

UNIVERSITY OF PADOVA

European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation
A.Y. 2025/2026

Dehumanization of Palestinians

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Israeli Political and Official Discourse

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Word Count Declaration: 21.887

Abstract

This study examines how Palestinians are represented in Israeli political, military, and public discourse following the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023, and the extent to which these representations contribute to the legitimisation of mass violence against them. The study is based on dehumanisation theory and employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its methodological approach. The data consist of thirteen excerpts from statements made by Israeli political, military, and other officials, published between 9 October 2023 and 13 January 2024.

The analysis showed that dehumanisation is not expressed through a single strategy but through a network of interconnected discursive forms, including animalistic dehumanisation, delegitimising beliefs, social categorisation, moral disengagement, and the representation of Palestinians as a collectively responsible group. The most important finding of the study is that Palestinians are systematically constructed as a single, undifferentiated collective entity, without any distinction between combatants and civilians, thereby facilitating the legitimisation of mass violence against them. The findings confirm the theoretical link between dehumanisation and the legitimisation of mass violence and highlight the crucial role of language in constructing representations that make violence against a particular group more easily justifiable.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Pietro de Perini, whose knowledge, positivity, support, and guidance were invaluable to the completion of this dissertation.

I would also like to thank all the Professors of the Master's Programme, both during the first and the second semester, for the journey into knowledge they offered us, as well as all members of the staff for their guidance and assistance.

With heartfelt appreciation, I would like to thank my family and friends for their constant support.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to all the people I met during this experience, with whom I shared the same journey and whom I consider my EMA family.

Authors note

The truth is that I hesitated for quite some time when choosing the topic of my dissertation. I decided to move away from the subjects that were already familiar to me, namely education, the refugee crisis,

and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the end, I chose to focus on one of the issues that has affected me most deeply in recent years: the question of Palestine. I did so in order to pay tribute to the thousands of children who have been killed since 7 October 2023 and to open a new window of knowledge for myself.

Growing up, I had the impression that things were gradually getting better. After all, in history classes we always focused on the Second World War and almost never continued beyond it. We believed that “Never Again” had been achieved, even while the Balkans were burning. And beyond our European geographical bubble, even while people were being massacred in Rwanda. So how did we get here? How did we diminish the meaning of “Never Again”?

Working on this dissertation, which examines how language shapes our world and, in turn, is shaped by it, and engaging with International Humanitarian Law, I must admit that I struggle to understand why humanity has institutionalized a legal framework for how wars should be conducted. Every act of violence and every conflict should be condemned from its very beginning, rather than the use of violence being accepted as a legitimate means of resolving disputes. Some may say that I view the world too romantically. My response is that everything is ultimately a social contract. If we have collectively decided to organize our affairs in one way, we can also decide to organize them differently.

We must never forget how easily hate speech can turn to hate crime
Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary General

Genocide is always accompanied by dehumanization of the victims
B’Tselem

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Introduction

Introduction to the topic

Following the atrocities of the Second World War, the international community turned towards the protection of human rights by establishing international law as we know it today, creating international organisations, and adopting the slogan "Never Again." However, these efforts have not prevented new outbreaks of mass violence around the world. Since October 2023, humanity has, for the first time, witnessed a genocide unfolding in real time (Cotteret, 2025).

The origins of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, when Israel had not yet been established as a state and was gradually represented by the Zionist movement, while Palestine was under Ottoman rule (Pappé, 2024). Over the years, violence has at times subsided and at other times escalated. However, since October 2023, the situation has changed dramatically.

This violence is also reflected in discourse. Dehumanising rhetoric against Palestinians has been employed by the Zionist movement since the beginning of the conflict (Pappé, 2024). However, following the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023, there was a significant escalation in the use of dehumanising, derogatory, and racist language by Israeli politicians, government officials, and senior military figures (Amnesty International, 2024). According to Amnesty International (2024), this rhetoric, together with the corresponding actions, indicated that the Palestinian population in Gaza was at serious risk of genocide. Similarly, South Africa's application before the International Court of Justice identified many of these statements as evidence of genocidal rhetoric and argued that similar expressions had become widespread in public discourse without meaningful condemnation or accountability (International Court of Justice, 2023, para. 106).

Against this background, the present study examines how Palestinians are represented in Israeli political, military, and public discourse, and the extent to which these representations contribute to the legitimisation of mass violence against them.

The study is based on dehumanisation theory and is conducted using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). In the present study, dehumanisation is understood as the process through which individuals or social groups are denied characteristics considered to be human and are portrayed as inferior,

dangerous, or unworthy of moral protection. There are two main forms of dehumanisation, animalistic and mechanistic, and it can be expressed through different dimensions, such as delegitimising beliefs, social categorisation, moral exclusion, and moral disengagement. These concepts constitute the theoretical framework of the present study and are discussed in detail in Chapter 2 (Haslam, 2006).

Examining these issues is particularly important in the contemporary context, as they raise broader questions regarding the limits of human rights protection, the effectiveness of international law, and the preservation of the principle of "Never Again."

Methodology

Research Aim

The present study aims to examine how Palestinians are represented in the public discourse of Israeli politicians and officials, with particular emphasis on whether dehumanising language is used against them. At the same time, it seeks to investigate whether there is a connection between these representations and the legitimisation of mass violence against Palestinians.

Research questions

To achieve the aim of this study, the following two research questions will be addressed:

- How are Palestinians represented in Israeli political and public discourse?
- How does Israeli discourse justify and normalise mass atrocities against Palestinians as a whole?

These two research questions are intended to address the overall aim of the study by examining how Palestinians are represented in official public discourse, whether different dimensions of dehumanisation can be identified in this discourse, whether recurring patterns emerge, and whether these representations are linked to the justification and legitimisation of mass violence against Palestinians.

Research Data

The research sample consists of thirteen excerpts from statements made by Israeli politicians and officials. These excerpts were produced in the immediate aftermath of the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023, specifically between 9 October 2023 and 13 January 2024. This period was selected because, according to Amnesty International (2024) and South Africa's application before the International Court of Justice (2023), there was a significant escalation in dehumanising rhetoric against Palestinians during this time. The excerpts were selected purposively because they corresponded most closely to the theoretical dimensions of dehumanisation discussed in Chapter 2.

The sample includes not only politicians and officials with authority within the War Cabinet, but also military officers, government officials, ministers, members of the Knesset, and government spokespersons. Although not all of them were members of the War Cabinet, they all held institutional positions that gave them significant public visibility and the ability to influence public discourse and public opinion.

Research Method

The method employed in this study is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The focus of CDA on language and discourse originated in critical linguistics, which emerged in the late 1970s (van Dijk, 2015). Critical Discourse Analysis is a qualitative research method that emphasises the role of language as a means of power closely connected to ideology and social and cultural change (Bryman, 2017). More specifically, CDA is a form of discourse analysis that primarily examines the ways in which the abuse of social power and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimised, and resisted through text and discourse within their social and political contexts. Critical discourse analysts take an explicit position in order to understand, expose, and ultimately challenge social inequality. Political discourse constitutes one of the most important fields of application of CDA, as it is directly related to issues of power, ideology, and social inequality.

According to van Dijk (2015), the general characteristics of CDA are the following:

- a. It primarily focuses on social problems and political issues within their social and political contexts.

- b. It is interdisciplinary.
- c. It explains discourse in relation to the properties of social interaction and social structure.
- d. It focuses on the ways in which discourse structures establish, confirm, legitimise, reproduce, or challenge relations of power abuse in society.

Among the main principles of CDA identified by Fairclough and Wodak (1997) are the assumptions that discourse performs ideological work and that discourse constitutes a form of social action.

Some of the theoretical issues that are central to CDA include the relationship between social macro- and micro-structures, domination as a form of power abuse, and the ways in which dominant groups control text, context, and consequently the minds of others.

According to van Dijk (2015), language use, discourse, verbal interaction, and communication belong to the micro-level of social analysis, whereas power, domination, and social inequality between groups are phenomena of the macro-level. Consequently, Critical Discourse Analysis seeks to bridge the gap between these two levels.

A central concept in most critical studies of discourse is power, and more specifically the social power of groups or institutions. According to van Dijk (2015), social power can be understood as the ability of groups or institutions to control the actions and minds of others. Such power is often based on privileged access to social resources, including knowledge, information, and public discourse. Groups that control influential forms of discourse are more likely to shape and control the actions of others.

Van Dijk (2015) also discusses the strategy known as the ideological square, according to which the general strategy of dominant discourse and mind control typically follows the basic polarisation of underlying group ideologies: emphasising our good things, emphasising their bad things, mitigating our bad things, and mitigating their good things.

CDA does not constitute a single unified theoretical framework. Within its general aims and characteristics, there are various approaches to CDA that may differ considerably in both theoretical and analytical terms. Nevertheless, CDA represents a critical perspective that can be found across all areas of discourse studies. As such, it allows for the use of all methods of interdisciplinary discourse analysis, as well as other relevant methods from the humanities and social sciences (van Dijk, 2015).

The present study adopts Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis. According to this model, every discourse can be analysed at three interconnected levels. The first level

is the text, which refers to the linguistic features of discourse, such as vocabulary, metaphors, grammatical choices, and rhetorical strategies. The second level is discursive practice, which concerns the processes of production, distribution, and consumption of discourse, as well as the ways in which particular meanings are constructed and reproduced. The third level is social practice, which examines the relationship between discourse and broader social, political, and ideological structures of power. Fairclough argues that discourse does not merely reflect social reality but actively contributes to shaping, reproducing, or challenging it. Consequently, the analysis links the linguistic features of texts to the processes through which they are produced and to the broader socio-political context within which they are created and acquire meaning.

Potter and Wetherell (as cited in Bryman, 2017) argue that it is important to engage with other discourse analytic studies in order to sharpen the analytical sensitivity that lies at the core of discourse analysis and because previous studies may offer insights relevant to the analyst's own data.

In this context, the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), as presented in the study by Maalej and Zibin (2025), is employed to identify and analyse metaphorical expressions that contribute to the dehumanization of Palestinians in Israeli public discourse.

This procedure begins with a close reading of the texts in order to identify words and expressions that deviate from their literal meaning. These expressions are then examined in relation to their historical, political, and social context in order to understand their function within discourse. Particular emphasis is placed on identifying the relationship between the target domain and the source domain of a metaphor. For example, when Palestinians are represented as “cockroaches,” the target domain is human beings and the source domain is insects.

Subsequently, the linguistic features of the metaphors and the ways in which they construct specific representations of social groups are examined. Finally, the metaphors are interpreted through the lens of dehumanization theory in order to demonstrate how certain linguistic choices deprive a group of people of characteristics associated with human worth, dignity, and moral status, thereby contributing to the legitimization or justification of violence against them.

The animal metaphors identified in the data are analysed as forms of animalistic dehumanization, as they portray Palestinians as inferior, dangerous, or not fully human, in accordance with Haslam's (2006) model.

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The author declares that, during the preparation of this dissertation, Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used, specifically ChatGPT (OpenAI), exclusively for language support (grammar, style, and translation) and for checking the reference list to ensure the correct application of the APA referencing style. The research design, literature selection, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, and final conclusions are the sole responsibility of the author.

Regarding the Use of the Term Genocide in This Study

Within the limited timeframe available for the completion of this dissertation, an effort was made to collect sources from Palestinians, Israelis, and scholars specializing in the subject in order to maintain objectivity. The aim is not to demonize one side over the other, since, as Albanese argues (as cited in Cotteret, 2025), this conflict is tragic not only for Palestinians but also for Israelis.

Chapter 1 presents the positions of scholars who argue that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza, scholars who were initially opposed to the use of the term genocide but later changed their position as the conflict evolved and new evidence emerged, and scholars who continue to reject the characterization of the events as genocide.

In the present study, the term genocide will be used to describe the situation on the basis of the findings of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, Francesca Albanese (2024), the International Court of Justice (2024), which considered the claim of genocide to be plausible, as well as the assessments of international organizations, legal scholars, and researchers examining the Palestine-Israel conflict.

Structure

With regard to the structure of this dissertation, Chapter 1 presents the history of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, focusing on the Israeli policies that led to the current situation, describing the conditions of the present crisis, the rhetoric surrounding it, and the complicity of the international community in violations of international law. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework of the study, focusing on

polarisation, self- and other-representation, and dehumanisation. It also clarifies a number of legal concepts that recur throughout the dissertation, including international law, customary international law, international humanitarian law, international criminal law, genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, occupation, civilians, and hate speech, in order to ensure conceptual clarity. Chapter 3 presents the research data, namely excerpts of discourse in which Palestinians are dehumanised in public discourse, together with their analysis and the discussion of the findings. Finally, the dissertation concludes with the study's conclusions, the discussion of the findings in relation to the research questions, the limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 1: Historical and current framework

This chapter aims to provide a concise yet comprehensive overview of the long history of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, from its origins in the late nineteenth century to the present day. It then examines key aspects of the contemporary context, including the main positions in current academic and legal debates regarding the characterisation of the events in Gaza, as well as issues such as torture, the lack of accountability, and international complicity. Finally, it discusses the use of rhetoric and dehumanising language in both the historical and the contemporary contexts.

Historical context

As noted in the Introduction, the origins of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict can be traced to the late nineteenth century, when Israel had not yet been established as a state, the Zionist movement was gradually emerging as its political representative, and Palestine remained under Ottoman rule (Pappé, 2024).

During the period of the Ottoman Empire, travellers and diplomats from around the world referred to and recorded this territory on their maps as Palestine. By the end of the nineteenth century, approximately half a million people lived there, around 70% of whom were Muslims, alongside significant Jewish and Christian communities. These populations lived across the three Ottoman districts of Nablus, Acre, and Jerusalem, which together covered roughly the area of present-day Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. In the final years of the Ottoman Empire, Palestine was undergoing modernisation, experiencing a cultural renaissance, and witnessing the emergence of a modern Palestinian identity. However, this process was interrupted by the First World War and the rise of Zionism in Palestine (Pappé, 2024).

Christian Zionism originated in sixteenth-century Europe among Evangelical Christians, primarily in pursuit of their own religious and political interests. They were the first to view Jews as members of a nation or ethnic group rather than merely followers of the Jewish faith. However, Christian Zionism differs from Jewish Zionism, which emerged largely in response to the rise of violent antisemitism and nationalism in Europe. Jewish intellectuals regarded nationalism as a means of modernising Jewish identity, revived the ancient Hebrew language, and interpreted the Old Testament as a historical document supporting the claim that Palestine belonged to the Jewish people. Nevertheless, the early Zionists did not initially consider Palestine to be the only possible location for a Jewish state and even proposed the establishment of such a state in Uganda, although this plan was later abandoned (Pappé, 2024).

According to Pappé (2024), the first Zionist settlers arrived in Palestine in 1882. From this early period, Palestinians were portrayed as outsiders and usurpers of the land who therefore ought to be removed to neighbouring countries. Pappé (2024) argues that settler colonialism relies on the dehumanisation of the Indigenous population. In the Palestinian case, this took the form of a particular rhetorical strategy

in which Palestinians were portrayed as "nomads" with no genuine connection to the land, despite the existence of villages that had been inhabited for thousands of years. At the same time, the settlers claimed that their mission was to modernise an underdeveloped land, but not its people, who were expected to leave.

Following the end of the First World War, the victorious powers - Britain, France, and the United States - established the League of Nations and introduced the Mandate System, under which the League authorised member states to administer former colonies or territories of the Ottoman Empire until they were considered ready for full independence. Palestine came under British administration in 1917 and was governed under the British Mandate from 1923 to 1948. The British government had previously entered into agreements with representatives of the Pan-Arab nationalist movement and had promised the Palestinians that they would be able to exercise their right to self-determination and achieve independence, like other newly established Arab states. However, under the influence of the Zionist movement, which argued that a Jewish homeland in Palestine would serve Britain's strategic interests in the region, the British government issued the Balfour Declaration in 1917. The Declaration stated that Palestine would become a national home for the Jewish people while simultaneously safeguarding the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, who constituted the majority of the population (Pappé, 2024).

During the 1920s, the Zionist movement underwent a fundamental transformation. Rather than seeking a secure homeland for the Jewish people with the support of the imperial powers, it increasingly pursued the settler-colonial project of Palestine through large-scale land purchases and the displacement of the Indigenous population. It was also during this period that the Zionist paramilitary organisation, the Haganah, was established. According to Pappé (2024), the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, which had been part of the Zionist project from the outset because Palestine was never "a land without a people", began in the 1920s and continues to the present day. In response, displaced Palestinian farmers, many of whom had been forced into overcrowded shantytowns, developed a new form of resistance against both Zionism and British rule through guerrilla warfare (Pappé, 2024).

Britain attempted to manage the outbreak of violence in 1929 by revising its governing policy, as its commissions of inquiry concluded that the violence resulted from the Zionist project of displacing Palestinians and the Palestinian resistance to it. Nevertheless, under pressure from the leader of the World Zionist Organization, the pro-Zionist policy continued. In response, Palestinians initially sought

to change British policy through petitions, demonstrations, and conferences held in London between 1930 and 1936. This was followed by the Arab Revolt of 1936 - 1939, which was suppressed through extensive violence, aerial bombardment, and collective punishment (Pappé, 2024).

Britain continued to rely on commissions of inquiry in an attempt to resolve the conflict. In 1937, the Peel Commission proposed the partition of Palestine and the creation of a future small Jewish state alongside Jordan. However, in 1938, the Woodhead Commission concluded that it would not be possible for most of the Mandate of Palestine to become a Jewish state without committing a profound injustice against the Palestinian people.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the mass murder of six million Jews further hardened the Zionist position, which no longer sought any compromise with the Palestinians, while continuing to receive support from Britain, the United States, and the European powers (Pappé, 2024).

The final three years of the British Mandate (1945–1948) were marked by the failure of diplomatic efforts to end the conflict, the inability of the Arab world to influence developments on the ground, and the Zionist movement's final preparations for the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians. Significantly, even before the official establishment of the State of Israel, three Zionist paramilitary organisations were already operating: the Haganah, the Irgun, and the Stern Gang (Pappé, 2024).

Unable to resolve the conflict, Britain referred the question of Palestine to the United Nations on 1 February 1947. The UN subsequently adopted Resolution 181, which proposed the partition of Palestine and ultimately led to the establishment of the State of Israel. Under the UN proposal, 56% of the territory of Palestine was allocated to the proposed Jewish state, 43% to a Palestinian state, while Jerusalem and its surrounding areas were to become an internationally administered enclave (Pappé, 2024).

According to Amaireh (2024, as cited in Maalej & Zibin, 2025), the official position is that Israel is recognised by the United Nations as a sovereign state that was established in 1948 with the support of imperial Britain as a homeland for the Jewish people, at the expense of the Palestinians who were already living there. This has resulted in a continuing impasse. On the one hand, Palestinians view Israel as a settler-colonial power against which resistance is justified. On the other hand, Israel maintains that it possesses historical rights over Palestine as its "Promised Land" and, as part of its expansionist ideology, over neighbouring Arab territories as well.

According to Pappé (2024), it was evident that both the Palestinians and the wider Arab world would reject the partition plan. Israel took advantage of Palestinian opposition to the plan, and in February 1948 launched what Pappé describes as the largest campaign of ethnic cleansing in Palestine up to that time through large-scale expulsion operations. The objective was to remove as many Palestinians as possible in order to create a state with a Jewish majority. To achieve this, Plan Dalet was implemented. Under this plan, each village was surrounded on three sides while the fourth side was deliberately left open to allow residents to flee. The villages were then destroyed, and explosives were placed among the ruins to prevent anyone from returning. By the time the British Mandate officially ended, while Britain remained responsible for maintaining law and order, approximately 250,000 Palestinians had already become refugees. By the end of 1948, around half of Palestine's Arab population had been expelled, more than 500 villages had been destroyed, and most Palestinian towns had been devastated. The Arab states waited until the formal end of the British Mandate on 14 May 1948 before sending troops in an attempt to halt the ethnic cleansing operations, but they failed to do so. It was during this period that Gaza began to take the form with which it is associated today. Before 1948, Gaza had been a cosmopolitan city. Afterwards, according to Pappé (2024), it was transformed by Israel into the world's largest refugee camp in order to facilitate the ethnic cleansing of other parts of historic Palestine and to contain the resulting refugee population. As a result, most of the people living in Gaza today are refugees or descendants of refugees displaced during the ethnic cleansing of 1948.

Therefore, 1948 constitutes a major turning point in the Israeli - Palestinian conflict. For Jews, it represents the War of Independence and the establishment of the State of Israel. In contrast, for Palestinians and the Arab world more broadly, the same year represents the Nakba ("Catastrophe"), namely the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians through the forced displacement of more than 750,000 Indigenous inhabitants of Palestine and their descendants, followed by the destruction of property, expulsion, displacement, and the killing of Palestinians by the Israeli army (Fierke, 2008).

In Palestine, the displacement and elimination of the Indigenous Arab population were regarded as an essential part of the creation of Israel as a "Jewish State." Joseph Weitz, head of the Jewish Colonization Department (1932-1948), argued that there was no room for both peoples in the country. In his view, the only solution was a Palestine without Arabs, insisting that everyone had to be transferred and that not a single village or tribe should remain (Albanese, 2024).

The international response to the ethnic cleansing of Palestine initially resulted in the Lausanne Protocol (1949), which called for the return of Palestinian refugees, reaffirmed the 1947 partition plan, and supported the internationalisation of Jerusalem. Ultimately, however, it resulted in the consolidation of the borders sought by Israel. According to Pappé (2024), the Nakba of 1948 was not only an act of ethnic cleansing and land seizure, but also an attempt to make the reconstruction of a Palestinian nation impossible.

Israel was never held accountable for the crimes against humanity committed during the ethnic cleansing of 1948, despite the existence of extensive reports by experts documenting these events. According to Pappé (2024), this was due to decisions taken "from above." As a result, Israel continued to employ ethnic cleansing as a means of establishing and consolidating the state, leading many scholars to describe it as a settler-colonial society. Furthermore, Pappé (2024) argues that Israel's actions between 1948 and 1967 demonstrate that Zionism functioned as an ongoing settler-colonial project seeking to acquire more land while leaving as few Indigenous inhabitants as possible, thereby securing a Jewish demographic majority.

By 1963-1964, Israel had already developed the Shaham Plan, which aimed to establish Greater Israel, encompassing the whole of historic Palestine, including present-day Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. In order to gain control of the territories it had not secured in 1948, Israel fought the Six-Day War in 1967, after which it controlled the entirety of historic Palestine (Pappé, 2024). Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and later annexed East Jerusalem, marking the beginning of a prolonged military occupation in violation of international law. The new municipal boundaries of Jerusalem were drawn largely according to Israel's political, demographic, and economic interests, with the aim of ensuring a Jewish majority (B'Tselem, 2019). The occupation has included practices such as administrative detention, killings, house demolitions, land confiscation, and routine abuse by the military, all of which have become part of Palestinians' everyday reality. In terms of external support, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) was established in 1963 as a lobbying organisation in the United States to promote unconditional support for Israel. According to Pappé (2024), since 1967 the United States has adopted the position that the conflict began in 1967, and this remains the basis of its policy today.

During this period, additional Israeli settlements were established in the Jordan Valley, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank, including some of the areas most densely populated by Palestinians. Under

international law, all of these settlements are considered illegal. Nevertheless, the Israeli Supreme Court initially approved them as temporary measures justified on grounds of defence and national security, before they later became permanent civilian settlements.

It is important to note that, in the meantime, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was established in 1964 as an umbrella organisation representing the various Palestinian resistance groups. For many years, it was recognised as the sole representative of the Palestinian people willing to negotiate a two-state solution while insisting on the right of return for Palestinian refugees. In 1982, following Israeli attacks, the PLO was forced to leave its headquarters in Lebanon and relocate to Tunis, significantly reducing its effectiveness in pursuing the Palestinian liberation struggle. According to Pappé (2024), Yasser Arafat, the leader of the PLO, was willing to recognise Israel and abandon the armed liberation struggle. However, Israel was not prepared to negotiate a two-state solution or withdraw from the territories it had acquired in 1948 and 1967, which successive Israeli governments regarded as the principal achievement of the Jewish state.

The period between 1967 and 1987 in the Occupied Palestinian Territories was also characterised by forced displacement, arrests, prolonged and arbitrary detention, and widespread abuse. In 1981, the military administration governing the Gaza Strip and the West Bank was replaced by a civil administration, which, according to Pappé (2024), added "the hardship of a hostile bureaucracy to the humiliation of military oppression." In practice, Palestinians could do virtually nothing without obtaining permission through Israel's system of checkpoints.

It was under these conditions that the First Intifada (1987-1993) broke out, reflecting widespread Palestinian resistance to the occupation (United Nations, n.d.). The uprising was primarily a non-violent protest movement during which Palestinians briefly gained control of several villages and neighbourhoods. Israel responded with killings, detention without trial, and collective punishment, including house demolitions, school closures, and expulsions.

During the First Intifada, in 1991, Israel further strengthened its policy of separation by introducing restrictions on the movement of Palestinians. From that point onwards, Palestinians were required to obtain individual permits from the Civil Administration in order to enter Israel or East Jerusalem. These restrictions were gradually tightened until Israel permanently established checkpoints and significantly strengthened the criteria for obtaining permits. This policy effectively divided Palestinian

territory into three separate areas - the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip - making travel between them entirely dependent on Israeli authorisation (B'Tselem, 2019).

In response to the PLO's increasingly conciliatory position, the United States and the Soviet Union convened the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991. As a condition for its participation, Israel demanded that the PLO be excluded from the negotiations. Consequently, Palestine was represented by two alternative delegations. These delegations presented proposals that laid the political and social foundations for a two-state solution. Although the United States viewed these proposals favourably, Israel rejected them. The PLO also rejected the proposals and instead entered into secret negotiations with Israel.

Under the Oslo I Accord, Israel agreed to relinquish direct control over approximately 40% of the West Bank and to allow the newly established Palestinian Authority - created under the agreement and largely based on the former PLO - to administer Palestinian civil affairs. However, the Palestinian Authority was required to cooperate with the Israeli military and intelligence services in monitoring and suppressing resistance to the occupation. According to Pappé (2024), the way in which the agreement was negotiated, without the knowledge of the Israeli Prime Minister and without the participation of the Palestinian leadership based in Jerusalem that had taken part in the Madrid Peace Conference, together with the terms of the agreement itself, created deep divisions within the Palestinian resistance movement.

In 1995, the broad principles of the Oslo I Accord were formalised in the Oslo II Accord. Under this agreement, almost the entire West Bank was divided into three administrative areas based on demographic criteria that reflected neither geographical realities nor the territorial continuity of Palestinian land. Palestinian Areas A and B became fragmented and geographically disconnected, while Area C remained contiguous and included the Israeli settlements (B'Tselem, 2019). In practice, rather than bringing peace, Oslo II significantly worsened conditions in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and contributed to renewed cycles of violence.

Although the Oslo Accords initially raised hopes for peace and the establishment of a Palestinian state, they ultimately failed to resolve the conflict (United Nations, n.d.). Israel continued to control all border crossings, restrict Palestinians' freedom of movement through temporary and permanent checkpoints, and enforce a rigid and arbitrary permit regime that affected every aspect of Palestinian life. In 1994, Israel constructed a perimeter fence around the Gaza Strip, thereby gaining complete

control over the movement of people and goods between Gaza, Israel, the West Bank, and the rest of the world. As a result, daily life in Gaza became a continuous struggle, entirely dependent on Israel's permit system. To this day, Israel also maintains control over Gaza's territorial waters based solely on its own security assessments (B'Tselem, 2019).

The years 1996-1999 marked Benjamin Netanyahu's first term as Prime Minister. Although he pledged to uphold the Oslo Accords, he ultimately introduced more repressive measures against Palestinians, including the establishment of hundreds of checkpoints. He also intensified the Judaization of the greater Jerusalem area by allowing Jewish settlers to displace Palestinians, authorised the construction of tunnels alongside the Western Wall in Jerusalem, and responded to all forms of Palestinian resistance with collective punishment (Pappé, 2024).

The failure of the Oslo process contributed to the outbreak of the Second Intifada in September 2000, which intensified the violence and further deepened the lack of trust between the two sides (United Nations, n.d.). Following the outbreak of the Second Intifada, Israel imposed new and far stricter restrictions on Palestinian movement within the Occupied Palestinian Territories, many of which remain in force today. In the Gaza Strip, Israel established checkpoints that divided the territory into three separate areas. In the West Bank, it installed dozens of checkpoints and hundreds of physical obstacles, including dirt mounds, concrete blocks, and trenches. These measures constituted the most extensive and long-lasting restrictions on Palestinian movement since the beginning of the occupation, disrupting every aspect of daily life and preventing Palestinians from maintaining a normal routine (B'Tselem, 2019). The uprising gradually subsided following the death of Yasser Arafat in 2004. The failure of the Intifadas also reflected the inability of the secular Palestinian national movement to end the subjugation of the Palestinian people. Combined with the increasingly moderate leadership of the Palestinian Authority, this contributed to growing support for organisations such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (Pappé, 2024).

At this point, it is useful to briefly discuss the origins of these organisations. Both Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad originated from the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which had been founded in Egypt in 1928. The Israeli authorities initially viewed the Brotherhood favourably, believing that it could weaken the secular Palestinian resistance movement, and therefore allowed it to expand its influence in the Gaza Strip. However, the Brotherhood went on to establish the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in 1981 and Hamas in 1987. Both organisations consist of political and military wings.

According to Pappé (2024), Israel continued to regard Hamas as a useful counterweight to the secular and left-wing factions of the Palestinian resistance movement and secretly supported it, despite its public statements to the contrary.

In the following years, Israel intensified the Judaization of the West Bank and the Jerusalem area while further restricting the rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel through numerous discriminatory laws.

In 2002, the Israeli government decided to construct the Separation Barrier in the West Bank. The barrier fragmented contiguous Palestinian urban and rural areas, severed community ties that had developed over generations, and fundamentally reshaped the Palestinian landscape. Stretching approximately 712 kilometres, it was constructed in the form of a border barrier (B'Tselem, 2019).

That same year, the Arab League proposed the Arab Peace Initiative, which offered full recognition of Israel by all Arab states and endorsed a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders, without even referring to the right of return for Palestinian refugees. Israel and the United States rejected the proposal (Pappé, 2024).

In 2005, Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip with the intention of turning Gaza into a confined territory that would contain Hamas while allowing Israel to conduct military operations from outside without exposing Jewish settlers to danger (Pappé, 2024). Specifically, Israel removed approximately 8,000 Jewish settlers, dismantled all settlements in Gaza, relinquished responsibility for its civil administration, withdrew its military forces, and declared an end to its military rule over the Gaza Strip (Pappé, 2024; B'Tselem, 2019). These measures led to violent confrontations because many settlers refused to leave. In practice, however, this represented a new model of occupation rather than its end.

Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections in 2006, but under pressure from Israel and the United States, the other Palestinian political parties refused to recognise the new government. This ultimately led Hamas to seize control of the Gaza Strip by force in 2007. In response, Israel imposed a blockade on Gaza, restricting access to essential goods and, at times, limiting residents' access to water and electricity (Pappé, 2024). The blockade, which remains in place today, has further worsened the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip (United Nations, n.d.). As a result, Gaza has often been described as the world's largest open-air prison. The blockade caused severe economic collapse and left much of the population dependent on international humanitarian assistance. Under its blockade policy, Israel prohibits most travel to and from Gaza, restricts the import of numerous goods, and severely

limits exports. It also prevents the construction of a seaport that would allow the free movement of people and goods and blocks the reconstruction of Gaza's airport, which was destroyed in an Israeli airstrike in 2001 (B'Tselem, 2019). In addition, Israel launched three major military operations in the Gaza Strip between 2008 and 2014 (B'Tselem, 2019).

The period from 2009 to 2024 is described by Pappé (2024) as the Netanyahu era. According to Pappé, this period was characterised by the continued expansion of Jewish settlement in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the tightening of the blockade on Gaza, and the consolidation of an apartheid regime affecting Palestinians within Israel. In 2022, when the government sought to make the judiciary accountable to the executive, mass protests erupted across the country. Pappé (2024) argues that these demonstrations essentially reflected a conflict between secular Israel and the emerging theocratic direction of the state, while making no reference to the apartheid system imposed on Palestinians. He further argues that, when Hamas carried out the attacks of 7 October 2023, Israel was, in effect, on the verge of civil war.

To conclude this section, it is important to note that Israeli violations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories have been documented for decades. By 2004, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) had already informed the international community of its obligations to bring serious violations of international law to an end. By 6 October 2023, Israel had long denied the Palestinian people's right to self-determination through a racially discriminatory apartheid system. According to Albanese (2025), the unlawful blockade of Gaza, compounded by repeated military offensives involving war crimes and crimes against humanity, had already rendered the Gaza Strip "unliveable", thereby creating the conditions for genocide.

Current context

Since the establishment of the State of Israel, the settler-colonial regime has developed a number of structural foundations that have led to the current situation. B'Tselem (2025a) identifies three of the most significant. First, the apartheid regime, which relies on segregation, demographic engineering, and ethnic cleansing. Second, the systematic and institutionalised use of violence against Palestinians, while those responsible continue to enjoy impunity. Third, institutionalised mechanisms of dehumanisation that portray Palestinians as an existential threat.

According to Pappé (2024), the current assault on the Palestinian people must be understood within this broader historical context, in which Israel has imposed a violent and discriminatory regime on Palestinians, reaching its most extreme form against those living in the Gaza Strip. Pappé (2024) also argues that, as early as the 1940s, Zionist forces deliberately provoked confrontation and subsequently used Palestinian violence to justify claims of self-defence, thereby facilitating the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian areas through collective punishment. In his view, Israel's current policy represents a continuation of this historical pattern. Pappé (2024) further argues that Israel has used the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023 as a pretext for implementing genocidal policies in the Gaza Strip, while, for the United States, the conflict has provided an opportunity to reassert its influence in the Middle East.

Culmination of the conflict

Every genocide has a triggering event, typically a violent incident that creates a sense of existential threat. The attacks carried out by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups on 7 October 2023, which primarily targeted civilians, involved numerous war crimes and may also have constituted crimes against humanity. According to B'Tselem (2025a), these attacks served as the trigger for the current escalation.

On 7 October 2023, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, entered Israeli settlements and communities surrounding the Gaza Strip (Maalej & Zibin, 2025). The attacks resulted in the deaths of 1,218 Israelis and foreign nationals, of whom 882 were civilians, while 251 people were abducted and taken to Gaza as hostages (Cotteret, 2025). The Brigades brought Israeli hostages of different ages and nationalities back to Gaza with the aim of negotiating a prisoner exchange with the Israeli government involving Palestinian detainees and prisoners (Maalej & Zibin, 2025).

For Israeli society, the attacks themselves, together with their scale and consequences, created a profound sense of existential threat that led to significant social and political changes. According to B'Tselem (2025a), from October 2023 onwards, Israel fundamentally transformed its policy towards Palestinians, shifting from one primarily centred on repression and control to one characterised by destruction and extermination. More specifically, Israel has imposed collective punishment on the Palestinian people by portraying them collectively as "terrorists," "animals," and threats to national security, thereby presenting the punishment of the entire population as justified (Cotteret, 2025).

Debate on Genocide

This section presents some of the main representatives of each position, along with selected arguments, in order to provide the broader context of the debate regarding whether genocide is being committed in Gaza. To avoid moving away from the aims of the present study, a comprehensive review of all scholars' positions and arguments will not be undertaken.

Characterization as Genocide

After 7 October 2023, the scale of Israeli violence against Palestinians reached such an extent that, on 18 October 2023, 789 lawyers, scholars, and practitioners representing a wide range of academic and professional perspectives signed a public statement warning that Gaza was at risk of genocide (Public Statement: Scholars Warn of Potential Genocide in Gaza, 2023). In addition, as early as 2023, the Israeli historian Segal (2023) characterised Israel's actions in Gaza as genocide. In January 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ, 2024) considered the claim of genocide to be plausible and ordered provisional measures. In July of the same year, the Court ruled that Israel's presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories as a whole was unlawful and that it was required to withdraw completely, unconditionally, and as rapidly as possible. The United Nations General Assembly subsequently stated that the occupation should be dismantled by 18 September 2025 (Albanese, 2025). At the time of writing this thesis, Israel had not taken the above-mentioned actions.

In the same vein, in March 2024, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, Francesca Albanese, argued in her report *Anatomy of a Genocide* (2024) that there were reasonable grounds to believe that acts of genocide had been committed. In December 2024, Amnesty International likewise stated in its report *You Feel Like You Are Subhuman* (5 December 2024) that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza.

On 16 September 2025, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory concluded that Israel was committing genocide in the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, it emphasized the obligations of all states to prevent genocide, to cease committing and/or aiding and assisting genocide, and to punish those who commit and/or incite genocide (Albanese, 2025).

B'Tselem (2025), the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, stated in its report *Our Genocide* that:

“An examination of Israel’s policy in the Gaza Strip and its horrific outcomes, together with statements by senior Israeli political leaders and military commanders regarding the objectives of the assault, leads to the unequivocal conclusion that Israel is taking coordinated, deliberate action to destroy Palestinian society in the Gaza Strip. In other words: Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.”

Finally, both the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention (Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, 2024) and Academics for Peace have argued that genocide is taking place. More specifically, Prof. Mike Brand (Adjunct Professor of Mass Atrocities and International Law), in a statement issued through Academics for Peace, analyses the legal definition of genocide under the 1948 Genocide Convention and argues that the situation in Gaza meets the relevant legal criteria (Brand, n.d.).

Scholars Who Changed Their Position

Some scholars were initially reluctant to use the term genocide and instead described Israel’s military campaign in Gaza after 7 October 2023 as involving crimes against humanity or war crimes. Over time, however, they revised their assessments and came to argue that Israel is committing genocide.

For example, Dov Waxman (2023), Professor of Political Science and Israel Studies and Director of the UCLA Y&S Nazarian Center for Israel Studies, responded critically to Segal’s (2023) characterization of the situation as genocide, instead referring to a humanitarian catastrophe, the risk of genocidal practices, and war crimes. Nevertheless, as early as 2023, Waxman expressed concern about the rhetoric of the Israeli government, arguing that it dehumanized Palestinians and increased the risk of genocidal acts. Subsequently, Waxman (2025) revised his position and now argues that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza, maintaining that genocidal intent has become unmistakable. As he states, “Deliberately making it impossible for Palestinians to live as a group in Gaza crosses the legal threshold of genocide” (Waxman, 2025).

Similarly, the Israeli-American Holocaust and genocide scholar Omer Bartov initially referred to war crimes and crimes against humanity. By May 2024, however, he concluded that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza, arguing that a pattern of genocidal intent had become evident through both the

statements of Israeli leaders and the corresponding actions of the Israeli military. Bartov famously stated: “I have taught classes on genocide for a quarter of a century. I can recognize one when I see one” (Bartov, 2025). Bartov (2025) further emphasizes that recognizing genocide is of critical importance not only for the Palestinian and Israeli peoples, but also for the future of international law and genocide studies.

Scholars Who Do Not Accept the Term Genocide

On the other hand, there are scholars who reject the use of the legal term genocide to describe the events in Gaza. The Israeli government has denied all allegations of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide, and continues to portray the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) as the most moral army in the world (Bartov, 2025).

According to Goda and Herf (2025), it is inappropriate to use the term genocide to describe the conflict that began with Israel’s response to the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023. More specifically, Goda (2025) argues that accusations of genocide emerged shortly after the Hamas attacks, as early as October 2023, before there had been sufficient time to investigate the situation thoroughly. At the same time, he contends that attempts were made to redefine genocide in ways that dilute the essential legal elements of the crime (Goda, 2025).

Goda and Herf (2025) further maintain that the primary cause of the suffering experienced by the population of Gaza is the war initiated by Hamas. They argue that, from the outset of the conflict, Israeli leaders made clear that the war was directed against Hamas as a hostile armed organization and that its destruction constituted a legitimate military objective rather than a campaign against the people of Gaza. They also cite the statement made before the International Court of Justice by Israel’s legal representative, Tal Becker, who argued that if any acts could be described as genocidal, they were committed against Israel.

It is also argued that allegations of genocide rely heavily on civilian casualty figures reported in Gaza. According to Goda (2025), these figures originate from Gaza’s Ministry of Health, which is controlled by Hamas and allegedly manipulates the data by failing to distinguish between civilian and combatant deaths and by inflating the reported numbers of women and children killed. More broadly, Goda (2025) contends that Hamas conducts warfare from within civilian areas, with its fighters and military

infrastructure operating in and beneath hospitals, shelters, schools, mosques, and other civilian facilities, thereby placing civilians at risk.

Supporters of this position further argue that Israel does not intentionally target civilians. As evidence, Goda and Herf (2025) refer to leaked remarks attributed to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu concerning restrictions on the return of civilians to areas from which they had departed after receiving aid from distribution centres, on the grounds that they might intermingle with Hamas operatives. However, the newspaper *Maariv*, which reported these remarks, noted that they contradicted statements by Israeli defence officials, who supported allowing civilians to return.

According to Goda (2025), the genocide accusation “is political, designed not so much to describe a crime as to place Israel, its military, its citizens, and its supporters outside the boundaries of decency and human values.”

Finally, following statements by the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention and Human Security asserting that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza (Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, 2024), more than one hundred academics signed a letter arguing that “the Institute falsely accuses Israel of committing genocide in Gaza... Israel’s counterterrorism campaign in Gaza is not genocidal, either in intent or in action. Civilian deaths there are the result of Hamas embedding itself within populated areas and using civilians as human shields” (Wyman Institute, 2026).

On Antisemitism

Goda (2025) argues that the allegation that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza constitutes antisemitism, as it stems from narratives that portray Jews as uniquely evil and murderous. Bartov (2025), however, rejects this position, arguing that it is not antisemitic to show images of Palestinian children who have been dismembered by American-made bombs dropped by Israeli pilots. He further contends that genocide scholars who characterize allegations of Israeli genocide in Gaza as antisemitic risk undermining the foundations of genocide studies. According to Bartov, such a position is not only morally troubling but also creates space for denial, impunity, and the abandonment of the responsibility to condemn inhumanity and genocide wherever they occur (Bartov, 2025).

Albanese, who has also been accused of antisemitism, defines antisemitism as hatred of or discrimination against Jewish people because they are Jewish. She argues that the accusations directed

against her stem from her criticism of the Israeli government and its policies, rather than from any hostility toward Jews as an ethnic or religious group (Cotteret, 2025).

Pappé (2024) also argues that Israel seeks to suppress criticism of its policies by frequently invoking accusations of antisemitism. More specifically, he contends that Israel's definition of antisemitism includes criticism of the Israeli state as well as challenges to the moral foundations of Zionism.

Is the Goal Ethnic Cleansing?

Many observers and scholars describe the situation as a war. However, according to Bartov (2025) and Albanese (as cited in Cotteret, 2025), this characterization is misleading, as by 2024 the Israeli military was no longer fighting an organized military force. The Hamas formation responsible for the attacks of 7 October 2023 had largely ceased to exist, leaving behind a significantly weakened organization. Moreover, former Israeli Chief of Staff and Minister of Defense Moshe Ya'alon stated that the Israel Defense Forces were primarily engaged in a campaign of demolition and ethnic cleansing aimed at removing the population from northern Gaza (Bartov, 2025).

There have been explicit references to the Israeli campaign against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip as ethnic cleansing rather than genocide. According to Bartov (2025), however, the two crimes are closely connected, and genocide has ultimately become the means through which ethnic cleansing is being pursued. As he argues: “When an ethnic group has nowhere to go, is repeatedly displaced from one so-called safe zone to another, relentlessly bombed, and starved, ethnic cleansing can turn into genocide” (Bartov, 2025).

Torture and Genocide

According to Albanese (2026), torture has always been a central feature of the displacement of Palestinians by Israel and is rooted in discriminatory practices directed against Palestinians as a whole. During the British Mandate in Palestine, methods such as torture were employed as strategies of counterinsurgency. These practices were later adapted and incorporated into Israeli security structures, both before and after 1948, as tools for controlling and suppressing Palestinian resistance.

With regard to the contemporary situation, Albanese (2026) focuses on the systematic use of torture by Israel against Palestinians since 7 October 2023. Her report discusses extensively the use of torture at collective and individual levels, as well as within detention facilities.

According to Francesca Albanese (2026), Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are subjected to multiple forms of physical and psychological violence, including malnutrition, denial of medical care, ill-treatment, sexual violence, forced displacement, and constant surveillance. Albanese argues that the cumulative impact of siege, obstruction of humanitarian aid and food supplies, military violence, and mass displacement has created a “torturous environment” aimed at breaking Palestinian resistance, dignity, and steadfastness (*sumud*).

Furthermore, she argues that practices such as starvation and restrictions on humanitarian aid function not only as military tactics but also as forms of collective punishment and social torture, producing long-term physical and psychological consequences for the Palestinian population. Finally, Albanese (2026) links these practices to broader objectives of Palestinian displacement, territorial control, and settlement expansion.

According to Albanese (2026), since October 2023 torture in detention in particular has reached unprecedented levels. Arrests have been carried out on a massive scale, and Israeli soldiers have taken control of entire communities, violently detaining even elderly persons, people with disabilities, pregnant women, and children. Certain groups have been specifically targeted for detention and heightened abuse, sometimes resulting in violent death, including activists, doctors, political figures, human rights defenders, and journalists.

Genocide constitutes the ultimate form of torture. According to Albanese (2026), the manner in which torture has been implemented in detention facilities since October 2023, often openly and publicly acknowledged, reveals its integration into a broader genocidal campaign. Torturous detention conditions have resulted in an unprecedented number of deaths in custody. These practices function to degrade Palestinian bodies, break psychological integrity, and erode collective resilience. Even short-term detention inflicts physical and psychological harm whose effects extend beyond the individual, affecting families and entire communities in ways that are enduring and, in many cases, irreversible. In this context, Albanese (2026) argues that “torture constitutes a fundamental pillar of a genocidal project aimed at the complete elimination, physical and psychological destruction, displacement, and replacement of the Palestinian people, rather than a series of isolated incidents.”

Lack of Accountability

As Albanese (2026) argues, there is complete impunity for these acts of torture and, consequently, for broader genocidal practices. More specifically, since October 2023, only one case has resulted in a conviction: in February 2025, a military court sentenced a reservist to seven months' imprisonment for the sexual abuse of a Palestinian detainee at the Israeli military base of Sde Teiman. However, the sentence was never enforced, and the perpetrator was effectively protected. By contrast, the official responsible for leaking the video footage of the abuse was discredited and removed from his position.

In this context, lethal crimes against Palestinians are committed without those responsible being held accountable. As a result, such crimes become “normalized” in the eyes of soldiers, military commanders, politicians, media figures, and Israeli society more broadly (B'Tselem, 2025a).

Rhetoric and Society

To understand the intensity and persistence of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it is worth referring to the analysis of the Israeli journalist Gideon Levy (2023, as cited in Maalej & Zibin, 2025). According to Levy, Israeli society has been shaped by three central beliefs. First, the belief that Israel occupies a unique or privileged position as the “chosen people,” a notion that is often invoked to legitimize its actions. Second, the perception that Israel continues to be viewed primarily as a victim, even within the context of the prolonged Israeli occupation, thereby obscuring the position of the Palestinians. Third, the systematic dehumanization of Palestinians, who are frequently not regarded as equal human beings possessing the same rights and inherent human worth.

Genocidal intent and torture have become a collective enterprise in which state institutions (the executive, legislative, and judicial branches), religious authorities, academics, media organizations, public figures, medical personnel, and other sectors of society contribute to rhetoric directed against Palestinians (Albanese, 2026).

Indicative in this regard is the following passage from Albanese (2026) concerning investigations into the torture of a Palestinian detainee at the Israeli military base of Sde Teiman: “Senior ministers described torture as ‘sacred work’, investigations as national betrayal, and the perpetrators as ‘heroic warriors’. A rabbi offered blessings, and the public largely opposed any investigation.” Religious

leaders therefore play a significant role, invoking biblical narratives to moralize cruelty and frame collective punishment and revenge against Palestinians as a moral duty.

Furthermore, the media, academia, and popular culture disseminate this rhetoric and dehumanizing language through mainstream platforms (Albanese, 2026). Bartov (2025) argues that the media shields the Israeli public from the scenes of devastation in Gaza in order to promote the narrative that this is a defensive war “against an enemy resembling the Nazis.” Particularly striking are televised calls for the “destruction” of Gaza as an “opportunity” to remove its population, celebrations of acts of torture, public discussions regarding the legitimacy of raping detainees, and videos showing Israeli soldiers shooting Palestinians or blowing up residential areas. Civilians have also been allowed access to witness and record the abuse of Palestinians using their mobile phones (Albanese, 2026).

According to Bartov (2025), Israel, which was established in the aftermath of the Holocaust as a response to the Nazi genocide of the Jews, has consistently perceived threats to its security through the prism of a potential “another Auschwitz,” that is, another genocide. As a result, those perceived as enemies are frequently portrayed as Nazis. The term “Nazi” is repeatedly used in Israeli media discourse to “depict Hamas and, by extension, all residents of Gaza, based on the popular claim that none of them are uninvolved, not even infants, who would eventually grow up to become fighters” (Bartov, 2025).

Dehumanizing Rhetoric

According to Albanese (2024, 2026), this rhetoric has been developing for decades, rooted in colonial structures and narratives, reaching the level of the dehumanization of Palestinians. Since 7 October 2023, statements that incite genocide have multiplied significantly.

More specifically, the above demonstrates how dehumanizing language and inhumane treatment are disseminated and normalized within Israeli society. According to Albanese (2026), “dehumanization is deliberate, violence is authorized, and accountability is evaded. Torture, as a means of enacting genocidal intent, is socially produced, politically defended, and publicly absorbed as the ‘unquestionable right of the colonizer’, whereby one nation unites in celebrating the destruction of another.”

In the contemporary context, Albanese (2026) highlights how language is used to frame Palestinians as “human animals,” “terrorists,” and “human shields.” She argues that such representations contribute to

the construction of the entire civilian population as a legitimate target. Even children, who are at times portrayed as “future terrorists,” are affected by this discourse, which both reflects and reinforces a climate of fear and vulnerability.

Segal (2023) also draws attention to the dehumanizing language employed by Israel, which portrays Palestinians collectively as the embodiment of absolute evil. According to Segal, this rhetoric serves to justify the large-scale destruction of Palestinian lives, blur the distinction between Hamas combatants and Gaza’s civilian population, and obscure the broader context of settler colonialism and occupation (Segal, 2023).

Rhetoric and Third-State Complicity

Beyond the lack of accountability and the acceptance of, or even participation in, such practices within Israeli society, the recognition or denial of genocide has crucial implications for the role and obligations of other states. As noted above, on 26 January 2024, the ICJ confirmed the serious risk of genocide in Gaza, thereby triggering the obligations of other states to prevent genocide and to punish incitement, perpetration, and complicity. According to Albanese (2025), these obligations have yet to be fulfilled.

According to Albanese (2025), the ongoing genocide of Palestinians must be understood as an internationally enabled crime. Powerful third states continue to provide support in four key areas: diplomatic, military, economic, and “humanitarian,” thereby enabling Israel to continue violating international law.

These powerful third states reproduce Israeli distortions of international law and colonial rhetoric in an effort to justify their own complicity in genocide. Following 7 October 2023, most Western leaders have portrayed Israelis collectively as “civilians” and “hostages,” while portraying Palestinians collectively as “ Hamas terrorists,” “legitimate” or “collateral” targets, “human shields,” or lawful detainees, thereby erasing fundamental distinctions between combatants and civilians. Furthermore, the broader assault on Gaza has been framed as a battle of civilization against barbarism, reviving the discourse of the “war on terror” and thereby providing justification for violence against Palestinians. Western leaders have also expressed support for Israel’s “self-defence,” a claim that Albanese (2025) argues is not justified under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. For example, United States President Joseph Biden repeated unsubstantiated reports concerning “beheaded babies,” while “the

leader of the opposition in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Keir Starmer, defended Israel's right to cut off water and electricity to civilians" (Albanese, 2025).

Even amid urgent calls for a ceasefire, Western states, led by the United States, supported only humanitarian "corridors," "pauses," and temporary "truces," without making any substantial effort to secure a permanent ceasefire, thereby contributing to the continuation of the violence. Significantly, after October 2023, the United States used its veto power in the United Nations Security Council seven times, thereby influencing ceasefire negotiations and providing diplomatic cover for Israel's actions in Gaza (Albanese, 2025).

At the same time, a number of non-Western states have turned to international courts in an effort to seek accountability and pressure Israel to halt genocide and other violations of international law, in contrast to most Western states, which continue to reject the characterization of genocide (Albanese, 2025). The Court found a plausible risk of "irreparable prejudice" to the rights of Palestinians in Gaza, a protected group under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, and ordered Israel, *inter alia*, to "take all measures within its power" to prevent genocidal acts, prevent and punish incitement to genocide, and ensure the provision of urgently needed humanitarian assistance.

In its defence, Israel argued that its conduct was consistent with international humanitarian law. However, Albanese (2024) contends that Israel has strategically invoked the framework of international humanitarian law as a form of "humanitarian camouflage" in order to legitimize genocidal violence in Gaza.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter sought to provide both the historical and contemporary context of the Israeli - Palestinian conflict, with particular attention to the evolution of rhetoric and dehumanisation over time. It demonstrated that the events following 7 October 2023 cannot be examined in isolation from the long historical development of the conflict. At the same time, it outlined the broader context within which Israel's military campaign after 7 October 2023 should be understood, including the different academic and legal perspectives regarding its characterisation, as well as issues such as torture, the lack of accountability, and the role of the international community. References to rhetoric and dehumanising language were presented in both the historical and contemporary contexts, highlighting that they do not

constitute a new phenomenon but rather a longstanding practice employed throughout the conflict. This overview is not intended to provide an exhaustive analysis of these individual issues; rather, it aims to establish the necessary context for the examination of the concept of dehumanisation in the following chapter.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework considered necessary for a broader understanding of the present study. More specifically, it is divided into two parts. The first is a predominantly theoretical section, beginning with a discussion of polarisation and self- and other-interpretation, before focusing on the theory of dehumanisation and its various forms. The second is a legal section that provides conceptual explanations of key terms that are either referred to throughout the dissertation or are essential for a broader understanding of the topic. The concepts defined include international human rights law, customary international law, international humanitarian law, international criminal law, genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, occupation, the civilian population, and hate speech.

Polarization, Self-Representation and Othering

The history of genocide demonstrates that discrimination, persecution, and other preliminary stages often prepare the ground for genocide (Albanese, 2024). Some of these preparatory stages are also characterized by the use of language. Maalej and Zibin (2025) identify polarization as one such stage, whereby an in-group and an out-group are constructed. Since conflicts inherently involve processes of polarization, they generate their own configurations of inclusion and exclusion. A second stage is self- and other-representation, which provides the interpretative frameworks through which the in-group and out-group are understood. In situations of conflict, members of the in-group typically employ positive

self-representations, whether literal or metaphorical, while simultaneously constructing negative representations of the out-group.

Discussing discrimination against people perceived as fundamentally different from oneself, Leyens et al. (2000, as cited in Maalej & Zibin, 2025) argue that “people belonging to these groups are others; they are fundamentally different from ‘us’ and, therefore, are not considered to possess fully human characteristics and are viewed as subhuman.” Importantly, this ideological process is manifested through what van Dijk (2003, as cited in Maalej & Zibin, 2025) refers to as othering, arguing that “one way of doing this is to represent Others in terms of a Problem-for-Us at all social levels: jobs, housing, welfare, crime, behaviour, and so on.”

Dehumanisation

According to Crary (2021), the term dehumanisation is used in both public and academic discourse to describe some of the most extreme forms of violence perpetrated by human beings against other human beings. Although the concept has been defined in different ways throughout the literature, it is most commonly used to describe rhetoric and practices based on derogatory comparisons between socially vulnerable human groups and animals, resulting in their degradation, marginalisation, and, in some cases, their exposure to extreme forms of violence, including genocide (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014).

Domains of Application

According to Haslam (2006), the concept of dehumanisation lacks a systematic theoretical foundation. Nevertheless, a number of theoretical approaches have been developed, as the concept appears across multiple fields of academic research. The principal areas in which dehumanisation has been studied include ethnicity and race, gender and pornography, disability, medicine, and technology.

The most common and historically significant application of the concept of dehumanisation concerns ethnic and racial conflicts, as well as phenomena such as genocide and migration. Within this context, certain social groups dehumanise others, and these dehumanising representations become widely disseminated, portraying ethnic and racial others as barbarians. More specifically, other groups are depicted as inferior by attributing to them characteristics that imply a lack of civilization, moral sensibility, self-restraint, or rationality (Haslam, 2006).

Dehumanisation is fundamental to the process of genocide. Haslam (2006) notes that during the Holocaust, the Bosnian wars, and the Rwandan genocide, victims were systematically represented through ideologies that likened them to vermin or other inferior beings, both before and during the violence. Evidence of genocidal intent, and of the ways in which dehumanisation and hate incitement shape military behaviour, can be found in the statements of military commanders, including senior officials, as well as in the remarks of soldiers in the field when examined alongside their corresponding actions (B'Tselem, 2025b; Albanese, 2024).

One of the most common forms of dehumanisation is the comparison of human beings to animals. The relevant literature repeatedly documents cases of racist representations in which ethnic or racial groups are described as dogs, pigs, rats, vermin, or insects, while their full human status is often explicitly denied (Haslam, 2006). The connection between animalistic dehumanisation, colonialism, and social polarisation was already highlighted by Fanon. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he describes the colonial world as a Manichaean system that rigidly divides people into two opposing camps: the colonisers and the colonised. Within this binary framework, the colonised are portrayed as inferior and not fully human. Fanon observes that the coloniser describes the colonised through a “zoological language”, constantly drawing on references to the animal kingdom in order to symbolically degrade them and deny them full human status (Fanon, 1961/2004).

Two Models of Dehumanisation

Haslam (2006) introduced a new theoretical model, proposing two forms of dehumanisation: animalistic dehumanisation and mechanistic dehumanisation.

Animalistic Dehumanisation

According to Haslam (2006), animalistic dehumanisation occurs when a group is portrayed as lacking attributes considered uniquely human, such as higher cognition, culture, morality, refinement, self-restraint, and rational thought. The literature documents numerous examples of racist representations in which ethnic or racial groups are described as dogs, pigs, rats, parasites, or insects, while their full human status is often explicitly questioned (Haslam, 2006). As a result, members of groups likened to

animals, insects, or parasites are perceived as primitive, violent, or driven primarily by instinct. This form of dehumanisation is frequently accompanied by feelings of contempt and disgust, reflecting an implicit hierarchical comparison, as well as a tendency to explain others' behaviour in terms of desires and impulses rather than cognitive states. Animalistic dehumanisation is most clearly illustrated in contexts of intergroup conflict, such as genocide, racial stereotyping, and attitudes towards immigrants. Animal and organism metaphors for ethnic outgroups are common in these contexts, as is the perception that differences between groups are as profound and impermeable as the boundaries between biological species.

However, Haslam is not the only scholar to have examined this form of dehumanisation. Animalisation has been a widespread feature of the subjugation of human beings across different historical periods and geographical contexts (Crary, 2021). The connection between animalistic dehumanisation, polarisation, and colonialism was already identified by Fanon. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he describes the colonial world as a Manichaean system that rigidly divides humanity into two opposing camps: the colonisers and the colonised. Within this binary, the colonised are portrayed as inferior and not fully human. Fanon observes that the coloniser describes the colonised through a "zoological language", constantly drawing on references to the animal kingdom in order to symbolically degrade them and deny them full humanity (Fanon, 1961/2004).

Crary (2021) argues that animalistic comparisons are not merely offensive metaphors but are grounded in pre-existing assumptions about what constitutes a "fully human" life. These assumptions are not neutral; rather, they are shaped according to the dominant group's self-image, with its own characteristics presented as the standard of humanity. Consequently, those who deviate from this standard become more readily subjected to animalistic dehumanisation (Crary, 2021).

Finally, according to Crary (2021), animalistic ideologies rest on the belief that certain animals may legitimately be subjected to harsh and merciless treatment, an assumption that can be transferred to human groups by comparing them to those animals. However, the emergence of the modern animal rights movement from the 1970s onwards contributed to the development of approaches that seek to ground human dignity without presupposing human superiority over animals. Within this perspective, every human being is regarded as deserving of respect by virtue of their humanity alone.

Mechanistic Dehumanisation

The second form is mechanistic dehumanisation, in which individuals are portrayed as lacking emotions, warmth, individuality, and personal agency. In this case, they are not likened to animals but rather to machines or inanimate objects, which are perceived as cold, passive, and interchangeable.

Comparison of the Two Models

Haslam (2006) argues that the two forms of dehumanisation are associated with different emotions and modes of representation. Animalistic dehumanisation is often accompanied by contempt, degradation, humiliation, and feelings of disgust and revulsion towards the target group, which is portrayed as inferior and less than fully human. In contrast, mechanistic dehumanisation is more closely associated with indifference and emotional detachment.

The two forms of dehumanisation also differ in the ways they are represented through language. Animalistic dehumanisation operates through a vertical hierarchy, in which the “Other” is portrayed as subhuman, degraded through humiliating treatment, and positioned lower on a scale of human worth, civilization, and development. By contrast, mechanistic dehumanisation is based on a horizontal comparison grounded in perceived difference. In this case, individuals are not represented as inferior but rather as alien, distant, or non-human, being symbolically excluded from the human community rather than placed at a lower position within it (Haslam, 2006).

Psychological Approaches to Dehumanisation

One of the most influential accounts of dehumanisation is Bar-Tal’s (2000) theory of delegitimising beliefs. According to this approach, in situations of conflict, extremely negative characteristics are attributed to another group in order to exclude it from the category of acceptable human groups and deny its humanity. Dehumanisation constitutes one of the principal forms of delegitimation and is expressed either through the portrayal of a group as subhuman or through its association with negatively valued superhuman entities, such as demons or monsters. These beliefs serve several

functions in contexts of intergroup conflict, including explaining the conflict, justifying the violence of the in-group, and reinforcing a sense of superiority over the “Other” (Bar-Tal, 2000).

Kelman (1976) also examined the moral dimensions of dehumanisation in the context of mass violence as punishment, focusing on the conditions under which normal moral restraints are weakened. He argued that hostility generates violence indirectly by dehumanising victims, so that no moral relationship with the victim remains to inhibit the perpetrator’s violent behaviour. Dehumanisation involves the removal of two fundamental characteristics of human existence from its victims. First, identity, that is, the perception of an individual as a unique, autonomous, and distinct person capable of making choices. Second, community, namely the recognition of individuals as members of a broader human collectivity whose members care for one another. When these elements are stripped away, victims cease to be regarded as fully human beings and can more easily become targets of violence.

Closely related is the concept of moral exclusion developed by Opatow (1990). Moral exclusion refers to the process through which individuals or groups are placed outside the boundaries within which moral values, principles of justice, and obligations of concern apply. Dehumanisation represents one of the most extreme forms of moral exclusion, as it leads to the perception that victims are not entitled to equal moral treatment. Similarly, Bandura (2002) argues that dehumanisation functions as a mechanism of moral disengagement, enabling perpetrators to engage in violence without guilt, self-condemnation, or empathy, because victims are no longer perceived as human beings with feelings, hopes, and concerns, but rather as inferior beings or impersonal objects.

Furthermore, human values occupy a central place in processes of dehumanisation. Schwartz and Struch (1989, as cited in Haslam, 2006) argued that dehumanisation may arise when an out-group is perceived as not sharing the moral and social values of the in-group. Such perceptions facilitate moral distancing and may increase the acceptance of hostile or aggressive attitudes towards that group.

Socio-Cognitive Foundations of Dehumanisation

In most theoretical accounts, dehumanisation is understood primarily as a process that facilitates the release of aggression or reduces the burden of moral inhibitions and vicarious distress.

Haslam (2006) further argues that self–other asymmetries in the explanation of behaviour may also help explain dehumanisation. For example, people tend to interpret the behaviour of others more in terms of impersonal causes and less in terms of intentions or conscious choices, which may reinforce a more mechanistic perception of others (Malle, 1999, as cited in Haslam, 2006).

According to Haslam (2006), social categorisation may contribute to dehumanisation in three ways. First, through depersonalisation, whereby members of the outgroup are stripped of their individuality. Second, by promoting an emotionally charged perception of the outgroup as a threatening entity. Third, when the suffering of the outgroup is perceived as the collective responsibility of the ingroup. In such cases, members of the ingroup may dehumanise the outgroup in order to weaken their own moral restraints and reduce feelings of guilt (Haslam, 2006).

Social categorisation may contribute to both mechanistic and animalistic dehumanisation. In the former, depersonalisation leads to perceiving others as interchangeable and lacking individuality, whereas in the latter, the outgroup is perceived as lacking uniquely human characteristics (Haslam, 2006). Finally, according to Wilder (1986, as cited in Haslam, 2006), depersonalised or de-individuated outgroups are often perceived as particularly threatening because of their apparent cohesion and the tendency to view them as a single, unified entity.

Usage of Language and Metaphors in Dehumanisation

According to Ekman (2000, as cited in Maalej & Zibin, 2025), people use animal metaphors to conceptualise other human beings “to indicate how little they matter.” The analysis of animal metaphors extends beyond static interpretations and includes diachronic perspectives that not only characterise individuals or groups but also serve to represent entire nations or countries.

Within the cognitive paradigm, metaphors are said to play a central role “not only in language but also in thought and action” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, as cited in Maalej & Zibin, 2025). As a form of action, genocide in recent human history has often been facilitated by metaphorical representations, with Holocaust Jews depicted as “parasites”, Iraqis as “rapists”, Rwandan Tutsis as “cockroaches”, and

Bosnians as “Islamic fundamentalists” (Musolff, 2010; Lakoff, 1991; Hintjens, 1999; Mowarin, 2014; Karčić, 2022, as cited in Maalej & Zibin, 2025).

Concept explanations

For a better understanding of the present study, it is necessary to introduce a number of key legal concepts and frameworks that recur throughout the dissertation or are essential for understanding the topic more broadly. Specifically, this section examines the concepts of international human rights law, customary international law, international humanitarian law, international criminal law, genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, occupation, the civilian population, and hate speech.

International Human Rights Law

International Human Rights Law (IHRL) is a branch of international law aimed at protecting the fundamental rights and freedoms of all human beings. It developed primarily after the Second World War and is based on the consent of states, as expressed through international and regional human rights treaties (Moeckli et al., 2022).

Its principal sources are international treaties, customary international law, and general principles of law, as provided for in Article 38 of the Statute of the International Court of Justice (Moeckli et al., 2022). Key instruments of International Human Rights Law include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Although it was primarily developed to protect individuals in times of peace, International Human Rights Law continues to apply during armed conflicts, operating alongside International Humanitarian Law (Moeckli et al., 2022).

Customary International Law

Customary International Law constitutes one of the primary sources of international law and is binding upon all states, regardless of whether they have acceded to specific international treaties (Moeckli et al., 2022). It emerges through the general and consistent practice of states, accompanied by the belief that such practice is legally required (*opinio juris*).

In the field of human rights, customary international law plays a particularly important role, as certain fundamental norms are considered binding on all states even when they do not derive from treaty obligations. A notable example is the prohibition of torture, which is widely recognized as a norm of customary international law (Moeckli et al., 2022).

International Humanitarian Law

International Humanitarian Law (IHL), also known as the Law of War or the Law of Armed Conflict, constitutes the primary body of rules applicable during armed conflicts. Its purpose is to balance the violence inherent in warfare with the demands of humanity by limiting the effects of hostilities. To this end, it protects those who do not participate, or no longer participate, in hostilities, such as civilians, the wounded, the sick, and prisoners of war, while simultaneously imposing restrictions on the means and methods of warfare (Moeckli et al., 2022).

The principal sources of International Humanitarian Law are the Hague Conventions, the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, the Additional Protocols of 1977, and customary international law. Its fundamental principles include distinction between civilians and combatants, proportionality, military necessity, and the prohibition of unnecessary suffering. Serious violations of International Humanitarian Law may give rise to individual criminal responsibility and constitute international crimes, thereby creating a direct link between International Humanitarian Law and International Criminal Law (Moeckli et al., 2022).

International Criminal Law

International Criminal Law (ICL) is a branch of international law concerned with the prosecution and punishment of individuals responsible for some of the most serious violations of international law. Unlike traditional international law, which primarily focuses on states, International Criminal Law

centres on the individual responsibility of those who commit or order the commission of international crimes (Moeckli et al., 2022).

Its core principle is that certain acts are so grave that they cannot be regarded solely as matters of domestic concern but rather as issues of international concern. Under contemporary International Criminal Law, the four core international crimes are genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression (Moeckli et al., 2022).

The development of International Criminal Law has progressed from ad hoc international tribunals, such as those established for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, to the creation of the International Criminal Court (ICC). The ICC operates according to the principle of complementarity, intervening only when national courts are unwilling or unable genuinely to investigate or prosecute such crimes (Moeckli et al., 2022).

Genocide

Genocide constitutes the denial of the right of existence of a human group and encompasses practices aimed at its total or partial destruction. Raphael Lemkin, who introduced the term “genocide,” argued that it does not refer to a single act but rather to a set of persecutory and destructive actions. These actions may range from the physical extermination of the members of a group to the dismantling of its political, social, and cultural institutions, as well as its language, religion, and collective identity. In this sense, genocide is understood as a process that develops gradually rather than as an isolated event (Albanese, 2024).

Genocide has been recognized as one of the gravest crimes under international law (B’Tselem, 2025a). According to Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (United Nations, 1948, Art. II), genocide means:

any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

It is critically important that, according to Article III of the Convention (United Nations, 1948, Art. III), not only genocide itself is punishable, but also conspiracy to commit genocide, direct and public incitement to commit genocide, attempted genocide, and complicity in genocide.

Albanese (2024) further explains that the crime of genocide contains two interrelated elements: criminal intent and criminal responsibility. Both elements must be established in order for conduct to qualify legally as genocide. The perpetrator's intent to destroy a protected group, in whole or in part, distinguishes genocide from other international crimes. This specific intent may be demonstrated through direct evidence, such as statements by senior officials or official documents, or it may be inferred from patterns of conduct, given that genocide is an organized crime with a collective dimension. Of the five acts that define genocide, the first three require proof that the prohibited act occurred, whereas the latter two require proof of intent to achieve a particular result, rather than proof that the result was actually achieved.

Furthermore, according to Article IV of the Convention, any person committing one of the above acts shall be punished regardless of official capacity, whether they are rulers, public officials, or private individuals (United Nations, 1948, Art. IV). According to Article VI, persons charged with genocide shall be tried either by a competent tribunal of the state in whose territory the act was committed or by an international penal tribunal having jurisdiction over the case (United Nations, 1948, Art. VI).

The International Criminal Court (ICC), established by the Rome Statute in 1998 and operational since 2002, has jurisdiction over the four core crimes, namely genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression (Bantekas & Oette, 2024). In contrast, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the principal judicial organ of the United Nations since 1946, adjudicates disputes between states and examines whether a state has violated its obligations under the Genocide Convention (Symonides & Volodin, 2001).

Therefore, the crime of genocide gives rise to both individual and state responsibility, emphasizing the need for individual accountability before domestic or international courts, regardless of any official position held by the perpetrator. At the individual level, criminal responsibility may arise not only from the direct commission of genocide but also from participation in acts such as attempt, conspiracy, direct and public incitement, planning, ordering, or aiding and abetting genocidal acts. A key requirement for establishing such responsibility is the existence of specific intent (*dolus specialis*), namely the intent to contribute to the total or partial destruction of a protected group, together with knowledge that the relevant actions may contribute to that outcome. At the same time, state responsibility may arise when genocidal acts are committed by persons acting in their capacity as state officials or while exercising state authority, in which case their conduct is attributable to the state itself (Albanese, 2024).

It is also important to refer to Article VII of the Genocide Convention (United Nations, 1948, Art. VII), which reinforces the international character of the crime of genocide by providing that genocide shall not be considered a political crime and therefore cannot serve as a basis for avoiding extradition or prosecution. Moreover, both morally and legally, genocide cannot be justified under any circumstances, including claims of self-defence (B'Tselem, 2025a).

Finally, it is important to address the obligations of third states. According to Article I of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the contracting parties undertake not only to punish but also to prevent genocide (United Nations, 1948, Art. I). This obligation is not limited to states directly involved in a conflict but applies to all states that are parties to the Convention. Furthermore, under the Geneva Conventions and customary international law, states are required to respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law, as well as to prosecute serious violations such as war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and torture (Albanese, 2025). In this context, a state may incur international responsibility not only when it directly participates in international crimes, but also when it provides substantial aid or assistance to acts that it knows contribute to their commission.

Crimes Against Humanity

According to Article 7 of the Rome Statute, crimes against humanity are defined as specific acts, including murder, extermination, enslavement, forcible displacement of populations, imprisonment,

torture, sexual violence, persecution, apartheid, and other inhumane acts, when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population and with knowledge of that attack (International Criminal Court, 1998, Art. 7).

The Statute clarifies that such an attack does not refer to isolated incidents of violence, but rather to an organized course of conduct carried out pursuant to, or in furtherance of, a State or organizational policy.

War Crimes

According to Article 8 of the Rome Statute, war crimes consist of serious violations of international humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions committed during armed conflicts (International Criminal Court, 1998, Art. 8). These include, inter alia, the wilful killing of civilians, torture and inhuman treatment, hostage-taking, the unlawful deportation or transfer of populations, the extensive destruction of property not justified by military necessity, as well as attacks directed against civilians, hospitals, humanitarian missions, and other protected civilian infrastructure.

The Statute also recognizes as war crimes the use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare, the obstruction of humanitarian assistance, sexual violence, and the recruitment of children into armed conflicts. These crimes may be committed in both international and non-international armed conflicts and are regarded as among the most serious violations of international law (International Criminal Court, 1998, Art. 8).

Although the concepts of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes often overlap in practice, international law distinguishes them as separate categories of international crimes. In particular, genocide differs from the other crimes because it requires the specific intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a protected group.

Ethnic Cleansing

Ethnic cleansing refers to the process by which one ethnic group forcibly expels or removes members of other ethnic groups from a particular territory with the aim of creating ethnically homogeneous areas

(Symonides & Volodin, 2001). This process is often associated with forced displacement, loss of property, and serious violations of human rights. Although ethnic cleansing is not recognized as a distinct international crime with a clearly defined legal definition comparable to genocide, it is frequently associated with war crimes, crimes against humanity, and, in certain cases, genocidal practices.

Some of the most widely recognized cases of ethnic cleansing in the contemporary era occurred during the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda (Symonides & Volodin, 2001). The concept of ethnic cleansing has also been used to interpret the Nakba of 1948, during which more than 750,000 Palestinians were displaced or forced to flee their homes (Pappe, 2024).

Occupation

Under International Humanitarian Law, a territory is considered occupied when it is placed under the effective authority of a hostile army, that is, when a state exercises effective control over foreign territory without the consent of the sovereign state. Occupation does not necessarily require armed resistance, as the 1949 Geneva Conventions also apply in cases of partial or total occupation, even where such occupation encounters no military resistance (Wilmshurst, 2012).

The existence of an occupation carries significant legal consequences, as the state exercising control assumes obligations towards the population of the occupied territory. These obligations include the protection of civilians, the prohibition of forcible transfers and deportations, respect for fundamental rights, and the application of the relevant rules of International Humanitarian Law. Furthermore, under International Human Rights Law, a state's obligations may extend beyond its national territory when it exercises effective control over foreign territory or populations (De Schutter, 2014).

Occupation is not always exercised directly through military administration. According to international law, indirect occupation may also exist when a state exercises control over a territory through a dependent administration or an armed group whose actions can be attributed to that state (Wilmshurst, 2012).

A decisive factor in determining the existence of occupation and the applicability of the corresponding international obligations is not formal sovereignty over a territory, but rather the effective control exercised over that territory and its population (De Schutter, 2014).

Civilians, Combatants, and Legitimate Targets

One of the fundamental principles of International Humanitarian Law is the principle of distinction, according to which parties to an armed conflict are required to distinguish between combatants and civilians, as well as between military objectives and civilian objects. Consequently, only combatants and military objectives may constitute lawful targets of attack (Bantekas & Oette, 2024).

A military objective is defined as any person or object which, by its nature, location, purpose, or use, makes an effective contribution to military action and whose destruction, neutralization, or capture offers a definite military advantage. In contrast, civilians and civilian objects are protected from attack under International Humanitarian Law (Bantekas & Oette, 2024).

Combatants are individuals who directly participate in hostilities as members of organized armed forces or groups. However, the distinction between combatants and civilians is not always clear, particularly in situations where civilians occasionally engage in activities related to the conflict. For this reason, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) proposes three criteria for determining whether an individual is directly participating in hostilities: (a) the act is likely to adversely affect the military operations or military capacity of a party to the conflict, or to inflict harm on protected persons or objects (threshold of harm); (b) there is a direct causal link between the act and the expected harm (direct causation); and (c) the act is specifically designed to support one party to the conflict to the detriment of another (belligerent nexus).

The protection of civilians constitutes a central objective of International Humanitarian Law. Therefore, the deliberate targeting of civilians or civilian objects is prohibited and may amount to a serious violation of international law and, under certain circumstances, a war crime (Bantekas & Oette, 2024).

Hate Speech

Hate speech constitutes one of the most significant challenges facing contemporary states, as it involves the promotion of violence, hatred, or discrimination against individuals or groups on the basis of characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion, or other identity markers (Moeckli et al., 2022). Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 4 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) require states to prohibit and criminalize war propaganda as well as the incitement of racial or ethnic hatred (Moeckli et al., 2022). Therefore, the use of speech to incite violence constitutes a criminal offence in almost all states.

However, the distinction between protected freedom of expression and hate speech is often complex. According to Moeckli et al. (2022), when speech, within its specific social and political context, incites, justifies, or legitimizes violence, encourages discrimination, or promotes hatred against particular groups, it may fall outside the protection afforded by freedom of expression, as it is incompatible with the fundamental values of human rights.

Furthermore, the case law of the European Court of Human Rights has recognized that the collective targeting of an entire religious or ethnic group as dangerous or threatening may constitute a form of hate speech. Notably, the Court held that portraying Muslims as a whole as being associated with terrorism amounted to a severe attack against that group and was therefore not protected by freedom of expression (Moeckli et al., 2022).

Chapter Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter outlined the theoretical and legal framework upon which the present study is based. It first demonstrated how polarisation and the construction of a distinction between "us" and "them" can, through language, lead to the dehumanisation of a group. This process may take various forms, including animalistic dehumanisation, mechanistic dehumanisation, delegitimising beliefs, social categorisation, moral exclusion, and moral disengagement. The chapter then presented the key legal concepts and branches of international law relevant to the conflict, providing a clearer understanding of the subject and highlighting states' obligations in relation both to speech-related

violations, such as hate speech, and to violations arising from conduct. This theoretical and legal foundation provides the basis for the discourse analysis presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Data, Analysis and Discussion

This chapter presents the research data, consisting of thirteen excerpts from speeches and public statements made by Israeli politicians and officials following the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023, after which the State of Israel further altered its policy towards the Palestinian population. Specifically, the statements analysed were made between 9 October 2023 and 13 January 2024. Excerpts that fall within the theoretical framework of dehumanisation were selected and are critically analysed through this lens.

The analysis does not focus exclusively on instances of animalistic dehumanisation, but also examines other dimensions of dehumanisation, including delegitimising beliefs (Bar-Tal, 2000), social categorisation (Haslam, 2006), the removal of identity and community as a means of legitimising mass violence as punishment (Kelman, 1976), moral exclusion (Opotow, 1990), and moral disengagement (Bandura, 2002). Methodologically, the analysis draws upon Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis (1992), as well as the Metaphor Identification Procedure proposed by Maalej and Zibin (2025) to identify excerpts containing animalistic dehumanisation.

During the analysis, it became evident that the different forms of dehumanisation do not occur in isolation but rather coexist and reinforce one another. Individual statements frequently combine multiple dehumanising strategies, including animalistic dehumanisation, social categorisation, delegitimising beliefs, and moral disengagement. For this reason, the organisation of the following sections emphasises the dominant pattern identified in each excerpt, without excluding the presence of additional forms of dehumanisation. For example, the construction of Palestinians as a single, undifferentiated group, without distinguishing between combatants and civilians, appears in almost all of the excerpts analysed.

Palestinians as a Collective Whole – Animalistic Dehumanisation – Genocidal Intent

As noted above, the excerpts do not exhibit only a single characteristic of dehumanisation. The excerpts presented in this section share three common features: animalistic dehumanisation, the subsequent justification of violence through such dehumanisation, and genocidal intent, as well as the construction of Palestinians as a collective whole - that is, without any distinction between combatants and civilians, thereby legitimising collective punishment through mass violence.

The first excerpt comes from the then Israeli Minister of Defence, Yoav Gallant. On 9 October 2023, while briefing the Israeli military (International Court of Justice, 2023, para. 101), he stated:

“We are imposing a complete siege on the Gaza. There will be no electricity, no food, no water, no fuel, everything will be closed. We are fighting against human animals and we are acting accordingly” (Fabian, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023).

He further stated:

“Gaza won’t return to what it was before. We will eliminate everything. If it doesn’t take one day, it will take a week. It will take weeks or even months, we will reach all places” (International Court of Justice, 2023, para. 101).

This constitutes a clear example of animalistic dehumanisation, according to Haslam (2006) and the metaphor identification procedure proposed by Maalej and Zibin (2025), since the term “*animals*” is used metaphorically rather than literally. The term “*animals*” is employed to negatively evaluate, degrade, construct the *Other*, and ultimately dehumanise Palestinians, who are portrayed as possessing characteristics inferior to those of human beings - as human animals.

The metaphor strips Palestinians of their human nature and serves to justify violence against them (Maalej & Zibin, 2025). For this reason, Gallant states that they should be dealt with “*accordingly*,” implying that actions against them are justified on the basis of the characteristics that he himself attributes to the people living in Gaza.

Furthermore, Gallant's declaration of a complete siege on Gaza, involving the denial of electricity, food, water, and fuel, indicates that he addresses the entire population of Gaza as a single collective entity. In other words, the statement implies no distinction between combatants and civilians, Hamas

members and ordinary residents, thereby indicating the possibility of harm to civilians, mass violence as punishment, and genocidal intent. These elements correspond to Kelman's (1976) theory, according to which, in the context of international conflict, mass violence as punishment becomes possible when both identity - that is, recognition of individuals as distinct persons - and community - the recognition of individuals as members of a shared human community whose members care for one another - are removed. These characteristics appear to have been stripped away in this case, with the consequence that the entire population of Gaza is constructed and presented as a legitimate target.

The second statement likewise conveys the totalising nature of the attack on Gaza through the phrases *“we will eliminate everything”* and *“we will reach all places.”* The assertion that Gaza will never return to its previous condition, together with the emphasis on totality expressed through the words *everything* and *all*, can likewise be interpreted as expressions of genocidal intent (Maalej & Zibin, 2025).

The following excerpt follows the same pattern with regard to the portrayal of Palestinians as a homogeneous group and animalistic dehumanisation. On 25 October 2023, during an interview on the British television channel Sky News, Dan Gillerman, Israel's former ambassador to the United Nations, was asked to comment on the United Nations' concerns regarding Israel's collective punishment of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip through the blockade and the suspension of fuel supplies (Kasim, 2023). More specifically, the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, had referred to clear violations of international humanitarian law in Gaza by Israel, stressing that the Hamas attacks could not justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people. In addition, Guterres called for an immediate ceasefire, although the UN Security Council failed to adopt a resolution aimed at ending the ongoing escalation (Kasim, 2023).

Among other remarks, Dan Gillerman stated:

“I'm very puzzled by the constant concern the world is showing for the Palestinian people, and is actually showing for these horrible inhuman animals” (Law for Palestine, n.d.).

This statement also constitutes a case of animalistic dehumanisation (Haslam, 2006), in which Palestinians are portrayed as animals in order to deny them human characteristics and undermine their human status. The statement further implies that, because they are portrayed as animals, the international community should not be concerned about violations of international law committed

against them. Thus, dehumanisation is once again employed to justify violence and punishment directed against Palestinians.

Moreover, Gillerman refers to the Palestinian people as a whole, rather than exclusively to Hamas combatants. This provides another example of social categorisation as described by Haslam (2006), whereby dehumanisation is facilitated through depersonalisation, that is, the erasure of the individuality of out-group members. According to this perspective, the out-group comes to be perceived as a single, homogeneous, and threatening entity. Consequently, mass violence as punishment becomes more readily legitimised, as the ordinary moral restraints against harming others are weakened through processes of dehumanisation (Kelman, 1976).

The following excerpt also contains all three recurring patterns identified in this section: the portrayal of Palestinians as a homogeneous group, animalistic dehumanisation, and genocidal intent. On 11 October 2023, Ezra Yachin, an Israeli reserve soldier and veteran of the Deir Yassin massacre during the 1948 Nakba, was called up for reserve duty to deliver a motivational speech intended to boost the morale of Israeli troops. The speech was subsequently circulated on social media (International Court of Justice, 2023, para. 101):

“Be triumphant and finish them off and don’t leave anyone behind. Erase the memory of them. Erase them, their families, mothers and children. These animals can no longer live...Every Jew with a weapon should go out and kill them. If you have an Arab neighbour, don’t wait, go to his home and shoot him...We want to invade, not like before, we want to enter and destroy what’s in front of us, and destroy houses, then destroy the one after it. With all of our forces, complete destruction, enter and destroy. As you can see, we will witness things we’ve never dreamed of. Let them drop bombs on them and erase them” (Middle East Eye, 2023b).

This excerpt is among the clearest examples of genocidal intent, expressed through the speaker's repeated exhortations to Israeli soldiers to "finish them off", "erase them", "leave no one behind", and "drop bombs on them". Palestinians are treated as a single, undifferentiated group, with no distinction made between combatants and civilians. This is particularly evident in the statement that anyone who is simply an Arab should be shot, explicitly endorsing violence against civilians.

Furthermore, Palestinians are once again described as "animals", a form of animalistic dehumanisation that serves to diminish their human worth (Haslam, 2006) and to legitimise mass violence against them as a form of punishment, as discussed in the preceding excerpts (Kelman, 1976).

Another excerpt that exhibits all three recurring patterns is taken from a statement by Danny Neuman. On 25 December 2023, Danny Neumann, a former member of the Israeli Knesset, stated during an interview on Israel's Channel 13:

"I tell you, in Gaza without exception, they are all terrorists, sons of dogs. They must be terminated, all of them must be killed," he said. "We will flatten Gaza, turn them to dust, and the army will cleanse the area. Then we will start building new areas for us, above all, for our security" (Middle East Eye, 2023a).

Once again, this excerpt displays the same recurring characteristics. Palestinians are constructed as a collective whole, although this time they are all explicitly labelled as terrorists. Animalistic dehumanisation is likewise present, as they are referred to as *"sons of dogs"* in order to diminish their human worth. Moreover, genocidal intent is particularly explicit in the statement *"they must be terminated."*

A new element introduced in this excerpt concerns future plans for Gaza, according to which new areas will be built there for Israelis. This aspect connects directly to the historical context discussed in Chapter 1, where Pappé (2024) describes settler colonialism and ethnic cleansing as processes carried out through methods consistent with those articulated in this statement.

The following excerpt repeats the pattern of animalistic dehumanisation, this time alongside genocidal intent. During an appearance on *The Patriots*, a political talk show broadcast on Israel's Channel 14 on 9 October 2023, Israeli Minister of Education Yoav Kisch stated:

"Those are animals, they have no right to exist. I'm not arguing on how it should be done, but they need to be exterminated" (Law for Palestine, n.d.).

As in the previous excerpts, the word *"animals"* is used metaphorically and therefore constitutes a case of animalistic dehumanisation. The group is portrayed as lacking characteristics considered uniquely human and is equated with animals. The statement also advocates the extermination of the group by asserting that it has no right to exist, which is consistent with Haslam's (2006) argument that animalistic dehumanisation frequently occurs in contexts of intergroup conflict, including genocide.

Here again, dehumanisation appears to function by weakening ordinary moral restraints and facilitating the legitimisation of mass violence as punishment, extending to genocidal intent (Kelman, 1976).

The final excerpt in this group emphasises the portrayal of Palestinians as a homogeneous group. On 12 October 2023, Israeli President Isaac Herzog, during a press conference for foreign media in Tel Aviv, stated:

“It is 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. They could have risen up, they could have fought against that evil regime which took over Gaza in a coup d'état. But we are at war, we are defending our homes, we are protecting our homes, that's the truth and when a nation protects its home it fights and we will fight until we break their backbone” (Omaar & Omari, 2023).

This excerpt illustrates what Haslam (2006) describes as social categorisation, whereby depersonalisation - the erasure of the individuality of out-group members - contributes to their dehumanisation. It also represents a clear example of the perception that the out-group bears collective responsibility for the suffering of the in-group (Haslam, 2006). Indeed, the statement explicitly assigns responsibility to an entire nation.

In this way, the recurring pattern of constructing the out-group as a single, homogeneous, and threatening entity reappears. Palestinians are once again represented as a collective whole, with no distinction drawn between Hamas members and the remaining civilian population of Gaza.

The article by Omaar and Omari (2023) further notes that, at that time, approximately one million of Gaza's Palestinians were children. It also includes the response of Hanan Ashrawi, who served for thirty years as a Palestinian Authority peace negotiator with Israel, stating:

“When you have 1,200 or 1,300 people killed and more than two thirds of them are women and children, is this getting Hamas, is this killing Hamas?” (Omaar & Omari, 2023).

Additionally, certain parts of the excerpt could raise questions or be regarded as contradictory. First, Herzog states that the entire nation of Israel is fighting to defend and protect its home. However, Pappé (2024) argues that Palestinians have been subjected to ethnic cleansing since the 1920s, involving their expulsion from their homes and land in order to enable Israel to expand its borders and establish a Jewish demographic majority.

Second, the claim that Palestinians, as a nation, deserve to suffer because they did not rise up against Hamas could likewise be regarded as contradictory. Pappé (2024) argues that, for decades, Palestinians sought solutions in accordance with international law, but that successive initiatives - including those undertaken during the period of the British Empire and the Mandate, the United Nations Partition Plan, the Madrid Conference of 1991, and the Oslo Accords - were violated to their detriment. As a result, some Palestinians came to place their hopes in Hamas's military wing. Finally, Pappé (2024) also argues that Israel provided covert support to Hamas in order to instrumentalise the organisation for the benefit of Israeli policy, a claim that stands in contrast to this and similar statements.

Palestinians as a Collective Whole – Delegitimising Beliefs

In this subsection, the common feature across the excerpts is the presence of delegitimising beliefs. Once again, Palestinians are portrayed as a single, homogeneous group, with no distinction made between combatants and civilians.

The first excerpt in this category comes from Major General Ghassan Alian, then Head of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), who, on 9 October 2023, issued a recorded statement addressed to Hamas and the residents of Gaza. The statement, published on COGAT's official channel, declared:

“Hamas became ISIS and the citizens of Gaza are celebrating instead of being horrified. Human beasts are dealt with accordingly. Israel has imposed a total blockade on Gaza, no electricity, no water, just damage. You wanted hell - you will get it.” (COGAT-MOD, 2023).

This excerpt reflects Bar-Tal's (2000) theory of delegitimising beliefs. The residents of Gaza are attributed extremely negative characteristics by being described as *"human beasts"*, thereby denying them their human status. Such beliefs function to justify and legitimise violence against them, as implied by the phrase *"dealt with accordingly."*

Furthermore, the entire population of Gaza is once again treated as a collective whole and subjected to collective punishment, with no distinction drawn between Hamas combatants and civilians (Kelman, 1976).

The following excerpt follows the same pattern. On 1 November 2023, Amihai Eliyahu, Israel's Minister of Heritage, stated during an interview on Radio Kol Berama:

“there is no such thing as uninvolved civilians in Gaza.”

He further stated:

“They can go to Ireland or deserts, the monsters in Gaza should find a solution by themselves”

and

“we wouldn’t hand the Nazis humanitarian aid” (The Times of Israel, 2023).

The article also notes that, although Eliyahu served as a government minister, he neither participated in nor exercised influence over the Israeli War Cabinet responsible for wartime decision-making. Nevertheless, he remained a senior public official with a prominent public platform and the capacity to influence public discourse.

In this excerpt, Palestinians are once again constructed as a collective whole, with all Palestinians being held responsible for the actions of Hamas and no distinction being made between combatants and civilians (Haslam, 2006). At the same time, the statement reflects delegitimising beliefs (Bar-Tal, 2000), as Palestinians are described as *“monsters”* and compared to *“Nazis”*, thereby portraying them as the embodiment of ultimate evil.

The following excerpt once again reflects the theory of delegitimising beliefs, while also introducing a new pattern: polarisation and self- and other-representation. On 15 October 2023, during the first meeting of Israel's emergency national unity government, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated:

“I have seen our amazing soldiers who are now on the front line. They know that the entire nation is behind them. They understand the scope of the mission. They are ready to take action at any time in order to defeat the bloodthirsty monsters who have risen against us to destroy us. Hamas thought that we would come apart - we will dismantle Hamas” (Prime Minister's Office, 2023).

In this excerpt, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu employs metaphorical language to describe Palestinians, referring to them as *“bloodthirsty monsters.”* This metaphor reflects Bar-Tal's (2000)

theory of delegitimising beliefs. More specifically, it seeks to deny the humanity of the out-group by associating it with subhuman characteristics. In doing so, it contributes to the justification of extensive violence.

The statement also conveys a sense of ingroup superiority (Bar-Tal, 2000): on the one hand, Israeli soldiers are portrayed as *"amazing"* and supported by *"the entire nation,"* while, on the other hand, Palestinians are depicted as *"bloodthirsty monsters."* The excerpt also illustrates the polarisation of groups and the processes of self- and other-construal, whereby the ingroup is represented positively, whether literally or metaphorically, while the out-group is represented negatively (Maalej & Zibin, 2025).

The following two excerpts reflect delegitimising beliefs, as well as the generalisation of the conflict as a means of legitimising it. On 24 December 2023, during his Christmas message, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated, among other things:

"We're facing monsters, monsters who murdered children in front of their parents...This is a battle not only of Israel against these barbarians, it's a battle of civilization against barbarism" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

This excerpt once again reflects Bar-Tal's (2000) theory of delegitimising beliefs, as Palestinians are characterised as *"monsters."* However, an additional feature is also evident. The speaker generalises the conflict, moving beyond the specific context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and reframing it as a struggle between civilisation, represented by Israel, and barbarism, represented by Palestinians. This framing serves to portray Israel's actions as being carried out for the benefit of humanity as a whole and, in doing so, contributes to the justification of violence committed by the in-group (Bar-Tal, 2000).

On 15 October 2023, during an interview with the American television network CNN, Israeli President Isaac Herzog, while publicly revealing Hamas's *Captive Taking Handbook*, entitled *"The Warrior's Guide – Jihad Version"*, for the first time, stated, among other things:

"So therefore the story is not Israel versus Palestinians, or Judaism versus Islam - God forbid - the story is about humans, humanity, are we with the good or with evil, that's where humanity should stand. And the battle that we are carrying out now, as a nation rising up as a lion is against evil, and

we will uproot evil so that there will be good for the entire region and the world” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023b).

In this excerpt, the President of Israel similarly universalises the conflict, extending it beyond the Israeli–Palestinian context to encompass humanity as a whole. At the same time, he employs the Manichaean framework of the struggle between good and evil (Fanon, 1961/2004). Israel is represented as embodying good, while Palestine is associated with evil. In this way, Israel's military actions are constructed as a moral responsibility to eradicate evil.

Moral Disengagement

In this subsection, alongside the patterns already identified, the concept of moral disengagement is introduced.

The first excerpt is taken from a statement delivered by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu from the Kirya military headquarters in Tel Aviv on 13 January 2024, in which he stated, among other things:

“Nobody will stop us - not The Hague, not the axis of evil and not anybody else...The State of Israel, the IDF and our security services are fighting a moral and just war that is without parallel, against the Hamas monsters, the new Nazis. This international campaign of denigration will not weaken either our hand or our determination to fight until the end...This is the war of the sons of light against the sons of darkness” (Prime Minister's Office, 2024).

The excerpt begins with the Prime Minister stating that no one - not even The Hague - will stop Israel's actions, referring to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which is based in The Hague.

The statement also reflects Bandura's (2002) concept of moral disengagement, according to which perpetrators are able to inflict violence without feelings of empathy or remorse because the targets of that violence - in this case, Palestinians - are perceived as inferior and reduced to impersonal objects. It conveys a sense of superiority over the law, a disregard for international law, a lack of accountability, and the complicity of third states that have allowed violations of international law to continue for decades. Finally, South Africa's application before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) - that is, its attempt to uphold international law - is portrayed as an act of defamation. Pappé (2024) argues that

Israel adopts a distinctive interpretation of international law, maintaining that what ultimately matters is how its political leaders interpret international law and the relevant judicial decisions.

The excerpt further contains another example of delegitimising beliefs (Bar-Tal, 2000), through references to "monsters" and "Nazis", as well as an example of polarisation and self- and other-representation (Maalej & Zibin, 2025). Israel's war is presented as moral and just, Israeli soldiers are described as the "sons of light", while Palestinians are characterised as the "sons of darkness". Moreover, framing the conflict as a struggle between light and darkness serves to legitimise it as a cause pursued for the benefit of humanity as a whole.

The then Israeli Minister of Energy and Infrastructure, Israel Katz, posted on X on 13 October 2023:

“Humanitarian aid to Gaza? No electrical switch will be turned on, no water hydrant will be opened and no fuel truck will enter until the Israeli abductees are returned home. Humanitarianism for humanitarianism. And no one will preach us morality” (Katz, 2023).

This excerpt once again reflects the pattern of collective punishment, as measures affecting the entire population are presented as legitimate, thereby facilitating mass violence as punishment through the removal of individuality and community (Kelman, 1976).

Furthermore, the statement *“no one will preach us morality”* also reflects Bandura's (2002) concept of moral disengagement, discussed in the previous excerpt. Here too, Katz presents the in-group as being beyond moral judgement, suggesting that no external actor has the authority to question or condemn its actions.

Discussion

Although this study was initially oriented primarily towards animalistic dehumanisation, which is the most readily identifiable form of dehumanisation, the data and analysis demonstrated that several other dimensions of dehumanisation - including delegitimising beliefs, mass violence as punishment, social categorisation, moral exclusion, and moral disengagement - which are less immediately apparent, are also present in the political, military, and public discourse represented by the excerpts analysed in this study.

The analysis further demonstrated that the dehumanisation of Palestinians is not expressed through a single strategy but rather through a network of interconnected patterns. Most statements combined more than one dimension of dehumanisation, suggesting that these different strategies operate in a complementary rather than an independent manner.

The most significant finding concerns the construction of Palestinians as a collective whole and, consequently, as legitimate targets, without any distinction being made between combatants, Hamas members, civilians, elderly people, women, or children, thereby presenting them as recipients of mass violence as punishment. The systematic construction and representation of Palestinians through language as collectively responsible appears to function as the principal mechanism through which the legitimisation of mass violence becomes possible. Although this dimension of dehumanisation was not initially apparent, the analysis revealed that it was present in the overwhelming majority of the excerpts.

This finding is directly related to Haslam's (2006) theory of social categorisation, according to which dehumanisation operates through depersonalisation - the erasure of the individuality of out-group members - and through the perception of the out-group as a single, homogeneous, and threatening entity. The finding also corresponds to Kelman's (1976) argument that dehumanisation removes both the identity and the community of victims, thereby weakening the ordinary moral restraints against mass violence. The construction of Palestinians as an undifferentiated collective subject appears to function precisely in this manner.

The second most frequently occurring pattern, identified in six of the thirteen excerpts and closely related to the construction of Palestinians as a collective whole, concerns genocidal intent. The findings suggest that dehumanisation accompanies and facilitates discourses that may be interpreted as expressions of genocidal intent, consistent with Haslam's (2006) argument that dehumanisation is closely associated with intergroup conflict and, in particular, genocide.

Delegitimising beliefs and animalistic dehumanisation appeared with almost equal frequency, occurring in six and five excerpts respectively. These constitute the most overt forms of dehumanisation, as they rely on comparisons with animals or monsters and are almost invariably accompanied by the legitimisation of violence. Furthermore, delegitimising beliefs and polarisation construct a moral distinction between good and evil. Across the analysed excerpts, Israelis are represented as moral actors, defenders of civilisation, protectors of humanity, and sons of light, while Palestinians are

portrayed as animals, monsters, barbarians, terrorists, and sons of darkness. These findings correspond to Bar-Tal's (2000) theory of delegitimising beliefs and Haslam's (2006) theory of animalistic dehumanisation.

This rhetoric constructs Israel as the representative of civilisation and humanity, while simultaneously constructing Palestinians as the embodiment of barbarism and evil. Such representations are consistent with the Manichaean model of polarisation described by Fanon (1961/2004), in which colonial power constructs itself as the bearer of civilisation while representing the colonised as barbaric and not fully human.

At the same time, a contradiction appears to emerge. Since 2023, Israel has been accused of committing genocide in the Gaza Strip, a claim that appears fundamentally inconsistent with its discursive self-representation as the embodiment of civilisation. According to Ira Byock (2012), Margaret Mead is widely reported to have argued that the earliest archaeological evidence of civilisation was a healed femur, as this reflects care and solidarity towards an injured individual.

Moral disengagement (Bandura, 2002), whereby the actions of the in-group are constructed as being above morality and accountability, appears less frequently in the present dataset. Nevertheless, Israel is repeatedly represented as disregarding international law and the recommendations of the International Court of Justice. This pattern also finds support in Pappé's (2024) historical analysis, in which he argues that Israel has developed a distinctive relationship with respect to the interpretation and observance of international law.

From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, these strategies should not be understood as merely linguistic choices. Rather, language constructs identities, power relations, and particular representations of Palestinians, which in turn contribute to the legitimisation of specific political and military practices. Through these discursive constructions, Palestinians are constituted as a particular type of subject, thereby facilitating the legitimisation of particular political and military practices (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2015).

Chapter Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of the present study support the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2. The data and analysis demonstrate that dehumanisation does not operate through isolated discursive

strategies but rather through a combination of mutually reinforcing mechanisms. Most importantly, the most persistent pattern identified was not the use of animal metaphors itself, but rather the systematic construction of Palestinians as a single, undifferentiated, and collectively responsible subject upon which animalistic dehumanisation, delegitimising beliefs, moral disengagement, and the legitimisation of mass violence are subsequently built.

Conclusion

This chapter presents the conclusions of the study. It seeks to answer the research questions by drawing on the findings, which demonstrate how Palestinians are constructed and represented through language as a particular type of subject. Finally, the chapter discusses the study's limitations and offers suggestions for future research.

The history of this issue stretches back millennia, while the specific Israeli–Palestinian conflict dates to the late nineteenth century. The question of Palestine originated during the era of colonialism, before the development of international law as it has been understood since 1948 and its subsequent evolution. Strikingly, however, the Palestine question continues to be shaped by settler-colonial rhetoric and practices, including the forcible displacement of populations—that is, ethnic cleansing—largely because of the international community's complicity and the support of powerful states. In this sense, the question of Palestine represents a legacy of empire and colonialism that continues to endure through the protection afforded by major powers, as though international law had never existed.

The present study has demonstrated that the current dramatic escalation of the conflict cannot be understood in isolation but must instead be viewed as part of a historical process extending back to the conflict's origins in the late nineteenth century. Throughout this period, recurring patterns include ethnic cleansing and settlement expansion, namely the displacement of Palestinians from Palestine in pursuit of a Jewish demographic majority in the territories occupied by Israel. Other recurring features include non-compliance with international law, the invocation of self-defence as a justification, and the use of collective punishment.

The use of language to organise, support, and justify the conflict is not a recent phenomenon but has been evident since the arrival of Jewish settlers in Palestine in the late nineteenth century. These practices were first cultivated, conceived, and legitimised through language and through the

construction of the "other" as a collective entity. Palestinians were represented in specific negative and dehumanising ways then, and they continue to be represented in similar ways today, in order to reinforce and justify a discourse of conflict aimed at ethnic cleansing. However, as Bartov (2025) argues, what began as a project of ethnic cleansing has culminated in the genocide of Palestinians.

The most significant finding of this study is not simply that dehumanising expressions were identified in Israeli political discourse. Rather, the analysis demonstrates that dehumanisation constitutes a coherent discursive system through which Palestinians are constructed as a collective and undifferentiated subject, deprived of individuality and moral worth. This linguistic construction functions as a mechanism that legitimises practices which, under ordinary circumstances, would be regarded as both morally and legally unacceptable.

Reading Albanese's report on the use of torture, particularly in relation to Palestinian detainees, raises a fundamental question: *who, ultimately, has been dehumanised?* Is it those who construct the label of the "other" as less than human, or those who speak and act in inhumane ways? These are tragic conditions for all societies. Why has Israel chosen this path in order to secure its existence? Is it because, as Pappé (2024) argues, it cannot tolerate the existence of an independent Palestinian state?

Relationship to the Research Questions

In this subsection, the findings of the study are related to the research questions presented in the Introduction in order to assess the extent to which the analysis has provided answers to them.

The first research question concerned how Palestinians are represented in Israeli political and public discourse.

Based on the findings of the present study, Palestinians are represented as a unified, undifferentiated, and morally delegitimised collective entity. The individuality of group members disappears and is replaced by generalisations that collectively equate them with Hamas, terrorists, animals, monsters, barbarians, or the "sons of darkness". Language, therefore, does not merely describe Palestinians; it constructs them as a particular type of subject.

The second research question examined whether this representation in official Israeli political discourse serves to justify mass violence against Palestinians as a whole.

The analysis demonstrated that the legitimisation of mass violence against Palestinians as a whole is achieved through their dehumanisation. More specifically, this process emerges from the combination of several mutually reinforcing discursive strategies of dehumanisation, including animalistic dehumanisation, delegitimising beliefs, social categorisation, moral disengagement, and the construction of Palestinians as a collectively responsible subject. These strategies operate cumulatively, weakening empathy towards the outgroup and facilitating the legitimisation of widespread violence. In this respect, the findings of the present study are consistent with the theoretical relationship between dehumanisation and hate speech presented in Chapter 2. The portrayal of Palestinians as collectively dangerous, inhuman, or morally inferior is repeatedly accompanied by forms of discourse that legitimise or incite widespread violence against them.

Limitations of the Study

First, this study relied primarily on excerpts included in South Africa's Application instituting proceedings before the International Court of Justice (International Court of Justice, 2023), as well as on the reports of Albanese (2024) and B'Tselem (2025). This choice enhanced the reliability of the dataset by allowing the cross-verification of both the selected statements and their English translations from the original language. At the same time, however, it means that the sample is limited to statements already selected and documented by these sources and therefore does not constitute an exhaustive representation of Israeli public discourse as a whole.

Furthermore, the sample consists exclusively of statements made by Israeli politicians and public officials who held institutional positions during the period under examination. Although not all of them participated in Israel's War Cabinet, they all occupied official positions that provided them with substantial access to public discourse and the ability to influence both political decision-making and public opinion. Consequently, their statements were treated as part of official Israeli political discourse by virtue of their institutional roles and their influence on public debate.

With regard to the methodology, Critical Discourse Analysis is a qualitative research approach that inevitably involves interpretation on the part of the researcher and may therefore be characterised by a

degree of subjectivity. Consequently, different researchers may place emphasis on different aspects of the same data.

Finally, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict constitutes a profound and highly complex historical phenomenon, which may require investigation over a considerably longer period than that available for the completion of the present study.

Suggestions for Future Research

During the course of this study, a number of issues emerged that could be explored further in future research. These relate to the internet, terrorism, and antisemitism.

One issue that proved particularly interesting concerns the way in which digital platforms mediate access to information on politically and geopolitically sensitive topics.

More specifically, during the literature review, Google searches using the terms "South Africa against Israel International Court of Justice," "Anatomy of a Genocide," "Gallant we are fighting human animals," and "Dan Gillerman human animals" consistently displayed, as the first search result, not material directly related to these search queries but a sponsored advertisement by the Israel National Digital Agency entitled *Hamas' Doctrine of Warfare: Documentation and Primary Materials on How Civilian Space Is Leveraged in Armed Conflict* (Israel National Digital Agency, n.d.). This observation raises questions regarding the role of political advertising in search engines and its potential influence on users' access to information.

In addition, while using Google Translate to translate an excerpt from Albanese's report *Anatomy of a Genocide* (2024), it was observed that the term *genocide*, which appeared in the original text without quotation marks, was rendered in the Greek translation as «genocide», with quotation marks, thereby modifying the literal presentation of the term. This observation indicates the need for a more systematic examination of the ways in which automatic machine translation tools may influence the rendering of politically or legally sensitive terminology.

These observations open up a broader field for future research concerning the role of search engines, digital platforms, and artificial intelligence tools in shaping access to information and public discourse on politically and geopolitically sensitive issues.

The next recommendation for future research concerns the definition of terrorism and the difficulty of distinguishing it from a struggle for national liberation. It is important to note that there is no universally accepted legal definition of *terrorism* under international law. In 2025, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued a *Call for Inputs* on the terms *terrorism*, *terrorist organisation*, and *violent extremism* (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2025). According to Pappé (2024), Israel, the United States, and the European Union have portrayed all forms of Palestinian resistance as terrorism without sufficient or impartial justification. He argues, however, that such resistance should instead be recognised as a national anti-colonial liberation struggle. Similarly, Said (2025) criticises the ease with which Palestinian actions are labelled as terrorism and emphasises Palestinians' right to self-representation, arguing that for decades they were denied the opportunity to present their own account of history. Consequently, future research should examine what ultimately constitutes terrorism, where the boundary lies between terrorism and national liberation struggles, who has the authority to shape the discourse surrounding terrorism, and whether terrorism discourse and the designation of actors as terrorists are linked to colonial power and rhetoric.

The final recommendation for future research concerns the use of the term antisemitism. As discussed earlier in this study, Pappé (2024) argues that Israel treats virtually any criticism directed at the state or its policies as antisemitic. Likewise, Said (2025) notes that, in the past, merely arguing that discussions of peace in West Asia (the Middle East) should also address the Palestinian question was sufficient for an individual to be accused of antisemitism. In light of recent developments, clarifying the meaning and use of this term has become increasingly important.

Accordingly, these issues open up a broader field for future research into the role of search engines, digital platforms, and artificial intelligence tools in shaping information and public discourse on politically and geopolitically sensitive issues, as well as in clarifying contested concepts such as terrorism and antisemitism.

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