

Emergency Policy Snapshot November 2023

Israel's War on Gaza

What's the issue?

A massive onslaught is underway against Palestinians in Gaza. Since October 7, more than 14,000 Palestinians have been killed, including at least 5,840 children and 3,550 women, and approximately 33,000 have been injured, according to the Ministry of Health in Gaza. More than 1.6 million people have been internally displaced, with some 671,000 sheltering in 150 UNRWA facilities.

Many human rights organisations, UN experts and 800 scholars of genocide and international law have raised the alarm that what Israel's actions have gone beyond war crimes to potentially constitute the crime of genocide, defined as the "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group". Accompanying Israel's criminal action have been multiple public statements by Israeli officials indicating genocidal intent, such as the Israel's Minister of Defence's promise to "eliminate everything" in Gaza or Israel's President Isaac Herzog: "It's an entire nation out there that is responsible. This rhetoric about civilians not aware, not involved – it's not true."

Palestinians in Gaza, the majority of whom are refugees displaced in the mass ethnic cleansing of 1948 (the Nakba), are today experiencing what they describe as a **new Nakba**. On October 12, Israel issued an impossible ultimatum to the 1.2 million Palestinians living in northern Gaza to evacuate. Many Palestinians refused to leave their homes, aware of Israel's longstanding policy of expelling Palestinians under the fog of war and preventing them from returning. Many, therefore, have been determined to stay, preferring to face death over a second expulsion as Israel prepares to raze the civic, economic, social, and cultural heart of Gaza to the ground. Now under a tightened siege, without access to water, electricity, fuel or food, Palestinians in Gaza are bombed from air, land, and sea. Complete neighbourhoods are flattened; schools, universities, medical facilities are damaged or destroyed.

For 75 years Israel has continually advanced its settler colonial project - occupying more and more Palestinian land and dispossessing more and more Palestinian people under a regime of apartheid. Israel is now committing a genocidal campaign in Gaza with impunity, against a civilian population, half of whom are children.

While the announcement of a 4-day temporary truce due to begin on Friday 24th offers the hope of urgently needed relief with the promise of a pause in Israeli military attacks and some additional humanitarian aid. However, Benjamin Netanyahu has committed to continuing the war "until complete victory" after the truce expires. Without international pressure for a permanent ceasefire, Israel will be free to continue its genocidal war against the Palestinian people.

What's the UK position?

- The UK government and opposition have given Israel a diplomatic green light to act with impunity. Both have endorsed Israel's actions, which amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity by invoking the right of Israel to self-defence to justify Israeli military actions that have resulted in multiple atrocities. Moreover, as the UN [Special Rapporteur](#) on the occupied Palestinian territories and other legal experts have pointed out, "Israel cannot claim self-defence against a threat that emanates from the territory it occupies".
- By providing military, political and economic support to Israel at this time, the UK government with the support of the Opposition has aided and abetted the war crimes Israel is committing. This may mean individual UK officials are criminally liable for breaches of international law.
- The UK has been isolated diplomatically, failing to support international initiatives to halt Israel's military aggression. On October 27, the UK abstained on a UN General Assembly resolution passed by an overwhelming majority of member states calling for an "immediate, durable and sustained humanitarian truce leading to a cessation of hostilities". At the UN Security Council on 15th November, the UK abstained on a resolution passed by 12 out of 15 members, calling for an "urgent and extended humanitarian pauses and corridors" in Gaza for "a sufficient number of days" to allow full, rapid, safe and unhindered access for UN agencies and partners.
- The UK government has taken steps to further shrink civil society space by promoting support for Israel and exacerbating attacks on civil liberties of Palestinians in the UK and other citizens expressing support for Palestinian rights. UK government buildings have been required to fly the Israeli flag. The former Home Secretary, Suella Braverman has suggested that waving the Palestinian flag may be a criminal offence, a statement echoed by the Leader of the Opposition, Keir Starmer. Both the Cabinet Secretary and the Education Secretary have also made [interventions](#) that have sought to curtail the autonomy of academic institutions and freedom of expression in higher education.

Why does it matter?

- The **inalienable rights of the Palestinian people** are enshrined in decades of international law and United Nations General Assembly and Security Council resolutions. The failure to fulfil these rights is the root cause of the conflict.
- The UK is a **signatory to the Geneva Conventions**, which requires states to 'respect and ensure respect for' the conventions, and the 1948 **Convention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide**. **All states have a duty to prevent genocide**.
- International humanitarian law **prohibits forcible transfer, and the collective punishment of populations**, which includes siege, the harming of civilians and destruction of civilian infrastructure.

- The **equal rights of Palestinians in the UK to participate in public life** are guaranteed by national human rights legislation but Palestinians and those who support their rights are facing efforts to silence and exclude them.
- The UK government has demonstrated its ability to use international mechanisms to defend international law when it has the **political will**, as in the case of Ukraine, but in the case of Israel it is giving it carte blanche to commit crimes - even sending naval vessels to the region.

What can British policymakers do?

1. **Take immediate action to fulfil their duties under international law to ensure the protection of an occupied people as they face an unfolding genocide.** The UK must do everything reasonably in its power to prevent the commission of acts that violate international law, including the crime of genocide. It can do this by demanding an **immediate ceasefire**, lifting of the siege to restore electricity, fuel, water, food; and unimpeded humanitarian access in order to protect Palestinian lives, in line with international law.
2. **Suspend UK diplomatic and military support to Israel** as it perpetuates war crimes and crimes against humanity to end UK complicity in these atrocities.
3. **Hold Israel to account under international law**, including by supporting the International Criminal Court in investigations of war crimes and ensure that it is supported to issue arrest warrants urgently to bring all those charged to justice.
4. Ensure that public bodies uphold their legal responsibilities to **protect equal participation in democratic and civic space**, by defending the rights of Palestinians in Britain and those who stand with the Palestinian people in a spirit of solidarity and common humanity.

Where can I learn more?

- Institute for Palestine Studies: *Genocide in Gaza*: <https://www.palestine-studies.org/>
- Medical Aid for Palestinians: <https://www.map.org.uk/>
- Visualising Palestine: <https://visualizingpalestine.org/visuals/gaza-closure>
- Al Jazeera: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/14/a-guide-to-the-gaza-strip>
- UNRWA: <https://www.unrwa.org/gaza-emergency>

The British Palestinian Committee is an independent organisation working to ensure that British Palestinian perspectives are integral to public discourse and policy making on Palestine.

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