

PARIAH

How Gaza Broke Israel

*A chronicle of witness, silence and reckoning
in the world's first livestreamed genocide*

Richard Powell

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DEDICATION

To the more than 260 Palestinian reporters, photographers and editors who were killed documenting this genocide after Israel tried to blindfold the world to it. May their record be the conscience of our time.

Gaza is the "worst ever conflict for reporters" with more journalists killed in two years than World War I, World War II, Vietnam, Yugoslavia, Iraq and Afghanistan, combined.

Costs of War Project, Brown University

"We make the best weapons in the world, we've given a lot to Israel ... and you used them well"

US President Donald Trump, 13 October 2025, Speech to Israeli Knesset

"Genocide... is a crime which shocks the conscience of mankind."

United Nations General Assembly Resolution 96(I), 1946

"Young people won't remember October 7 the same way. We need to ensure when history books are written, they don't write about the victims of Gaza."

Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, 13 January 2026, Israel Security Briefing at MirYam Institute

"By way of deception, thou shalt do war"

A maxim of Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence agency

PROLOGUE

The World Watched Gaza Burn

This book is a record of the world's first livestreamed genocide: documented not by foreign correspondents in the field, but largely by the Palestinians being killed.

In October 2023, the world looked directly into Gaza and did not turn away. For the first time in history, a modern army's destruction of a civilian population was recorded from inside the kill-zone by the people being killed. Palestinians filmed their final hours, broadcasting the end of their existence to billions; the genocide unfolded in real time, undeniable, unmissable.

No one would ever be able to claim they had not known.

This chronicle draws on the author's 300+ Gaza news reports published since 2023, supplemented by third-party documentation, eyewitness testimony, government records, leaked memos, court filings and the vast digital archive created by Palestinians themselves. Every claim has been cross-referenced against multiple sources and every statistic traced to its origin. The sourcing style favours narrative integration over academic footnoting but the evidentiary foundation is forensic.

This is not advocacy disguised as journalism; it is journalism that refuses to sanitise what the evidence shows. The goal is

neither to persuade nor to inflame, but to create a record that survives the fog of propaganda and the erosion of memory.

The author of this book has reported from war zones over two decades, beginning with the theatre of Kosovo as a journalism student, then on to Iraq, Sudan, Liberia and Beirut. Every conflict had a familiar script; the press briefings, the escorts, the military censors, the managed tours of curated ruins... but Gaza was different. Israel sealed the enclave not only from essential supplies but from the journalists who would normally bear witness. There were no convoys of correspondents driving into a battered city, no roving crews juggling the risk of injury or death with the reward of recording era-defining coverage on the front line... this was the first war where the press was deliberately excluded in total.

Gaza became a black box: its only light, the flicker of its people's phones. The truth of the assault survived only because Palestinians recorded it until their batteries died or their lives were taken. Each morning from October 2023 onward, the global public opened screens to new ruins, new children wrapped in sheets, new livestreams cut short mid-sentence. The global viewer became a front-seat witness. Governments mouthed the familiar ritual "Israel has the right to defend itself," even as entire districts were pounded into dust. The propaganda machine did what it always does in the first hours of a war: it built a wall of myth, but this time that wall crumbled as quickly as it was erected while reality was being streamed from beneath it.

The footage from Gaza was raw, immediate and human. Mothers clutching dead children, journalists broadcasting until an airstrike hit beside them, surgeons working by the

light of their iPhones as generators failed. In the absence of the foreign press, Palestinians became the chroniclers of their own destruction; reporting, filming and speaking to us as it was happening. More than 100 journalists would be killed in the first year alone, the highest death toll for the profession in any conflict in history.

What made Gaza different was not only the scale of the killing, but the impossibility of looking away. Global audiences watched hospitals overwhelmed, watched families digging through rubble with bare hands, watched children starve while mile-long aid convoys waited at sealed gates.

And yet, Gaza's journalists worked unflinchingly. Wael al-Dahdouh, Al Jazeera's local bureau chief, continued broadcasting even after Israeli strikes killed his wife, son, daughter and grandson in October 2023. When asked why he returned to reporting within hours of burying his family, he answered simply: "The world must see." In January 2024, his eldest son Hamza, also a journalist, was killed by another Israeli strike. Yet, Dahdouh patiently waited for the gallery in Doha to tell him when to start speaking again... his presence on-screen a symbol of Palestinian witness and a refusal to let grief silence truth.

Gaza's genocide was not hidden behind narrative; it struggled to be hidden at all. For the first time in modern warfare, truth outran the machinery built to bury it.

Hasbara – the Israeli state's propaganda system – found itself fighting a more difficult enemy than militants: the world's eyes. For two years, some followed this onslaught day-by-day, night-by-night, tracking every statement, every denial, every attempt to invert the meaning of what the

cameras showed. The archive is vast: eyewitness testimonies, official briefings, leaked documents, satellite imagery and the tens of thousands of videos and messages Palestinians uploaded before their accounts went dark.

What began as journalism became record-keeping that will ensure Gaza will be one of the most documented crimes in history... and, simultaneously, one of the most contested. The struggle was no longer only over territory or sovereignty but over memory itself.

This book is an attempt to preserve that memory. It is not a catalogue of atrocity for its own sake, but a record of how truth fought to survive systematic distortion. It charts how governments, media institutions and political elites rehearsed language to blunt the horror: “surgical strikes,” “human shields,” “terror targets” and “collateral damage.” Words became the instruments of a second assault: one aimed not at bodies but at comprehension. The goal was clear; fracture the public’s ability to understand what it was watching, or who to apportion blame to.

Yet millions of ordinary people understood instinctively when they saw children pulled from the rubble, and recognised what was happening. They saw the journalists killed while wearing press vests and they saw the starvation, the siege, the bombed hospitals. People did not *need* experts to decode the meaning of what they could not see.

Gaza’s raw footage cut through decades of finely-honed narrative discipline. It exposed the fragility of Western self-image, the failure of international law to prevent what it was designed to prevent and democracies that built their reputations on human rights promises yet continued

weapons transfers and diplomatic protection despite vast civilian casualties.

That protection did not emerge spontaneously; it was cultivated through a dense ecosystem of political financing that rewarded compliance and punished deviation. Data compiled by Track AIPAC, analysing Federal Election Commission records, shows that the most reliable defenders of Israel's Gaza campaign in US Congress were also its most heavily-funded beneficiaries.

By 2025, the five largest lifetime recipients of pro-Israel lobby money in Congress had collectively received more than \$7 million. At the top was Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, who had received approximately \$1.95 million. In October 2023 he declared, "Israel is our strongest ally in the world. We trust them," and then championed an unconditional \$14 billion arms package. Senator Ted Cruz, recipient of roughly \$1.87 million, went further: "The United States must ensure that Israel has all the weapons and all the time that it needs to utterly eradicate Hamas."

On the Democratic side, Senator Ron Wyden, with lifetime pro-Israel contributions exceeding \$1.28 million, criticised Netanyahu's conduct while voting to sustain the weapons pipeline that made the devastation possible. In the House, Speaker Mike Johnson, recipient of more than \$1 million, used his agenda-setting power to force Israel-only aid bills and denounce ceasefire calls as "outrageous."

Track AIPAC's data does not allege illegality. Its significance lies elsewhere: lawmakers who receive the most pro-Israel funding deliver the most reliable political outcomes. In this sense, Gaza was defended not only by weapons and

vetoed, but by a financial architecture that transformed donor preference into US foreign policy.

This book is written for the record, but also out of conscience. It follows the collapse of official stories and the emergence of the truth. It examines how a global audience, connected by empathy and witness, challenged the power of the most sophisticated information apparatus in the Middle East, with micromanaged guidance by the world's only superpower. It asks why, despite the relentless visibility of the crime, the killing is allowed to continue.

Gaza held up a mirror to the world and in it, nations saw not an enemy but their own moral collapse. This book does not argue that every death was intentional; it argues something more precise... that the structures in place - the siege, the dehumanisation, the impunity - made mass civilian death inevitable, and that those who maintained those structures knew this.

The genocide did not happen in darkness, but under a spotlight: and yet, still the bombs fell and still governments continued to arm Israel throughout.

The account of it that follows does not begin on 7 October nor with the failure of intelligence systems or with the collapse of political leadership... It begins decades before in the architecture of siege that made such an explosion inevitable, and it begins with a system built to contain a people and erase their history: a structure of domination that was inevitably set to produce catastrophe.

PART I — THE FIRE BEFORE THE FIRE

CHAPTER 1

The Architecture of Siege

Gaza's destruction did not begin on 7 October 2023. It began with the architecture of siege: a system designed to cage, starve and ultimately break a population into submission.

Long before rockets, massacres, or mass graves, Gaza existed in a state of engineered suffocation. Its slow death was not a secret; it was a policy, meticulously documented and quietly accepted by a world that had grown accustomed to the abnormality of its suffering.

For sixteen years after the 2006 elections brought Hamas to power - an outcome international observers certified as free and fair - the 2.3 million Palestinians of the Gaza Strip lived within an architecture of control unique in its totality. Israel's perimeter fence, a billion-dollar lattice of steel and concrete, was perpetually watched by a silent army of drones, automated gun turrets and surveillance towers covered in cameras so powerful they could read a licence plate from half a mile away.

Beyond the shore, Israeli gunboats enforced a maritime blockade, penning fishermen into a shrinking zone of three nautical miles, sometimes less. In this hermetically-sealed world, every person crossing a checkpoint, every calorie entering the Strip, every watt of electricity flowing through its crippled grid and every byte transmitted from

a smartphone or laptop was counted, controlled, and weaponised.

The system's architects termed it 'economic warfare'. The Israeli lawyer and special advisor, Dov Weisglass, expressed its cruel precision in 2006 when he stated that the goal was to "put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger." This was no rogue comment; it had crystallised into state policy. It was the arithmetic of cruelty turned into governance.

The consequences were relentless. Electricity – the lifeblood of modern society – arrived in fits and starts for four to eight hours a day, its flow dictated by Israel's strategic calculations and Egypt's reluctant co-operation. Without power, water pumps failed, flooding streets with sewage where children played.

Brackish, contaminated water poisoned the wells. Fuel convoys were rationed by spreadsheet; hospitals, running on generators, were forced to shut down ventilators and incubators at night to conserve power. Israel's political and military leadership labelled this intricate system of deprivation 'security'. Under international law, it was known by its true name: collective punishment.

Even Britain's future prime minister, David Cameron – a politician with no sympathy for Hamas – described Gaza in 2010 as "an open-air prison". António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, told the UN General Assembly 10 years after that, "If there is a hell on earth, it is the lives of children in Gaza today."

This architecture of suppression did not begin on 7 October 2023. It was already deeply embedded in Western

institutions, quietly disciplining Palestinian visibility even when no war was underway. One of the clearest examples unfolded not in a parliament or courtroom, but in the corridor of a London children's hospital.

The Hospital That Censored Gaza's Children

In February 2023, eight months before the Gaza war would return to the world's front pages, a quiet act of erasure took place inside one of London's most respected hospitals.

Along a corridor outside the children's outpatient department at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, a display had stood for more than a decade. It was not political in any conventional sense. It consisted of ceramic plates, each hand-painted by schoolchildren in Gaza as part of a cultural exchange project with pupils attending the hospital's own specialist school for young patients.

The project was called 'Crossing Borders - A Festival of Plates'. The images were simple and unmistakably childlike: olive trees, fishing boats, birds, houses, sunrises. One plate showed the golden dome of al-Aqsa mosque. Another included a Palestinian flag. Others depicted ordinary scenes of life in Gaza: markets, families, the sea. Each was accompanied by a small handwritten caption explaining what the child had drawn and why. The plates had hung there quietly for years, offering sick children and their families a moment of colour and connection. They had generated no controversy. No protests, no petitions, no complaints from patients... until a letter arrived.

In early February 2023, the hospital's chief executive received a formal legal communication from UK Lawyers for Israel, a well-funded advocacy group that specialises in

legal and regulatory pressure on public bodies. The letter asserted that the presence of the Gaza children's artwork was making Jewish patients feel "vulnerable, harassed and victimised." It claimed that certain images, particularly the Dome of the Rock with a Palestinian flag, could be interpreted as denying Jewish religious ties to Jerusalem and therefore amounted to discrimination.

The letter invoked the Equality Act. It warned the hospital that allowing the plates to remain on display could expose it to legal liability. There was no evidence that any patient had complained. No named individual and no recorded grievance; just the letter. The hospital removed the artwork within days. A decade-long display created by children in Gaza was taken down from the walls of a British children's hospital not because it was disruptive, inflammatory, or hateful, but because a legal lobby group had said it might offend. When the decision became public, the hospital issued a carefully-worded statement.

It said it regretted that the artwork had offended some communities and that its removal had offended others and promised to "work with relevant parties" to find a way forward. The plates were placed in storage, but the damage had already been done. Freedom of Information disclosures later revealed what many had suspected: no formal complaints from patients or families had ever been logged. The sole trigger for the removal was the intervention by UK Lawyers for Israel.

The hospital had not weighed competing patient views. It had not consulted the children who created the artwork or considered the broader principle of artistic expression; it had simply complied. The message was unmistakable:

Palestinian identity itself had been deemed too risky for a public hospital wall. The reaction was swift. Civil liberties groups, educators and campaigners condemned the decision as censorship. The Palestine Solidarity Campaign described it as a case study in how legal intimidation was being used to silence Palestinian voices in British institutions. Writers and artists warned that even the most innocent expressions of Palestinian life were now being treated as suspect.

The Palestinian diplomatic representative in London at the time, Husam Zomlot, wrote directly to the hospital. He called the removal discriminatory and dehumanising, an act that erased Palestinian children from a space designed to care for children. Two years later, after the United Kingdom formally recognised the State of Palestine, that same mission became the Embassy of Palestine in London. The legal status of Palestinian representation changed, but the plates did not return.

What made the Chelsea Hospital episode so revealing was not simply that art had been removed, but how it had been removed. No riot, no protest or emergency; just a lawyer's letter and institutional fear. This was not war: this was peace-time Britain. Even here, in a hospital corridor decorated by children, Palestinian existence had been ruled incompatible with neutrality. It was a warning of what was to come

The Prophet of Demographic Doom

The hermetically-sealed siege locking up over two million people from every angle in Gaza was not improvisation. It was the fulfilment of a vision articulated decades earlier by Israel's most influential demographic strategist, a man

whose prophecies shaped government policy at the highest levels and whose words would prove prescient.

Arnon Soffer, an emeritus professor of geography at the University of Haifa, began his career in the early 1970s observing what he called “growing Arab population centres” in Israel’s northern Galilee region. This demographic shift, he believed, threatened the security and Jewish identity of the state. As founder of the university’s geography department, he drew maps highlighting what he viewed as crucial geographic and demographic trends, presenting them to government and military officials who listened with rapt attention. His warnings resonated deeply within political circles.

Ariel Sharon, Israel’s former prime minister, reportedly sought Soffer’s advice when developing the 2005 Gaza Disengagement Plan. The plan proposed a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza not to grant Palestinians freedom, but to avoid what Soffer called the “demographic bomb”: the reality that a single state controlling all the territory from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River would soon have an Arab majority.

In a 2004 interview with *The Jerusalem Post*, titled “It’s the Demography, Stupid,” Soffer laid out a vision that was equal parts pragmatic and apocalyptic... “When 2.5 million people live in a closed-off Gaza, it’s going to be a human catastrophe,” he predicted with disturbing accuracy. Then came the statement that would define his legacy and reveal the genocidal logic at the heart of Israeli policy: “So, if we want to remain alive, we will have to kill and kill and kill. All day, every day.” The words hung in the air like a verdict already pronounced. Soffer

continued: “Unilateral separation doesn’t guarantee ‘peace.’ It guarantees a Zionist-Jewish state with an overwhelming majority of Jews.”

His message was brutally clear: the only way Israel could secure its Jewish identity was to cage Gaza’s population behind walls and fences, and then systematically destroy any resistance that emerged from that open-air prison. Critics on the left accused Soffer of justifying violence and ethnic cleansing, others saw his words as a harrowing but realistic assessment of what Israel might face without decisive action.

Three years later, in 2007, Soffer sought to clarify what he claimed had been widely-misunderstood: “I didn’t recommend that we kill Palestinians. I said we’ll *have* to kill them.” The distinction, to Soffer, was crucial: he was not advocating murder, he was predicting it as an inevitability of demographic mathematics. “We are living in a 100-year period of terrorism,” he stated in that 2007 interview, “and we have another 100 years of terrorism ahead of us. We will forever be forced to live by the sword.” He detailed the disengagement from Gaza as necessary not for peace but for preservation: “The purpose of disengagement was not to put an end to terrorism or Kassam fire. Its purpose was to stop being responsible for a million and a half Arabs who continue to multiply in conditions of poverty and madness.”

Today, Arnon Soffer is semi-retired but still lectures at Israel’s National Defence College, sharing his hardline demographic theories with the next generation of Israeli military leaders. His core belief has never wavered: “If we don’t kill, we will cease to exist.” For Soffer, the numbers are not merely statistics; they are the nation’s fate, and Gaza’s destruction is not a war crime but a demographic necessity.

By 2023, Soffer's prophecy had materialised exactly as he predicted... the prison was buckling under its own weight.

A United Nations Conference on Trade and Development had already published a report eight years prior warning that the years-long blockade and three Israeli military operations in six years meant Gaza "could become uninhabitable by 2020" if the trend continued. UNICEF documented that 97 percent of its water supply was unfit for human consumption. The World Bank estimated youth unemployment at over 60 percent, a figure that spoke of a generation with no future. Control had become algorithmic: Israel's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) published meticulous import lists dictating which fruits could enter, which construction materials were forbidden, even how many litres of milk were permitted per child per day. It was occupation by macro-management, a humanitarian catastrophe administered through Excel sheets.

Energy Apartheid: The \$35 Billion Betrayal

The cruelty of the siege extended beyond bullets and barriers. Even as Gaza's 2.3 million residents lived with less than four hours of electricity per day, Israel and Egypt finalised a deal that laid bare the architecture of resource plunder and economic exclusion. In August 2025, Israel signed a \$35 billion, 15-year contract with Egypt to export 4.8 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually from the Leviathan gas field off its coast. Egypt, positioning itself as a regional energy hub, would become Israel's largest gas customer, cementing an economic alliance built on mutual profit from Palestinian dispossession.

Court-released emails show that years earlier, former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak had worked with the financier Jeffrey Epstein - later exposed as a human trafficker, child sex offender and serial rapist - to line up Wall Street backing for Leviathan. Epstein acted as an intermediary between Israeli officials and JPMorgan executives during the same period that Israel's tax framework for the gas field was being finalised.

The Leviathan gas deal revealed something more disturbing than profiteering amid siege. It exposed how completely Palestinian absence has been normalised and how an entire population can be sealed off, impoverished and rendered invisible while their land and sea are quietly absorbed into global markets. This was not a moral collapse triggered by war, nor a temporary suspension of principles in the name of security, it was the smooth functioning of a system long-practised: one that treats Palestinian life as an obstacle to be removed, managed or ignored altogether.

To understand how such a system could operate so openly - and with so little international resistance - it is necessary to look beyond the present siege. The destruction of Gaza did not emerge from a vacuum: it was the latest chapter in a pattern established long before blockades, borders or energy contracts existed.

CHAPTER 2

A Century of Massacres

The violence that would culminate in Gaza's destruction was not an aberration but the continuation of a century-long pattern: conquest through terror, displacement and the systematic erasure of Palestinian existence.

The Unbroken Pattern

Long before the Nakba, before the term 'Israeli' even existed, European settlers arriving in Palestine under British colonial protection formed armed militias – the Haganah, Irgun, and Lehi (the Stern Gang) – that pioneered the tactics of Israeli statehood: assassinations, bombings and the systematic terrorising of the indigenous population.

Between 1936 and 1939, during the Arab Revolt against British colonial rule and Zionist settlement, these militias worked alongside British forces to crush Palestinian resistance with unprecedented brutality. Villages from Haifa to Jerusalem (Al-Quds) to Balad al-Sheikh were attacked, homes torched, inhabitants driven out or murdered. These early massacres established the template: terrorise the population until they flee, then claim their land as abandoned. This pattern would repeat for nearly a century.

On 22 July 1946, Zionist militants from the Irgun – led by Menachem Begin – planted bombs in the King David

Hotel in Jerusalem, which housed the British administrative headquarters for Mandatory Palestine. The explosion killed 91 people, including 28 British soldiers and officials, 41 Arabs and 17 Jews. It remains one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in the region's history.

At the time, British Pathé newsreels and the international press called the Irgun exactly what they were: "Jewish terrorists." The British government declared the Irgun a terrorist organisation. Yet just three decades later, the man who commanded that bombing, Menachem Begin, would become Prime Minister of Israel, celebrated as a statesman and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize alongside Egypt's Anwar Sadat.

The bombing was not an isolated incident but part of a broader campaign of terror. The Irgun and Stern Gang carried out systematic attacks on British, Arab, and even Jewish targets deemed insufficiently militant. Their objective was clear: make Palestine ungovernable until the British withdrew and the land could be seized by force. This history is rarely taught. The state of Israel was not founded by peace-loving pioneers fleeing persecution; it was founded by armed European settlers who used terror as a calculated tool of conquest, and who later whitewashed their origins beneath the language of national liberation.

As the UN pushed partition in 1947, Zionist forces unleashed a campaign of terror across Palestine designed to empty the land of its indigenous inhabitants. Massacres were carried out in Abbasiya, Al-Khisas, Bab al-Amud, Sheikh Bureik and Jerusalem, aimed at clearing Palestinians from strategic areas that would become the new Israeli state. Then came Deir Yassin on 9 April 1948: the massacre that would define

the Nakba. Irgun and Lehi forces entered the village near Jerusalem and executed over 100 villagers, including women and children. Survivors described soldiers going house to house, shooting families in their homes, throwing grenades into shelters, others spoke of rape and flamethrowers. The terror was deliberate and strategic: word of Deir Yassin spread panic across Palestine, triggering a mass exodus.

Massacres at Jaffa and Tantura followed the same script. By the time Israel declared statehood on 15 May 1948, more than 750,000 Palestinians had been ethnically cleansed, over 500 villages destroyed and entire regions emptied of their population. Towns were seized and renamed; Arabic street signs vanished, replaced by newly-minted Hebrew toponyms. The newborn state was baptised in blood and denial.

Every Palestinian family carries such a history. Ali Abunimah, the Palestinian-American journalist and co-founder of The Electronic Intifada, has documented what the Nakba meant through his own family's experience. "Both sides of my family experienced the whole range of horrors that Zionism inflicted on us," he said.

His father's family was from Battir, a village near Bethlehem. In 1948, as Zionist militias advanced, the family fled under fire. This was one of the few Palestinian villages not destroyed that year, and the family returned after the armistice; only to find themselves living under Israeli military occupation after 1967. "When they occupied the West Bank, the Israelis gave a window for Palestinians to apply for residency cards," Abunimah explains. "My father was outside Palestine at the time. He was unable to establish his residency. So even though all his family, his mother, his

sisters, all of them were there, he was never able to go back and see them after 1967.”

His mother’s story was even more emblematic. She was born in Lifta, on the northwest edge of Jerusalem, one of the first villages attacked and depopulated in December 1947. She was ten years old when the violence forced her family first to take shelter in Jerusalem, then to flee to Jordan. “They never went back. They lost their house, their property, everything.” Lifta’s stone homes still stand today, uninhabited, above the highway into Jerusalem, preserved by a years-long campaign but still off-limits to those expelled. It is one of the few remaining examples of Palestinian village architecture from that time.

The violence did not end with statehood. In 1953, Israeli forces under Ariel Sharon’s command massacred civilians in the village of Qibya in the West Bank, destroying 45 houses and killing 69 people, mostly women and children hiding in their homes. In November 1956, in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis, Israeli troops carried out one of the worst massacres in the new state’s history. In Khan Yunis, Gaza, soldiers executed hundreds of Palestinian civilians, with many shot in their doorways or forced into lines and mown down with machine guns. A week later, in Rafah, they did it again. The pattern had calcified: military control justified as retaliation, the occupied turned into permanent suspects.

When Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza in the 1967 war, it extended this regime of military control across all of historic Palestine. A dual legal system emerged: military law governed Palestinians while civilian law applied to Israeli settlers, apartheid encoded in legislation.

Even exile offered no safety. In September 1982, Israeli forces commanded by Defence Minister Ariel Sharon surrounded the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut while allied Lebanese Christian militias entered and massacred more than 3,000 Palestinian and Lebanese Shia civilians over three days. The IDF provided illumination flares throughout the night to light the killing, controlled all entry and exit points and watched through binoculars as the slaughter unfolded. An Israeli government inquiry found Sharon “personally responsible” for the massacre, forcing his resignation. Yet, he would later return as Prime Minister, and the massacre – like all that came before – would be framed as a regrettable but understandable response to terrorism.

The massacres continued through the decades. In 1994, an Israeli settler named Baruch Goldstein opened fire in the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron during Ramadan prayers, killing 29 Palestinian worshippers and wounding more than 100. Israeli soldiers guarding the mosque stood by and, in some cases, prevented Palestinians from fleeing or fighting back.

In 2002, during the Second Intifada, Israeli forces invaded the Jenin refugee camp in a massive military operation. Bulldozers demolished entire city blocks with families still inside. The exact death toll remains disputed - Israel blocked UN investigators from entering for weeks - but survivors described systematic executions, the use of Palestinian civilians as human shields and the deliberate destruction of medical facilities. Human rights organisations documented what they called a “massacre buried under rubble and censorship.”

For the past two decades, Israel has treated Gaza as both prison and testing ground. Massive military operations were launched in regular intervals, each one marketed as a “defensive response” to rocket fire:

- Operation Cast Lead (2008-09): More than 1,400 Palestinians killed, over half civilians;
- Operation Pillar of Defence (2012): Hundreds killed in sustained bombardment;
- Operation Protective Edge (2014): Over 2,100 Palestinians killed, including 500 children;
- Great March of Return (2018-2019): Israeli snipers shot at thousands of unarmed protesters at the fence, killing more than 200 and permanently disabling many more;
- Operation Guardian of the Walls (2021): Sustained bombing campaign killing hundreds.

Each offensive systematically destroyed schools, clinics and power plants. Each time, reconstruction was deliberately blocked or delayed, and each time, the same weapons tested on Gaza’s dense neighbourhoods were later marketed at international arms fairs as ‘combat-proven.’

The Reinvention of the Conqueror

Israel’s founding generation, lionised as pioneers, were in fact European émigrés reinvented as natives. David Ben-Gurion began life as David Grün in Poland; Moshe Sharett as Moshe Chertok of Ukraine; Golda Meir as Golda Mabovitch of Kyiv. Menachem Begin (Begun) and Yitzhak Shamir (Yezernitsky) came from Belarus and Poland, commanding militias Britain rightly called terrorist

organisations. In 1937, Szymon Perski applied for Palestinian citizenship under the British Mandate; decades later, as 'Shimon Peres', he would claim that Palestine never existed.

After 1948, surnames were Hebraised: Scheinerman became Sharon, Brog became Barak, masking origins beneath a script of biblical authenticity. These acts of self-creation built the ideological scaffolding for a settler state that claimed ancient indigeneity while practising modern colonialism. The myth of return hid the reality of reinvention.

A century later, that mythology still underwrites every policy of exclusion from citizenship laws to the Genetic Information Law, which restricts ancestry testing to state-approved labs, ensuring the story of origin remains state property. Beneath every Hebrew name echoes a Slavic ghost.

Codifying Collective Punishment

This violence was not spontaneous but doctrinal. In the aftermath of the 2006 Lebanon war, Israeli strategists formalised the Dahiya Doctrine, named from the Beirut suburb reduced to rubble by Israel's aerial bombardment. It promised deterrence through overwhelming, disproportionate destruction of civilian infrastructure: the punishment of entire societies until resistance became impossible. Gaza would ultimately become this concept's ground zero.

Western governments, eager clients of the Israeli defence industry, consistently framed the many assaults leading up to the one the world is most familiar with today as 'security operations.' The media consistently framed them as

sudden ‘flare-ups’ disconnected from the siege and decades of occupation. The slow violence of deprivation and medical collapse – the violence of malnutrition and permits denied – barely registered. For international audiences, Gaza existed only when it was exploding.

Inside Israel, democracy corroded. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, indicted for bribery and fraud, faced mass protests over his judicial overhaul. In what analysts widely interpreted as a move to preserve power, he allied with ultranationalist and religious-supremacist factions led by Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich: figures who spoke openly of “purging terrorist villages” and annexing the West Bank. Dissent became treason. Gaza, ever the common enemy, offered dark unity to a nation turning inward.

Across the fence, despair hardened into resolve. Nearly half the population was unemployed; two-thirds of youth had no work. Families survived on UNRWA (the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees) food parcels worth less than two dollars a day. Anaesthetics were rationed in hospitals; surgeons performed amputations under local sedation while the Strip’s cancer centre ran on Qatari diesel donations... every metric – economic, medical, social – pointed toward total collapse. In 2022, UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese described Gaza as “a territory under permanent siege designed to destroy hope.” Her report detailed the denial of exit permits for critically-ill patients; over a thousand deaths between 2018 and 2022 alone. International outrage, when it came, was brief and performative.

Politicians praised Israel’s patience, knowing full-well the arsenal of American weaponry it was sitting on, and

what it could do. The abnormal had not just become mundane; it had been institutionalised. This normalisation depended on the erosion of language... Official military vocabulary stripped Palestinians of humanity: “neutralising infrastructures” instead of killing families, “operatives eliminated” instead of civilians incinerated. When a UN school sheltering hundreds was shelled, it was called “a precision strike on Hamas assets.”

Through compliant media repetition, occupation was rebranded as “counterterrorism.” Words like “terror tunnels” and “surgical strikes” pre-empted moral comprehension. Entire families vanished from municipal registers just as villages once vanished from maps. The same bureaucracy that issued ration cards now issued target lists while colonial theology had evolved into algorithmic management.

By 2023, the occupied West Bank simmered. Israeli raids on Jenin and Nablus killed teenagers; settlers torched homes with impunity. Ministers spoke of “voluntary migration” from Gaza: a euphemism for ethnic cleansing. Analysts warned that a society stripped of hope was being pushed beyond endurance, their memos were ignored. Western leaders who had celebrated the Abraham Accords and courted Saudi Arabia, spoke of “a new era of peace” but Gaza was omitted from the script.

Inside the besieged enclave, despair was giving way to something colder and harder. A generation that had known nothing but drones and darkness was reaching its limit. Graduates drove donkey carts; children played war amid ruins. Hope had been replaced by endurance, which was turning into defiance.

For approaching two decades, the blockade had maintained an equilibrium of despair: a containment strategy disguised as conflict management. Western capitals could speak of “de-escalation” while funding the weapons that maintained the cage. Each bombardment was framed as a “round of fighting,” as if it were sport rather than the destruction of a trapped population. Diplomats praised “restraint” while infants died in powerless incubators: the silence was not ignorance, it was complicity.

Then came the morning of 7 October, 2023...

At dawn, the illusion ruptured. Fighters from Gaza breached the barrier in a stunning, multi-pronged assault. They overran bases and settlements along the border and within hours, Israeli command collapsed and chaotic footage flooded global screens. The world that had ignored Gaza’s slow death suddenly rediscovered it, but only as perpetrator.

By midday, before facts could be verified, the narrative was fixed: Hamas terrorists had launched a barbaric invasion; Israel faced an existential threat. Western leaders repeated the phrase “unprovoked attack.” All context – years of siege, decades of dispossession, a century of massacres – was erased. Editors deleted the word ‘occupation’ as being political, civilisation was under assault by savagery.

Israel’s retaliation began within hours, with a fury that eclipsed all before it. Entire districts of Gaza City were erased on the first night. Israeli captives taken back to Gaza could have been in any building, under any bomb. To grasp what follows – the deliberate starvation orders, the massacres in so-called safe zones, the obliteration of hospitals – one must first understand the silence that made such crimes possible.

Think-tanks rebranded siege as “containment” as diplomats stayed silent, afraid to offend a donor. News editors diligently sanitised language while governments measured stability by Palestinian submission. For years, the world’s power brokers and opinion-shapers had rehearsed their respective parts until it had become habit. The international community spoke of “conflict” when the accurate term was imprisonment, of “clashes” when the reality was decimation.

When Gazans finally broke through the fence on 7 October it shattered the silence those individuals had so long held in the face of their suffering. The flames that rose that morning were not born of chaos but of history: a fire stoked by strangulation, fortified by neglect and fanned by a century of systematic violence that had never been meaningfully challenged. What the world saw as an explosive eruption was, in truth, the inevitable culmination of years of engineered despair, and the response to a century of massacres that began in Haifa in 1937 and had never stopped.

One must consider this series of events if they are to understand why a response was given that day. But grasping the truth of what happened on 7 October requires cutting through layers of mythology that would be constructed within hours of the first shots, myths designed to justify the annihilation that followed.

PART II — RUPTURE & WAR FOR REALITY

CHAPTER 3

The Breach

In October 2023, the illusion of Israeli invincibility shattered in a single morning ... not because of Hamas's military strength, but because of catastrophic failures, ignored warnings and a doctrine that may have killed more Israelis than it saved.

At dawn on Saturday, 7 October 2023, the perimeter that had imprisoned Gaza for sixteen years cracked open. What followed was not merely a military assault, but the construction of a narrative; a carefully-orchestrated mythology that would shape the global response and provide moral cover for genocide. Within hours – before a single fact had settled – that narrative ossified into gospel, designed not to inform but to justify eradication.

Fighters from several factions – Hamas's Qassam Brigades, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and smaller resistance cells – breached Israel's security fence in more than twenty locations. Bulldozers cleared paths through the sensor-wired barriers; motorbikes and pickup trucks poured through. Others crossed by paraglider, soaring above the gun towers that had fired on anyone who approached them for years before.

Within minutes Israeli surveillance feeds went dark. Within hours the world was staring at an event it had been told was impossible. Israel, the state that marketed itself as

omniscient – its intelligence service described as the best in the world, its AI surveillance system “The Gospel” celebrated for predicting human behaviour – was suddenly blind. Southern communities from Sderot to Be’eri and Kfar Aza awoke to chaos. Sirens failed and the army did not answer calls. A population drilled for constant war was struck by its own myth of invincibility.

The first footage appeared on Telegram channels at 06:45 local time: paragliders descending over music-festival tents near Re’im, gunmen in pickup trucks entering army posts and civilians fleeing along the highways. Within minutes international outlets were streaming the clips without verification. Numbers of the dead changed hourly while rumour and reality fused.

In London, Washington, and Brussels, statements of solidarity were drafted before the smoke had cleared. “Israel has the right to defend itself,” said one head of government after another, an automatic refrain that required no evidence, no definition, no memory. No leader asked the question buried beneath that phrase: can an occupying power claim self-defence against those it occupies?

The blockade that international law defined as collective punishment had been effaced. In diplomatic language, context itself became a threat to narrative.

Mythmaking: Architecture of a Manufactured Crisis

Within forty-eight hours, the story hardened into creed. Western newspapers printed Israeli military bulletins as verified fact. The early estimate of 1,400 dead - later quietly revised to 1,139 – was repeated endlessly until it became history. The New York Times headlined it as “the worst

massacre of Jews since the Holocaust.” Television anchors recited lurid details - beheaded babies, raped women, burned infants – without corroboration.

The claims originated from Israeli officials and were amplified by the prime minister’s office; no forensic evidence was produced... yet presidents, prime ministers and ambassadors repeated them verbatim. By the time human-rights investigators arrived weeks later, many of the stories had collapsed. Israeli police admitted no evidence of mass beheadings existed; no photographs supported the claimed atrocities. Regardless, the damage had been done. The moral licence for annihilation had been issued and the world’s sympathy had been conscripted into complicity.

The Collapse of the Rape Narrative

Months later, in a Tel Aviv District Court, Israel’s own prosecutors quietly confirmed what many independent journalists had already begun to suspect: that one of the most shocking claims of 7 October - the alleged mass rapes committed by Hamas - had no evidentiary basis. Prosecutor Adi Livni told judges that “after extensive review, no verified forensic or witness-based proof of rape or sexual assault has been submitted to the Attorney General’s office.”

From the earliest days of the war, Israeli officials and Western media had invoked “systematic rape” as the moral cornerstone of their narrative, portraying the assault as pure barbarism and the ensuing Gaza invasion as a righteous crusade. But investigators were denied access to alleged sites, and no victims or witnesses were ever presented. Reporters who questioned the story faced censorship by Israel’s military censor or professional retaliation abroad. Israeli lawyers and activists began demanding a parliamentary

inquiry. “War crimes were excused using lies,” said one Tel Aviv attorney. “The damage to truth and to real victims of sexual violence is irreparable.”

For many Israelis, the episode marked a point of no return in their government’s credibility crisis. The collapse of credibility did not rest on anonymous rumours alone; it was reinforced by the handling of specific cases elevated into national symbols and then treated as political assets rather than matters requiring transparency.

The Bibas Case

One of the most emotionally-charged stories of the Gaza war was the Bibas family: a mother and two red-haired children torn from their home, endlessly replayed as an emblem of helpless civilian innocence and used to harden public consent for the scale of Israel’s retaliation. Their images became moral ammunition, yet behind the scenes, the Israeli military itself was telling a very different story.

In early February 2024, Israeli troops recovered CCTV footage from a command-and-control centre used by the Mujahideen Brigades, a Palestinian Islamic Jihad-aligned group operating in Khan Younis. The footage showed Shiri Bibas and her two sons, Ariel and Kfir, being brought alive into the compound by militants on 7 October. It then showed them being moved again on 10 October, loaded onto a truck and taken elsewhere, still alive.

Based on this material, Israeli military sources told journalists that the family was not being held by Hamas at all, but by the Mujahideen Brigades, and that they were believed to have been killed later when the Israeli Air Force bombed buildings in the area where they were being held. This

was Israel's own battlefield intelligence assessment, derived from recovered enemy CCTV and communicated directly to the press.

On February 6 and 7, 2024, those conclusions were published by two of Israel's most prominent aligned outlets. The Times of Israel ran a report citing Israeli military sources and IDF-recovered footage, stating that the Bibas family had been taken by a PIJ-affiliated group and was "likely killed in an Israeli strike in Khan Younis." The Jewish Chronicle published the same assessment, reporting that the family "were likely killed when Israel struck the Khan Younis building where they were being held," based on the recovered CCTV and military analysis.

Both articles noted that the Mujahideen Brigades themselves had already claimed the family was killed in an Israeli airstrike, and that Hamas had made the same claim. But in February 2024, for the first time, those claims were being corroborated by Israeli military intelligence, not contradicted by it; then, quietly, the record was erased. Both the Jewish Chronicle and The Times of Israel removed these articles from their websites. No retractions, no corrections or explanation. The published Israeli military assessment that Israeli bombs likely killed Israeli children simply vanished from the accessible record.

A year later, in February 2025, when the bodies of Shiri, Ariel and Kfir were returned, Israeli officials announced a radically different story. Now they said the children and their mother had been murdered in captivity by their captors. No forensic reports were released, no CCTV was shown and no intelligence transcripts were published. The earlier military

assessment was never acknowledged and the outlets that had reported it had already deleted the evidence.

Yet one fact remained stubbornly incompatible with the new narrative. Yarden Bibas, the children's father, was kept alive for more than a year and released by Hamas as part of a negotiated exchange under a ceasefire. In hostage systems, captors do not normally execute their most emotionally powerful hostages – a baby, a toddler, and their mother – while preserving the least useful bargaining chip.

What happened to the Bibas family was not just a tragedy, it was a case study in how a war story was rewritten. Israel's own military intelligence once concluded that its bombs had killed them. When that conclusion became politically intolerable, it was deleted and replaced with something else. The case came to represent not only civilian tragedy but a deeper collapse in narrative credibility: if even the most potent stories were being managed through selective disclosure, then the edifice of wartime communication itself was called into question.

The most incendiary claim was that Hamas committed systematic sexual violence on 7 October. But by January 2025, Israel's own prosecutors – notably Moran Gaz (who led the Southern District prosecutions and part of the 7 October investigative team) – acknowledged that there was “no evidence” of rape or sexual assault committed by Hamas fighters during the October 7 attack, and that no such cases were being filed. UN investigators confirmed that no concrete proof existed.

The New York Times' central source in its explosive major investigation titled “Screams Without Words” published in December 2023 claiming Hamas had “weaponized sexual

violence” was later found to have provided details that could not be verified, with some subsequently contradicted by other evidence. Critical follow-ups noted serious gaps and contradictions in the ‘evidence’ it had provided: family members of an alleged victim named in the article later denied that rape was ever reported to them, while other claims were not supported by forensic or medical corroboration.

By the time the claims began to unravel, the damage was already done. A macabre theatre had been constructed in plain sight: one in which fabricated allegations dehumanised Palestinians, neutralised dissent and converted mass punishment into moral obligation. The deception was systematic; and for a time, it succeeded.

The Campaign to Silence Truth-Tellers

In late 2025, as the international community began to reckon with the scale of misinformation deployed to justify Israel’s assault on Gaza, the machinery of narrative control turned on those who dared state uncomfortable facts. Reem Alsalem, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls, became the latest target after posting a factual statement: “No Palestinian applauded rape in Gaza. No independent investigation found that rape took place on the 7th of October.”

The Israeli Foreign Ministry demanded her resignation, claiming she “denies Hamas rape documented by Hamas itself,” but this was demonstrably false. A Haaretz investigation in April 2024 established that “the intelligence material collected by the police and the intelligence bodies, including footage from terrorists’ body cameras, does

not contain visual documentation of any acts of rape themselves.”

Alsalem’s statement was accurate on both counts: Israel had not permitted independent investigations, and two major UN examinations were unable to verify a single case of rape. Pramila Patten, the UN Secretary-General’s adviser on sexual violence in conflict, wrote in paragraph 74 of her report that “in the medico-legal assessment of available photos and videos, no tangible indications of rape could be identified.” Paragraph 77 added that while extensive material was reviewed, “no digital evidence specifically depicting acts of sexual violence was found in open sources.”

The UN Commission of Inquiry’s June 2024 report was equally clear. Paragraph 16 noted that the Commission had sent Israel requests for evidence. Israel did not respond. Paragraph 17 stated: “The commission notes the absence of forensic evidence of sexual crimes committed on 7 October.” Paragraph 18 added: “The commission has not met any survivors of sexual violence committed on 7 October despite its attempts to do so.” The Commission also found “some specific allegations to be false, inaccurate, or contradictory with other evidence or statements.”

Yet the campaign against Alsalem continued, amplified by media outlets that had never retracted their original unverified reports. The New York Times’ discredited story by Jeffrey Gettleman remained online without correction. The pattern was now unmistakable: those who stated verifiable facts were targeted, while those who spread unverified claims faced no accountability whatsoever.

Ignored Warnings: A Deliberate Failure

In Israel, shock gave way to fury. The state's image of omnipotence had disintegrated overnight, but the evidence now available suggests that what collapsed on 7 October was not intelligence but will. Egypt's security services issued detailed warnings two weeks before the attack. Egyptian officials had detected unusual Hamas activity and alerted their Israeli counterparts to expect a significant operation. Years of reliance on drones and algorithms had replaced human reconnaissance. The Gaza Division of the IDF, deployed mainly along the fence, had been depleted to police West Bank protests. Senior commanders dismissed the Egyptian warnings as implausible: how could Hamas, under total surveillance, mount a coordinated assault?

But by early 2024, leaked documents published by Haaretz and The Intercept revealed that elite IDF units stationed along the border had received stand-down orders as Hamas fighters breached the fence. "We got a strange order ... don't engage, stay in place," one officer said. Authorisation to fire only came hours later, when the killing was already widespread. Not just Egypt but American intelligence agencies had detected suspicious Hamas preparations in the days before 7 October. Surveillance towers along the border were conveniently "under maintenance" – despite clear indicators, top Israeli officials failed to act.

A recording attributed to Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, allegedly from September 2023, circulated in Israeli media and added fuel to conspiracy theories about foreknowledge. In it, a voice claimed to be Gallant's states: "We need a big event – something that will free our hand completely." The recording's authenticity has been disputed; the Defence

Ministry declined to comment. Critics of Netanyahu's government cited it as evidence of deliberate inaction, while supporters dismissed it as fabrication.

The Shin Bet's own internal probe later acknowledged that the attack could have been prevented had the agency acted differently; a concession that led Israeli commentators to compare the failure to historical shocks like Pearl Harbor and 9/11. Opposition figures accused Netanyahu of allowing the assault to proceed to restore his political power and secure *carte blanche* for Gaza's destruction. At the time, Netanyahu faced corruption trials, mass protests over his judicial overhaul and plummeting approval ratings. His coalition with ultra-nationalist figures Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich was fracturing. He needed a unifying crisis and 7 October provided it.

Within hours, emergency powers were invoked and corruption trials suspended. A nation that had been tearing itself apart rallied behind its embattled prime minister. The attack – preventable, according to multiple intelligence sources – became the justification for Gaza's systematic destruction.

Norman Finkelstein, whose book *Gaza's Gravediggers* examines how powerful actors have undermined justice for Palestinians, has tracked this pattern for decades. "Israel has done this before," he said. "The Goldstone Report on Operation Cast Lead in 2008–09 was a moment when Israel briefly faced global scrutiny. But Judge Richard Goldstone's later retraction – which I attribute to blackmail or pressure – dismantled any momentum. Since then, Israel has never seriously been threatened with accountability again."

Finkelstein believes the Egyptian warnings were ignored because Netanyahu needed exactly what happened: a crisis large enough to justify total war. “Netanyahu faced corruption trials and massive protests. He was politically dead, but October 7 resurrected him,” he explains. “Within hours, emergency powers were invoked, trials suspended. The attack justified Gaza’s destruction. Israeli citizens may have been sacrificed by their government for strategic advantage.”

International jurists are now urging a full investigation. Legal experts warn that if these allegations are confirmed, they would represent one of the most cynical manipulations of national tragedy in modern times.

Chaos at Zikim Beach: Friendly Fire and Confusion

As more evidence emerged, the story of 7 October grew darker still... Fresh video and radio intercepts from the IDF’s coastal base near Zikim Beach, just north of Gaza, revealed catastrophic confusion, with Israeli troops firing on both Hamas infiltrators and fleeing Israeli civilians.

Footage aired by Channel 12 captured soldiers shouting, “Who are we shooting at?” as tanks and drones pounded the shoreline. An internal IDF debrief obtained by Haaretz admitted that commanders had misidentified targets and issued orders to “fire on all movement” in the coastal sector, including beach resorts where Israeli civilians were sheltering.

Subsequent investigations, including a forensic reconstruction by Al Jazeera’s Investigative Unit and the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry (A/HRC/56/CRP.3, June 2024), indicated that Israeli security

forces killed a number of Israeli civilians and hostages during the fighting even though those victims were initially counted within the death toll attributed to Hamas. Investigators concluded that the Hannibal Directive – the secret protocol permitting the army to kill captured Israelis rather than let them be taken hostage – was activated at Zikim and other bases along the border. Israeli survivors described “a rain of fire from every direction.”

Opposition lawmakers demanded transparency. “What happened there was not a battle, it was total chaos,” Knesset member Ofer Cassif said. “Our own forces fired indiscriminately, and Israeli civilians were killed by Israeli fire. The government is now trying to conceal that.” The Zikim revelations undercut Israel’s casualty narratives and reinforced a growing pattern: a significant share of Israeli deaths on 7 October resulted from Israel’s own emergency doctrines, not from Hamas alone.

The Internal Truth: Better Dead Than Captured

The full scale of the Hannibal Directive’s application on 7 October would only become clear through painstaking investigative journalism over the months that followed.

By mid-2024, a comprehensive Haaretz investigation documented that IDF operations under the directive had directly endangered at least 54 Israeli hostages. Drawing on military communications, survivor testimony and forensic analysis, it concluded that approximately 20 of those hostages were killed as a direct or indirect result of Israeli military actions, not by Hamas fighters, but by their own army’s doctrine that preventing capture took precedence over preserving life.

The Hannibal Directive, conceived in the 1980s following several high-profile hostage crises, codified a brutal calculus: better that Israeli soldiers die than be taken alive, where they might be used as bargaining chips in prisoner exchanges. The protocol authorised massive force – artillery, airstrikes and tank fire – to stop vehicles or groups believed to be transporting captured Israelis, even if it meant killing the hostages themselves. As Hamas fighters breached the border and seized captives from kibbutzim and the Nova music festival, the directive was activated across multiple sectors.

One tank commander, speaking anonymously in a recording obtained by investigators, described receiving the order: “We were told: no vehicle returns to Gaza with hostages. Use all force necessary. We understood what that meant. We fired on cars we knew had Israelis inside because the order was clear: better they die by our hand than be taken.”

The directive’s cold logic played out in real time across the border region. Israeli Apache helicopters fired on convoys of vehicles heading back toward Gaza. Many contained Hamas fighters, others contained Israeli hostages. The pilots could not always tell the difference, and under the Hannibal Directive, that uncertainty was resolved in favour of lethal force.

White Flag Incident

The most haunting example came on 15 December 2023, more than two months into the war when three Israeli hostages – Yotam Haim, Alon Shamriz and Samer Talalka – escaped their captors in Gaza City. They emerged shirtless to show they were unarmed, waving a white flag fashioned

from cloth and calling out for help in Hebrew. IDF soldiers opened fire and all three were killed instantly.

An investigation later revealed the soldiers had been operating under standing orders that treated any movement in designated zones as hostile. The white flag – the international symbol of surrender recognised in every armed conflict since the Geneva Conventions – meant nothing in a kill zone where Hannibal logic prevailed: shoot first, identify later. “They were metres from safety,” said the mother of one victim before the Knesset. “They did everything right ... they escaped, they waved white, they called in Hebrew and our army shot them.”

The incident sent shockwaves through Israeli society. Families of hostages, already anguished by the lack of progress in negotiations, now faced the unbearable reality that their loved ones might be killed not by Hamas, but by the IDF’s own protocols.

By August 2025, as fragile ceasefire negotiations continued, the grim accounting of hostages had become clearer. Of the approximately 250 people taken into Gaza on 7 October: 148 had been returned alive – some through negotiations, others through military operations; 58 bodies had been repatriated; between 48 and 50 individuals were still believed to be in Gaza, with intelligence estimates suggesting roughly 20 remained alive. But the question that haunted every negotiation, every press conference, and every family vigil was this: how many of the dead had been killed not by Hamas, but by Israel’s own application of the Hannibal Directive? Israeli officials refused to provide a comprehensive accounting. Military censors blocked

investigations and families demanding answers were told their questions undermined national security.

The state that claimed to value every Jewish life above all else could not admit – or would not admit – how many of its own citizens it had killed to prevent their capture. Former soldiers began to speak anonymously. Their testimonies painted a picture of systematised violence against Israel’s own people. “We were trained that capture was worse than death,” one former Golani Brigade soldier told investigators. “On 7 October, we applied that training. We fired on vehicles we believed contained hostages. We knew we might be killing them but we were told it was necessary.”

The doctrine that was supposed to protect soldiers from the horror of captivity had instead created a different horror: a military that would kill its own citizens to prevent their capture, and then classify the evidence to prevent accountability.

Families Demand Truth

As the evidence mounted, families of hostages began to organise.

In January 2025, a coalition of hostage families filed a petition with the Israeli Supreme Court demanding a full investigation into the application of the Hannibal Directive on 7 October. They wanted to know how many had been killed by IDF fire, which commanders had authorised lethal force on vehicles carrying hostages and whether alternatives existed that were not pursued. “The state demanded absolute loyalty from its citizens: mandatory service, reserve duty, endless sacrifice,” one petition stated. “... and in return, on their darkest day, the state chose their death over their

capture. That is not security, that is abandonment dressed up as doctrine.”

The petition was dismissed on national security grounds. The military censor classified key evidence. Families were warned that pursuing their inquiries could “harm operational security” and “embolden the enemy,” but the questions would not die. As one Israeli human rights lawyer put it: “We built an entire security doctrine on the principle that Israeli lives are sacred, that we will do anything to bring our people home. Then, when tested, we discovered the doctrine meant: we will kill you rather than let you be captured. That truth is destroying the moral foundation of the state.”

The Hannibal Directive, once a closely-guarded secret, had become a weapon turned inward, killing at least 20 Israeli hostages according to Haaretz investigations, not protecting them.

Hidden Dead: Concealing Military Losses

While the public grappled with the horror of the Hannibal Directive, another, even more systematic deception was unfolding within the apparatus of the Israeli state. For months the government reported IDF casualties through carefully-managed press releases: a few dozen here, a few hundred there, each framed as the painful but necessary cost of a just war. The official death toll hovered stubbornly below 2,000. But determining actual IDF losses proved almost as difficult as counting Palestinian dead. Casualty reporting became another front in the information war; one in which opacity served political ends. The resulting void was filled by rumour, speculation and distortion.

Official IDF figures as of late 2025 placed soldier deaths at approximately 920 since 7 October 2023. For a military campaign of this duration and intensity – over a year of brutal urban combat in one of the most densely populated places on earth – the number strained credibility. Former defence minister Moshe Ya’alon publicly challenged the official narrative. In March 2025 he said that Israeli casualties in Gaza had reached 15,000 killed and wounded combined: an extraordinary admission from a former chief of staff and defence minister.

The scale of injuries was beyond dispute. The Ministry of Defence’s Rehabilitation Division reported treating over 20,000 soldiers for physical and psychological wounds since October 2023, with about 1,000 new cases each month. It projected 100,000 disabled veterans by 2030, implying either miraculous survival rates or massive undercounting of fatalities. Military families began speaking publicly about discrepancies: delayed death notifications, funerals held quietly without press coverage and loved ones whose names never appeared on public casualty lists. “We’ve been lied to from the beginning,” said one father whose son died in a tank ambush near Khan Younis. “My son died in November 2023. We buried him in January 2024. His name never appeared anywhere. They’re hiding the real cost of this war because the truth would destroy Netanyahu, politically.”

Into this vacuum rushed misinformation. Claims that 11,000 Israeli soldiers had been killed spread across social media. The number was false, but it came from something real: the number of soldiers newly-classified as disabled, or receiving psychological treatment, or listed among the wounded. Through mistranslation and deliberate conflation, injured became dead. No leaked

document existed and no whistleblower had come forward, but the rumour's persistence revealed something true: when a state refuses to provide credible information, its citizens and critics will fill the void with whatever narratives seem plausible.

Economist and former Israeli intelligence officer Shir Hever described the mechanism: "When a government hides the cost of war, it invites the worst assumptions. The families know something is wrong. The soldiers know. The official numbers don't match what they've seen, and so rumours flourish because the state has forfeited its credibility." Even if the official count of 920 dead were accepted, the ratio of wounded and disabled to killed – roughly twenty to one – was extraordinary. If Ya'alon's 15,000 figure was accurate, Israel had suffered casualties at a rate not seen since the Yom Kippur War. Either way, the "swift, decisive victory" Netanyahu promised was a fiction. The supposedly invincible IDF had been ground down in attritional urban warfare, taking losses the government could not politically afford to acknowledge.

For soldiers in the field, the uncertainty was corrosive. "We knew it was bad," one reserve officer said. "But we thought the brass knew what it was doing. Now we realise they were just managing the narrative. How do you keep fighting when you can't trust your own government to tell you how many of your brothers have died?"

The state that demanded absolute sacrifice from its citizens repaid that sacrifice with evasion and silence. Whether the true toll was 920 or far higher, one fact was undeniable: Israel had lost the ability to be believed. In wartime, that loss of credibility is itself a strategic defeat, measured not in

territory, but in the erosion of the bond between a nation and the young people it sends to die in its name. What shattered on 7 October was not only a fence, it was the credibility of a state.

Israel entered the Gaza war claiming moral clarity and strategic control but it emerged exposed as something far darker: a power willing to sacrifice truth, civilians and even its own citizens to preserve a narrative of righteousness. That breach - of law, of trust, of human life - would never close, and it would define everything that followed.