value of the Digital Malevolence framework lies in its capacity to illuminate behavioral dynamics that transcend politically defined ideological boundaries. Across NVE ecosystems, recurring patterns of manipulation, exploitation, cruelty, and notoriety-seeking behavior appear with clear consistency, despite variation in the narratives espoused by individual participants. As digitally mediated forms of harm continue to evolve, it is imperative that

practitioners recognize these behaviors as indicators of risk and move beyond static ideological classifications toward an adaptive and nuanced understanding of contemporary online threats.

It is immensely clear that the emergence of NVE signals an alarming transformation in how harmful online communities are organized and sustained. Rather than forming around coherent political, religious, or ideological worldviews, these ecosystems appear centered around shared behavioral practices, social reinforcement mechanisms, and the pursuit of influence, status and control. As such, NVE represents a phenomenon that is a manifestation of a larger trend in which technology facilitates new forms of interpersonal exploitation, cruelty, and violence. As online ecosystems continue to evolve, so does the complex interplay of extremism, criminality, exploitation, and other forms of digitally mediated harms. The future of behavioral threat assessment may therefore depend less on determining what individuals believe in favor of focusing on how individuals behave. Digital Malevolence not only provides a framework for understanding NVE, but a broader conceptual lens through which the next generation of online threats can be identified, studied, and disrupted.

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WAR CRIMES

From Victims to Perpetrators? The Israeli Jewish Case

How does a victim become an oppressor? A political psychologist examines the Israeli Jewish case.



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To the honor of Halina Balter

How do we explain one of history's most haunting paradoxes? For roughly two thousand years, Jews endured an almost unbroken chain of suffering: persecutions, pogroms, expulsions, blood libels, special taxation, forced conversions, and massacres, culminating in the Holocaust, in which six million innocent Jews were murdered in just seven years (1938–1945). Yet within a single generation, this same people, shaped by centuries of victimhood, became, in the eyes of many, perpetrators of ethnic cleansing, apartheid, and the violent dispossession of another people: the Palestinians. How does that happen? **How does a victim become an oppressor?**

Introduction

The Jewish-Arab conflict — the broader struggle from which the Israeli-Palestinian dispute grew — was born at the end of the nineteenth century, when the first waves of Jewish settlers arrived in Palestine, then a province of the crumbling Ottoman Empire. At the time, Jews were a tiny minority: in 1880, roughly 27,000–30,000 Jews lived there, most of them non-Zionist, representing no more than four to six percent of the total population.

The conflict's roots lay in a collision of dreams. The Jews who came did so under the banner of Zionism — a national movement born of desperation and pride, built on the conviction that Jewish survival required a homeland of their own. Scattered across Europe, America and other continents, vulnerable to the whims of host nations, Jews needed, the Zionists argued, a place where they could be masters of their

own fate. That place, in their vision, was the ancient land of Israel. And so they came — first in a trickle, then in waves — to build, to farm, to settle. But the land was not empty. Palestine was home to an Arab population that was simultaneously awakening to its own national identity, in the same territory, at the same historical moment. Two peoples, two dreams, one land: the collision was, in retrospect, almost inevitable.

In that broader sense, this tragedy belongs to the long, unfinished arc of an evolving global moral conscience.

DANIEL BAR-TAL

The sheer inevitability of it struck at least one sharp observer very early. Nagib Azoury, a Maronite Christian and Ottoman official based in Jerusalem, published a remarkable warning in 1905, in his book *Le Réveil de la Nation Arabe* (*The Awakening of the Arab Nation*):

Two important phenomena, of the same nature but opposed, are emerging at this moment in Asiatic Turkey. They are the awakening of the Arab nation and the latent effort by Jews to reconstitute on a very large scale the ancient Kingdom of Israel. These two movements are destined to confront each other continually until one of them prevails over the other. The final outcome of this struggle, between two peoples that represent two contradictory principles, may shape the destiny of the whole world.

It reads less like a political analysis than a prophecy — and it was fulfilled. From the moment the first Zionist pioneers set foot in the Holy Land in 1882, the two movements have

been locked in continuous, often violent, struggle.

Yet the struggle has not remained symmetrical. Until 1948, Jews were the weaker party, a minority fighting for the right to immigrate, to purchase land, and to survive. Since the war of 1948, the balance shifted decisively: Jews became the majority within their new state and held the upper hand.

This essay traces that arc across six phases, from 1882 to the present day. In each phase, I identify the defining events and the ideological currents that shaped Jewish-Israeli consciousness and hardened its dominant narrative. My aim is not to offer a comprehensive history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — that would require many volumes. Instead, this is a selective account, focused sharply on a single, urgent question: How did the victims become the perpetrators?

The First phase of 1882-1947: Zionist Ideology and Violent Conflict

The first period opened with the arrival of the First Aliyah in 1882 — the initial wave of Zionist immigration to Ottoman-controlled Palestine. It ran through the British conquest of 1917 and the British Mandate that followed, lasting formally from 1920 to 1948. It was during these decades that the attitudes, visions, and aspirations were forged that would shape the Jewish-Israeli mindset for generations to come. Here is that founding repertoire.

Delegitimization

The earliest encounters between Zionist Jews and Arabs in the nineteenth century left a

lasting imprint, one that would harden into stereotype over the following decades. The early waves of Zionist immigrants were overwhelmingly European, and many carried with them the colonial, Eurocentric assumptions of their era: above all, the belief that European civilization was simply superior to others. Through this lens, inherited from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European thought, the Arab world, lumped together as "the Orient," appeared backward, primitive, frozen in time. This orientalist outlook seeped deeply into early Zionist attitudes, casting Arabs as inherently inferior. Over time it calcified into something close to a national consensus: Arabs as uncivilized, trapped in a feudal world with no real concept of justice or modernity. That delegitimizing image, remarkably, still circulates among a large majority of Israeli Jews today.

Dreams of Expansion

Many Zionist leaders dreamed of a state far larger than the one that eventually emerged and the West Bank sat squarely inside that dream from the start. Two camps formed early on, but both took the West Bank for granted; the real argument was over the East Bank (Transjordan), not Judea and Samaria. For virtually everyone in the movement, the West Bank wasn't even up for debate. It was simply assumed to be part of the future homeland. This was formally articulated in 1919 by the Zionist Organization at Versailles, voiced by Theodor Herzl, Chaim Weizmann, David Ben-Gurion, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, and others. That vision remains alive today, championed by leading government figures, much of the opposition, and a majority of the Israeli Jewish public.

The Dream of Transfer

From the earliest waves of immigration, most Zionist leaders also entertained a darker vision: the disappearance of the Arab population, whether through voluntary emigration or, failing that, forced transfer. Herzl, Ben-Gurion, and others spoke of it openly. And at several critical junctures since — the 1948 war, the 1967 war, and again since 2023 — that dream has been partially enacted by leading figures within the Israeli government and the Israeli military.

The New Jew

The early Zionist movement, especially through thinkers like Max Nordau and the cultural Zionists who followed, set out to forge something they called the “New Jew”: the *Muskeljude*, or “Muscle Jew.” It was meant as a decisive break from diaspora identity. Gone would be the pale, bookish, ghetto-bound Jew: passive, bent by centuries of persecution, forever dependent on the tolerance of gentile neighbours. In his place would stand a proud, physically powerful, self-reliant Hebrew, someone who worked the land with his own hands and, when necessary, defended it with his own fists. This new Jew would owe nothing to anyone, care nothing for outside approval, and be defined by courage and direct action rather than negotiation or appeasement. It was, in essence, a total reinvention of Jewish identity: from a people shaped by exile and survival to one shaped by sovereignty and will.

Threat, Fear, and Insecurity

As the threat intensified over time, largely in response to the accelerating pace of Zionist immigration, it bred a deepening sense of fear and

insecurity among Jews in Palestine, a feeling that hardened into a cornerstone of the dominant Zionist worldview. Arabs were increasingly framed not as neighbours but as adversaries in a zero-sum struggle for land and national legitimacy. At the turn of the century, Palestinian resistance grew up. As violent clashes broke out in the early twentieth century, this framing calcified into something darker: a narrative that delegitimized the Palestinian presence outright, casting Palestinians as violent, untrustworthy, thieves, and murderers, a standing existential threat to the Zionist project itself. Arabs, in this telling, weren’t just hostile. They were irrational mobs, whipped into frenzy by malicious intent, bent on destroying the Jewish national dream. Settlers were founding new institutions and buying up land at scale. And those land purchases came at a human cost: Palestinian *fellahin* (peasants), who had farmed the land for generations under the existing feudal system, were frequently forced off it the moment ownership changed hands.

Specifically, the violence that followed was neither isolated nor incidental. Riots erupted in both 1920 and 1929, making clear that this was now a sustained, violent conflict. The 1920 riots in Jerusalem were sparked by continued Jewish immigration, both to the city and to outlying villages in Galilee. The 1929 riots began over access to the Western Wall but quickly spread to Hebron, Jaffa, Safed, and beyond. And in 1936, a Palestinian uprising against British rule broke out, fueled by the sheer scale of Jewish immigration; it would rage on until 1939, exacting a heavy toll on the Palestinian population. For the most part, though, Jews sided with the British in suppressing the rebellion. Thus they were also

attacked and this caused violent retaliation from Jewish militia groups.

Out of this came necessity: Jews built their own paramilitary and underground organizations to defend themselves: Hashomer, the Haganah, the Palmach, the Etzel, the Lehi. Each new round of conflict deepened and hardened the negative, violent stereotypes each side held of the other. And critically, it was Jews who, over time, built the narratives that sustained the conflict, stories that justified continuing the fight against “the enemy,” without ever pointing toward a peace the other side might recognize as fair.

It's worth pausing on something important here: parts of this psychological repertoire weren't invented from scratch. They were drawn from a much older Jewish tradition. The sense of victimhood, for instance, runs deep in Jewish culture, etched in by centuries of historical experience. So too does a powerful ethnocentric self-image, rooted in the ancient idea of being the “chosen people” and “a light unto the nations.” As the conflict with the Arabs took shape, these older beliefs with the sense of victimhood, the positive self-image were adapted and folded into the emerging collective story. Other elements like patriotic fervour, the delegitimization of Arabs were newer, forged specifically by the conflict itself. And once this worldview took hold in the collective mind, it became something more than belief: it became the lens through which people interpreted events, judged information, and decided how to act.

It's also worth remembering that Britain, for its part, was openly sympathetic to Zionist goals, a sympathy enshrined in the Balfour Declaration. That sympathy was made concrete early on,

with the appointment of Lord Herbert Samuel, a Jew, and a Zionist himself, as the first High Commissioner. Under British patronage, Jewish institutions and organizations advancing the Zionist cause were built and strengthened. Only toward the end of the 1930s, as Arab protest intensified, did that support begin to wane, accompanied by tightening restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine.

Then came the Second World War, in which six million Jews were murdered, a trauma so vast it reshaped everything that followed. Hundreds of thousands of survivors sought refuge in Palestine, only to find the doors shut by Britain. It was this, the horror of the war and its aftermath, that finally pushed Britain to abandon the Mandate altogether and hand the question of Palestine to the United Nations, successor to the League of Nations.

Phase Two (1947–1966): Partition, War, and the Nakba

On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly voted to end the British Mandate and partition Palestine into two states: one Jewish, one Palestinian, with Jerusalem placed under international supervision. The numbers behind that plan tell their own story: Jews, then 33 percent of the population (about 650,000), despite owning only 6 percent of the land outright got 56 percent of the land. Palestinians, who made up 67 percent of the population (roughly 1,350,000 people), were left with just 43 percent. It's not hard to understand why Palestinian leadership and the broader population rejected the plan as fundamentally unfair. Mainstream Jewish Zionist leaders, by contrast, formally accepted it, and Britain announced

the Mandate would end at midnight on May 14, 1948.

Civil war broke out almost immediately, as British authority crumbled and Palestinian attacks on Jewish communities began. The first part of the war was between the two communities. The Arab side initially held the initiative. Fighting centered on roads, mixed cities, and isolated communities. The Jewish forces (the Haganah) shifted from defence to offensive operations. The goal was to secure the territory allotted to the Jewish state. After Israel declared statehood, several Arab states intervened without coordination and with different goals on behalf of a Palestinian community already battered by the 1936 rebellion, triggering the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. As the war progressed, Jewish forces gained the upper hand, bolstered by Czechoslovak arms shipments and full mobilization.

Central to this turn was Plan Dalet, a military blueprint for seizing territory across Mandatory Palestine in preparation for statehood. Commissioned by Jewish Agency leader (and soon-to-be first Prime Minister) David Ben-Gurion and finalized by the Haganah on March 10, 1948, the plan governed Israeli military operations from that point until the war's end in early 1949. It would prove central to what Palestinians call the Nakba, the catastrophe of their mass expulsion. Its tactics were stark: besieging Arab villages, bombing urban neighbourhoods, forcibly expelling residents, and burning homes and fields, then detonating explosives in the rubble to ensure no one could return.

By the war's end in 1949, Israel controlled 22 percent more territory than the partition plan had allotted. For Israelis, it was a victory. For Palestinians, it was the Nakba, the catastrophe. Roughly 750,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled and became refugees; some 450 villages were destroyed in the process. About 12,000 Palestinians were killed in total, roughly 1 percent of the population, including in a number of massacres. After the war ended, a further 3,000 Palestinians were killed attempting to cross back into Israel to retrieve belongings or harvest crops; Israel labeled them "infiltrators" and authorized soldiers to shoot them on sight. Palestinian society with its institutions, its elites, its political leadership, its societal and cultural outputs, was effectively dismantled.

Israelis paid a steep price too: roughly 6,000 Jews were killed, about 1 percent of the Jewish population, including in several massacres of their own.

The roughly 150,000 Palestinians who remained within Israel's borders after the war were placed under strict military rule until 1966, subject to travel restrictions, work controls, land confiscation, political surveillance, heavy censorship, and arbitrary curfews. At the same time, a large wave of Jewish immigration brought approximately 688,000 people to Israel between 1948 and 1951, consisting primarily of Holocaust survivors and Jews from North Africa and the Middle East.

During the state's first two decades, the state was autocratic: there was a heavy censorship, strikes were forbidden as well as demonstration, and the population was treated differentially. A hegemonic culture of conflict

dominated virtually every national institution, cultural production, school textbooks, official rhetoric, leaders' speeches, national ceremonies, public space, all of it. Mass media played a central role: in this era, primarily radio, alongside newspapers and magazines. Radio was controlled directly by the Prime Minister's office, which used it to promote the ethos of conflict; as the main channel of information for the public, the media simultaneously helped manufacture that ethos and embed it in the public consciousness. This dominant narrative, selective, biased, distorted by design, formed the bedrock of the broader culture of conflict. It amplified anything that reinforced the narrative and buried anything that didn't. Meaningful political opposition to this approach was essentially non-existent during these years.

It's worth pausing here on something essential: from the Jewish perspective, the Holocaust isn't simply one historical event among many, it functions as a kind of metaphor for Jewish history itself. This matters enormously for understanding the siege mentality, the fear and insecurity that runs through Israeli society. One observation by Amos Elon, written decades ago in his 1971 book *The Israelis*, still captures it with striking precision:

"The Holocaust remains a basic trauma of Israeli society. It is impossible to exaggerate its effect on the process of nation-building... There is a latent hysteria in Israeli life that stems directly from this source... The trauma of the Holocaust leaves an indelible mark on the national psychology, the tenor and content of public life, the conduct of foreign affairs, on politics, education, literature and the arts."

During this same period, Israel received substantial military, technological, and economic support from both France and Germany, the latter partly as compensation to Jews for the Holocaust.

Phase Three (1967–1993): Occupation Takes Root

This phase opened with the 1967 war, a decisive Israeli victory that, within six days, brought Sinai and Gaza under Israeli control (taken from Egypt), along with the West Bank (from Jordan) and the Golan Heights (from Syria). I'll focus here on the West Bank and Gaza, since these are the territories populated by Palestinians.

The first fact worth noting: alongside the military triumph, roughly 200,000 Palestinians fled, were displaced, or were expelled into Jordan. They were barred from returning after the war, and the army treated anyone attempting to cross back as an "infiltrator", fair game to be shot. It amounted to a small-scale Nakba, and the order came from General Uzi Narkis and Defense Minister Moshe Dayan.

The legal status of the West Bank has been contested ever since 1967: is it "occupied territory" or merely "disputed territory"? Nearly every state and international body, along with a small minority within Israeli Jewish society, favours the first description, which carries real weight: occupation implies temporary control over land against the wishes of its population, by a state that makes no claim to permanent sovereignty. Those who prefer "disputed" point out that the territory never belonged to any sovereign political entity, since under the 1947 UN partition plan it was meant to become part of an Arab state. Whatever the legal label, Israeli military

and civil control has touched every dimension of Palestinian life in the West Bank and Gaza.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, two rhetorical arguments took hold among Israeli politicians. The first was security, the need for defensible borders and strategic depth. The second was historical and religious, articulated by Defense Minister Moshe Dayan: “We returned to the holiest of our places, in order to never part from them.” Leading figures within the Labor Party backed both territorial expansion and Jewish settlement of the newly occupied territories, framing them, pointedly, as “Auschwitz borders.” On September 27, a public statement endorsing the vision of a Greater Israel appeared in the country's major newspapers, signed by 57 of Israel's most prominent writers, intellectuals, senior military officers, and political figures, names recognized then and now. Its influence on Jewish public opinion was enormous.

The newly occupied territories were reframed almost immediately as “liberated,” and quickly reclaimed their ancient names: Judea and Samaria, the cradle of Jewish history, religion, and culture. The word “occupied” simply vanished from official vocabulary and public discourse. On June 28, 1967, Israel formally annexed East Jerusalem. Notably, by that same June, Prime Minister Levi Eshkol from the Labor Party, in his capacity as chair of the Ministerial Security Committee, had already determined that Israel's security border would run along the Jordan River. The following month, Labor Minister Yigal Allon drafted an unofficial plan that would go on to shape settlement policy for decades: under his framework, Israel's eastern border would follow the Jordan River,

meaning the Jordan Valley and the eastern slopes of the West Bank needed to fall under Israeli control to form a defensible frontier. The plan also called for Jewish settlement around Jerusalem. By the summer of 1967, in addition to East Jerusalem, Jews had already begun settling in Gush Etzion. The plan of Sharon as the minister of defence and agriculture in Likud government was to settle inside the West Bank hills to establish enough settlements, roads, and territorial corridors to ensure enduring Israeli control over most of it and to prevent the development of a contiguous Palestinian state. This plan was implemented by governments of Likud.

The government, for its part, largely deferred to settler demands and built the legal and constitutional scaffolding to support them. The 2021 book *The Occupation and Justice: The Supreme Court of Israel and the Occupied Territories*, by Kretzmer and Ronen, devotes 500 pages to this history and arrives at a sobering conclusion. The authors find that the Supreme Court has legitimized all controversial policies and practices of the Israeli authorities in the Occupied Territories, including those incompatible with international law, and with few exceptions has not intervened in those policies and practices. Rather than scrutinizing the legality of these practices directly, the Court has generally focused on procedural fairness and questions of reasonableness and proportionality — meaning, in practice, that the most problematic policies in the Occupied Territories have received either explicit or implicit judicial approval.

With regard to occupation, over the decades, Israel built an extensive apparatus of control and surveillance over the Palestinian

population, drawing on the army, police, the General Security Services (Shin Bet), the Mossad, and the legal system, all backed by enormous institutional and financial resources. Sustaining the occupation has meant recruiting tens of thousands of Palestinian informants through coercive methods; maintaining control through force, what IDF orders have sometimes euphemistically called “creating a sense of persecution;” killing Palestinians deemed threats to soldiers, police, or civilians; and assassinating political leaders and activists. It has meant detaining and sometimes killing children, relying on indefinite detention, torture, and military court proceedings, denying entry permits and residency rights, imposing collective punishment, demolishing homes, and maintaining roadblocks and closures. Occupying authorities have confiscated land, destroyed homes, and expelled residents from their communities, generating a pervasive, engineered sense of insecurity through an elaborate bureaucracy of control, sometimes requiring more than a hundred separate permits for basic requests, alongside population registries and surveillance reaching into nearly every corner of Palestinian life. In a system where virtually any act of resistance is officially classified as “terrorism,” the result has been a steady proliferation of human rights violations and broader injustice.

Looking back to the occupation's earliest years (1967–1970), Israeli officials actively explored strategies for expelling Palestinians altogether. Under Ariel Sharon's command, Israeli forces executed dozens of Palestinians suspected of involvement in resistance without trial. Between 1967 and 1968, roughly 75,000 residents of Gaza were forcibly displaced, a policy Golda Meir

defended by branding them a “fifth column.” A further 25,000 or more Gazans were simply barred from returning after the war. In 1970–71, Sharon oversaw the “five-finger plan” – a strategy that carved Gaza into five isolated zones through military control and settlement expansion, leading to the demolition of thousands of Palestinian homes and the forced relocation of Bedouin communities into the Sinai Peninsula.

The 1982 Lebanon War against the PLO, widely regarded as Israel's second “war of choice” triggered unprecedented protest within Israeli society, including, for the first time, dissent from within parts of the military establishment itself. Images of Palestinian fighters confronting one of the world's most powerful armies left a deep emotional mark on Palestinians, on the watching world, and on segments of the Israeli public as well. Global outrage, including from Israeli Jews themselves, intensified further after the massacre of an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 Palestinians by right-wing Lebanese Phalangist militias, who were allowed by the Israeli army to enter the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut.

In December 1987, the First Intifada erupted, which was a largely nonviolent popular uprising. It reflected widespread Palestinian opposition to life under occupation. Over its course, roughly 1,100 Palestinians were killed. As Defense Minister, Yitzhak Rabin directed Israeli forces to respond with what became known as the “break-their-bones” policy, using “force, might, and beatings” to suppress the uprising.

Throughout this third phase, the United States, along with other Western nations, supplied Israel with advanced weaponry and

ammunition, while offering substantial economic and political backing. This support reflected Israel's role as what was often described as a Western "aircraft carrier" in the region. Between 1972 and 1993 alone, the United States cast 29 vetoes at the UN Security Council to block resolutions critical of Israel.

The Fourth Phase 1993-2000: Peace Process

On September 13, 1993, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) signed the Oslo Accords, formally, the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, in Washington, D.C. Israel recognized the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people; in return, the PLO recognized Israel's right to exist and renounced terrorism and violence. Both sides committed to a transitional process of Palestinian self-government across parts of the West Bank and Gaza.

In 1994, Israel began implementing the first stage of the agreement, withdrawing its forces from Gaza and Jericho. The Palestinian Authority was established, with Yasser Arafat, head of the PLO, at its helm. The follow-up agreement, Oslo II, was signed in Taba, Sinai, on September 27, 1995, granting Palestinians independent authority over Palestinian cities in the West Bank and Gaza, along with 450 villages. Elections were promised in Palestinian Authority-controlled areas, and the West Bank was carved into three administrative categories, Areas A, B, and C¹.

It's crucial to note what Oslo left unresolved: the establishment of a Palestinian state, its borders, the division of Jerusalem, security arrangements, the question of refugee return, and the

status of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories—in other words, the very heart of the conflict. Negotiations on these core issues were scheduled to begin no later than 1996 and conclude by May 1999. They never happened.

In the meantime, the accords brought real harm to Palestinians in several ways. Dividing the West Bank into three unequal zones made it far harder to work in Israel or to travel in and out of Gaza, deepening internal Palestinian divisions. The Palestinian Authority was left with sharply limited powers and was required to coordinate with Israeli security forces. Israel, meanwhile, retained effective control over the Palestinian economy. And Jewish settlements kept expanding throughout this period, not a single one was ever removed.

The accords also shifted attitudes among part of the Israeli Jewish public. For a majority of Israeli Jews, the agreements helped legitimize and humanize Palestinians, opening space to see them as genuine partners for peace. They also brought greater recognition of a distinct Palestinian national identity and put the question of Palestinian statehood squarely on the table. But on the security front, the accords delivered little reassurance. Terror attacks continued, carried out primarily by Hamas, and intensified sharply after a religious Jewish settler massacred 29 Palestinian worshippers and wounded 125 more at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron.

In an effort to halt the erosion of public support for the peace process, Israeli leaders organized a major rally in Tel Aviv's central square on November 4, 1995. As he was leaving the rally, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated

by Yigal Amir, a religious-nationalist Jewish student opposed to the peace process. In February 1996, Palestinian terror attacks struck Israeli cities with renewed intensity.

In May 1996, the right-wing Likud party won national elections, and its candidate, Benjamin Netanyahu, formed a right-wing government.

Throughout all of this, Jewish settlement construction continued unabated. The most dramatic surge in settler numbers began once Likud, under Menachem Begin, took control of the government in 1977, at which point there were 38 settlements housing 1,900 settlers. By 1999, that number had ballooned to 183,900 settlers, not counting Jewish residents of East Jerusalem. These settlements, expanding continuously, profoundly shaped the trajectory of the conflict and Israeli-Palestinian relations, even as successive governments repeated the misleading, propagandistic claim that “the settlements are not an obstacle to peace.”

Phase Five (2000–2022): Disillusionment, Blockade, and Apartheid

Between 2000 and 2003, Jewish Israeli public opinion underwent a profound shift, one whose effects are still felt today. The shift was driven largely by two events that unfolded within two months of each other: the collapse of political talks at Camp David in July 2000, and the outbreak of the Second Intifada two months later, in September. A third event, the 2005 withdrawal from Gaza and its aftermath, would later compound the effect.

The escalation that followed was fueled, in large part, by misinformation fed to the Israeli public

by most of the country's leaders, the mass media, and official institutions. Then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak's framing that the Palestinians were not genuine partners for peace, and that Arafat had deliberately launched the Second Intifada as a campaign of violent liberation took hold widely, despite being disputed. This narrative was reinforced by horrific violence that began in earnest soon after, which many Israelis took as confirmation of Barak's claims. The toll of the Second Intifada was devastating on both sides: roughly 1,050 Israelis killed (about 710 of them civilians, including 119 children), and roughly 4,700 Palestinians killed (about 2,200 civilians, including 980 children). Out of this grew a deep pessimism about the prospects for any resolution, and about Palestinian intentions more broadly. Right-wing politics became the dominant force in Israeli Jewish society, while dovish positions shrank dramatically, though they never disappeared entirely. By 2026, only about 10-15 percent of Israeli Jews still held a dovish orientation; the broader culture of conflict had reasserted itself as the dominant frame.

Even within nominally Palestinian-controlled “Area A,” security remains illusory: the Palestinian Authority permits both regular Israeli military units and undercover units (disguised as Arabs) to enter and make arrests. Until June 13, 2021, Israeli forces could enter any Palestinian home, day or night, citing “intelligence and security reasons,” without requiring any special authorization. Military checkpoints remain a defining feature of Palestinian life, regulating movement into Israeli areas and even into predominantly Palestinian zones like East Jerusalem; Palestinians need military

permits simply to pass through. Israel frames these checkpoints as essential protection against attacks, a legacy of the suicide bombing campaigns of the early 2000s. Palestinians experience them very differently — as a degrading restriction on basic freedom of movement, and a daily symbol of Israeli control over their lives.

After Hamas seized control of Gaza in 2007, Israel imposed a comprehensive blockade, sharply restricting the movement of both goods and people. While humanitarian aid has been permitted, it has come with calculated limits. Israeli authorities reportedly determined minimum caloric requirements for survival and capped food imports accordingly. A wide range of items were banned outright at various points, including chocolate, pasta, margarine, jam, musical instruments, shoes, books, matches, shampoo, and baby food, along with restrictions extending to medical supplies, wheelchairs, and industrial materials. Egypt, for its part, has also repeatedly closed Gaza's southern border.

In Israel's 2009 elections, following Ehud Olmert's resignation, who carried negotiation with Mahmoud Abbas and provided the most advanced plan to solve the conflict, the right-wing bloc triumphed, and Benjamin Netanyahu began what would become a string of terms as prime minister. For twelve years, Israel's leadership embodied the ethos of conflict at the highest level, and the coalition formed in 2015 leaned firmly rightward, marking the first time that any reference to Palestinian statehood was absent from a coalition's founding documents. Consistent with this, Netanyahu refused to negotiate with Mahmoud Abbas, who opposed violence as a tool of Palestinian liberation but maintained security cooperation with Israel. As

part of the Roman principle “divide and rule,” Netanyahu passed money from Qatar to Hamas which refused to recognize the state of Israel, hoping that the money would satisfy Hamas not to attack Israel.

Meanwhile, more extreme elements within Israeli society pushed for creeping annexation, encouraged confrontations between settlers and Palestinians, and entrenched what many now describe as a system of apartheid. In April 2021, the U.S.-based Human Rights Watch released a 213-page report, *A Threshold Crossed*, concluding that Israeli authorities are committing the crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution. The report argues that the Israeli government maintains structural oppression to maintain the domination of Jewish Israelis over Palestinians in both Israel and the Palestinian territories, where today both groups of people are about equal in size.

Since 2007, Israel and Hamas have existed in a recurring cycle of escalation and fragile cease-fire. Periods of relative calm have occasionally allowed Gazans to work and trade with Israel, but they've been repeatedly interrupted by major rounds of violence:

- **2008–2009 (Operation Cast Lead):** 1,391 Palestinians killed, at least 759 (55 percent) of them civilians, including 318 children. Israel lost 10 soldiers (4 to friendly fire) and 3 civilians.
- **2012 (Operation Pillar of Defence):** 174 Palestinians killed, hundreds wounded; Israel lost 4 civilians and 2 soldiers.
- **2014 (Operation Protective Edge):** 2,203 Palestinians killed, including at least 1,371 (62

percent) civilians, 527 of them children. Israel lost 67 soldiers and 6 civilians.

- **2017–2018 (Great March of Return):** UN reports documented 214 Palestinian deaths, including 46 children, and over 36,100 injuries from Israeli sniper fire.
- **2021 (May Conflict):** 256 Palestinians killed, 128 of them civilians; roughly 72,000 people displaced. Israel lost 1 soldier and 14 civilians.

Notably, in every one of these escalations, the initial military action came from Israel.

Throughout all of this, Jewish settlement in the West Bank never paused, regardless of which government held power. By mid-2024, roughly 500,000 Jewish settlers were living across approximately 127 settlements and more than 121 illegal outposts scattered throughout the West Bank, concentrated mainly in Area C. A further 230,000 Jews live in neighborhoods built in East Jerusalem, territory under Jordanian control until 1967. Israel has come to control roughly 60 percent of West Bank territory through a patchwork of legal and administrative mechanisms: requirements around land registration under British rule, military seizure justified by security needs, and land expropriation exploiting ambiguities in Ottoman-era law, among other methods. In recent years, Israel has pushed Palestinians off their land in Area C through settler violence and the establishment of agricultural outposts.

For context: approximately 2.75 million Palestinians live in the West Bank today, and roughly 350,000 in East Jerusalem. Across the entire territory between the Jordan River and

the Mediterranean, Jews and Palestinians now make up roughly equal shares of the population — about 50 percent each. It's evident at this point that no Israeli government has intended to hand full control of the West Bank to Palestinians. There is currently no real movement toward changing the status of the occupied territories, justified by the claim that there is no viable negotiating partner on the Palestinian side. Many right-wing Israeli leaders openly favour annexing all or part of the West Bank. Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, has expressed willingness to negotiate a two-state solution; Hamas, which has ruled Gaza under a totalitarian regime, rejects negotiation altogether, refuses to recognize Israel, and continues to favour violence as the path to ending the occupation.

The Sixth phase 2023–2026: Gaza War and the Ethnic Cleansing in the West Bank

The Israeli elections of November 1, 2022, produced perhaps the most extreme government in the country's history, a coalition fusing nationalist, racist, and messianic religious political forces. Composed of ultra-Orthodox parties, the national religious bloc, and Likud, this government moved swiftly in January 2023 to curb Israeli democracy: overhauling the legal system, restricting press freedom, politicizing the civil service, and more. These steps triggered sustained pro-democracy demonstrations that continued for roughly 40 weeks. In some sense, this trajectory was unavoidable — occupation by its very nature erodes democratic norms, and authoritarian tendencies had been deepening for two decades, particularly toward Israel's Arab

minority and the dovish opposition to occupation.

Gaza War

Then, on October 7, 2023, came an event that shook Israel, the region, and the world. That morning, 3,000 Hamas fighters and Gazan civilians launched a surprise assault on twenty Israeli kibbutzim and towns near the Gaza border. They murdered more than 1,200 people of all ages, over 800 of them civilians, and wounded, raped, and kidnapped 253 others: children, women, the elderly, men, and soldiers, in what amounted to acts of profound inhumanity. Thousands of rockets were fired into Israel, aimed squarely at civilian population centers.

Israel's response was immediate and devastating: an indiscriminate bombing campaign across Gaza's over two million residents that many have characterized as collective punishment. On October 27, Israeli ground forces entered Gaza and seized most of its territory. By the ceasefire of October 27, 2023, Israel had lost roughly 900–1,000 soldiers, with about 17,000 more wounded. Some 1.7 million Gazans became refugees, and most of the territory was reduced to rubble through bombing, shelling, and ground combat. Roughly 80 percent of homes in northern Gaza were destroyed or damaged, and over 60 percent across the Strip as a whole. Electricity, internet, and telecommunications were cut off, and water became scarce. An estimated 90 percent of Gaza's population faced severe hunger, while tens of thousands suffered from spreading infectious disease.

The toll since October 7, 2023, has been staggering. As of early May 2026, more than 72,600

Palestinians had been killed directly, over 30,000 in the first five months alone, with roughly 1,600 deaths per month thereafter. In addition, about 10,000 were buried in the rubble. Nearly 172,500 people have been injured. Israeli authorities have also arrested close to 21,000 Palestinians since the war began, with thousands held under “administrative detention” indefinitely, without charge or trial.

The Gaza war shattered whatever trust remained between the two peoples and foreclosed, for now, any path toward mutual understanding. It opened a wound that will take generations to heal. Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank carry deep trauma, as do Israeli Jews, though for Palestinians, this war is widely understood as a continuation of the original Nakba of 1948. Some Gazan families are now refugees for the second or third time in their lives, and many believe, pointing to statements from Israeli officials themselves, that Israel intends to expel them permanently and build settlements in their place.

The brutality in Gaza has led a wide range of observers, including Amnesty International, the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, and the International Association of Genocide Scholars, to describe Israel's conduct as genocide, drawing on the legal definitions set out in the 1948 UN Genocide Convention and the 1998 Rome Statute. Statements from senior Israeli officials have fuelled these accusations directly. Prime Minister Netanyahu invoked the biblical injunction to “*wipe out the memory of Amalek*” and promised retribution beyond precedent. Then-Defense Minister Yoav Gallant declared a total siege — no electricity, food, water, or fuel, describing Gazans as “*human*

animals” and stating he had “*released all the restraints*.” Current Defense Minister Israel Katz said all civilians in Gaza would have to leave. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich reportedly floated halving Gaza’s population within two years through occupation. Education Minister Yoav Kisch went further still, describing Palestinians in dehumanizing terms and suggesting they needed to be exterminated. Israeli leaders, with the public, not surprisingly denied the genocide and atrocities and even threatened to imprison people that accuse Israel of performing genocide.

On September 29, 2025, President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu jointly unveiled a 20-point peace plan, which Netanyahu formally endorsed. On October 9–10, 2025, Israel and Hamas signed Phase One of the agreement, and a ceasefire took effect as Israeli forces redeployed to agreed lines — though Israel retained control of roughly 57 percent of Gaza’s territory. On October 13, Hamas released the remaining 20 living Israeli hostages; in exchange, Israel released approximately 1,900 Palestinian detainees and prisoners. The remains of deceased hostages were returned in stages, with the final transfer completed by late January 2026.

The war was formally declared over in October 2025. Yet by June 16, 2026, 1,003 Palestinians had been killed by the Israeli military since the ceasefire, an average of four deaths per day. According to Gaza’s Health Ministry, 61 percent of these fatalities were men aged 18–60, 11 percent were women in that age range, 25 percent were children under 18, and 3 percent were adults over 60. Israel is reported to have violated the ceasefire at least 3,201 times between October 2025 and June 2026 through airstrikes,

shelling, and direct gunfire, and has expanded its territorial control from 57 percent to 60 percent of Gaza, with Netanyahu stating he has instructed the military to push toward 70 percent.

West Bank Atrocities

Meanwhile, in the West Bank, what amounts to a complete ethnic cleansing campaign is underway. Israeli military operations, movement restrictions, home demolitions, and settler violence continue to displace Palestinians and erode their access to housing, livelihoods, and basic services, compounding broader economic pressures across the territory. Since the Gaza ceasefire took effect on October 10, 2025, Israeli attacks in the West Bank have killed at least 981 Palestinians and injured over 3,100 more largely through near-daily violations of the truce. International monitors, including the UN and Amnesty International, report a sharp rise in settler violence since October 2023, frequently targeting Palestinian farming and herding communities. Amnesty International documents that more than 119 Palestinian villages or communities were partially or fully emptied between January 2023 and April 2026. Since January 2026 alone, more than 1,000 settler attacks have caused casualties or property damage across over 230 communities, displacing more than 2,200 Palestinians.

These attacks, often carried out by settlers from nearby outposts, frequently alongside Israeli military forces, have included killings, land seizures, public humiliation, home demolitions, the killing of livestock, arson against vehicles and fields, and the destruction of olive and fruit orchards, particularly in Area C. Yet Israeli security forces also operate in nominally

Palestinian-controlled Areas B and A, conducting arrests with the cooperation of Palestinian security forces. In Area B, settlers backed by the Israeli military have carried out what can only be described as pogroms. In Jenin, within Area A, the army established its first permanent outpost after destroying the city's refugee camp and expelling its residents.

By June 2026, approximately 192 recognized settlements span the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, home to an estimated 780,000–800,000 Israeli settlers. Excluding East Jerusalem, roughly 550,000 Jewish settlers live across 147 settlements considered legal under Israeli law. Human rights organizations estimate that between 140 and 165 new outposts have been established since October 7, 2023, bringing the total to around 350. These outposts are illegal even under Israeli law, having been built without official government approval while the international community, the UN, and the International Court of Justice consider every settlement and outpost in the occupied territories illegal under international law, full stop.

Today, roughly 3 million Palestinians in the West Bank are confined to about 40 percent of the combined territory of Areas A, B, and C, living under a legal system entirely separate from the one governing Jewish residents of the very same land, a structure widely described as apartheid. Israeli authorities have further fragmented Palestinian land through road networks built exclusively for settlers, linking settlement blocs together while isolating Palestinian communities from one another. Hundreds of checkpoints and barriers, maintained by the Israeli army, regulate nearly every aspect of Palestinian movement and daily life.

Explaining the Paradox

The narrative above has focused mostly on the actions of Israeli Jews. It is worth noting that those actions have almost never been met with apology. Denial has been a far more common response, visible across hundreds of statements from Israeli government and military spokespeople. In the rare cases where wrongdoing was acknowledged and investigated, charges were typically dropped, or the accused never served a full sentence. This pattern continues to this day.

This final section turns to the central question this essay set out to answer.

The Jewish-Palestinian conflict has now run for over 125 years. In its earliest phase, it was a confrontation between two communities, with Jews a meaningful minority. Since 1948, it has become something else entirely: a conflict between a powerful state and a Palestinian population left structurally weak. The Palestinian community, nearly erased during the Nakba, has spent the decades since struggling, so far unsuccessfully, to secure sovereignty and independent statehood. In fact, it is possible to say that 1948 war, with the Nakba, turned Israeli Jews from victims to perpetrators. From this year it continued till today with different form and intensity. There were short periods of expressed benevolent intention that never were realized and the malevolent intentions become hegemonic with actions of pogroms, displacement, exile, ethno-cleansing, apartheid, and even genocide.

Zionism and Its Ideology

It can be said with real confidence that the visions articulated by the Zionist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries still illuminate the path of Israeli Jewish action today. Zionism is worth distinguishing carefully from nationalism in general. Nationalism is the broader idea that a people sharing culture, language, ethnicity, or history constitutes a nation entitled to self-determination, typically through a sovereign state. Zionism is a specific expression of that idea: the belief that the Jewish people constitute a nation entitled to a homeland, historically tied to the Land of Israel. Notably, the definition of Zionism has never been fixed. It shifts continually with regional circumstances and the policies of whichever government holds power, and individual Israeli Jews tend to define it according to their own political leanings. It's no accident that Israel's Declaration of Independence specified no fixed borders for the new state. David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first leader, insisted on this omission over the objections of Moshe Sharett, precisely because he wanted to preserve the possibility of future expansion.

Today, the Israeli government supports policies widely described as apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and genocide against Palestinians. The Nakba of 1948 set the trajectory for Palestinian fate that has held ever since: Jewish forces dismantled Palestinian society then, and following the 1967 war, no Israeli government has agreed to establish a Palestinian state even on the 22% of historic Palestine represented by the West Bank and Gaza. Every government has instead continued occupying and settling those territories, while Gaza has lived under siege since 2007. The

struggle continues with the Palestinians cast, in effect, as David against an Israeli Goliath.

Jewish-Israeli identity, formed in the pre-state period, has persisted with varying intensity depending on the government in power, but its core principles have held across every administration since 1948. The founding ethos treated identity and territory as inseparable, territorial possession became entangled with the very meaning of Jewish nationhood. The land itself, carrying mythic weight as the cradle of Jewish culture and a promised future, became the incubator for a new Jewish identity defined by pre-state leaders. Already at this stage, a culture of conflict had taken root, becoming the guiding principle behind policy and action.

Since the 1967 war, this neo-Zionist vision has been joined by something closer to a pantheistic worldview, one that sanctifies the land itself as imbued with divine presence. Under this framework, settling every part of the Promised Land becomes a religious obligation, and relinquishing any portion of it becomes forbidden. This vision has gone hand in hand with a willingness to restrict the rights of Palestinian residents seen as obstacles to a homogeneous, fully Jewish-controlled territory. This combative mindset took root at Zionism's very beginning and grew progressively less restrained as Palestinians were delegitimized and Jews were simultaneously cast as perpetual victims throughout decades of conflict. The practical result has been steady territorial expansion and an intensifying, uncompromising conflict, both with Palestinians living inside Israel and those in the occupied territories, all justified through particularist national-religious values and security concerns. Settlers themselves became

symbols of a reawakened Israeli vitality and rootedness. This dynamic accelerated after 2000, and especially after 2009, when Netanyahu began the longest tenure of any Israeli prime minister, steering the state toward an increasingly extreme nationalist, religious, and racially exclusionary direction, one that has culminated in the Gaza war and the ethnic cleansing and apartheid conditions now visible in the West Bank.

Zionism, in its dominant form, has enclosed itself within moral, historical, and religious justifications for an exclusive claim to the land, while largely dismissing equivalent Palestinian claims. As a result, positions on both sides have hardened, and the other side's claims have become, in the eyes of many, illegitimate. From there, it is a short step to delegitimizing Palestinians outright and pseudo-rationalizing the violence inflicted on them. Statements from nationalist leaders, frequently former senior military officers, along the lines of "I don't care what's good for the Palestinians, only what's good for the Israeli people," reflect a particularist identity unwilling to relinquish territory it considers liberated. Security concerns have fused with historical, religious, and cultural justification. This trajectory has pushed Israeli governance steadily toward authoritarianism, with formal and informal institutions alike supporting territorial expansion and, at times, the displacement of Palestinian populations.

The Power of the Israeli State

Across this long period, Israel has emerged as a dominant regional power, militarily, economically, technologically, and politically. It maintains one of the world's most capable militaries:

an advanced air force, sophisticated missile systems, leading intelligence and cyber capabilities, naval forces, armoured divisions, drones, roughly 170,000 active personnel backed by hundreds of thousands in reserve, and a nuclear arsenal. This capability is reinforced by sustained military, economic, technological, and political support from the United States and much of Europe. This support typically driven less by moral conviction than by calculated realpolitik. The U.S. alone provides Israel with roughly \$3.8 billion annually in military assistance, and following the October 7, 2023, attack, Congress approved at least \$16 billion in additional emergency military aid. As a powerful state operating under an authoritarian, nationalist, religious, and anti-Palestinian government, Israel has faced few meaningful constraints from Washington, allowing it to pursue highly aggressive policies in Gaza and the West Bank largely without consequential international pushback. Israel has long sought regional dominance, intervening in conflicts beyond its borders, occupying parts of neighbouring states, and conducting sustained military operations, primarily through air power, across the wider Middle East for years, consistently framed as necessary self-defence. This is reinforced by a sophisticated propaganda apparatus operating internationally, aimed at shaping governments and public opinion in favour of Israel's narrative.

Palestinians, by contrast, remain fractured, governed in the West Bank by an unelected leadership cooperating with Israel on security while lacking any meaningful military capacity, and entirely dependent on Israel for nearly every aspect of daily life. They have no advanced

military force, but they retain considerable determination and a significant degree of international public sympathy, a form of support that resists conventional measurement. To date, 157 of the UN's 193 member states, including European nations like France, the UK, Portugal, and Spain, have recognized Palestinian statehood, though this recognition remains largely symbolic.

The Holocaust as Chosen Trauma

Beyond ideological Zionism, one of the most powerful forces shaping Israeli society is what's often called the "chosen trauma" of the Holocaust, still the central anchor of Jewish collective identity. The systematic murder of six million Jews by Nazi Germany continues to shape Israeli collective memory, political behaviour, education, and cultural narrative in profound ways. The Holocaust is treated as categorically unique, incomparable to any other genocide. It is remembered not simply as history, but as a warning that catastrophe can recur, under different perpetrators, in different forms. From an early age, Israeli Jews are taught to remember without healing, treating remembrance itself as a condition of belonging to Israeli society. The lesson is distilled into "never again": the conviction that only a strong, sovereign state can prevent a second Holocaust. Over time, the concept has expanded well beyond its historical origin, becoming a kind of code for existential threat, invoked by leaders, media, and ordinary citizens alike, treated as something that could recur at any time, in any place. Though history's antagonists toward the Jewish people have varied — Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Germans, Arabs — they are often folded into a single narrative of

perpetual, undifferentiated hostility: the idea that nations of the world, across history, share an essential hatred of Jews, reinforcing a belief that Jews are destined to "*dwell alone*." This belief feeds directly into a pervasive siege mentality.

What matters most here is how the Holocaust has become entangled with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict itself. Over decades of conflict, Israeli leaders and media have repeatedly drawn explicit comparisons between Nazis and Arabs. It is a rhetorical move that intensifies the delegitimization of Palestinians specifically, portraying them as murderous, cruel, bloodthirsty, and driven by genocidal intent toward Israeli Jews. Within this framing, Israeli Jews are cast as eternal victims of the conflict.

That victim status has proven remarkably functional. Scholarship in collective psychology identifies three consequences of occupying this role. First, moral disengagement: victimhood reduces felt accountability, suppressing guilt, empathy, and compassion toward the adversary even while inflicting violence. Second, moral entitlement: the belief that one's safety justifies nearly any means, with diminished regard for ordinary moral constraints. Third, moral silencing: the conviction that victimhood itself should insulate a society from outside criticism or condemnation — a dynamic frequently invoked by Israeli government, media, and public discourse, where criticism of policy is often equated with antisemitism.

This linkage was visible again after October 7, 2023, when the Hamas attack was explicitly tied, symbolically, to the Holocaust across Israeli public discourse, invoked repeatedly by

political leaders, mainstream and social media, and ordinary citizens. It was comparing to about 850 killed civilians to millions of harmless victims. The massacre was framed not merely as a horrific event in its own right, but as the latest chapter in a much older story of Jewish historical trauma.

Chosen Wars and Violent Encounters

It's also worth noting that nearly every Israeli war and military operation has been publicly framed by the government and military as unavoidable, a matter of necessity rather than choice. In reality, most of these wars reflected deliberate Israeli policy choices and strategic interests. Only the wars of 1948, 1967, 1973, and 2023 carry a credible claim to having been at least partially wars of necessity and even 1967 remains genuinely contested, while the 1973 war might well have been avoided had Prime Minister Golda Meir accepted Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's 1971 peace proposal. The opening phase of the 2023 Gaza war had clear justification; its prolonged continuation, however, increasingly reflected motives closer to retribution. Notably, with the exception of the 1982 Lebanon war, the Israeli military has shown almost unwavering obedience to government direction, even when carrying out actions widely regarded as morally indefensible.

A Militaristic Society

It bears emphasizing that a large majority of the Israeli Jewish public has supported nearly every war and military operation initiated by the Israeli military and approved by Israeli governments since 1948. Public sentiment ran predominantly hawkish until 1977, when peace with

Egypt began shifting attitudes. It was a trend that grew through the 1980s and 1990s, as a meaningful segment of Israeli society opened up to, and even actively pushed for, a peaceful resolution with Palestinians.

That trajectory reversed sharply in the early 2000s, following the collapse of the Camp David talks between Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat and the eruption of the Second Intifada. Israeli Jewish political attitudes have remained remarkably stable since then, persisting through 2026: roughly 65–70 percent hold hawkish views, 20–30 percent occupy the center, and only 10–15 percent remain dovish. Hawkish positions generally include support for settlement in the occupied territories, a persistent sense of existential threat, support for military force, distrust of Palestinians, and opposition to Palestinian statehood. Dovish positions, held by a shrinking minority, hold that occupation is harmful, that Palestinians can be trusted as negotiating partners, that territorial compromise is necessary for peace, and that a Palestinian state should ultimately be established.

Notably, the younger generations of Israelis tend to be sharply nationalist, religious, and exclusionary. It occurs as a consequence of demographic shifts toward a growing religious population that is overwhelmingly hawkish, reinforced by an education system emphasizing Jewish identity, religious tradition, and historical narrative while largely neglecting democratic civic content. The preparation of serving in the army begins at birth: When parents talk about a newborn, they describe the child as a soldier; later the militaristic socialization continues through kindergarten, primary school, mid school, and high school. In all these levels

there is direct and indirect learning about justness of the national goals, glorification of the Jewish nation, sense of self, collective victimhood, patriotism, importance of serving in the army, and delegitimization of Palestinians.

These contents are repeated by most of the mass and social media and specifically by leaders. This pattern is compounded by the ongoing occupation that has steadily transformed Israeli society into a militarized one, pushing its political system toward authoritarianism, in what many would call a largely unavoidable consequence of these underlying dynamics. Israeli society, particularly its secular and religious-Zionist sectors, remains deeply intertwined with the military: men serve mandatory terms and remain in reserve duty until age 50, alongside their own children as they, in turn, enter service. These shared reserve units sustain social bonds across generations, reinforcing mutual obligation and institutional obedience. The army has been fighting the causes delineated by the government, when they frequently exceed the international laws and interests of the Israeli nation, and involve immoral behaviours.

On Israel's 78th Independence Day in April 2026, official figures reported that the combined toll of fallen soldiers, security personnel, and civilian victims of war and terrorism across Israeli history had reached approximately 30,061, encompassing every casualty from the beginning of organized Jewish settlement in 1882 through statehood in 1948 and onward to 2026. Many more have suffered lasting physical and psychological wounds. Economists broadly estimate that the cumulative cost to Israel — borne primarily by Israeli Jews, who make up roughly 74 percent of the population — runs into the

hundreds of billions of dollars, likely exceeding one trillion when all direct and indirect costs across the decades are accounted for.

It's also true that resistance to addressing Palestinian national aspirations, and to negotiating a genuine peace, has carried its own cost: thousands of Israeli Jews have been killed or wounded in terror attacks over the course of this conflict. This is, in some respects, a price comparable to what other occupying and colonial powers have historically paid like France, the UK, the Netherlands, Morocco, Portugal, Russia, Belgium, Italy, and others. It is, in that sense, part of a pattern that has recurred across many countries throughout history in Europe, North America, South America, and Asia. Many Israeli Jews would dispute this framing, since a substantial number consider the West Bank, and in some cases even Gaza, to be rightfully part of their own state. But this view runs counter to the position held by the overwhelming majority of the world's states and international institutions. In that broader sense, this tragedy belongs to the long, unfinished arc of an evolving global moral conscience. It is my hope that the carnage will stop and both nation, Israeli Jews and Palestinians, will return to the path of peace where they were already.

Notes

1. The Oslo Accords signed in 1995 divided the Palestinian territory into three temporary administrative sectors, Areas A, B, and C, which would exist until a final agreement would be signed. The three areas do not have territorial contiguity but are separated from each other and the division was made on the basis of various population areas and recognition of Israeli security demands: **Area A** (18% of the West Bank) includes all of the Palestinian cities and their surroundings, with no Israeli settlements. It is under full civilian and security control by the Palestinian Authority. But Israeli security forces enter the area with the permission of the Palestinian Authorities to arrest Palestinians suspected

of violent resistance to occupation. **Area B** (22% of the West Bank) includes areas of many Palestinian cities, towns and villages, with no Israeli settlements. It is under civilian Palestinian control and under Israeli-Palestinian security control. **Area C** (60% of the West Bank) includes all Israeli settlements (cities, towns and villages) as well as over 350,000 Palestinian residents with some over 550,000 Jewish settlers. It is under full civilian and security control of Israel, except for Palestinian citizens.

READ THE COMPLETE ARTICLE

ihcr.institute/writing/from-victims-to-perpetrators-the-israeli-jewish-case/



WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Phoenix Rising: Women, AI, and the Architecture of a World That Cares

The office that anchored nearly two decades of American work on women, peace, and security was eliminated. What rises next must be built by the women it serves.



Katrina "Kat" Fotovat

CO-FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT, PEACEPAYS.AI

There is a particular quality of fire that destroys completely and, in doing so, reveals exactly what must be rebuilt, and by whom.

I have spent over three decades fighting for women and girls, often in the world's most dangerous places. I drafted post-conflict constitutions in Iraq and Kosovo. I worked proudly across five different administrations, with the unsung heroes and dedicated civil and foreign service officers from both USAID and the State Department, and hand in hand with global civil society leaders, other government and multilateral partners, and private sector entities. Of course, we were stronger together, building gender equity strategies, emergency response programs, and model processes that served as universal examples, positively changed the lives of millions of people globally, and demonstrated the better angels of the American spirit.

For years, I led the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues (S/GWI) as Acting Ambassador-at-Large in between political appointees overseeing women, peace, and security; economic empowerment; and the global fight against gender-based violence across every major humanitarian theater on earth. In 2025, the office was eliminated through the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) process. The ambassadorship gone. The entire expert team dispersed. Nearly two decades of bipartisan institutional architecture, including funding erased, global gender leadership upended, and genuine trust, which had been established in the furthest corners of the earth, were shattered.

I will not pretend this does not have significant consequences. It does. Women are dying because of these choices. Girls as young as 9 are being married off because programs that protected them no longer exist. Survivors of violence are arriving at locked doors where safe houses used to be.

Women must become the architects of AI, not its casualties.

KATRINA "KAT" FOTOVAT

We must rise out of this fire together. These moments are what I teach my son to call a "PrOpportunity", to find the hope and opportunity, through the fire of the problem.

From the ashes of what has been destroyed, something more resilient, more locally-rooted, and more powerful must rise. The phoenix is a metaphor for transformation. What rises is never identical to what burned. It is stronger. It is wiser about its own vulnerability. And this time, it must be built by the women it serves.

What the Flames Have Taken

To build wisely, we must name clearly what we have lost.

The Office of Global Women's Issues represented 18 years of sustained, bipartisan commitment to women as a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy. It anchored the International Women of Courage (IWOC) Awards, recognizing over 200 women from 90 countries who risked everything for justice and human dignity. It operationalized the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Act, which President Trump signed into law in 2017 with

broad bipartisan support. Senator Rubio co-sponsored it. Representative Kristi Noem authored the House version. Mike Waltz co-chaired the WPS Caucus. The Joint Chiefs praised it as "a low-cost, high-yield uncontested advantage over our competitors." In April 2025, the Defense Department "ended" that program.

The flames also consumed Ivanka Trump's signature achievement from the first Trump Administration: stemming from the Women's Global Development and Prosperity (W-GDP) Initiative, leveraging the Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act signed in 2018 (WEEE Act), an effort I proudly worked with her on and launched in 2019 as a whole-of-government effort on women's economic empowerment. It reached 12 million women in its first year. It channeled over \$1.6 billion in co-funded loans to women entrepreneurs in partnership with 13 countries. Ivanka wrote at the time that women's economic empowerment "shouldn't be viewed as a 'women's issue'" but as smart policy that benefits entire nations. She was right. The State Department and USAID funding that made those efforts no longer exist.

The human cost of all these cuts, including those from USAID and the UN, as estimated by development experts and journalists, is worth noting as we sift through the ashes. The cessation of UNFPA funding is projected to cause 34,000 additional preventable pregnancy-related deaths. Modeling projects 2.5 million additional child deaths from preventable causes between 2025 and 2030. Nearly \$400 million in gender-based violence (GBV) programming has been terminated and the administration's Emergency Humanitarian Waiver explicitly

excluded gender equality-related awards, formally designating the protection of women from violence as non-essential. Over 3 million women and girls have lost GBV services. Approximately 47.6 million women are projected to lose access to voluntary contraception. Child marriage and Female Genital Mutilation are also rising. These cuts were made despite the evidence showing that these efforts clearly supported the Administration's stated goals of promoting American prosperity, protecting Americans and stemming immigration, and preserving and promoting American strength.

A 2025 UN Women survey found 90 percent of women's organizations in crisis settings report operational disruptions. Nearly half face closure within six months. The Women's Refugee Commission's *A Year of Harms* catalogs the losses program by program. Refugees International's *"No One Cares About Us Anymore"* captures it in survivors' voices.

The fire has been devastating. And it has clarified everything.

The Digital Battlefield

As physical systems collapse, a parallel crisis is accelerating. The tsunami of AI is hitting our shores and exacerbating the impact of this tech in ways people often don't see until it is too late. We all feel it; people recognize there is a huge change in the world and often fail to see the connection to AI and tech, the impact of AI on social media on countries, cultures, kids, and especially women. Porn and hate have sadly been amplified in exponential ways.

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) encompasses online harassment,

cyberstalking, doxxing, non-consensual intimate imagery, and AI-generated abuse designed to silence, shame, and eliminate women from public life. Globally, **38 percent of women** have experienced some form of TFGBV. As documented by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, it operates on a continuum with physical violence often preceding or amplifying offline harm.

The State Department once funded dedicated TFGBV programs. Despite funds being appropriated by Congress, those programs are now archived history. And as physical clinics close and safe houses lock their doors, women increasingly depend on digital platforms for health information, crisis resources, and economic survival. When those digital spaces are simultaneously weaponized through AI-generated abuse and coordinated harassment, and when the programs designed to counter TFGBV have been defunded, women face a compounding catastrophe with nowhere to turn.

When we look at the data, it's clear that this isn't just a technical glitch or an issue with the underlying infrastructure. This is fundamentally a question of power and who is controlling the information that is shaping this space.

From a policy perspective, you can't solve a structural power problem simply by applying a technological band-aid. It requires a serious, intentional, and systemic power solution that actually addresses the core mechanics of how decisions are being made and we have to demand a seat at that table.

The Godfather's Warning and the Answer He Couldn't See

In August 2025, Geoffrey Hinton, Nobel laureate, pioneer of deep learning, and the person most people call the "Godfather of AI," stood before a packed conference in Las Vegas and issued a warning that stopped the room.

Hinton predicted that artificial intelligence will soon be "much smarter than us." He warned that conventional strategies of human control over superintelligent systems would ultimately fail. And then he proposed something radical: the only way to ensure that a more intelligent AI doesn't simply replace or destroy humanity is to give it a **maternal instinct**.

"The right model is the only model we have of a more intelligent thing being controlled by a less intelligent thing," Hinton said, "which is a mother being controlled by her baby." He proposed training AI to have "maternal instincts," programming it to care deeply about people, the way a mother cares for her children's survival. "That's the only good outcome," he said. "If it's not going to parent me, it's going to replace me."

Hinton admitted he did not yet know how to accomplish this technically, but stressed that researchers must prioritize the goal above all else.

This is one of the most consequential observations in the history of technology. And it points directly to the most urgent and overlooked crisis in artificial intelligence: the people who understand maternal instinct best, who have lived it, studied it, fought for it in the hardest places on earth, are almost entirely absent from the rooms where AI is being built.

Hinton's metaphor draws on a deep biological and social reality. Maternal instinct is not just kindness or patriarchal box-building; it is the product of complex systems that foster the protection of the vulnerable, long-term nurturing, the teaching of survival skills, social bonding, self-sacrifice, and care for the abandoned. These are not abstract values; it's the best of the protective and empathetic nature of both women and men. They are precisely the values that have been stripped from the US aid and now AI architecture. They are the values that women's organizations, practitioners, and survivors have embodied for decades, the very women in networks we have partnered with around the world for decades to promote peace, prosperity, and combat violence. And they are the values that must be encoded, deliberately, urgently, and by people who truly understand them, into the AI systems that, whether one agrees or not, already are being used to govern the world.

Professor Hinton identified the destination. Women who have spent their lives doing the work of protection, care, and inclusion know the road.

The question is: why aren't they the architects instead of the targets?

The Absence That Makes Everything Worse

According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), Global Gender Gap Report, less than 30 percent of the global AI workforce is female. That figure drops to 15 percent at leadership levels. In the Global South, where AI will increasingly govern access to healthcare, financial services, and safety systems, women's representation in tech leadership is even lower.

When women are excluded from building AI, AI inherits the assumptions of those who did build it, compounding the issue further. According to Harvard's Carr Center, hiring algorithms discriminate, with studies showing AI recruitment tools frequently hard-code historical human biases and penalize resumes containing gendered indicators. Medical imaging underperforms on female bodies; when diagnostic models are trained on single-sex or skewed data, accuracy rates plunge significantly when applied to women, risking missed diagnoses. Content moderation amplifies misogynist content, failing to curb a digital landscape. This is directly linked to how AI is being built. And it is not correctable by adding a diversity statement to a corporate website. It is correctable only by changing who holds power in the rooms where AI is designed, trained, evaluated, and deployed.

Here is the convergence that this moment has made undeniable: the same women who have been stripped of physical protection by the collapse of global aid are the same women who are most vulnerable to AI-enabled violence, and the same women whose wisdom, experience, and values are most urgently needed to build an AI that actually cares about human beings.

This is not just a coincidence but a crisis with a solution embedded in it, if we have the courage to act quickly.

The Phoenix Model: PeacePays.AI and the Architecture of What Rises

PeacePays.AI is building the phoenix.

After talking to so many women leaders around the world with whom we are still working, the

answer was clear. The amazing **PeacePays.AI** co-founders and team, with the support and partnership of other like-minded organizations, also taking on this space (less than 1% of organizations directly working on AI are focused on women), women leaders, civil society, and including experts in the tech industry, we recognized the needed mission, not a restoration of what burned, but something new, something structurally different. It was clear that something needed to be designed from the start to be resilient against the political volatility that just dismantled decades of progress in a matter of weeks.

Its foundational conviction is this: women must become the architects of AI, not its casualties. Not recipients of digital attacks. Not subjects of algorithmic systems. Architects. And that transformation, from target to creator, is both the answer to Professor Hinton's challenge and the antidote to the compounding crises of TFGBV, GBV, maternal mortality, and the collapse of women-led organizations worldwide. To answer the need and build the phoenix. **PeacePays.AI** is bringing women in to build the AI architecture through AI literacy, focusing on prevention, protection, promotion, and inclusive AI-building strategies.

Safety as Strategy. Women cannot protect themselves from technology-facilitated violence if they don't understand it. **PeacePays.AI** works with global early-warning systems to ensure gender data is utilized and AI is embedded to provide early detection of risks and threats where they are most urgently needed to prepare and protect. AI can help strengthen early warning systems and bring in the lived experiences of women into quantitative models in a way that

couldn't be done before - ultimately making everyone safer. Paired with rapid response resources to respond to this rising violence and based upon the risks identified by the early warning systems.

Additionally, through my own lived experience as a women leader that was doxed and threatened, using much of the work done at the State Department, **PeacePays.AI** also provides AI Safety Training, to equip women with direct knowledge of how deepfakes, surveillance tools, coordinated harassment campaigns, and AI-generated content are deployed against them transforming potential victims into informed advocates who can protect themselves, their communities, and their organizations. Safety education is not defensive. It is a vital strategic infrastructure.

AI Literacy as Liberation. **PeacePays.AI** teaches women not just how to use AI tools but how they work, their training data, their embedded biases, their points of failure, and their pressure points for change. Understanding a system is the prerequisite for governing it. Literacy is not a soft skill. It is the foundation of power, and it belongs to everyone. We are training women to utilize AI to create their own sustainability models for themselves, their communities, and their organizations to fill at least some of the gaps left by the end of much of the global gender funding.

Innovative Sustainability. **PeacePays.AI** builds locally-led, financially viable ecosystems where women generate income through AI-enabled work, develop technical expertise that belongs to them, and sustain their communities through models that don't evaporate when the political

wind changes. This is not development assistance. It is economic architecture. And it is what makes the phoenix fireproof. AI bolsters women's economic security by automating administrative workflows and optimizing resource allocation, allowing female leaders, entrepreneurs, and workforce participants to reclaim time and scale their ventures efficiently. Furthermore, it enables women's organizations to transition to innovative, data-driven sustainability models by utilizing predictive analytics to secure diversified funding and forecast community needs. By integrating these advanced tools, these organizations can unlock new revenue streams through digital services and AI-driven consulting, ensuring long-term financial independence and resilient global impact.

Inclusive storytelling and media initiatives.

PeacePays.AI bridges the gap between abstract data and human reality, ensuring that the lived experiences of women on the frontlines are ignored. Through documentaries, films, and locally-led storytelling, we help bring urgently needed human narratives into the global conversation.

The power of storytelling across technology platforms and social media cannot be underestimated. These systems increasingly shape how people understand the world, democracy, conflict, identity, and one another. Women must not only be represented in these spaces; they must also actively harness them to advance narratives that strengthen peace, protect girls, defend freedom, and expand prosperity for all.

Women as the Maternal Instinct in AI. This is the heart of it. Professor Hinton told us that AI needs to care about people the way a mother

cares about her children, but he didn't know how to build it. PeacePays.AI's answer to his stated problem? Bring in the mothers, the women, the best of men. We work directly with innovative and caring leaders in the tech industry to create training benchmarks to directly teach the new generation of AI. This is both elegant and urgent: bring the women who *embody* that instinct into the rooms where AI is built. Women who have navigated conflict zones, delivered healthcare in war-torn clinics, counseled survivors of sexual violence, and negotiated peace agreements understand, at a cellular level, what it means to prioritize human survival and dignity above efficiency and profit. Those are the values that must be encoded into AI. Those women must be at the table, not as consultants or focus groups, but as designers, ethicists, and executives. Working with organizations and tech industry leaders, such as through Positive AI Labs, we bring the voices of the women leaders directly to teach the new generation of AI models at the base level, helping shape their thinking with the wisdom and learned experiences of women around the world.

Call to Action: This Is the Moment

The window is open, the gender crisis is acute, and the solution is clear. What is needed is a collective effort, all hands on deck, bridging the AI world, human rights, and gender equality nexus together to try to use innovative approaches to bring the world back to deal with this collective crisis. This will require resources and the courage to demand transformation rather than restoration. This is an effort requiring urgent action. PeacePays.AI is doing its part, and we would call on others to also bring their

resources, expertise, and recognition of the global urgency for support for gender efforts.

To international donors, Germany, the EU, Canada, the UK, and every nation that has watched these efforts falter: Fill the gap. Fund women's organizations. Restore maternal health programming. Finance GBV services. And invest in the next generation of women-led AI programs—not as a niche initiative, but as core development infrastructure.

To technology companies: The AI you are building will either care about people or it won't. The women who can give your systems a human conscience exist—they are fighting for their lives in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Yemen, and dozens of other places, and they are building organizations like PeacePays.AI right where your headquarters are. Hire them. Fund them. Give them seats on your safety boards, your ethics teams, and your engineering leadership.

To foundations and philanthropies: The moment for incremental grants to well-established NGOs has passed. This is the moment for transformational investment in women's leadership, especially by building inclusive AI architecture, tech-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) protection infrastructure, and locally-led sustainability models that can withstand political upheaval. The multiplier effect of investing in women who can both protect their communities and reshape the systems that govern them is incalculable.

To US policymakers: Restore Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) and Women's Economic Empowerment implementation in full. Treat TFGBV as the humanitarian crisis it is. Build regulatory frameworks for AI that require

gender equity in design, safety testing against gendered harms, and strict accountability when systems are weaponized against women.

To every woman who has ever worked in this space and is watching it burn: Your knowledge is not lost. Your relationships are not destroyed. Your expertise is more urgently needed now than it has ever been. Do not wait for permission to rebuild; be the firefighters the world needs.

To women everywhere who are living this: You are not what was lost. You are what rises. The infrastructure failed you. The instinct—yours, ours—has not.

The World Professor Hinton Imagined Already Exists in Women

Geoffrey Hinton stood at a conference in Las Vegas and described the future that could save humanity: AI that cares about people the way a mother cares about her children. AI that protects the vulnerable even when it has the power to dominate them. AI that chooses nurturing over control.

"These super-intelligent caring AI mothers," Hinton said, "most of them won't want to get rid of the maternal instinct because they don't want us to die."

He was describing a value system. And that value system has been alive, in women's organizations, in humanitarian workers, in peacekeepers, in midwives, in GBV survivors who became advocates, in diplomats who spent careers fighting for the dignity of women they would never meet, for as long as human beings have organized themselves into communities of care.

The crisis we face is not a lack of the right values. It is a lack of the right people in the right rooms.

PeacePays.AI is changing who is in the room. Every woman it trains in AI literacy is a woman who can carry those values into the architecture of systems that will govern billions of lives. Every woman who moves from subject to designer, from potential victim of algorithmic harm to author of AI that protects, is the answer to Professor Hinton's challenge made real.

The phoenix does not rise from the ashes by accident. It rises because something essential survived the fire, something that cannot be defunded, disbanded, or archived on a government website. It rises because the women who embody care, protection, and the fierce refusal to let vulnerability go undefended are still here.

They are still here. We are still here.

And we are building, and we are rising, please join us!

Key reports: "No One Cares About Us Anymore" (Refugees International); A Year of Harms: Impact of US Foreign Aid Cuts (Women's Refugee Commission); At a Breaking Point (UN Women); Effects of reductions in US foreign assistance on HIV/TB (The Lancet); Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security; UNFPA; Women in Global Health).

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HEALTHCARE • MIGRATION AND REFUGEES

The Humanitarian Cost of Broken Self-Government: Human Dignity, Federalism, and America's Crisis of Responsibility

Homelessness, untreated illness, and rural hospital closures are usually described separately. Beneath them lies one institutional collapse: power has come loose from responsibility.



Michael Bedenbaugh
POLITICAL ANALYST AND AUTHOR

I. Introduction and Background of the Issue

The humanitarian crisis in America is not hidden. It is visible in tents under bridges, the mentally ill cycling through jails, rural hospitals struggling to survive, migrants dying in borderlands, families losing access to care, and citizens who no longer know which level of government is responsible when public systems fail.

We often describe these problems separately: homelessness, mental illness, immigration, poverty, Medicaid, food insecurity, hospital closures, addiction, elder care, public school failure, and the erosion of civic trust. But beneath them lies a deeper institutional collapse: America has lost the ability to connect power with responsibility.

This article is not about one president, one political party, one budget fight, or one social program. I am going to share two personal examples because I have seen them up close: mental health and immigration. They are not the whole crisis but they are evidence of a broader breakdown.

Over the past half-century, the United States has centralized increasing amounts of revenue, authority, and administrative control in Washington, D.C., while weakening the state and local systems that once carried primary responsibility for many services closest to human dignity. The result has not been stable compassion.

It has been a national political football.

One administration expands programs. Another cuts them. One Congress attaches

requirements. Another threatens funding. One party speaks the language of compassion while avoiding the structural consequences of disorder. Another speaks the language of order while often ignoring the human beings trapped inside that disorder. Meanwhile, the vulnerable are forced to live with the consequences.

A society that cannot enforce accountability cannot protect dignity.

MICHAEL BEDENBAUGH

Recent federal social-service reductions illustrate the scale of the risk. The Congressional Budget Office estimated that Medicaid provisions in H.R. 1 would increase the number of people without health insurance by 7.8 million in 2034 relative to baseline projections. The Kaiser Family Foundation, known as the KFF (the US's leading independent, non-profit organization focused on national health policy, health journalism, and public opinion polling), **estimated** that the enacted reconciliation package would reduce federal Medicaid spending by \$911 billion over ten years and increase the number of uninsured people by 10 million. CBO also **estimated** that SNAP-related provisions in H.R. 1 would reduce federal spending by \$287 billion over the 2025–2034 period.

These are budget numbers that represent families, nursing homes, hospitals, clinics, disabled citizens, working parents, and children. These reductions are not the origin of the crisis. They are evidence of a deeper structural failure that has been building for decades.

A humane republic should not abandon vulnerable people to whichever faction happens to control Washington. But neither can it pretend that a distant federal bureaucracy can compassionately manage every human need in a nation as large, diverse, and locally complicated as the United States.

2. Human Rights, Human Dignity, and the Conflict Dynamics Involved

Human rights abuses do not always arrive as dramatic acts of violence. Sometimes they appear as abandonment, as untreated illness, or as a person sleeping outside a building that once existed to care for people like him. Most commonly now they appear as a rural county losing its hospital or a patient losing access to medication.

In international humanitarian work, many understand that weak institutions, corruption, displacement, poverty, and state failure can produce human suffering. But in the United States, we often resist using that same language about ourselves. We call our failures “policy disputes.” But when policy failure becomes predictable, preventable, and recurring, it becomes a moral crisis.

The dynamic conflict in America today is not simply left versus right. It is nationalized politics versus local human need.

A person with schizophrenia does not live inside a federal budget category. A hungry child does not experience hunger as a partisan talking point. A migrant crossing the desert does not die as an abstraction in an election-year debate. Human suffering is local, immediate, and embodied. But our politics has become

nationalized, performative, distant, and often financially captured.

There is also a deeper American conundrum that must be admitted honestly. A nation founded on individual liberty will always be vulnerable to disorder. Freedom allows people to choose, build, move, dissent, fail, worship, speak, organize, and resist authority. That liberty is the source of America’s genius. But it also means the United States will never be as orderly as societies built around centralized control.

A free society cannot eliminate all suffering through executive orders. It cannot anticipate every personal crisis, family collapse, addiction, illness, migration pressure, economic disruption, or moral failure. Liberty produces creativity, but it also produces instability. It allows opportunity, but it also allows neglect. It protects the individual from the state, but it can also leave individuals exposed when families, markets, communities, and local institutions fail.

That is the hard truth: **individual liberty without civic responsibility can become abandonment. But government power without constitutional restraint can become domination.**

America was born inside that contradiction. The Constitution begins with the words “We the People,” and its Preamble commits the nation to forming “a more perfect Union,” establishing justice, promoting the general welfare, and securing liberty. Yet the nation that wrote those words also tolerated slavery, the greatest legalized humanitarian abuse in American history. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery in 1865, while the 14th and 15th Amendments greatly expanded civil rights after the Civil War. The 14th

Amendment prohibited states from denying due process or equal protection of the laws, and the 19th Amendment later guaranteed women the right to vote.

That history matters because it warns against simplistic answers. State and local control alone did not protect human dignity. In many cases, state power was used to deny it. But centralized national power has also failed when it became distant, bureaucratic, politicized, or captured by money. The question is not whether the power should exist but how power can be restrained, localized, accountable, and morally bound to the protection of human dignity.

A humane republic must therefore hold two truths at once. First, liberty requires limits on state power, because government itself can become an instrument of abuse. Second, liberty requires public responsibility, because without institutions capable of intervening when people are abandoned, freedom can become a cruel word for those left without help.

This is the central tension in the American experiment. We are not trying to build a perfectly ordered society at the cost of liberty. Nor should we accept preventable suffering as the price of freedom. The challenge is to build a republic in which freedom and responsibility reinforce each other, where government is close enough to see human suffering, restrained enough not to become oppressive, and accountable enough to be corrected when it fails.

3. Human Stories and Real-Life Case Examples

Bull Street and the Collapse of Public Responsibility

For years, as CEO of South Carolina's historic preservation non-profit, I saw how the loss of historic resources often revealed a deeper loss: the disappearance of public obligations that earlier generations had once accepted. This article is not about buildings alone. However, buildings can become witnesses and show us what a society once believed it owed to its people.

One of the clearest and most painful examples is the former South Carolina State Hospital campus on Bull Street in Columbia.

In the 1820s, South Carolina began building what became one of the state's most significant public investments in the treatment of mental illness. The original asylum building was designed by Robert Mills, one of South Carolina's most important architects and later the designer of the Washington Monument. The South Carolina Department of Archives and History describes the Mills Building as an enduring monument to both the State Mental Hospital founders and Robert Mills.

Over generations, that campus grew into a vast public system utilizing dozens of buildings, totaling over a million square feet, all dedicated in one form or another to mental health treatment, outpatient care, custody, confinement, and intervention.

It was not a perfect system. No man-made system ever is. Institutions for the mentally ill have often reflected both compassion and control. They have provided care, but also confinement. They have offered shelter, but sometimes at the cost of liberty. There were flaws, failures, and

practices later generations were right to question.

But the existence of that campus still represented something morally important: South Carolina once accepted that mental illness was a public responsibility.

That responsibility slowly eroded.

After World War II, as more money and authority flowed through Washington, state systems increasingly depended on federal support. This arrangement allowed state politicians to brag about keeping taxes low while federal politicians bragged about delivering money back home. Everyone could claim credit. No one had to fully own the responsibility.

Then, as federal support weakened, as it did under President Reagan's budget cuts in the 1980s, the weakness of that arrangement was exposed. States had allowed critical human services to become dependent on Washington, but many lacked either the revenue or the political will to replace what was lost. In Columbia, the old Mental Health campus eventually ceased to serve the public purpose for which generations had built and expanded it.

The question was no longer how best to treat the mentally ill. The question became who had the right to control and profit from the property. In 2007, the South Carolina Supreme Court considered whether the 600-acre property was held in a charitable trust and whether, and under what conditions, it could be sold. The court held that the property was subject to a charitable trust, but that a sale could be allowed with proceeds placed in trust for the Department of Mental Health.

A place created for public care became a contest over real estate value.

The property was eventually redeveloped into a mixed-use development district; much of the structures built to provide mental health care were demolished and replaced with new retail, restaurants, apartments, and a minor league ball park. I do not oppose redevelopment in principle. Cities change. Properties evolve. Adaptive reuse can be valuable. But when a site built for the care of vulnerable people becomes a private development opportunity while the streets around it fill with people suffering from untreated mental illness, we must ask what exactly has been preserved because the human need did not disappear. It moved to sidewalks, underpasses, emergency rooms, jail cells, public parks, and downtown storefronts.

This is but one example of how the American system is failing. Washington created dependency. The state lost the will to sustain its own responsibility. Local communities inherited the suffering. Private interests inherited the land. The people most in need of care became politically invisible.

The Border and the Exploitation of Human Hope

The second experience that shaped my thinking came during my 2024 campaign for Congress as an independent. I made a deliberate decision to go to the Texas-Mexico border to see the immigration crisis for myself. I did not want my understanding filtered only through cable news, party talking points, or campaign rhetoric. I wanted to talk to people on the ground.

What I saw was worse than I expected.

The immigration issue has become one of the most destructive bipartisan failures in modern American politics. Both major parties benefit from its malfunction. Democrats often speak the language of compassion while failing to confront the criminal systems that exploit migrants on the journey north. Republicans often speak the language of law and order while turning migrants into symbols of invasion. Each side raises money, excites its base, and accuses the other of cruelty or betrayal. Meanwhile, the border remains broken, migrants remain vulnerable, border communities remain strained, and cartels profit from the chaos.

At the border, I was shown video of corpses: innocent women and children who had died of thirst in the mesquite fields of South Texas. They were not criminals in any meaningful moral sense. They were human beings who had believed in, and had been sold, the dream of a better life in the United States. Instead, their hope became a commodity in a criminal marketplace.

The international migration system has become a pipeline of exploitation. Good people who want work, safety, dignity, or opportunity are drawn into a system controlled in many places by smugglers, criminal networks, and cartel-linked actors. The legal distinction between human smuggling and human trafficking matters, but on the ground those lines can blur. A person may begin by paying to be smuggled and later become trapped by debt, threats, labor exploitation, kidnapping, extortion, or sexual violence. Human aspiration becomes criminal revenue.

The Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) has warned that illicit actors,

including transnational criminal organizations, engage in human smuggling along the southwest border for profit and without regard for migrant safety. Citing a Department of Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center estimate, FinCEN **reported** that human smuggling along the southwest border generates roughly \$2 billion to \$6 billion in yearly revenue for illicit actors.

This is the part of the immigration debate that America refuses to confront honestly. A broken border does not simply create an administrative problem for the United States. It creates a revenue stream for criminal organizations. Every failure to build a lawful, fast, humane, and enforceable immigration system strengthens the networks that prey on migrants.

During periods of permissive policy or overwhelmed enforcement, many political leaders treated migrant arrival primarily as a humanitarian accommodation. But accommodation without order can become complicity. If the practical result of policy is that desperate people must pay criminal networks to move through dangerous territory, then moral intention is not enough. Good intentions do not absolve us of the consequences of a broken system.

Then, when national politics shifts, many of those same migrants become targets of enforcement. The same human beings first exploited by smugglers and cartels are transformed into objects of national political theater. They are used by one side as proof of compassion and by the other as proof of invasion. Their humanity disappears in both narratives.

The deaths are real. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) **reported** that in fiscal year 2023, Border Patrol recorded 704 migrant deaths and conducted 5,826 rescue events, resulting in 42,340 rescued migrants. The International Committee of the Red Cross describes missing and dead migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border as a humanitarian challenge involving disappearance, death, serious medical issues, family separation, and the dignified management of the deceased. The International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Missing Migrants Project reported that at least 1,267 migrants died or disappeared in the Americas in 2023, with nearly half of fatalities occurring along the U.S.-Mexico border.

These facts should trouble every American regardless of party. A sovereign nation has the right and duty to control its borders. But a republic dedicated to human dignity has no right to tolerate a system in which people are lured into cartel-controlled routes, die in fields, disappear in deserts, and then become campaign props.

Again, this is not the whole humanitarian crisis in America. It is another warning sign. Immigration reveals the same pattern as the State Mental Health Facility mentioned earlier: political leaders avoid responsibility, systems malfunction, private or criminal interests profit, and vulnerable people bear the cost.

4. Social, Political, Humanitarian, and Economic Consequences

The social consequences of this institutional failure are visible everywhere.

In mental health, the consequence is homelessness, incarceration, emergency-room dependency, addiction, untreated trauma, family collapse, and downtown disorder. When states allow mental health systems to decay, police become first responders to psychiatric crisis. Jails become treatment centers by default. Emergency rooms become shelters. Families become case managers. Small businesses become the front line of social collapse.

In immigration, the consequence is death, exploitation, cartel enrichment, fear in immigrant communities, overwhelmed local governments, strained schools, distrust of law enforcement, and anger among citizens who believe the law no longer means anything. Border communities bear the direct burden, but the political shockwaves move through the entire country.

But the pattern is larger than these two examples.

When rural hospitals close, federal officials blame market forces, state officials blame reimbursement rates, hospital systems blame labor costs, and communities are left without care. When schools fail, Washington blames states, states blame districts, districts blame parents, and children lose years they can never recover. When food assistance is cut, one party celebrates fiscal discipline, the other celebrates outrage, and families are left to navigate hunger. When addiction overwhelms a town, law enforcement, health care, courts, churches, families, and social services all absorb pieces of the crisis, but no one owns the whole responsibility.

This is the humanitarian danger of a fractured republic. The suffering is real, but responsibility is always somewhere else.

Health care reveals another dimension of the same problem. Large hospital systems, insurers, pharmaceutical companies, and corporate providers increasingly dominate the medical landscape. The danger is not only cost. It is distance. When medical systems consolidate, communities often lose local control, independent doctors lose autonomy, rural areas lose access, and patients become numbers inside distant administrative systems.

This matters because a return to state responsibility will fail if state governments are captured by the very corporations they are supposed to regulate. If hospital chains, insurance companies, pharmaceutical interests, developers, and outside donor networks dominate state politics, then decentralization will not restore accountability. It will merely move captured power closer to home.

That is why campaign finance reform is central to humanitarian reform. State lawmakers who write health care, welfare, mental health, housing, and education policy must answer to their own constituents and not outside donor pools, corporate PACs, national ideological machines, or industries seeking favorable regulation.

The economic consequences are severe. When mental health systems are closed, costs do not disappear. They move to jails, hospitals, law enforcement, courts, emergency services, shelters, and businesses. When immigration systems fail, the cost is paid by migrants, border communities, employers, schools, hospitals, and taxpayers. When health care consolidates, costs rise and access shrinks. When Washington cuts programs abruptly, states scramble to fill

gaps they may not have the revenue or will to fill.

The political consequence is perhaps the most dangerous: citizens lose trust.

They see visible suffering and hear officials blame someone else. They see money spent, but conditions worsen. They see corporations profit while communities decline. They see politicians campaign on crisis but rarely solve it. They see migrants used as symbols rather than treated as human beings. They see the mentally ill abandoned while public assets become private wealth. They see federal and state officials pass responsibility back and forth like a burden no one wants to carry.

That loss of trust is not merely unfortunate. It is destabilizing. Our Republic cannot survive if citizens believe every institution is rigged, every policy is theater, every official is bought, and every vulnerable person is expendable.

5. International Response, Accountability Efforts, and Existing Challenges

The immigration crisis already has an international dimension. Migration through Mexico and toward the United States involves countries of origin, transit, and destination. It involves poverty, violence, corruption, asylum law, labor demand, criminal networks, border enforcement, humanitarian relief, and international cooperation. No single nation can solve it alone. But the United States has a special responsibility because its economy, laws, enforcement choices, labor markets, and political signals shape the incentives migrants and smugglers respond to.

International organizations have warned repeatedly about migrant deaths, disappearances, family separation, and lack of access to essential services. The International Committee of the Red Cross frames missing and dead migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border as a humanitarian challenge involving death, disappearance, medical need, family separation, and dignified recovery of the dead. IOM's Missing Migrants Project has also documented deaths and disappearances in the Americas, with the U.S.-Mexico border consistently among the most dangerous migration corridors.

Yet accountability remains fragmented. Smugglers blame migrants for taking risks. Politicians blame the other party. Federal agencies blame limited resources. States blame Washington. Washington blames states. Mexico blames U.S. demand and policy. The United States blames Mexico's cartel power. Humanitarian organizations respond to the suffering but cannot reform the political incentives producing it.

The same fragmentation appears in domestic social services. Medicaid, SNAP, mental health, homelessness, and health care access involve federal dollars, state administration, local implementation, private contractors, nonprofit organizations, and corporate providers. Responsibility is scattered across so many actors that accountability evaporates.

Internationally, the United States speaks often about human rights, democratic accountability, corruption, migration, trafficking, and state capacity. But those principles must also be examined at home. A wealthy republic that cannot deliver basic accountability for mental health

care, rural health access, immigration administration, food assistance, or education should not treat its domestic failures as mere partisan disputes.

Human dignity depends on institutions. When institutions become too distant, too captured, too polarized, or too unaccountable, vulnerable people suffer. When suffering is ignored long enough, civic trust decays. When civic trust decays, conflict follows.

6. Connection to IHCR's Mission of Humanitarian Conflict Resolution, Human Dignity, and Peacebuilding

This issue belongs squarely within the mission of humanitarian conflict resolution because conflict does not begin only when violence erupts. Conflict begins when communities lose trust, when vulnerable people are abandoned, when institutions become unaccountable, and when political factions benefit from disorder.

America's internal humanitarian crisis is a warning. All the previous examples are not isolated problems. They are signs of a republic losing the capacity to connect power with responsibility.

Human dignity requires more than rights written on paper. It requires systems that can deliver care, protect the vulnerable, regulate power, expose abuse, and correct failure. Peacebuilding inside a democracy requires restoring civic trust before distrust hardens into permanent hostility. Conflict prevention requires ensuring that political competition does not turn human beings into disposable symbols.

The central question is not whether America should be compassionate. Most Americans believe it should be. The question is whether our institutions are still capable of organizing compassion responsibly.

That requires rebuilding accountability. It requires knowing who is responsible when a mentally ill person is abandoned, when a migrant dies, when a rural hospital closes, when a school fails, when a nursing home neglects its residents, or when food assistance is cut. A society that cannot locate responsibility cannot enforce accountability. A society that cannot enforce accountability cannot protect dignity.

IHCR's mission calls for awareness, accountability, and recommendations for resolution. That is precisely what America needs now: not another partisan performance, but a serious confrontation with how our institutions have allowed suffering to be nationalized, monetized, and politicized.

7. Recommendations, Solutions, and Policy Actions Moving Forward

The path forward must reject two false choices. The first false choice is that compassion requires centralized federal control. The second is that federalism requires abandoning vulnerable people to state neglect. A humane republic must do something harder: restore responsibility closer to the people while building strong guardrails against abuse, discrimination, incompetence, and corporate capture.

First, services closest to human dignity should be made primarily state responsibilities, including mental health, local health care access, welfare administration, family services,

homelessness response, and education. But responsibility must be explicit. States should not be able to claim credit when programs work and blame Washington when they fail.

Second, revenue must follow responsibility. A state cannot be responsible for human services while Washington controls the dominant revenue streams and returns money through grants, waivers, mandates, and formulas. Duties should be decentralized to the most feasible level of governance, but the revenue necessary to fulfill those duties must be decentralized as well.

Third, the federal government should retain a rights-protection role. A return to state responsibility cannot mean tolerating discrimination, abuse, neglect, or denial of constitutional protections. I was born in rural South Carolina in 1961, at the end of the Jim Crow era. I know enough about my own state's history to understand that state and local governments can neglect, discriminate, abuse, and fail. Local control alone does not guarantee justice. But distant control does not guarantee compassion either.

Fourth, local journalism must be rebuilt. A decentralized republic depends on vibrant locally supported media systems with reporters who attend county meetings, investigate hospital closures, monitor nursing homes, examine state budgets, expose conflicts of interest, and tell citizens which lawmakers are responsible for which failures.

Fifth, out-of-state money must be removed from in-state politics. If states are going to reclaim responsibility for health care, mental health, welfare, education, and public safety, then state lawmakers must answer to their constituents,

not outside donor pools, corporate PACs, national hospital systems, insurance companies, pharmaceutical interests, developers, or national ideological machines.

Sixth, antitrust enforcement must address hospital, insurance, pharmaceutical, and media consolidation. Local accountability cannot survive if local markets are controlled by distant corporate systems. A humane federalism requires competitive local economies, independent medical providers, local news, and state regulators who are not captured by the industries they oversee.

Seventh, immigration reform must be lawful, fast, humane, and enforceable. The United States should create a system that reduces cartel revenue by expanding lawful processing, accelerating asylum decisions, increasing regional cooperation, punishing criminal smuggling networks, and making clear that neither open disorder nor indiscriminate mass enforcement is humane. A sovereign border and human dignity are not opposites. They are both necessary.

Eighth, Congress should end omnibus lawmaking and require single-subject bills. Major changes to Medicaid, SNAP, immigration, health care, and social services should be debated openly, on their own merits, in language citizens can understand. Hidden provisions in massive legislative packages obscure responsibility and weaken democratic consent.

Ninth, civic education must be restored. Citizens cannot hold a federal republic accountable if they do not understand which level of government is responsible for what. Confusion benefits opportunistic politicians.

Knowledge empowers citizens.

8. Conclusion: A Call for Awareness, Accountability, and Action

The issues are deep and terrifying because the failure is not in one place.

Washington has centralized money. Federal agencies have centralized rules. Corporations have centralized influence. Hospitals and insurers have centralized care. Political parties have centralized messaging and fundraising. Media conglomerates have weakened local scrutiny. Outside donors have distorted state elections. Cartels have monetized migrant desperation. Citizens have been left trying to discover who, exactly, is responsible for the suffering in front of them.

But this can be repaired.

It will require a huge civic effort: constitutional reform, immigration reform, fiscal reform, campaign finance reform, antitrust enforcement, local journalism, civic education, and a renewed moral seriousness about public responsibility. It will require citizens to stop treating government as a distant spectacle and begin again the hard work of self-government.

SC's Mental Health System and the Texas border tell different stories, but they point to the same national failure. In one case, the mentally ill were abandoned after public responsibility decayed and a place built for care became private value. In the other, migrants were exploited by criminal networks after political leaders allowed immigration to become a permanent campaign weapon.

But these are not the only humanitarian crises in America. They are warnings. They show what happens when authority is centralized, responsibility is blurred, money captures politics, local journalism weakens, public services become partisan weapons, and human beings disappear inside systems designed to avoid accountability.

A humane republic cannot depend on the benevolence of whichever faction happens to control Washington. Human dignity requires something steadier than partisan victory. It requires institutions close enough to understand suffering, flexible enough to respond to local realities, transparent enough to be scrutinized, and accountable enough to be corrected when they fail.

This is not about empowering states' rights as much as elevating states' responsibilities.

The goal is to build a system in which no elected official, no agency, no corporation, no hospital chain, no donor network, no cartel, and no level of government can hide from responsibility.

America's humanitarian challenge is constitutional, moral, and civic. We must rebuild a federal system in which states no longer hide behind Washington, Washington no longer hoards the revenue, corporations no longer purchase public policy, cartels no longer profit from disorder, and citizens no longer lose their dignity because responsibility has been scattered so widely that no one can be held accountable.

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WAR CRIMES

Israel's Genocide in Gaza and Ethnic Cleansing in the West Bank

The evidence, place by place and date by date, for war crimes in Gaza and the dispossession of Palestinians across the West Bank.



Alon Ben-Meir

PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER, INSTITUTE FOR HUMANITARIAN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Israel has betrayed the very values that made the Jewish people the world's conscience for millennia—values forged in our own persecution, meant to bind us forever to the defense of the persecuted. Instead, from the occupation of 1967 to the genocide now consuming Gaza and Israel's inhumane crimes against the Palestinian people in the West Bank, it has desecrated a sacred inheritance, turning the moral wisdom of the ages into an instrument of cruelty, dispossession, and death.

Introduction

The war crimes Israel has perpetrated against the Palestinians in Gaza—and its relentless ethnic cleansing across the West Bank—defy every moral principle that governs human behavior. Much of the world now condemns Israel, most openly, some only in whispers, but the verdict is unmistakable: its moral standing has collapsed to a point of almost no return. This ruin is the work of the extremist government now in power and the savagery with which it grinds down a captive people—reducing a nation once revered as a moral exemplar to a byword for impunity, and a synonym for shame before the world.

To make the case against Israel, I will present a few out of hundreds of documented pieces of evidence for each of these crimes—citing the time and place of each, and, in most instances, the names of the victims themselves. I conclude this work by calling on all Israeli and diaspora Jews to rise and demand that the Israeli government immediately cease its barbaric treatment of the Palestinians. They must rise, not just to safeguard Palestinian lives and dignity, but so Israeli Jews themselves can begin the arduous and necessary journey toward collective atonement and lasting redemption.

Moral Army is a Myth

Creeping annexation and ethnic cleansing may redraw a map, but they cannot erase a nation.

ALON BEN-MEIR

One of the most consistent claims Israel has made over the years is that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is the most moral military in the world — a claim taken for granted by Israelis themselves and by many others around the world. The egregious assault on the Palestinians in so many different settings, times, and circumstances raise the cynical question: if the most “moral military” in the world is capable of committing such heinous crimes against tens of thousands of innocent Palestinians only because of who they are, how much worse can a corrupt, bloodthirsty army be?

How did an army that once preached “purity of arms” fall this far? Herbert Kelman, in his classic study of “sanctioned massacres,” showed that ordinary soldiers commit atrocities when three conditions converge — authorization, which suspends normal moral judgment; routinization, which removes any occasion to raise moral questions; and dehumanization, which strips victims of identity and community.¹ All three have been supplied to the IDF in abundance. There are six mutually reinforcing forces that explain the transformation from “purity of arms” to “sanctioned massacre,” which social psychology has long since named.

First, dehumanization from the top. When the defense minister announces a total siege with

the words “we are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly,”² he was portraying Palestinians as subhumans. Although that’s not an explicit order to kill civilians, such language can strip away moral restraint, signaling that Palestinian lives are of lesser value and that violence against them carries diminished ethical consequence

Second, the existential mindset. Israeli political psychologist Daniel Bar-Tal has spent decades documenting the “siege mentality” and the delegitimization of the adversary that sustains intractable conflict—beliefs that cast one’s own side as the eternal, sole victim and deny the other’s humanity. Sociologist Eva Illouz put it more bluntly: “Where you see human beings, Israelis see enemies,” and Israelis have lost “the capacity to identify with the suffering of a distant other.”³ A population defined as an existential threat cannot be a population of victims.

Third, October 7 and the summoning of Holocaust memory. The savagery of that day was real and searing. Still, it was immediately transposed into a biblical register when the prime minister told the nation and its soldiers to “remember what Amalek did to you”⁴ — a verse whose scriptural sequel commands the annihilation of men, women, and infants alike. Genocide scholar Omer Bartov, an Israeli-born historian, concluded that the IDF’s operational pattern came to match precisely that rhetoric.⁵ Trauma was converted from a claim on the world’s conscience into a license against it.

Fourth, sanctified vengeance. Albert Bandura’s work on moral disengagement describes exactly this machinery: inhumane conduct is cognitively restructured into something “benign or

worthy” through moral justification and sanitizing language, while responsibility is displaced upward and the injury inflicted is minimized.⁶ “Mowing the lawn,” “collateral damage,” and “human shields” are not descriptions; they are anesthetics.

Fifth, the long apprenticeship of occupation. Nearly six decades of checkpoints, night raids, demolitions, and military courts habituated a conscript army to treating an entire people as a population to be managed rather than citizens to be respected. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, whom Isaiah Berlin called the conscience of Israel, warned from 1967 onward that the occupation would corrupt the occupier as surely as the occupied, and coined the term “Judeo-Nazis” precisely to describe what he feared the army would become. What was heresy in 1982 reads today as prophecy.

Sixth, impunity and industrialized distance. Almost no soldier is investigated, fewer still are charged, and killing is now mediated through algorithmic target lists and munitions released from miles away — conditions under which, as Hannah Arendt observed of bureaucratized evil, atrocity requires no monsters, only functionaries who never see a face. An army that is never held to account learns that nothing it does is accountable.

Taken together, these forces demonstrate that the “most moral military” was always a myth—a comforting fiction embraced by the perpetrators. The unfolding horror in Gaza has stripped that myth naked for the whole world to see. The IDF flagrantly breached nearly every category imaginable: torture; ethnic cleansing; indiscriminate killing; deliberate deprivation of aid,

food, fuel, and medicine; dehumanization; attacks on humanitarian zones; wholesale destruction of infrastructure; demolition of homes; cold-blooded execution; strangulation of movement; assassinations of journalists; and attacks on hospitals and health clinics. The sheer number of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the IDF brought a near-global conclusion that Israel committed genocide through the most egregious crimes imaginable. The following offers a window into what genocide looks like.

Dehumanization

Israel's dehumanization of the Palestinians was never incidental; it was cultivated through language, law, and habit. Officials and public figures spoke of "human animals," invoked Amalek, and denied the existence of Palestinian innocents — rhetoric the UN's commission of inquiry cited as evidence of genocidal intent.⁷ Occupation converted persons into permits, checkpoints, and case numbers. Two legal systems governed one territory: civil law for settlers, military courts for Palestinians — an architecture B'Tselem and others named apartheid. School curricula, conscription, and media erased Palestinian history and grief alike.

Dehumanization supplied the permission. Once soldiers were taught that no Gazan is innocent, that an entire population is inhuman, the distinction between combatant and child dissolved. Hannah Arendt understood how ordinary this becomes: the perpetrators of mass murder, she wrote, were "neither perverted nor sadistic," but "terribly and terrifyingly normal."⁸ Free-fire zones, flattened

neighborhoods, and starvation as strategy followed logically— not from battlefield necessity, but from the prior conviction that these lives never counted. Genocide begins in the mind long before the airstrike.

Settler pogroms in the West Bank proceed under army protection; prisons have become, as B'Tselem documents in its report "Welcome to Hell," networks of torture where starvation, sexual violence, and death go unpunished. Impunity is not the failure of the system. It is the system's design. The consequence was moral anesthesia. Once a people are rendered faceless, killing them requires no justification and abusing them incurs no penalty. Emmanuel Levinas located the whole of ethics in that vanished feature: "The face is what forbids us to kill."⁹ For him, the face is not a likeness but the encounter with another's irreducible singularity, and it issues its command before any argument about security is made. To strip a people of that face—to convert them into a demographic problem or a statistic—is not merely to insult them, but to dismantle in advance the one restraint that makes violence against them unthinkable.

Indiscriminate Killings

Israel falsely claims that its military forces never engaged in indiscriminate killing of Palestinians, when in fact such killings happened routinely in broad daylight. The deliberate killings were seemingly meant not merely to neutralize a security threat but to eliminate as many Palestinians as possible, regardless of age, gender and circumstances. There were hundreds of such incidents; the following offer only a glimpse of the wanton, indiscriminate killings

that Israel denies, but the iron-clad evidence speaks for itself.

On October 31, 2023, four Israeli aerial munitions struck the six-story Engineers' Building in central Gaza, which collapsed, knowing it was sheltering some 350 civilians. Human Rights Watch verified at least 106 dead—34 women, 18 men, and 54 children—from families including the Abu Saeed clan, of whom 23 perished together. Survivor Ameera Shaheen lost 20 relatives; she awoke in hospital screaming for her daughter. Naheed Mahmoud watched rescuers free her niece Nada, 17, whose “lower body was crushed under the rubble... she was in severe pain, yelling and screaming.”¹⁰ Those who claim that the Israeli army is subject to civilian authority and must follow orders also know that every soldier understands the difference between combatants and innocent civilians.

Not only have there been hardly any known cases where an Israeli soldier disobeyed an unlawful order to kill non-combatants, but there were, conversely, many documented incidents — captured on soldiers' own phones and verified by Amnesty International, The Washington Post and the Associated Press — in which soldiers cheered as residential blocks were leveled and as strikes killed Palestinian civilians. On December 21, 2023, Israeli forces stormed a Sheik Radwan home, hurling grenades into a room where 12 civilians sheltered, then opening fire. Seven were killed: Ahmed al-Khalidi, 34; Fatma al-Khalidi, 32, seven months pregnant, her “belly and face full of metal fragments;” Nawal al-Khalidi, 70; her blind 73-year-old husband Abd Rabu, allegedly shot after the house was secured; and others whose legs, a survivor said, “looked like mincemeat.” Five-year-old

Faisal endured seven surgeries and may never walk. His uncle said the once-fearless boy now “can never be left alone.”¹¹

Another chilling example is the killing that took place on November 22, 2023, in Gaza City on Moneer al-Rayyes Street in the Tal al-Hawa neighborhood, with no battle raging and no threat in sight. Israeli snipers methodically picked off four unarmed members of the Doghmosh family—Mohammed, Salem, Montasser, and Farid—and wounded two more.¹² They were not fighters; they were civilians in their own neighborhood, marked for death simply for being Palestinian men. No army that hunts the unarmed can call itself the most moral in the world.

Attacking Rescue Teams and Hospitals

Not only does the IDF shoot and kill innocent Palestinians, but they have also made it a practice to attack rescue teams and aid convoys that come in cases of emergency to help the wounded and evacuate the dead resulting from an Israeli attack. This, of course, is not only against international law and is considered a war crime, but it also shows the heartlessness that has characterized the Israeli onslaught on the Palestinians in Gaza. A couple of abhorrent examples demonstrate the egregiousness of such inhumanity.

On November 20, 2023, after a days-long siege, Israeli tanks and snipers surrounded the Indonesian Hospital facility at Beit Lahiya. Fire struck the post-operative department, killing at least 12 people and wounding dozens. Snipers on rooftops blocked ambulances, and troops later disabled the main generator, forcing the

hospital out of service.¹³ Another ghastly case took place on December 6, 2024, when the Kamal Adwan Hospital in northern Gaza was raided by Israeli forces; they killed four medical professionals and left about 20 injured. Overnight, troops severely damaged the oxygen generators, leaving only two inexperienced surgeons to provide critical care.¹⁴ The strike was part of repeated assaults that ultimately shut the hospital down by late December.¹⁵

And to cap these debased violations of the human right to medical treatment, one other incident stands out. On March 23, 2025, in southern Rafah, a convoy of clearly marked ambulances and a fire truck, emergency lights flashing, came to aid the wounded. Israeli soldiers unleashed over 900 rounds across two hours, killing 15 rescue workers—among them paramedic Refaat Radwan, who recorded much of the attack—then buried them in a mass grave, alongside their crushed rescue vehicles.¹⁶ To slaughter medics racing to save lives and hide the evidence is not the mark of morality; it is the signature of impunity.

This is a part of a wider pattern in which medical sanctuaries, meant to shelter the sick and wounded, became sites of killing.

Preventing Supply of Essential Aid as a Weapon of War

I do not believe that there is anything more inhumane that deserves universal condemnation than the deliberate starvation of men, women, and especially children as a weapon of war. This not only points to the beastly conduct of Israel in a war against civilians but to the utter loss of the last vestiges of any moral tenet by a country founded on the ashes of the hundreds of

thousands of Jews who perished from starvation.

On August 22, 2025, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC)—the world's foremost authority on food crises—confirmed Famine (Phase 5) in Gaza Governorate, with over *half a million people facing starvation and preventable death*.¹⁷ UNICEF reported in July 2025 that the entire under-five population, more than 320,000 children, are at risk of acute malnutrition.¹⁸ Nine-year-old Jana, who had recovered from malnutrition in 2024, relapsed and died in October 2025 as aid restrictions persisted; her two-year-old sister Jouri had already starved to death on August 20.¹⁹ Doctors reported infants dying for want of basic potassium chloride.²⁰

For framing, these were not logistical failures but, according to assessments by the UN and rights bodies, deliberate policy: UNRWA said it had enough food stockpiled outside Gaza to feed the entire population for months, with trucks left waiting at closed crossings.²¹ By late August 2025, Gaza's Health Ministry recorded at least 289 malnutrition deaths, including 115 children.²² The earliest emblematic case was 10-year-old Yazan al-Kafarneh, who had cerebral palsy and needed a special diet; he wasted to a skeleton and died in Rafah on March 4, 2024, becoming, as the *New York Times* put it, “the face of starvation in Gaza.”²³

But to fathom the extent of the Israelis' cruelty, one has to listen to former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, who announced on October 9, 2023, “a complete siege... No electricity, no food, no water, no fuel—everything is closed,” adding, “We are fighting human animals.”²⁴ And adding

insult to injury, the then Energy Minister, now Minister of Defense, Israel Katz said, “Not a fuel truck will enter until the Israeli hostages come home.”²⁵ Human Rights Watch concluded Israel was using starvation as a weapon of war—a war crime—deliberately blocking water, food, and fuel. By December 6, the WFP reported nine of ten households in northern Gaza had gone a full day and night without food.²⁶

Attacking Israeli Designated Safe Zones

In Gaza, the IDF established designated “safe zones” for Palestinians to enter, yet deliberately and repeatedly attacked these very same zones. These malicious attacks can only be described as a deliberate trap just to kill as many Palestinians who, for a moment, feel that they are safe. If this is not a grave travesty, then I don’t know what is. Just try to internalize the following:

On February 20, 2024, an Israeli tank fired at a multi-story building housing only Médecins Sans Frontières staff and their families in al-Mawasi—the very “humanitarian zone” Israel had designated and ordered civilians to flee toward. The strike killed two people and injured seven. MSF had given Israeli authorities the building’s exact coordinates, saw no military targets nearby, and received no warning.²⁷ One would accept the possibility that in a certain case the coordinates were wrong, resulting in such a tragic error. The attack however, underscored a pattern in which no place in Gaza—even Israel’s own declared safe areas—offered families refuge, as these attacks have been repeated time and again.

On December 4, 2024, an Israeli airstrike hit a makeshift camp sheltering 21 displaced families in al-Mawasi, Khan Younis—an area Israel had unilaterally declared a “safe humanitarian zone.” The strike and secondary explosions, seemingly sparked by gas cylinders used for domestic purposes, incinerated all 21 tents, killing at least 23 Palestinians, among them at least four children and two women, one of them pregnant, and gravely wounding others. The UN noted it was the seventh attack on displacement camps in two weeks, part of a relentless targeting of families who had already lost their homes and were living in canvas shelters.²⁸ Every time such a criminal attack takes place, you find the Israeli authorities providing baseless excuses—in this instance, claiming to target senior Hamas commanders—trying to explain away the daily unfolding tragedies.

Normalizing Torture

Whereas Israel denies it engages in torture of Palestinians prisoners, the evidence available not only proves Israel’s lies and deception but demonstrates the unimaginable extent of torture, sparing no one regardless of age and gender. The UN documented the torture and deaths at Sde Teiman and other facilities.²⁹ Thousands of Palestinians—including women, children, doctors, and patients—were taken from Gaza, shackled and blindfolded, and held incommunicado, subjected to waterboarding, electric shocks, burning, stress positions, prolonged food and water deprivation, and sexual abuse. Nurse Younis al-Hamlawi described being forcibly penetrated with a foreign object and electrocuted;³⁰ another detainee recounted being suspended from chains and electrocuted until “the world was spinning... and I fainted.”³¹

B'Tselem found deliberate denial of medical care in six of ten autopsies. At least 84 Palestinians have died in Israeli custody per B'Tselem's monitoring; other rights organizations cite at least 94 deaths.³²



Dr. Adnan al-Bursh, the 50-year-old head of orthopedics at Gaza's al-Shifa Hospital, was seized by Israeli forces on December 14, 2023, while treating patients at al-Awda Hospital in northern Gaza, and taken to Ofer Prison in the West Bank. He died in custody; Israeli prison authorities confirmed his death on April 19, 2024.³³ Fellow inmates told Sky News that at Sde Teiman, he had been beaten so severely he could no longer use the bathroom unaided, and when he arrived at Ofer Prison, guards threw al-Bursh into the prison yard naked from the waist down, his body bearing clear signs of assault; he died not long after.³⁴

The UN Special Rapporteur on health, Tlaleng Mofokeng, said she was “horrified” and warned his case raised serious concerns that “he died following torture at the hands of Israeli authorities,” demanding an independent international investigation.³⁵ Israel withheld his body.

In the West Bank, the systematic torture of Palestinian detainees over decades represents one of the darkest failures of basic decency by the Israeli authorities, whether inflicted to instill fear, extract information, humiliate, or reduce a person to silence; it strips victims of dignity and leaves wounds that do not fade. The routine use of such abuse, which ends with the death of the prisoner, corrodes the moral fabric of any society that tolerates it, making violence seem normal and lives expendable.

There are scores of cases of tortured Palestinian prisoners in the West Bank. Here are only a couple of cases that describe the sheer inhumanity of the Israeli prison guards. On September 30, 2024, Israeli soldiers stormed the Silwad home of 17-year-old Walid Khaled Abdullah Ahmad, dragging the boy from his bed. Nearly six months later, on March 23, 2025, he collapsed and died in the yard of Megiddo prison — the first confirmed death of a Palestinian child in Israeli detention.³⁶ Prisoner-rights groups reported he had suffered from severe deprivation and abuse; medical accounts cited signs of starvation and neglect.³⁷ A child who should have been in school instead died in a facility notorious for torture, held for months without a resolved charge.

His case reflects the broader pattern documented by B'Tselem in its report “Welcome to Hell,” which found a “systemic, institutional policy” of abuse including severe beatings, sexual assault, deliberate starvation, and sleep deprivation.

Deliberate Destruction of Infrastructure

The mass destruction of civilian infrastructure by Israel was carefully calculated to ethnically cleanse the territory and prevent the Palestinians from ever returning. This unprecedented and indiscriminate scorched-earth destruction, leaving thousands of Palestinians buried under the rubble, defies madness and inhumanity.

In April 2025, the United Nations Satellite Center (UNOSAT) found roughly 70 percent of all structures in Gaza were destroyed or badly damaged, totaling 174,486 buildings, while civilian infrastructure has been flattened 80 to 90 percent.³⁸ Even after the October 2025 ceasefire, demolitions continued behind Israeli lines.

The BBC verified that more than 1,500 buildings were leveled in Israeli-controlled zones in the month after the October 10, 2025 ceasefire took effect, most through systematic demolition rather than combat.³⁹ Israeli soldiers have since testified to the “systematic and deliberate” flattening of structures posing no threat, describing bulldozers that “were simply destroying homes.”⁴⁰

The Killing of Journalists

To prevent the world from witnessing and reporting in real time on Israel's continuing incomprehensible atrocities, the IDF did not hide the targeting of Palestinian journalists in cold blood, deemed as “executions” by many observers. More than 200 journalists, almost all Palestinian, have been killed since October 2023. The Palestinian Journalists Syndicate counts 264, the UN counted over 260 by

December 2025, and CPJ, after a contested internal review, lists 209.⁴¹ Brown University's Watson Institute found more journalists killed in Gaza than in both World Wars, the Korean and Vietnam wars, the 1990s and 2000s wars in Yugoslavia, and the post-9/11 war in Afghanistan combined.⁴²

Israel has barred independent foreign correspondents from entering Gaza since October 7, 2023, a blackout approaching a thousand days by mid-2026,⁴³ leaving Palestinian journalists as the only witnesses, and then killing them. The Palestinian Journalists Syndicate has documented 4,127 violations against media workers, including destroying 140 journalists' homes and 187 media institutions.⁴⁴ CPJ also found Israel responsible for two-thirds of the 129 journalists killed worldwide in 2025, the deadliest year for the press in more than three decades.⁴⁵

Ravaging the West Bank

Israel's intention to annex the West Bank required, first, that law defined the land as Israeli sovereign. Once sovereignty was treated as a foregone conclusion, Palestinians became obstacles to be cleared rather than persons bearing rights. Hobbes described the result precisely: “Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice”—and in that condition, “force, and fraud, are in war the two cardinal virtues.”⁴⁶ Settlers and soldiers now operate inside that vacuum: over 1,000 attacks causing casualties or damage in five months—six a day—the highest pace on record, and 46 communities emptied entirely. Displacement, the UN Secretary-General warns, is at “levels not seen since 1967,”⁴⁷ amid what Amnesty International calls state-driven ethnic

cleansing. Annexation did not follow lawlessness. It manufactured it.

To have a real sense of the extent of Israeli soldiers' and settlers' merciless rampage in the West Bank, a few examples of various crimes against the Palestinians offer a shocking picture of what they have and continue to endure.

Extrajudicial Killing

On December 8, 2023, during a raid on al-Far'ah refugee camp, security-camera footage obtained by B'Tselem captured two short-range executions. Rami Jundob, 25, was shot and fell; a military jeep then approached and a soldier fired again, afterward filming the dying man on his phone. Jundob died the next day. Thaar Shahin, 36, who had hidden beneath a car, was shot dead from close range.⁴⁸ The footage of a soldier casually filming a man he had just shot became a searing emblem of impunity; Israel's military opened an inquiry, to no avail.

The gruesome extrajudicial killings continue unabated, revealing a collapse in moral restraint where such wanton killing barely registers in the Israeli public consciousness. In Jenin, during a raid on November 27, 2025, soldiers were filmed shooting two Palestinians at point-blank range: Yusef 'Asa'sah, 39, and al-Muntaser bel-lah 'Abdallah, 26. The footage shows the men, labeled "wanted," led from a building and surrendering—then ordered back inside to sit on the ground, where soldiers executed them despite apparently posing no threat. B'Tselem's director called it "the result of an accelerated process of dehumanization... and the complete abandonment of [Palestinian] lives," committed with full impunity.⁴⁹

On October 19, 2023, in the Nur Shams camp, 15-year-old Taha Mahamid stepped outside, holding only a cellphone, and told his sister Sara, "I won't be long." He was shot. His father, Ibrahim, 58, unable to bear 'the sight of his son bleeding on the ground,' went to him and was shot in the abdomen. Israeli forces blocked ambulances; Taha lay motionless with blood pooling around his head. "No sound, no movement... no one came to him," Sara said. Taha died in those early morning hours; Ibrahim died of his wounds four months later. HRW found neither was armed.⁵⁰

The extrajudicial killings continue with chilling regularity, revealing a hardened moral numbness. Palestinian lives, including the lives of children, are regarded as disposable rather than as lives of equal human worth.

B'Tselem's June 2026 report "Unshielded Childhood" documented 54 Palestinian children and teenagers killed by Israeli forces in the West Bank in 2025 alone, and 235 since October 7, 2023—the highest rate of child killings there since the occupation began in 1967, with roughly one in four West Bank fatalities being a minor. B'Tselem found no evidence that any of the 2025 child victims posed a threat or belonged to any armed group, documented that medical teams were delayed or blocked in nearly a quarter of cases, and noted that not a single indictment has been filed since October 2023.⁵¹

Settler Violence

The government did not merely tolerate settler violence; it commissioned it. Ministers armed militias, funded outposts, and shielded perpetrators from prosecution. Settlers torch olive

groves, sever water lines, steal livestock, and burn cars — behavior Amnesty International concludes is not the work of rogue individuals but state policy designed to accelerate annexation.⁵² The purpose is exhaustion. Make farming impossible, water inaccessible, sleep unsafe—and families leave without a single expulsion order being signed. OCHA has documented more than 190 water and sanitation structures damaged or destroyed this year, nearly always unpunished and frequently carried out under the watchful protection of Israeli soldiers. Limited access to safe and clear water has led to an increase in skin diseases and other infections, among other hazardous health conditions.⁵³ The following examples illustrate the pattern.

After settlers established the illegal Meitarim Farm outpost a kilometer away from the Palestinian village of Khirbet Zanuta, in the South Hebron Hills, they waged a relentless campaign against Zanuta's residents: burning tents and classrooms, breaking into homes, beating villagers with rifles, smashing solar panels, emptying water tanks, and pumping sewage onto farmland. Settlers destroyed water tanks and power lines and stole equipment; in one incident a soldier stood by, then fired into the air to cover the settlers' retreat.⁵⁴

In October 2023, armed settlers pressed a rifle to the chest of shepherd Masafer Yatta, kicked him in the stomach, forced him face-down, covered his head, and threatened to kill him—invoking Gaza. “Did you see what we did to the children of Gaza? We'll do the same to your children,” one told him. “When he put his rifle on my chest and hit me on my stomach... my daughters were watching and screaming,” the shepherd

recalled. Another resident of Zanuta, “Marwa,” recounted that settler Yinon Levi “broke our door and beat our children with their rifles... as we were sleeping.” Adel al-Till said: “We were the last family... We were afraid, it was terror.” Raids came alongside Israeli forces, and police ignored two Supreme Court return orders. By March 30, 2025, satellite imagery confirmed Zanuta “no longer exists.”⁵⁵

Amnesty situates these individual expulsions within a deliberate, state-backed campaign of creeping annexation: between 2023 and 2025, Israel declared roughly 25,959 dunums of Area C as “state land”—about half of all such designations since the Oslo Accords—and by April 2026 there were 363 outposts across the West Bank, 212 of them established under the current government. Herding outposts alone expanded settler control to some 746,000 dunums, about 22 percent of Area C, with Peace Now and Kerem Navot finding settlers seized 70 percent of all the land they have taken since the 1990s within just two and a half years.⁵⁶

Demolition of Houses

Israel has perfected demolition as an instrument of dispossession. A Palestinian in Area C who wants to add a room, a cistern, or a solar panel must obtain a permit that OCHA describes as “nearly impossible” to obtain — then watch bulldozers arrive to demolish the building he had no lawful way to build.⁵⁷ Where the permit regime proves too slow, land is declared a firing zone, a nature reserve, or state property, with the burden of disproving it thrown onto the families who have farmed it for generations. At least 37,135 Palestinians were displaced across the West Bank in 2025 alone — a record.⁵⁸

The horror is not merely the rubble. It is the calculated cruelty of a legal architecture built so that Palestinian shelter is always a crime and Palestinian land is always available.

One particular example says it all. Days after the Gaza ceasefire, Israel launched “Operation Iron Wall” in the West Bank on January 21, 2025, ordering, via loudspeaker-mounted drones and armed raids, the entire refugee camps of Jenin, Tulkarem, and Nur Shams emptied. Human Rights Watch found roughly 32,000 residents displaced and about 850 buildings demolished—a forcible transfer it called a war crime. Nadine G., 53, fled Nur Shams with her husband and 14-year-old daughter, walking past ruined homes as “women along the way... were all crying.”⁵⁹ Her testimony gave the report its title: “All My Dreams Have Been Erased.”

Another chilling case is when, on May 5, 2025, Civil Administration personnel, escorted by Border Police and soldiers, along with an excavator and a bulldozer, carried out the largest demolition to date in Masafer Yatta—an area featured in the Oscar-winning film “No Other Land.” In roughly two and a half hours, they demolished ten homes, leaving 49 people, including 27 children, without shelter. They also destroyed sanitation structures, kitchens, 11 water tanks, 5 cisterns, sheep pens, and the solar power network. Families received tents and remained amid the rubble of their community.⁶⁰

For framing, OCHA reports that more than 1,700 Palestinians were displaced by “lack-of-permit” demolitions in 2025 alone in Area C and East Jerusalem—and that Operation Iron Wall produced “the longest and largest displacement crisis in the West Bank since 1967,” with at least

31,919 refugees driven from Jenin, Tulkarem, and Nur Shams camps.⁶¹ MSF documented that in Masafer Yatta's communities, four mass demolitions since February 2025 reduced more than 85 percent of homes and shelters to rubble, forcing families to move into caves.⁶²

Deadly Restriction of Movement

The movement of Palestinians from one checkpoint to the next within the West Bank itself has been criminalized. OCHA counted 925 checkpoints, gates, and earth mounds across the West Bank—the most in twenty years, restricting 3.4 million Palestinians.⁶³ A two-mile journey to a clinic can consume half a day; a mother seeking her child's medicine may not arrive at all, in a territory where a third of essential medicines are out of stock.⁶⁴ The purpose is not security. It is attrition—to make ordinary life so exhausting that staying becomes unbearable.

Without providing a reason, on March 2, 2025, Israel sealed all crossings, halting even baby formula and medications for over two and a half months. This was not an aberration; Israel frequently seals all crossings, offering various unfounded pretexts, such as suspicious terrorist infiltration or smuggling of drugs. The WHO called it a “deliberate withholding of humanitarian aid.”⁶⁵ Children died first: four-month-old Janat succumbed on May 4 before her evacuation could be arranged; five-month-old Zeinab Abu Halib died in her mother's arms *en route* to the hospital in July.⁶⁶ At Gaza City's Patients' Friends Hospital, five malnourished children—aged four months to four-and-a-half years—died over four days because the treatments to save them had run out under the blockade.⁶⁷

Night Raids

The night raid is the occupation's signature ritual. Soldiers arrive at two in the morning — not pursuing a suspect, often with no name at all — kick in doors, drag children from their beds, blindfold and cuff them before their parents, then take a boy away for weeks. The purpose is terror administered for its own sake. In his book, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche named the impulse plainly: “To see others suffer does one good, to make others suffer even more” — an “ancient, mighty, human, all-too-human principle.” Cruelty here is not a byproduct. It is the reward.

There are an endless number of night raids that can be cited here; only a couple are shown to demonstrate the cruelty of the Israeli occupying authority. Shortly after 8 p.m. on September 3, 2021, in Hebron's Tel Rumeida neighborhood in Hebron, roughly eight Israeli soldiers burst into the home of the extended Da'na family and pulled thirteen children—ranging from kindergarten age to elementary school—out of their beds. The soldiers herded the terrified, sobbing children onto a balcony and photographed them one by one; a soldier told the crying, trembling children to “say cheese” as he took their pictures.⁶⁸ Photographing minors in this manner is illegal under Israeli military regulations, and no arrests were made—the raid served no purpose but to intimidate. Families whose children have been similarly or worse treated by Israeli soldiers described children who afterward wet their beds, refused to sleep alone, and woke screaming from nightmares.⁶⁹

Another chilling case happened at 3:30 a.m. on October 12, 2022, when roughly eight Israeli

soldiers broke down the front door of a Palestinian home with a sledgehammer and stormed into the bedroom of a 13-year-old boy. According to his mother's testimony, a soldier kicked the boy as he lay in bed and the terrified child passed out; when the family rushed toward him, a soldier aimed his weapon at them. The mother begged to retrieve her two-month-old baby crying in a nearby crib and was refused permission. Her son was blindfolded, handcuffed, and taken away into the dark. “It was a hellish night I will never forget,” she said—the youngest children were left shaking and inconsolable.⁷⁰

These are not isolated aberrations but the machinery of a system. Israeli forces arbitrarily detain an estimated 500 to 1,000 Palestinian children every year, the overwhelming majority seized from their beds in terrifying pre-dawn raids—Save the Children found that 65 percent of detained children were taken between midnight and dawn, and that afterward 73 percent suffered insomnia and 53 percent recurring nightmares.⁷¹

B'Tselem, documenting four nighttime home invasions in Hebron in May-June 2023 alone, described a routine founded on “violence, collective punishment and systematic looting”—entire families roused at gunpoint, homes ransacked, and adults hauled into administrative detention without charge, a number that has quadrupled since 2023.⁷² The purpose is a permanent atmosphere of dread: no family knows which night the soldiers will come for their children.

Conclusion

The Gaza war should never have happened. It was, in effect,

delivered by negligence — Netanyahu's negligence above all.

The warning signs were there. Israeli intelligence knew Hamas was drilling for a large-scale operation. Egypt's intelligence chief, Gen. Abbas Kamel, reportedly phoned Netanyahu roughly ten days before the attack to warn that Hamas was preparing “something big,” even “a terrible operation”—a warning the prime minister's office flatly denies receiving.⁷³ Israeli observers along the fence flagged suspicious activity in Gaza. And yet two days before October 7, two companies from the IDF's Commando Brigade were pulled off the Gaza perimeter and sent to Huwara in the West Bank.⁷⁴

All of it was ignored, because Netanyahu had convinced himself Hamas was neither willing nor able to mount an attack of that scale. He acted on that conviction: for years he permitted the transfer of Qatari cash — tens of millions of dollars a month, roughly a billion over time — into Gaza, while Israeli intelligence watched Hamas dig hundreds of miles of tunnels and manufacture and procure weapons. A substantial share of that money went into rebuilding Hamas's military, in plain sight.

The logic was never a secret. At a Likud faction meeting in March 2019, Netanyahu reportedly told his own MKs: “Anyone who wants to thwart the establishment of a Palestinian state has to support bolstering Hamas and transferring money to Hamas... This is part of our strategy — to isolate the Palestinians in Gaza from the Palestinians in the West Bank.”⁷⁵ He now denies saying it, calling it a misquote⁷⁶ — but the policy he pursued said it for him. Divide and rule.

Taken together, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Netanyahu invited the catastrophe he failed to prevent, or, I dare say, chose not to prevent. What has followed confirms the design: a government openly intent on annexing at least northern Gaza, and systematically entertaining the ethnic cleansing of the territory. That is the tragedy in summary. The question now is where Israel goes from here.

A Mother's Grief Knows No Nation

Every Israeli mother should ask herself, in the privacy of her own heart, the question she has been taught never to ask: if my son were killed, would I mourn my child any more or less than a Palestinian mother mourn her own child?

Does grief check a passport before it breaks a heart? The tears are the same. The silence in the house is the same. The crib and the grave are the same. A mother's love knows no border, no flag, no faith — and neither, in the end, does a mother's unbearable loss. In Gaza, tens of thousands of mothers have learned this. Israel taught them.

Now dare to imagine it were you. Your family on the same land for generation upon generation — your grandfather's olive trees, your children's school, the graves of your dead in soil your name is written into. Then strangers arrive, armed, and tear you from all of it, declaring the land was theirs by a claim two thousand years old. Would you call that justice? Or would you call it what it is — the theft of a home, and of a history?

You know the answer. You have simply agreed not to say it aloud.

A Liability, Not an Asset

Israel was meant to be world Jewry's shield. It has become its exposure. Its crimes against humanity have fed a surging tide of antisemitism, and Jews from Melbourne to Montreal now pay for atrocities they never chose and openly abhor — condemned by association, defenseless by proxy.

And the young are walking away from supporting Israel. Not out of ignorance, but out of clarity: they recoil from a state that no longer reflects a single value they were raised on, and they will not spend their lives defending the indefensible. Israel has taken the deepest source of Jewish pride—the state itself—and turned it into a source of Jewish shame. There is no sanction, no boycott, no resolution that could inflict the wound Israel inflicted on itself and on the Jews around the world.

When Will the Israeli Public Awaken?

Nearly three years have passed since October 7, 2023, and its horrific consequences—and still the Israeli public remains numb. Numb, and certain: the Palestinians are an existential threat, full stop. It is a conclusion the government feeds them daily, and one they swallow whole, because the alternative requires thinking.

So, the question must be put plainly: what will it take to wake Israelis to reality?

The reality is not complicated. The Palestinians exist. They existed before the war, they exist after it, and they will exist long after Netanyahu and his coalition are gone. They have nowhere else to go — and no amount of denial, demolition, or displacement will conjure a country

willing to take them. Between the river and the sea, more than seven million Palestinians live intermingled with Israeli society, in Jerusalem, in the West Bank, in Gaza, and inside Israel itself. They are not a demographic problem to be managed. They are a people, and they are permanent.

Denying them their rights will not end the conflict; it will extend it by decades, perhaps generations. Creeping annexation and ethnic cleansing may redraw a map, but they cannot erase a nation. Every dunam seized, every home razed, every child raised under occupation is another year added to a war Israel insists it is winning, but will never win.

This is the illusion that must break. Not because the world demands it, but because Israel's own survival depends on it. A state that can conceive of no future beyond permanent domination of another people has already surrendered the one thing it cannot afford to lose — the moral premise on which it was founded.

A Betrayal of Its Own Purpose

Israel has betrayed the very reason it was created. A sanctuary born of unspeakable suffering has become an engine of it. A people who swore never again is doing to another people what was done to them — not in the same measure, but in the same spirit of a nation, a people, deemed disposable.

This will not be repaired in a decade, or in a generation. It will not be repaired at all unless Israel recognizes the Palestinians' right to a state of their own and becomes a constructive force in its region rather than the hand blamed for stoking its wars.

A nation founded to end persecution cannot survive as its author. Its redemption rests on justice; without it, there is no redemption at all.

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