

The Israeli War on Gaza from a Comparative Genocide Studies Perspective

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The Israeli war on Gaza has resulted in very heavy civilian casualties. Some people have called the war “horrific,” the “deadliest,” or a “humanitarian catastrophe-tsunami.” Others claim that it is a genocide. In order to grasp the extent of the war’s brutality, this article compared it with three cases that are recognized as genocides either by international institutions or Western authorities: the Herero and Nama massacre (1904–5), the Armenian deportation (1915–6), and the fall of Srebrenica (1995). The analysis found many common aspects among the four cases. The scale of violence of the recent Israeli war has already exceeded the initial stages of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and is becoming an immense ethnic cleansing comparable with the Armenian case. In light of the bellicose discriminatory discourses of the Israeli leaders, systematic destruction of civilian targets, forced starvation, and rapidly deteriorating hygiene conditions in Gaza, there are ample grounds to believe that the war on Gaza will develop into a full-fledged genocide if unchecked.

The Israeli military campaign against the Gaza Strip, following the October 7 attacks, has claimed (at the time of writing of this article) more than 26,000 Palestinian lives, mostly women and children. Experts have described the campaign in the following terms: “horrific” (AA 2023b), “outpacing any other conflicts” (Axios 2023), “unparalleled and unprecedented” (UN 2023d), “the most destructive” (CBC 2023), the “deadliest in the 21st century” (WP 2023), and “a perfect kind of humanitarian catastrophe-tsunami” (FT 2023). Some Muslim and Latin American leaders have even called it a “genocide.”¹ Probably one of the harshest denouncers is Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has not only repeatedly used the G-word but even described Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu as no less evil than Adolf Hitler (AA 2023d). The frequent use of the G-word, however, does not seem effective to deter the Israelis from acting more brutally against the Gazans.

There is another concern: The political instrumentalization of the word “genocide” risks

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¹ Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi accused the campaign as being “genocide” against Palestinians (Reuters 2023). Former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, posted on X on December 5, 2023: “What we are seeing is an attempt by the Israelis to commit genocide on the Palestinians.” Ramzan Kadyrov, President of Chechnya, commented that “What is happening in the Gaza Strip is clear evidence of the genocide of Palestinian Muslims” (Caucasus Watch 2023). Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro called on the world to “react and say no to the genocide against the people of Gaza.” Cuban President Miguel Diaz Canel accused the “Zionist barbarism” for “the genocide that is being perpetrated against the Palestinians.” Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva referred to “a genocide that led to the killing of [thousands of] children who had nothing to do with this war.” The Minister of the Presidency, Maria Nela Prada of Bolivia, condemned the Israeli campaign of “genocide unfolding inside the Gaza Strip” (Cradle 2023).

the banalization of the term and makes obsolete the notion as the crime of crimes. In exchange for Erdoğan's slander, for example, Netanyahu replied that "Erdogan, who is committing genocide against the Kurds, is the last person who can preach morality to us" (GI 2023k). For Netanyahu, it is Hamas who are committing a genocide, and "Hamas are the new Nazis" (TI 2023a). Therefore, Netanyahu asserted that the Israeli military is "the most moral army in the world," fighting to eliminate "the most abhorrent and brutal terrorist organization in the world" (GI 2023k). Some Western leaders echoed his views. For instance, Ursula von der Leyen, head of the European Committee, described the October 7 attacks as "the most heinous assault against Jews since the Holocaust" (European Commission 2023). John Kirby, US National Security Council spokesperson, when asked by a journalist about his response to those who called the US President "Genocide Joe," remarked that "What Hamas wants is genocide ... Israel is trying to defend itself against a genocidal terrorist threat ... If we are going to start using that word [genocide], fine, let's use it appropriately" (JP 2023). The proposal for an appropriate use of the term sounds nice, but one may wonder if Kirby's and Netanyahu's use of the word is appropriate?

I. What is a genocide?

According to the International Criminal Court (ICC), a genocide is a crime committed with the specific intent to destroy in whole or in part a "national, ethnic, racial or religious group" by killing its members or by "causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; or forcibly transferring children of the group to another group" (ICC). The definition is rather vague; therefore, it is necessary to establish eligible criteria based on concrete examples. Since it started in 2002, however, ICC has filed only one person for genocide, Omar Bashir, former Sudanese President, and the case remains in the pre-trial stage. The other cases judged as genocides by international judicial organizations are those concerning the massacre in Rwanda in 1994 and the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992–5. Thus, to date, we have very few examples of genocide confirmed as such by international law courts. Looking back in history, however, there are many cases that are believed to be applicable to the ICC rulings. The widest accepted case is the Holocaust—the Nazi persecution of European Jews before and during WWII. The 1930s–40s saw several other atrocities on a genocidal scale, such as "Holodomor" (1932–3), the Rape of Nanking (1937), the Serb massacre by the Independent State of Croatia (1941–5), the "Devil's satiety" of the Japanese 731 unit (1940–5), and the mass deportation of the Crimean Tatars, the Chechens, and the Ingush by the Stalin regime (1944–8). Later, the Khmer Rouge atrocities in Cambodia (1975–9), the elimination of the East Timorese (1974–99) and the Guatemalan Mayans (1962–96), and the Sabra and Shatila massacre of the Palestinian refugees (1982) are often classified as genocides.

Just mentioning a handful of cases, we can notice that these incidents are grossly dissimilar, taking place in different socio-political contexts, with a variety of scale and quite diverse methods of atrocities. This testifies that every genocide is unique in essence. Yet those diversities may perplex the people who are looking for a simple answer or a certain reference point. However, of what use is a reference point for genocide and for gauging the degree of genocidalness of respective cases? Does it make sense to say that one case is more genocidal than the other? Or is it morally acceptable to say that "It's

acceptable, because this case is less genocidal than that”? Of course not. Instead, it is our moral duty to condemn and prevent any atrocity against anyone. Having said that, however, the discussion does not exclude any attempts for comparison. Quite the contrary. Indeed, one cannot grasp the nature of what is taking place in front of his/her eyes, without taking into consideration similar incidents from the past. The importance of comparative genocide studies lies in this context. The comparison of past genocidal incidents enriches our knowledge of human atrocities and helps us find the way to prevent them from recurring.

What will be the starting point? Before starting our discussion, it is prudent to define the notion of comparison. A comparison is an act of taking up different things to find similarities and dissimilarities among them. This is quite different thing from an equation which considers one thing to be the same as another. To compare a past genocide with another does not mean equating them. Unfortunately, there is a dominant trend for this type of confusion in a wide circle of intellectual societies. The ungrounded reproach against Masha Gessen for her essay on the Holocaust is one of the latest examples of the confusion. Gessen, a well-known Russian-American journalist of Jewish origin, who had been awarded the German *Hannah Arendt Award for Political Thought*, was treated with displeasure by the two sponsors of the prize, the Heinrich Boll Foundation and the City of Bremen, because she compared the Warsaw Ghetto with the Israeli policy concerning the Gaza Strip (Gessen 2023). Tarik Cyril Amar criticizes the “extremely aggressive lobbies in the West” who set the rules that “comparing the Holocaust with anything is absolutely verboten” (RT 2023). His alarm is especially pertinent, as we are witnessing such people as Erdoğan preaching about what democracy is, based on the assumption that the West has given Netanyahu a free hand in Gaza, because “The slightest criticism [of Israel] is suppressed by attaching [to it] the label of antisemitism, and is considered a crime” (AA 2023d).

Apart from such emotional reactions, there are at least two reasons that make it better to avoid a comparison with the Holocaust. First, the Nazi policy of exterminating European Jews was a very complex phenomenon that had several different phases and dimensions. In a way, one can say it was a set of genocidal incidents, albeit committed by a single body politic. Second, the Holocaust was exceptionally immense and dwarfs all the other atrocities ever committed in human history. It was the genocide of genocides. This very fact, however, makes it unsuitable to be a “model case,” with the attendant risk of saying that no other incidents are genocide because they are less atrocious than the Holocaust. To properly assess the Israeli campaign in Gaza, it is necessary to find other reference points. To this end, the author takes up the following three cases: the German colonial massacre of the Herero and Namaqua people in Namibia (1904–5), the Armenian deportation by the Ottoman government during WWI, and the Serb atrocities against Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s. There are many other (possibly more suitable) cases for comparison, but the author picks up the three on the basis that they are relatively well-documented studies and widely, if not unanimously, accepted as cases of genocide.

Before entering into a close comparison among the four cases, it may be useful to survey the general course of events of the respective cases and to highlight the essence of their brutalities.

II. Israeli military operations in Gaza

The Gaza Strip was a part of the Ottoman administrative unit, the Kudüs Sancağı (Jerusalem district) or Filistin (Palestine). During the Ottoman rule, Muslim Arabs and Christian Arabs comprised the overwhelming majority (more than 90% at the beginning of the 20th century). After WWI, Palestine became a British mandate of the League of Nations, and many European Jews immigrated to Palestine. Their share increased from 12% in 1922 to 31% in 1947 (Hagopian & Zahlan 1974). In the wake of WWII, the United Nations proposed the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. As Arab countries rejected the plan, the first Arab–Israeli war broke out in 1948. The victorious Israel annexed 77% of the territory, and more than 700,000 Palestinians were forced to flee their homes. Many of them took shelter in Gaza. After the 1967 war, Israel took possession of the Strip and put the Palestinians under its occupational regime. As a result, the Gazans were to endure constant oppression, economic exploitation, and confinement. In 1987, Gaza Palestinians started the First Intifada. The protest continued until the early 1990s and eventually gave rise to the Oslo Accords, which were signed in 1993 (King 2007). However, as Israel did not fulfill its promise of the two-state solution, the Second Intifada broke out in 2000. Weary of the strenuous mass resistance, Israel unilaterally announced the withdrawal of its military and settlers, leaving Gaza for the Palestine Authorities in 2005. The next year, Hamas won the elections and subsequently took control of Gaza. In response, Israel introduced a heavy blockade. During the long siege, restrictions were tightened on the movement of people and goods, making life unbearable—families were separated, medical and educational services were degraded, the economy slumped, and poverty and unemployment were perpetuated (Vox 2023). The UN chief, Antonio Guterres, pointed out that “The Palestinian people have been subjected to 56 years of suffocating occupation. They have seen their land steadily devoured by settlements and plagued by violence; their economy stifled; their people displaced and their homes demolished” (UN 2023g). Additionally, Israeli troops killed more than 3,000 Palestinian civilians in the four consecutive invasions (2008–09, 2012, 2014, and 2021). According to Human Rights Watch, the Israeli occupation of Gaza was characterized by unlawful killings, forced displacement, abusive detention, unjustified confinement, and other discriminatory policies—major violations of international human rights and humanitarian law (IHRW 2016). Amnesty International has described these situations as “apartheid” (AI 2022). It is prudent to say that the Israeli policies mentioned are the background to the October 7 incidents.

Let us take a brief look at the Israeli military operations in Gaza that have started since October 7, 2023. At 6:30 a.m. local time, Palestinian militants launched massive attacks against the border posts manned by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). After neutralizing military bases, the Palestinian militants infiltrated Israel, killing 375 IDF soldiers and 764 civilians, and took some 248 persons hostage. Although the main force was the al-Qassam Brigades, a military wing of Hamas, the raid was in fact a joint operation of six different groups, including Communist DFLP (Flashpoint 2023). Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu tweeted a state of war, and his government formally declared war against Hamas the next day, mobilizing 300,000 reservists with the aim to “eliminate Hamas.” As part of their tactics, Israel started a siege against Gaza. On October 9, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant announced a total blockade of the Strip, and Israeli authorities began cutting electricity and stopping the entry of food and fuel. As a result, the sole power plant in Gaza stopped its operations on October 11. The Israeli government reiterated that Gaza would

not receive water, fuel, or electricity so long as the hostages were not freed. On October 15, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) announced that drinking water was running out in Gaza. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who visited the Rafah Crossing on October 20, stated that “Two million people are suffering enormously, have no water, no food, no medicine, no fuel, under fire, that needs everything to survive” (UN 2023b). Subsequently, human aid was allowed to enter Gaza, but the amount was far from adequate. On December 7, a UN representative declared its aid program no longer functioning (UN OCHA 2023c), and civic order began to “break down” (Guardian 2023). As a result, many Gazans began to starve. According to a UN report on December 21, over 570,000 people were starving (France 24 2023). The UN aid chief warned of a serious risk of starvation and famine, saying that “Half the people in northern Gaza and more than one third of displaced people in the south are simply starving” (UN 2023f). Furthermore, the abrupt breakout of a large number of refugees seriously deteriorated the sanitary conditions in the Strip. The UN rights chief Volker Türk remarked on December 28 that “The lack of food and basic essentials as well as poor hygiene are making the already dire living conditions of displaced people even worse and fueling disease.” Indeed, as the Israelis had inflicted serious damage on hospitals, medical service was unavailable for most Gazans. The UN emergency relief coordinator Martin Griffiths warned that “Gaza is a public health disaster in the making” (UN 2023h).

In the meantime, the Israelis intensified military operation. The Israeli Air Force (IAF) has been conducting massive air strikes over Gaza since October 7, destroying a large number of residential buildings, including schools, universities, and refugee camps. More than 70% of Gazan homes had been destroyed by the end of 2023 (Aljazeera 2023d). The oldest church (the Greek Orthodox St. Prophyrius Church) and mosque (the Great Omari Mosque) in Gaza were reduced to rubble. The bombing resulted in a massive amount of civilian victims. In early December, the UN aid chief described the civilian casualties of IDF operations thus: “More than 17,000 Palestinians have reportedly been killed since the start of Israel’s military operations, including over 4,000 women and 7,000 children. Tens of thousands are reported to have been injured, and many are missing, presumably under the rubble” (UN 2023f). To make things worse, the IDF targeted many shelters for the displaced people. By December 5, 2023, at least 222 IDPs sheltering in UNRWA camps had been killed (UN OCHA 2023b). These acts have been condemned as intentional killing of civilians. For instance, Human Rights Watch denounced IAF for having used white phosphorus against civilian targets (HRW 2023). Amnesty International claimed to have enough documentation attesting to the IDF’s intentional massacre of civilians (AI 2023). Even US President Joe Biden conceded that Israel had been carrying out “indiscriminate bombing” (AP 2023). Also, an IDF official, after killing 68 people in the Maghazi camp, admitted that the type of munition did not match the nature of the attack, causing extensive collateral damage that could have been avoided (TI 2023g).

The IDF started a large-scale ground operation on October 28. As the troops advanced into dense, urban neighborhoods, the civilian casualties rose rapidly. The IDF had divided the Strip into two by November 5 and encircled its northern half with a total communications outage (Aljazeera 2023b). Pressured by the US and international appeals for a brief pause to get aid to desperate civilians, Israel accepted a temporary ceasefire. The IDF withdrew from Gaza City without achieving any of its initial objectives on November 24. During this short interlude, the humanitarian situation in Gaza did not improve at all. The second ground operation started on December 1. The IDF announced that it would

expand ground operations into all of Gaza, including the southern enclaves that had previously been designated as “safe zones.” During the land operation, Israeli soldiers committed a variety of atrocities, including storming several hospitals, arresting many medical staff, and randomly shooting at and killing many civilians, who were apparently noncombatants. For example, a sniper massacred a Christian mother and daughter sheltering at the Holy Family Catholic Church (TI 2023h). The IDF even executed three of their own soldiers who had taken hostages. The hostages somehow escaped and were approaching for help, half naked and with a white flag, on December 15. Two were killed on the spot, and the third took shelter in a nearby building. A soldier chased this third man and shot him dead (TI 2023i). The IDF said that this was a mistake, but the suspicion of willful killing increased when the IDF disclosed that 18 troops were dead due to “mistaken identification” (TI 2024b). There are also suspicions of random roundups of civilians and hostage-taking. For instance, the IDF announced that they had taken captive more than 1,000 “ Hamas members ” on December 17. Their allegation was rebutted by Euro-Med Monitor, who accused the Israeli army of severe human rights abuse against the detained Palestinian civilians (EMHRM 2023). Despite these accusations, the IDF expanded its scope of operation, making the daily death toll well exceed the level of 250 deaths toward the end of 2023.

The Israeli operation has also brought about large-scale displacement. On October 13, the IDF warned Palestinians to leave northern Gaza within 24 hours on the pretext that the area would be a battlefield. By October 20, about 1.4 million people had been internally displaced, and more than 544,000 had taken shelter in a total of 147 UNRWA improvised facilities (UN OCHA 2023a). As the second land operation started, the number of IDPs grew. On December 3, the UN human rights chief said the following: “As a result of Israel’s conduct of hostilities and its orders for people to leave the north and parts of the south, hundreds of thousands are being confined into ever smaller areas in southern Gaza without proper sanitation, access to sufficient food, water and health supplies, even as bombs rain down around them. There is no safe place in Gaza” (UN 2023e). UNRWA confirmed that 85% of the population had been displaced by December 8.

Many experts have expressed their deep concern that these atrocities by the Israeli army amount to war crimes. As for the siege and blockade of the Strip, the UN human rights chief expressed “grave concerns around willful killing of civilians, firing of indiscriminate rockets, indiscriminate attacks using explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas, forms of collective punishment, obstruction of humanitarian aid, and – all forbidden under international law” (UN 2023e). Oxfam’s Regional Middle East Director accused Israel of using starvation as a weapon of war (Oxfam 2023). As for the massive displacement, Antonio Guterres mentioned that people in Gaza were “being told to move like human pinballs – ricocheting between ever-smaller slivers of the south, without any of the basics for survival” and denounced the increasing pressure for mass displacement across the border into Egypt (UN 2023f). Egyptian authorities shared the same concern and warned Israel not to push Palestinians into its territory. The Palestine Permanent Observer described these pressures as ethnic cleansing. He even claimed that “wholesale slaughter of innocent civilians, destruction of life-sustaining infrastructure, intentional starvation, and displacement of Palestinians from their land with no prospect of returning” attested to “Israel’s overt intention to destroy the Palestinian people” (UN 2023c). South Africa, for its part, filed a case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on December 29, 2023, accusing Israel of committing an act of genocide (ICJ 2023). Subsequently, the ICJ’s

preliminary ruling confirmed that “the right of the Palestinians in Gaza to be protected from acts of genocide [of Israel]” is “plausible” (ICJ 2024:19).

Discourses of Israeli Leadership

Since the hostilities broke out, the Israeli leadership has made clear their war aims: “The first goal is the elimination of Hamas. The second goal is returning all of our hostages. The third goal is to ensure that after Hamas is eliminated, the Gaza Strip does not go back to being a threat to the State of Israel, to any part of the State of Israel” (GI 2023i). However, they insist that these aims are necessary for national security and are therefore defensive measures. They repeatedly underscored the defensive nature of their military operations. Netanyahu took the October 7 attacks not only as a provocation but also as an undeclared war by Hamas, saying that “Hamas invaded Israeli territory and murdered innocent citizens, including children and the elderly. Hamas has started a brutal and evil war.” For him, the military actions of the IDF were not reprisals but self-defense: “We defend the right of Israel existing, of defending itself [and its] security for its people” (GI 2023e). For Netanyahu, the grand operation was a part of the defensive measures, “our second war of independence” (GI 2023f), and “They [the IDF soldiers] are defending our home” (GI 2023h).

The Israeli leadership, however, has articulated that their “defensive” measures have no limit. On October 7, Netanyahu made it clear that he would destroy the Gaza Strip and ordered its entire population to “evacuate.” He also said that “All of the places which Hamas is deployed, hiding and operating in, that wicked city, we will turn them into rubble. I say to the residents of Gaza: Leave now because we will operate forcefully everywhere” (GI 2023a). Two days later, Yoav Gallant announced, “We are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly” (TI 2023d), and the next day, he reiterated that “Gaza will never return to what it was” (TI 2023b). The same day, Ghassan Alian, the head of Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), uploaded a video statement in which he said as follows: “The residents of Gaza are celebrating [Hamas]. Human animals must be treated as such [...] You wanted hell, you will get hell” (TI 2023c). Those remarks suggest that the Israeli leadership had conceived the idea to impose inhumane conditions for the entire population in Gaza. If so, this can amount to a collective punishment, prohibited by Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention and Article 4 of the Additional Protocol II. This suspicion grew when Israeli President Isaac Herzog made it clear that Israel was not distinguishing between militants and civilians in Gaza by saying, “It’s an entire nation out there that is responsible. It’s not true: this rhetoric about civilians not aware not involved. It’s absolutely not true.” (ITV 2023). Israeli Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu echoed Herzog by saying, “There is no such thing as uninvolved civilians in Gaza” (TI 2023e).

Subsequently, Netanyahu changed his tone slightly and called civilians “to go south to safe zones” (GI 2023c). However, when the IDF started bombing southern Gaza in December, the “safe zone” effectively disappeared. This action suggests that the Israeli leadership intends to eliminate all of the Palestinians from Gaza. There are many remarks that support this assumption. For instance, on November 5, Eliyahu was reported as saying that “They [the Palestinians] can go to Ireland or deserts, [but] the monsters in Gaza should find a solution by themselves” (TI 2023e). Two Knesset members, Danny Danon, former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, and Ram Ben-Barak, former deputy director of the intelligence agency Mossad, published an article in *The Wall Street Journal* on

November 13, 2023 in which they called for “countries around the world to accept limited numbers of Gazan families who have expressed a desire to relocate” (WSJ 2023). The next day, Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich posted on Facebook, “I welcome the initiative of members of Knesset Ram Ben-Barak and Danny Danon on the voluntary immigration of Gaza Arabs to the countries of the world. This is the right humanitarian solution for the residents of Gaza and the entire region” (Aljazeera 2023c). Likud Intelligence Minister Gila Gamliel supported the plan by saying that “The international community should promote the voluntary resettlement of Palestinians in Gaza, for humanitarian reasons” (TI 2023f). Subsequently, the “voluntary resettlement” of the Palestinians has become a key agenda of the Netanyahu government. The Israeli prime minister discussed the “voluntary migration” during a Likud party meeting on December 25, 2023 and was reported as saying, “Our problem is the countries that are willing to absorb [the Palestinians], and we are working on it” (Aljazeera 2023a). The National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir and Finance Minister Smotrich proposed the deportation of Palestinians as a prerequisite for securing stability during the respective party faction meetings on January 1, 2024. Gvir told members of his far-right Otzma Yehudit party that the war had presented an “opportunity to concentrate on encouraging the migration of the residents of Gaza” and called such a policy “a correct, just, moral and humane solution.” Smotrich, on his part, told members of his Religious Zionism party that the “correct solution” to the conflict was “to encourage the voluntary migration of Gaza’s residents to countries that will agree to take in the refugees” (TI 2024a). On January 3, 2024, *The Times of Israel* reported that the government had secretly contacted Congolese authorities to this end (TI 2024c). In light of the ongoing Israeli wanton destruction of civilian targets, there are ample grounds to believe that the Israeli authorities are mulling over ethnic cleansing of Gazans.

No matter whether the IDF operations are a part of an Israeli plan for ethnic cleansing or not, it is undeniable that there has been an immense number of Palestine civilian casualties. However, Netanyahu rebuffs Israeli responsibility and puts the blame on Hamas by saying, “This will be a different kind of war ... Every day, they [Hamas] perpetrate a double war crime: targeting our civilians while hiding behind their civilians, embedding themselves in the civilian population and using them as human shields ... As Israel legitimately targets terrorists, civilians are unfortunately harmed. Hamas is responsible and should be held accountable for all civilian casualties” (GI 2023d). Netanyahu attempts to justify such a sophism by employing moral infusing discourses. From time to time, he describes Hamas as an “absolute evil.” When he met the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, he said that “Hamas is the savagery that we only remember from the Nazi crimes from the Holocaust. Hamas are the new Nazis. Hamas is ISIS, and in some instances, worse than ISIS ... This is a part of an axis of evil: of Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas ... We must take action to defeat Hamas to ensure that this doesn’t happen again. But this is ... the battle of civilization against barbarism. And if it’s not stopped here, this savagery will reach you very soon and reach the entire world” (GI 2023c). Yet even after international society fully realized the immense civilian casualties in Gaza and the pressure for a ceasefire rose high, Netanyahu stated that “Calls for a ceasefire are calls for Israel to surrender to Hamas, to surrender to terrorism, to surrender to barbarism. That will not happen” (GI 2023g). By the same token, he vindicated the IDF war crime charges by saying that “They [the IDF soldiers] are committed to eradicating this evil from the world ... Whoever dares to accuse our soldiers of war crimes are hypocritical liars ... Israel is fighting ... the war of humanity against

barbarism” (GI 2023f).

These moralistic remarks can entail serious consequences, with Netanyahu choosing to recite sinister phrases from the Tanakh. On October 12, 2023, in a speech at the Knesset, he mentioned that “The ancient command ‘Remember what Amalek did to you’ [is] ringing in our ears” (GI 2023b). On October 28, when Israeli forces were preparing for their land invasion of Gaza, Netanyahu told the soldiers, “You must remember what Amalek has done to you” (AA 2023a). He repeated the same phrase in a letter addressed to the Israeli soldiers and officers on November 3 (AA 2023c). The legend of the Amalekites in Tanakh can be considered an ancient case of genocide. The English translation of the phrase goes as follows: “So said the Lord of Hosts, ‘I remember that which Amalek did to Israel ... you shall smite Amalek, and you shall utterly destroy all that is his, and you shall not have pity on him: and you shall slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass ... Saul completely destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword” (Tanakh). As sociologist Michael Freeman put it, the moral theories of just war that are deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian values can also justify genocide (Freeman 1994: 280). In this regard, Netanyahu’s insistence on the “just war against evil,” coupled with the ominous Biblical legend, can incite some extreme forms of brutality.

III. Three Cases of “Genocide”

Now we compare these Israeli actions with past incidents that are recognized as genocides. We will take three cases as examples: the German colonial massacre of the Herero and Nama people (1904–05), the Armenian deportation (1915–16), and the Bosnian civil war (1992–95). The three incidents took place in different times and contexts, with different methods, and on varying scales. The target populations differed as well: an indigenous population in a European colony, a religious minority in a Muslim state, and fellow citizens in a former socialist country. For all these differences, they are all recognized as cases of genocide by international institutions in general and the Western nations in particular. The Namibian case is classified by the UN Report on Genocide (1985) as one of the earliest cases of genocide in the 20th century (UN 1985). In March, 2021, Germany acknowledged that their colonial army had committed an act of genocide “from today’s perspective” (Joint Declaration 2021). The same UN report also classified the Armenian case as genocide. The US officially recognized the “Armenian Genocide” on May 28, 1951. The Reagan administration proclaimed the Armenian Genocide as such on April 22, 1981, and the US Parliament adopted the resolution of official recognition for three times (1975, 1984, and 2019) (USHR 2019). The European Parliament declared in 1987 that “the tragic events in 1915–1917 involving the Armenians living in the territory of the Ottoman Empire constitute genocide” (European Parliament 1987). The Bosnian case was officially judged as a crime of genocide by the ICTY and its successor organ, the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT). Now, let us take a brief look at each case to find general common features.

The massacre of the Herero and the Nama

The massacre of the Herero and the Nama peoples took place in the context of colonialism. Germany formally colonized the territory of today’s Republic of Namibia in 1884, began to deprive the native people of their land and properties, and subsequently used the people as slave labor. This was a part of the well-defined policy to turn Namibia into German land,

and several thousands of German settlers were brought in to do so. The Germans seized the huge swaths of land and a large number of cattle possessed by the Herero, the largest ethnic group in the colony. The dispossession led to pauperization, and many Hereros were forced to work either in German farms or in construction plants as cheap laborers under systematic surveillance and discrimination. As a result, more than 8,000 Hereros stood in arms against German colonial rule in January 1904 (Drechsler 1980: 181–3). Unprepared for such a massive attack, the German colonial force could not fight off the Herero, and more than 100 German settlers and soldiers were killed (Bridgman 1981: 74). The reinforcements, led by Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha, arrived in June and started a counteroffensive, destroying the Herero settlements to stamp out the resistance. Faced with the brutal tactics of the Germans, many Herero fighters, together with their wives and children, escaped into the desert area. Von Trotha escalated the violence and ordered the extermination of all Herero people on October 2, 1904. His soldiers ruthlessly pursued the Herero by shooting and killing thousands of men, women, and children. The Germans blocked the rest of the Herero into the desert, expecting them to perish from thirst and starvation (Sarkin 2011: 114–6). The next year, the Nama, the second largest ethnic group, stood up to fight against the Germans. Von Trotha issued the second order on April 22, 1905, threatening the Nama with a similar fate to that of the Herero unless they surrendered. His soldiers then executed the order in cold blood. Thousands of Nama, regardless of age and gender, were brutally massacred, and their properties were destroyed (Zimmerer 2008: 52–3). The Herero–Nama uprising ended in 1907, but the German policy of extermination did not end then. The remaining Herero and Nama were incarcerated in concentration camps and subjected to harsh treatment—poor hygiene, little food, forced labor, and medical experiments. The camps were closed in 1908. By this time, however, roughly half of the incarcerated population had perished. It is generally accepted that, in the course of the genocide, 50,000–65,000 Herero and 10,000 Nama were murdered. The number corresponded to 80% of the Herero and 50% of the Nama population, respectively, before the war. The surviving Herero and Nama faced radical changes in their living conditions. Their properties, including land, cattle, and other assets, were expropriated under imperial regulations in 1905 and 1906, and possession of land and cattle was prohibited in 1907. The policy resulted in the deprivation of the peoples’ means of economic reproduction, and many of their descendants have been condemned to perpetual and institutionalized poverty (UN 2023a).

Armenian Deportation

The Armenian case is even more controversial and not easy to summarize. First of all, there are different views on how to define the incident. The Armenian government calls it the atrocities committed against the Ottoman Armenians by the government of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) during WWI (Armenia). The Armenian Genocide Museum–Institute (AGM), on its part, defines the incident as the extermination of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and the surrounding regions during 1915–1923 (AGM 2007). The US Parliament adopted this view. But such broad definitions make it difficult to grasp the nature of the incident, as there were several different phases, especially the reprisal killing of Muslims by the Armenian paramilitaries in Cilicia and the subsequent eviction of the latter. Therefore, it is better and more suitable for the purpose of this article to adopt the view of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), which is that “the Armenian genocide refers to the physical annihilation of Armenian Christian people living in the

Ottoman Empire from spring 1915 through autumn 1916” (USHMM 2019).

The number of casualties is another focal point. The UN Report on Genocide of 1985 estimated the casualties as being “at least 1 million,” but other institutions assert larger numbers. Both the European Parliament and the US Parliament assert the number of casualties as being 1.5 million. The Armenian government and AGM adopted the following view: “There were an estimated two million Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire on the eve of WWI. Approximately one and a half million Armenians perished between 1915 and 1923. Another million found shelter abroad or Islamized.” This means that the Armenians produced half a million children in the middle of persecution, which sounds implausible. Instead, USHMM adopts the following view: “There were approximately 1.5 million Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire in 1915. At least 664,000 and possibly as many as 1.2 million died during the genocide.” On the other hand, the Turkish government, who denies genocide, claims that “Prior to World War I, fewer than 1.5 million Armenians lived in the entire Ottoman Empire [of which] slightly less than 600,000 Anatolian Armenians died during the war period of 1912–22” (Türkiye 2022). The fact that the minimum number put forward by the US semi-official guardian of the records of human atrocities coincides with that of Turkey merits attention, as it shows that, albeit a gap in the estimated victims, Turkey recognizes that a mass killing did indeed take place.

The disputing parties, moreover, share very similar views on the causes of the massive fatalities. USHMM describes the course of events as follows:

In spring 1915 the Ottoman government began the deportation of the Armenian population from its northeastern border regions. In the months that followed, the Ottomans expanded deportations from almost all provinces regardless of distance from combat zones. The victims of the Armenian genocide include people killed in local massacres that began in spring 1915; others who died during deportations, under conditions of starvation, dehydration, exposure, and disease; and Armenians who died in or en route to the desert regions of the southern Empire. (USHMM)

The Armenian government and AGM posit a similar picture. According to them, the genocide started on April 24, 1915, when several hundred Armenian elites were arrested in Istanbul, only to be subsequently eliminated. Shortly thereafter, some 60,000 conscripted Armenian military personnel were disarmed and killed. The third phase was the deportations of women, children, and elderly people into the Syrian deserts. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed during the deportation. Others died of famine, epidemic diseases, and exposure to the elements. The Turkish version of events is not so different. It admits that the mass deportation of Armenians in eastern Anatolia took place by the order of the Ottoman government. It also agrees that a large number of people were dead in the course of and after the deportation. The people were killed by attacks, robberies, disease, famine, and many other of war’s privations.

So far, it can be said that the Turkish and the Armenian views are not very different from each other, except for the estimated number of victims. This means that what matters most is not the cognizance of the crime constituting facts but their interpretation. For example, the Turkish and Armenian views on the murderers of the deported people differ in the following way. The AGM relates that hundreds of thousands of people were murdered by “Turkish soldiers, police officers, [and] Kurdish bandits” (AGM 2007). In contrast, the Turkish government asserts that they were murdered “mainly by local Muslims” (Türkiye 2022). According to the former’s view, the mass murder was a military operation, but the latter denies this on the grounds that none of the instructions commanding the relocation

ordered killings. There were many incidents, however, in which the Armenian deportees were killed by the bandits in full view of the soldiers or by the soldiers themselves. The Armenian side interprets this as proof of the well-organized killing operation. In contrast, the Turkish side asserts these acts as derelictions or were due to out of capacity. The most contested focus of the dispute, however, is whether the CUP had a specific intent of genocide. The Armenian side claims that the CUP, who had long dreamed of a Great Turkish state, saw the Armenians as the main obstacle to their plan. Thus, the CUP had secretly developed a well-coordinated plan to eliminate Armenians by the eve of WWI, and the war came as a suitable opportunity for its implementation (Akçam 2006; Hovvansian 2007). On the other hand, the Turkish government, while admitting that the CUP had caused a mass murder by ordering “relocation,” denies it was an act of genocide, as they did not have such a will, and put forward that the “relocation” was a preventive measure to ward off the general uprising of Armenians in cooperation with the Entente powers. In other words, the Armenians assert an unprovoked, one-sided massacre, while the Turks argue due response to nationalist intrigues. Avoiding being trapped by the partisan disputes, Donald Bloxham, a historian, proposes a synthesist approach and puts forward a theory of cumulative radicalization. He admits that the feared prospect of Armenians joining with Entente forces was not ungrounded and that the fear led the CUP to the partial deportation. Those local measures gradually enlarged the CUP’s sphere, leading to the decision to remove the entire Armenian population from eastern Anatolia once and for all. At the same time, Bloxham refutes the Turkish assertions by saying, “Any claim that the murder of the Armenians when it unfolded was not a genocide, simply because there might not be unequivocal evidence of genocidal intent prior to May 1915, is as absurd as the suggestion that the Nazi ‘final solution’ was not a genocide because it was not inscribed before the invasion of Poland or the USSR that every Jew was to be murdered.” The idea of destruction of the Armenian community, he argues, “developed and was augmented over time around broad principles of discrimination and xenophobia, progressing from notions of removal by dilution and/or forced assimilation to physical removal by deportation and/or murder.” Borrowing a term from the Austro-Hungarian ambassador during WWI, Bloxham concludes that the Armenian deportation was “a means of creating a national state through the annihilation of foreign elements” (Bloxham 2005: 94). Namely, the Armenian deportation was an example of extraordinary large-scale ethnic cleansing that eventually took the form of genocide.

The Bosnian Civil War

Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia) was one of the six republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. According to the census of 1991, its population was 44% Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim), 31% Serb, 17% Croat, and 8% others. They were defined as equal shareholders of the sovereignty of the republic. In March 1992, the Bosnian government declared its independence from Yugoslavia. Bosnian Serbs opposed this, and created their own state, later called Republika Srpska (RS). As Bosnian Croats followed suit, a triangular civil war broke out. During the war that lasted until 1995, an estimated 102,622 people were killed, and 2.2 million were displaced. In the early phase of the war, Serbs seized two-thirds of Bosnia and committed atrocities against Bosniaks and Croats in the areas under their control. Bosnian Croats had their own strongholds in the western part of the country and committed similar atrocities. In 1993, for example, the Croat forces destroyed Bosniak homes, mosques, and cultural monuments and raped and murdered civilians in Ahmici and

Stupni Do. As a result, the Bosniaks suffered the most. It is often claimed that 80% of the civilians killed or displaced during the war were Bosniaks. However, this sounds a little exaggerated. According to the estimate of the ICTY, 16,700 (30%) of Serb civilians were killed out of a total 55,261.² Out of the total of 47,360 soldiers killed, an estimated 28,000 (59%) were Bosniaks, 6,000 (13%) were Croats, and 14,000 (29%) were Serbs (Bartrop 2016 xxxviii). Thus, the Bosniaks were not one-sided victims of the atrocities. Rather, their forces, albeit on a smaller scale, committed similar crimes against Serb and Croat civilians in the territory under their control (USHMM 2013).

When the three parties systematically expelled the civilians based on their ethnicity, they employed identical methods. They were “carried out by means of murder, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, extra-judicial executions, rape and sexual assaults, confinement of civilian population in ghetto areas, forcible removal, displacement and deportation of civilian population, deliberate military attacks or threats of attacks on civilians and civilian areas, and wanton destruction of property” (UN 1992). Such practices, locally called “etničko čišćenje,” led to the term “ethnic cleansing” getting international circulation and subsequently being recognized as a particular form of crime against humanity. The notion is defined as “a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas. To a large extent, it is carried out in the name of misguided nationalism, historic grievances and a powerful driving sense of revenge” (UN 1992).

During the war, and its aftermath, there was a broad public debate about whether ethnic cleansing was a euphemism for genocide, as there were several suspected cases of ethnic cleansing on a genocidal scale. The Siege of Sarajevo is one of these cases. From April 1992 to February 1996, the city was encircled by the RS army (VRS). The civilians endured incessant shelling for nearly four years, with their living quarters being burnt down, and many cultural monuments, public spaces, and religious institutions were destroyed. As a result, more than 10,000 people were killed (HMDT). Another, but not the last, contested case was the north-western Bosnian municipality of Prijedor. In 1992, the Prijedor town and surrounding villages were occupied by Serb forces. After neutralizing the Bosniak resistance, the Serbs started sending non-Serbs into concentration camps, where the inmates endured various forms of maltreatment—torture, malnutrition, random killings, and explosions. Their properties were confiscated or subjected to wanton destruction. The international courts, however, classified the two cases as ethnic cleansing, not genocide. This is clear in the judgement against Ratko Mladić, the supreme commander of VRS during the war. Mladić was indicted for the following counts: “The killing of Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats” in Biljani, Foča, Prijedor, and Vlasenica, “the detention of thousands of Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats in detention facilities in living conditions calculated to bring about their physical destruction” in the camps in Banja Luka, Prijedor, Foča and Bijeljina, and “the killing of over 7,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys of Srebrenica” (ICTY Mladić). Mladić was acquitted of the charge of genocide in the abovementioned municipalities except for Srebrenica on the grounds that although the physical perpetrators in several municipalities intended to destroy the Bosnian Muslims, “the people targeted in each municipality formed a relatively small part and were not in other ways a substantial part of the protected group.” The same logic was applied to the

² The rest were Bosniaks and Croats. The ICTY does not separate the number of Bosniak noncombatant victims from those of Croats.

case of Radovan Karadžić, the president of RS during the war. On March 24, 2016, Karadžić was found guilty of genocide in the area of Srebrenica in 1995 but was acquitted in other municipalities on the grounds that they were classified as crimes against humanity (ICTY Karadžić). Those judgements have clarified that ethnic cleansing and genocide are different categories of crime. The view is supported by many researchers. One of them, Marie-Janine Calic, succinctly summarized the point: “Whereas in some cases, ‘ethnic cleansing’ was aimed at the physical destruction of an ethnic community, there are other cases [in which] the objective was limited to the conquest of a strategically or economically important region through expulsion of the unwanted population, but without a clear intent to exterminate that community in whole or in part. In conclusion, ‘ethnic cleansing’ should not per se be identified with genocide” (Calic 2007: 106).

There still remains, however, the question of how one can distinguish genocide from large-scale ethnic cleansing. The ICTY has already given us the answer when the court, for the first time, found Radislav Krstić guilty of genocide on August 2, 2001, for the case of Srebrenica. Krstić was a former Commander of the Drina Corps that took part in the capture of Srebrenica in July 1995. Srebrenica was a small Muslim stronghold located in eastern Bosnia. When hostilities broke out, many Bosniaks were expelled in the region and took shelter in Srebrenica. Cut off from the other Muslim-controlled areas, Srebrenica became an enclave in the middle of the Serb-dominated territory. From the spring of 1992 to the early summer of 1995, VRS besieged the town and strictly controlled the movement of people and goods in and out of the enclave. As a result, the prevailing conditions for the inhabitants became dire (ICTY Krstić). In March 1995, Karadžić issued a directive to VRS: “By planned and well-thought-out combat operations,” VRS was directed to “create an unbearable situation of total insecurity with no hope of further survival or life for the inhabitants of Srebrenica.” VRS started restricting the logistics support of UNPROFOR to the enclave, making the humanitarian situation deteriorate to a catastrophic level. On March 31, General Mladić ordered the Drina Corps to conduct active combat operations around the enclave, and they captured UNPROFOR observation posts. Subsequently, the commander of the Drina Corps initiated the plan to reduce the enclave to its urban core, with the aim to plunge the Bosnian Muslim population into a humanitarian crisis and, ultimately, eliminate them. VRS began its final attacks against Srebrenica on July 6. At the meeting with UNPROFOR, Mladić made it clear that the Bosnian Muslims could survive only by leaving Srebrenica and that their survival was conditional upon a military surrender of the town’s men (ICTY 2017). By July 11, VRS had entered the town. As a result, approximately 20,000 to 25,000 Bosnian Muslims— mostly women, children, and the elderly—fled to seek shelter in Potočari, a compound used by the UN Protection Force. Conditions were dire: food and water were scarce, and there was a shortage of medical supplies. In the meantime, on the eve of the fall of Srebrenica, the vast majority of the able-bodied men, between 10,000 and 15,000, fled the enclave on foot in an attempt to reach the Muslim-controlled area. A large number of them were subsequently captured by VRS. On July 12, VRS soldiers systematically separated Muslim men of military age who had taken shelter in Potočari from the rest of the population. Together with others captured from the column fleeing on foot, the men were bussed to various execution sites and systematically murdered. The vast majority of them were executed over just a few days from 12 July until 17 July. The court estimated that the total number of executed men was within the range of 7,000 and 8,000 (ICTY Krstić).

The ICTY found Krstić guilty on the grounds that by killing all the men of fighting age,

VRS made it impossible for the Bosnian Muslim community of Srebrenica to survive for the next generation. The court also made an important decision: that it is not necessary for a plan of genocide to exist prior to perpetrators committing concrete genocidal actions. In the case of Srebrenica, the court confirmed that the initial plan had been an ethnic cleansing. No plan to commit genocide existed before or even right after the city fell. However, for unknown reasons, the decision was then taken to kill all the men of fighting age. The result would inevitably bring about the destruction of the Bosnian Muslim population in Srebrenica. The murderers did it with full awareness of the consequences. Thus, they had the clear intention of genocide while conducting the mass murder (ICTY 2001). This ruling defined two important criteria. First, it is not necessary for clear evidence that attests to the will of genocide prior to committing the crime. Second, ethnic cleansing changes into genocide at a certain point.

IV. Comparison of the four cases

Having viewed the general characteristics of the four cases in question, now we can juxtapose each phase of these incidents with others in accordance with the following five key aspects: background, provocation, civilian targeting, displacement, and forced starvation. These aspects are the most pertinent to apprehend the nature of ongoing violence.

Background

As UN Secretary general Antonio Guterres put it, “the attacks by Hamas did not happen in a vacuum.” Before October 7, 2023, the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip had to endure a series of dispossessions, eviction from their ancestral homes, and enclosure in a small, overpopulated area with incessant threats of bombardment by the IDF forces. They also suffered from systematic human rights abuses under the Israeli occupation regime. The situation is comparable to that of the Herero and the Nama before the uprising. Due to the steppe climate, the central plateau of Namibia was an area of extensive animal husbandry, and both the Herero and Nama subsisted as nomadic pastoralists. The systematic colonization of white settlers that began in 1894 brought about rapid dispossession of the land and livestock of the native population. As the best grazing land had belonged to the Herero, they saw much of their land and a good portion of their cattle pass into the hands of the white man. By 1903, the white population of the colony had risen to 4,640, and more than 25% of all Herero land had already passed out of native hands (Bridgman 1981: 50). As a result, many Hereros were forced to sell their labor to the colonists at an extremely low price (Kuss 2017: 38) The German settlers not only exploited the Herero; they also systematically mistreated them. They displayed a blatant racist attitude, describing the Africans as baboons, and treated them as such. The German judges either dismissed the charges against the settlers by the Africans or imposed very light sentences. Moreover, the Germans ignored their promise they had made in Article 3 of the treaty of protection with the Herero that they would respect the latter’s habits and customs. Deprived of all their rights, the Herero felt like slaves in their own country (Drechsler 1980: 133). The sense of injustice and well-grounded fear of loss of tribal identities were the principal motives that made them take up arms in January 1904. The same was true for the Nama uprising. It was also motivated by the perception of a threat to their own existence (Kuss 2017: 42).

Provocation

The Israeli government has justified their military operations in Gaza as an act of self-defense, claiming that the October 7 attacks were the worst atrocities against the Jewish people since the Nazis; therefore, the elimination of Hamas is necessary for national security. The Western countries are upholding the claim and support the IDF's operations both militarily and financially. But is it permissible to carry out such a disproportional reprisal against the Palestinians on the grounds that they had provoked first?

In the case of the Namibian genocide, the German operation started as a reaction to the armed rebellion of the Herero and the Nama. On January 12, 1904, the Herero launched their first attacks. "During the next ten days, almost every farm, village, and fort in Hereroland was attacked or at least threatened by the marauding hands of natives. The majority of the German farms were destroyed during those hectic days. [...] All farmers who fled lost everything: their livestock had been stolen; their possessions looted; and their buildings burned" (Bridgman 1981: 73) In all, more than 100 German settlers and soldiers were killed. The Germans were overpowered at first, as a total of some 2,000 men had to face more than 8,000 Herero warriors. Though not more than half of them were armed with rifles, they were militarily sophisticated. Due to their tribal discipline and warlike traditions, the Herero fighters proved to be "man for man equivalent to the German soldiers" (Bridgman 1981: 68). Initially, both sides suffered an even rate of casualties: German losses amounted to 210, while that of the Herero was 250. The Germans saw the deaths of a large number of officers in a series of battles. In the same vein, the Nama started their rebellion as random destructions of German farms in September 1904. Employing clever hit-and-run tactics, carefully avoiding open battles, they successfully waged an attritional guerilla warfare. Organized into smaller units, the Nama bands targeted smaller German formations such as patrols and transport columns. A testimony revealed that "Marching and resting troops, columns, stations and posts were exposed to constant danger from small groups of the enemy that would suddenly appear [from nowhere]. The situation was best described by the phrase 'enemy present everywhere'" (Kuss 2017: 43). As a result, the Germans suffered substantial losses. Moreover, the ultimate objective of the revolt was not restricted to the protest against the colonial system but to drive the Germans out of South West Africa, as both the Herero and Nama had felt the existential threat (Bridgman 1981: 66).

The Bosniaks of Srebrenica were not always subjected to the one-sided violence of the Serbs. They had their own forces. In early 1992, the Srebrenica Bosniaks began a counteroffensive against the Serbs, forcing thousands of Serb peasants to flee from the area. Since then, the Bosniaks regularly attacked the Serb villages near the enclave, committing wanton destruction, pillage, torture, imprisonment, and murder of civilian targets (Bartrop 2016: 169). The raids did not stop even after the UN designated the town as a "safe area." Heavy weapons were handed over, but Srebrenica was never disarmed. Using the UNPROFOR as a shield, the Muslim forces continued to intrude into the Serb-controlled area, searching for food to steal and killing civilians as a reprisal for the siege (Rohde 2017). In the meantime, Bosniak military police persecuted Serb citizens inside Srebrenica. They were detained in several facilities and subjected to physical abuse, serious suffering, and injuries to their bodies and health. In some cases, prisoners were beaten to death (ICTY 2008).

To sum up, not all the past genocides were unprovoked, and both Namibians and Bosniaks had committed atrocities against civilians, including willful targeting of non-

combatants and wanton destruction of their properties, some of which may have amounted to crimes against humanity. Nevertheless, the Germans and the Serbs were not acquitted from their crimes of genocide. Thus, provocations cannot justify disproportionate reprisals.

Civilian massacre

The Israelis have so far killed more than 26,000 Palestinians, more than 70% of which were women and children, but the Netanyahu government vindicates this as collateral damage, claiming that Hamas are using the civilian population as human shields. When he met the ICRC chief on December 14, 2023, for example, Netanyahu was reported as saying that “There’s a difference between the deliberate and systematic murder, maiming and menacing of civilians, which is what terrorism is, and the unintended consequences, unintended casualties that accompany any warfare” (GI 2023j). It is highly doubtful that Netanyahu’s soldiers are doing their best to avoid civilian casualties. An independent media study has confirmed that the AI-based systems used by the IDF to automatically generate targets were inflicting civilian casualties at an astonishing rate and that the fact was well known among the Israeli leaders. An anonymous source was cited as saying, “Everything is intentional. We know exactly how much collateral damage there is in every home.” It has also been confirmed that Israeli officials approved an attack they knew would kill up to hundreds of civilians in a bid to assassinate a single Hamas military commander. The report concludes that the ongoing Israeli military operations “more resembled the indiscriminate bombing of World War II than the modern era of codified civilian protection under international humanitarian law” (Wilkins 2023).

The German colonial troops employed a similar method when they pursued the counter-insurgency operations against the Herero and the Nama. Having destroyed the major Herero forces at the Battle of Waterberg in August 1904, the Germans continued the war of extermination of all Herero fighters, pursuing them into the Omaheke desert and indiscriminately killing every man, woman, and child whom they spotted (Kuss 2017: 42). When the Germans broke into the Herero camps in search of the guerrillas, they showed no mercy for women and children. A testimony reported that “The Germans spared no one. They killed thousands and thousands. I saw this slaughter for day after day” (Bridgman 1981: 126). The Germans adopted the same tactics against the Nama. One of the former’s military commanders wrote that “We must not allow the Hottentotts to escape, rather we must encircle and destroy them before they do so” (Kuss 2017: 45).

In the case of the Ottomans, it is highly dubious if they paid the slightest attention to protecting Armenian non-combatants when fighting against the rebels in such places as Van, Bitlis, Erzurum, and Zeytun in the spring 1915. Moreover, there are ample records of the Ottoman agents who committed random killings of civilians during the deportation (Lewy 2005: 224–6). It is also well-known that the Bosnian Serbs subjected the Srebrenica town and its surrounding villages to daily shelling from all directions and sporadic incursions of paramilitaries between April 1992 and March 1993, inflicting a great number of civilian casualties (Bartrop 2016: 169).

Those examples clearly show that the military operations that entailed immense loss of civilian life constituted a part of actions that would eventually amount to genocide. Contemporary American and European leaders seem to understand this well. For instance, EC President Ursula von der Leyen said that “Targeted attacks on civilian infrastructure with the clear aim to cut off men, women, children of water, electricity and heating with the winter coming, these are acts of pure terror” (Reuters 2022). The German Chancellor

Olaf Scholz asserted that drone attacks on civilians in the cities constituted “war crimes” (DW 2022). In addition, US Vice-President Kamala Harris denounced the wanton destruction of cities where enemy units were entrenched as “barbaric and inhumane” atrocities against civilians and classified them as “crimes against humanity” (BBC 2023). US President Joe Biden was more eloquent in saying that such actions would amount to a genocide (BBC 2022). These leaders have applied these criteria against the Russian actions in Ukraine, but, for unknown reasons, they still hesitate to apply the same judgment to the case of Israel.

Displacement

The Israeli military ordered the Gazans who lived in the northern part of the Strip to immediately “evacuate” from their homes on October 13, 2023. The measures were announced as though for their safety, and Netanyahu designated the southern Gaza areas as “safe zones.” However, the IDF subsequently enlarged their sphere of operation into the wide swaths of southern Gaza in December, and the “safe zones” effectively disappeared. To make things worse, the IDF demolished most of the residential buildings and destroyed social infrastructures, making it impossible for those who were “evacuated” to return to their homes and to resume their previous way of life. This fact leads us to the suspicion that the “evacuation order” was designed to serve the Israeli military aims and not the good of the Palestinians. If so, it was not a temporary safe measure but forced displacement.

Forced displacement itself does not always constitute an act of genocide. The Tsarist deportations of Germans, Jews, Poles, and Latvians during WWI were no doubt atrocities but a bit short of genocide. This was also the case for the Austro-Hungarian eviction of the Bosnian Serbs. The Stalinist deportation of the Chechens, the Ingush, and the Crimean Tatars can be considered examples of ethnic cleansing but are not unanimously accepted as genocide. Furthermore, the Greco-Turkish population exchange in 1924, though it caused enduring suffering to 1.5 million Orthodox Anatolian Greeks and half a million Hellenic Muslims, was internationally recognized as legitimate policies of nation states. On the other end of the spectrum, however, there are many examples of deportation with genocidal dimensions. The Ottoman Armenian case is the best known. In this case, the deportation was the central piece of genocide. Donald Bloxham explains the reason as follows:

The very nature of the deportations is sufficient evidence of genocide[e] [...]. Where the first anti-Armenian measures did not distinguish innocent individuals from ‘guilty,’ the new ones did not differentiate between communities with revolutionary traditions or the great majority without, nor between border regions and the interior. Unlike the first Zeytun deportees, the Armenians were not to be sent to places where settlement was possible, if difficult; they were sent, defenseless and without provision or the means of subsistence, to desert regions where natural attrition could take its deadly toll. (Bloxham 2005: 86)

In a similar vein, the Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica saw the following two stages of forced displacement prior to the genocide. Although bordering with the Serbian proper, eastern Bosnia used to be a Muslim majority region. With the objective to ethnically purify the territory, the Serb nationalist forces launched well-organized eradicating operations against the Bosniak population in early 1992. They engaged in looting homes, burning villages, and slaughtering the civilian population in the neighboring municipalities of Srebrenica. Even after the completion of military conquest, the Serbs systematically evicted the Bosniak citizens who were found in their territory to Srebrenica, which had remained

under Muslim control. According to a 1991 census, the Srebrenica municipality had a population of 36,000 (25,000 Bosniaks and 8,500 Serbs). Due to the influx of refugees from the surrounding municipalities, the population of the enclave swelled to over 50,000 people by mid-May, creating a humanitarian crisis, with a serious shortage of shelters, food, and medical services (Srebrenica Memorial). The plight lasted for more than three years. The Serbs then embarked on the second stage of displacement in May 1995. VRS began attacking the outposts of the enclave, gradually tightened a ring, and finally entered the town on July 11. During the attacks, the Serbs systematically burned Muslim houses and evicted the inhabitants with the aim to force them to concentrate in the Srebrenica town and then to escape to Potočari. By July 12, most of the noncombatant civilians of Srebrenica had gathered in and around the compound. Conditions there were dire, with almost no food, water, or shelter. VRS frightened the people, either by shelling near the compound or by abducting some of them. General Mladić insisted on the total “evacuation” of the civilians, and subsequently, women, children, and the elderly were transported to the Muslim-controlled areas. In the meantime, the military-aged men, together with those who had previously been captured by the Serbs, were all executed (ICTY 2017). In this regard, the “evacuation” of the Srebrenica population was a part and parcel of ethnic cleansing and a prelude to genocide.

The Israeli policy of forced “evacuation” of the Palestinians in Gaza shares many common features with the two cases. Just like the Armenians, the Gazans are indiscriminately displaced, based on Israeli President Herzog’s axiom that “an entire nation out there [...] is responsible.” As the Ottomans forced the Armenians to move from one place to another in accordance with the notorious 10% limit, the Gazans were being told to move like “human pinballs.” The Srebrenica Muslims, on their part, were first driven into the enclave, then concentrated into a much smaller space, and finally evicted once and for all. Just like the Ottoman Armenians who were randomly killed during the “relocation,” the northern Gazan refugees were bombed while moving to the southern “safe zones.” The Armenians were executed while staying in their encampments in Syria, and the Gazans are left defenseless against the air strikes, random shelling, and sniping of the IDF in the middle of the “safe zones.” The Serbs did the same to the Bosniaks hiding in the “safe area.” Although Israel has not yet destroyed a large portion of the population, nor rounded up and executed the majority of the male population, the deportation of the Gazans has already gone well beyond the scale of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and reached the level of the Armenian case.

Siege and Forced Starvation

Since October 7, 2023, the Israeli forces have put Gaza under a complete siege, prohibiting free movement in and out of the Strip and strictly restricting the import of any kind of goods, including humanitarian aid. Moreover, the Israelis are not providing the refugees with any kind of shelter and have systematically destroyed residences, schools, warehouses, and religious institutions. This policy has brought about a general malnutrition in the population, who suffer from starvation and exhaustion by exposure. These conditions are extremely unhygienic, and many people are dying of diseases accordingly. In light of Netanyahu’s remark on December 5, 2023, that “We know that if there would be a collapse — diseases, pandemics, and groundwater infections — it will stop the fighting [of Hamas]” (CNN 2023), it is plausible that the creation of these insanitary conditions for the refugees is a part and parcel of the Israeli strategy.

The Serbs adopted similar measures during the siege of Srebrenica. At that time, the enclave was totally besieged by VRS and cut off from the rest of the Bosniak-controlled territories. The situation worsened progressively, with the refugees and townsfolk running out of food and water. As pre-war food supplies were rapidly depleted, people began to eat anything they could find. From the spring of 1993 onward, Srebrenica was completely dependent on the humanitarian aid provided by the UNPROFOR. The aid, however, was often blocked by VRS (Bartrop 2016: 214). As a result, the Srebrenica enclave became the worst-affected case from food shortages in the Bosnian civil war. Contrary to the pretext that the blockage was a measure to prevent the Bosniak fighters from attacking the Serb territories, those who suffered most were those vulnerable elements such as pregnant and lactating women, as well as small children (Conley & de Waal 2019: 722; Slavková 2020: 78–9). The forced starvation was a well-planned policy aimed at a voluntary evacuation of the Bosniaks. In July 1994, for example, the commander of the Bratunac Brigade instructed his soldiers as follows: “The enemy’s life has to be made unbearable and their temporary stay in the enclave impossible so that they leave the enclave en masse as soon as possible” (ICTY 2003).

Forced starvation was also an integral part of the annihilation of the Ottoman Armenians. Most of the deaths were due to hunger and thirst (Suny 2015). Considering the cumulative radicalization of the deportation, the CUP did not have a wholesale plan of massive starvation laid out, but the ad hoc nature of the policy resulted in many more victims. As the local governments had to comply with the hectic “relocation” orders, they gave the Armenians only a few days to prepare for the journey. As a result, most of them could not carry enough food. To make things worse, it was almost impossible to find something to eat on the way, because the government had no plan (or will) for logistical support for those who were deported. It is estimated that of the first deportees from the eastern provinces who were ordered to move in May and June 1915, only 10 to 20% percent reached Syria alive. Later, the situation improved a little. Namely, of those from western Anatolia who were expelled in August and September 1915, some 80 to 90% could reach Syria. George Shirinian postulates that this was because a structure for the deportations had been established by the summer of 1915 (Shirinian 2017: 13). This fact by no means serves as a sign that the CUP cared for the adequate provision of the deported Armenians. It was true that the government provided food and water. However, these things were rather exceptional and far from adequate. A German consular official who traveled from Baghdad to Aleppo recalled that “The way stations with water were about forty miles apart, and many of the deportees did not have enough food or water to last even the three days of walking that it took to get from one station to the next. At some stations no food was available at all” (cited by Lewy 2005: 222). In contrast, the Syrian Armenians and foreign missionaries organized relief committees and actively supported the displaced people. They sent aid and dispatched missions even to the remotest provinces. They were the primary, and often the only, means of subsistence for the deportees. For some time, those foreign and domestic philanthropists received tacit approval and even support from the local authorities. But this was only because the CUP paid little attention to the deportees who managed to arrive in Syria. Their attitude changed in the autumn of 1915. Thereafter, the central government exerted strong pressure on the humanitarian response to the survivors of deportation. Namely, local Muslims who tried to give the Armenians food and water were strictly reproached by the gendarmes (Shirinian 2017: 22). Furthermore, the Armenian activists who supported the refugees were either arrested or persecuted. The CUP even

thwarted the international aid programs. The US ambassador who attempted to distribute the relief funds that had been collected by the US Armenian Relief Committee was prevented from doing so by the Ottoman government (Mouradian 2019: 252–5).

Even those who could reach Syria alive had to endure the daily threat of death by attrition. A large number of deportees who were destined for resettlement in Der-el Zor—one of the major “relocation” sites—were detained in encampments along the Euphrates. Many of them were put in an impossible position to acquire food and gradually died of hunger. The camp at Meskene was one of these detention centers. In early February 1916, the place hosted more than 2,000 tents and about 10,000 persons. Since the government did not distribute any food, most of the detainees had to live by begging. Those who did not manage to obtain any bread cooked and ate grass. Moreover, there was no latrine, and all around the camp was covered with a wide belt of excrements and garbage (Lewy 2005: 223). The deterioration of hygiene conditions inevitably resulted in epidemics of diseases, which took their heavy toll on the Armenian population.

The German colonial army adopted a similar tactic. On August 11, 1904, when the Germans gained the decisive victory over the Herero at the Waterberg, a large number of men, women, and children escaped from the encircling forces and fled into the Omaheke desert. As the Germans knew what kind of human catastrophe would be played out there, they expected the desert would complete “the task begun by German weapons.” Von Trotha ordered his soldiers to occupy all the known water holes around the edge of the desert and to block all Herero returning from the Omaheke. That was the moment when “the actual genocidal phase began” (Zimmerer 2008: 47). Trapped in the desert, the Herero frantically searched for water, only to hasten their death by exhaustion. An eyewitness said that the trails through the desert were littered with hundreds of carcasses. It is estimated that out of 50,000 and 60,000 Herero who had escaped into the desert, barely 3,000 could survive the death trap. (Bridgman 1981: 131). The Germans responded to the Nama uprising with the same strategy of extermination. Their troops systematically occupied watering places, destroying roughly half of the Nama population by starvation (Zimmerer 2008: 51).

According to Conley and de Waal (2019), who have studied historical cases of artificial famine, examples of the deployment of mass starvation on the scale of mass extermination are rare. The Namibian massacre and the Armenian deportation were among those few unambiguous cases (Conley & de Waal 2019: 705–6). Other examples are the ghettos during the Holocaust, the Ukrainian Holodomor (1932–1933), and the Nazi Hungerplan (1941–1945). The ongoing Israeli policy of forced starvation of the Palestinians has seemingly not yet reached the same level as these cases. The policy shares more commonalities with the Bosnian case. If one takes into consideration the remarks of Israeli policymakers on “voluntary” ethnic cleansing, it sounds appropriate to say that, at this stage, the Israeli siege of Gaza has fallen into the category of the use of starvation for gaining territorial control. But in light of the fact that in contrast to Srebrenica, where most of the besieged people could still stay under a roof, a large number of Palestinians have to bivouac under rubble or flimsy tents, so the situation in Gaza has already gone beyond the first stage of the siege of Srebrenica and is rapidly approaching the plight of the Armenians in the concentration camps. The Gazan hygienic crisis also bears resemblance to the Armenian case.

V. Conclusions

The comparison of the ongoing Israeli war with the Namibian, Ottoman, and Bosnian cases leads us to the following findings. First, the prewar conditions of the Palestinians in Gaza shared many of the colonialist characteristics with the German rule in Namibia. Second, the provocation of Hamas does not vindicate the scale of Israeli military actions in Gaza. The Namibian and the Bosnian cases show that not all the victims of genocide were unprovoked and that the disproportionate reprisals were the basic features of those two genocide cases. Third, the Israeli allegation of “collateral damage” does not make sense. It is not only because the wanton destruction of civilian objects is, as the Western leaders admit, a war crime, but also because they are carried out with the explicit aim of collective punishment. In this regard, the Israeli action shows a marked resemblance with those of the colonialist Germans, the CUP, and the Bosnian Serb leadership. Fourth, the massive displacement of the Gazans displays the same indiscriminate nature as the Armenian deportation and the Bosnian ethnic cleansing. In both cases, the “evacuations” were carried out with the clear aim of eliminating the unwanted elements from certain territories. The Israeli pretext of “safety measures” is almost identical with that of the Ottomans, who took no substantial measure to protect the deportees and carried out the “evacuations” for purely strategic purposes. The Bosnian Serbs employed the same hypocrisy. For them, the term “evacuation” is nothing but a euphemism for ethnic cleansing. Fifth, the Israeli siege, blockades of humanitarian aid, and exposure of the Gazans to helpless situations are intentionally creating the conditions of forced starvation, characteristics in common with the past three cases. The Germans imposed impossible living conditions on the Africans either by expelling them into deserts or by blocking their access to food and water. The Ottomans put the Armenians into starving conditions by sabotaging their logistic support, detaining them in places with no or insufficient access to nutrition, and preventing international aid. By doing so, they created extremely unhygienic conditions that resulted in immense human loss. This has a strong resemblance to the contemporary situation in Gaza. The Bosnian Serbs imposed a similar type of forced starvation on the people in Srebrenica. They shut the Bosniaks into a small and overpopulated area with an inadequate food supply and restricted the international aid to the minimal level before finally eliminating them.

These findings constitute reasonable grounds for the conclusion that the ongoing war has already shown several key symptoms of genocide. The Israeli military operations have gone well beyond the initial stages of the Namibian case (confinement in an unsustainable environment), the Armenian case (mass displacement, mass killings, forced starvation, and unhygienic conditions), and the Bosnian case (enclosure and siege in a small place, incessant bombing, and the cutting off of outside aid). If the Israeli campaign goes on unchecked, it is plausible to believe that it will develop into a full-fledged genocide. However, as to the question of whether the contemporary stage has already reached such levels, the answer is skeptical. The proportion of death is, so far, much lower than the previous cases. Moreover, whether the Netanyahu government is pursuing the policy with genocidal intention or not is not crystal clear. In light of the consistent remarks of the Israeli leadership on the mass migration of the Gazans, their intentions seem to remain at the level of ethnic cleansing. At the same time, however, compared with the ethnic cleansing during the Bosnian war, the ongoing Israeli war is much larger in scale and akin to the Armenian case. It is true that the scale of mass starvation in Gaza is gradually approaching those of the previous three cases. Regarding these developments, it seems

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prudent to call the Israeli war on Gaza an extraordinary immense ethnic cleansing that is on the threshold of genocide.

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