

I'm a Scholar of Genocide. We're Entering a Terrifying New Era.

Guest Essay in the NY Times, July 21; 2026 by Omer Bartov

How do genocides end? In most cases, there are two options. Either the perpetrators accomplish their goal, or a military force stops them and accountability ensues.

In 1904, the Imperial German Army began a campaign that nearly wiped out the Herero and Nama peoples in what was then German South West Africa, now Namibia, through fatal expulsions into the desert, incarceration in forced labor camps and outright murder. No one intervened. In 1915, the Ottoman Empire either murdered vast numbers of Armenians it sought to remove from the heartland of Anatolia or caused their death by forced marches. Feeble efforts to bring former Ottoman heads of state to account were quickly abandoned. To this day Turkey denies the genocide.

Conversely, because the Nazi regime was defeated in World War II, its genocide of the Jews and its other mass crimes were adjudicated at Nuremberg. Other genocides that also ended with the military defeat of the perpetrators — such as in Cambodia in 1979, in Rwanda in 1994 and in Bosnia in 1995 — all culminated in some sort of reckoning, however belated and incomplete. Denial of what occurred thus became impossible.

In the earlier case of genocides that “succeeded” because of impunity at the time or the absence of subsequent accountability, the perpetrator state went on to benefit from its criminal actions. The invention and codification of the concept of genocide after World War II was meant to prevent the persistence of this dynamic of impunity and profit.

What we have seen unfold in Gaza, where Israel stands accused in the International Court of Justice of committing genocide in the aftermath of the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks, appears to portend a new future for the crime.

It is a future in which other nations or leaders may have an incentive to pursue genocidal policies knowing they will not only get away with murder but may even benefit from it. It is a future in which the countries and international organizations that had been committed to stopping and punishing genocide may give license to its recurrence.

Since the current cease-fire in Gaza went into effect on Oct. 10, and President Trump’s 20-point plan was endorsed by the Security Council on Nov. 17, [more than 1,000](#) Palestinian civilians have been killed by Israeli attacks. The military now [controls nearly 70 percent](#) of the Strip. Two million Palestinians, who had previously lived in one of the most densely populated areas in the world, are now confined to a third of it, trying to survive in devastated spaces lacking the most basic humanitarian infrastructure.

After the cease-fire and exchange of Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners, Phase 2 of Mr. Trump’s plan began in mid-January, which intends to bring about the full demilitarization and reconstruction of the Strip, to be managed by a transitional technocratic Palestinian body. Overseeing the process is an international Board of Peace chaired by Mr. Trump. In the long term, the Trump administration [has spoken](#) about creating a multibillion-dollar futuristic “[New Gaza](#),” and is reportedly planning to build [a major military and personnel base](#) for multinational forces. This will inevitably consign Palestinians in Gaza to the role of construction workers and service providers for the rich inhabiting what used to be their land.

How did we get here?

The Israeli political and military leadership conducted an operation in Gaza that killed at least 70,000 people (as [admitted now](#) by the [Israeli](#) military), most of them civilians; wounded close

to 200,000; and caused vast numbers to die indirectly because of the utter destruction of medical facilities, housing and infrastructure, as well as the deprivation of food and clean water. As I [wrote](#) in July 2025, as a scholar of genocide, I believe this was a concerted attempt to destroy the Palestinians in Gaza, in whole or in part, and that the operation therefore reached the high bar of the 1948 Genocide Convention's definition of this crime.

Israel is unlikely to face a reckoning for its actions. The International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants for Mr. Netanyahu and his former Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant for war crimes and crimes against humanity, as well as for a Hamas official, who turned out to have been killed. The United States has tried to [undermine](#) the [court](#), and Mr. Netanyahu has repeatedly visited the White House to, among other things, try to reportedly persuade Mr. Trump to launch his attack on Iran. Israel may eventually be found guilty of genocide by the International Court of Justice, where South Africa has lodged a separate case against Israel, but the implications of such a ruling are unclear as long as Israel retains U.S. support on the U.N. Security Council, which acts as the enforcement arm of the I.C.J.

And so Israeli leaders will probably not be held to account, unless they are at some point handed over to the I.C.C. by a new Israeli government unwilling to bring them to justice in Israel and eager to restore the nation's international standing. That possibility is remote. Indeed, Mr. Trump's 20-point plan effectively bypasses any possible accountability or punishment for the authors of this crime by promising a bright future for everyone involved, although calls for the restoration of a semblance of normality for the Palestinians are unlikely to gain much sympathy when Israel and its allies are engaged in constructing an ideal city. What would be the point of stirring up old accusations when a brave new world is about to emerge?

It is true that Israel is experiencing increasing global isolation and disapproval among Americans across the political spectrum, but that is precisely what the glossy plans for a new Gaza may attenuate or even reverse: by persuading distracted publics in a troubled world that the issue of Gaza has been settled to everyone's satisfaction.

The Trump plan, if its vision is ever realized, would mean that the U.S. government or American businesspeople working on its behalf would be selling rights for leasing and construction on land expropriated from its residents, whose value is expected to rise sky high.

A collection of real estate moguls, possibly including Jared Kushner, Steve Witkoff and Mr. Trump himself, or companies they promote, would in that way reap a financial bonanza for businesses and investors, transforming the erasure of the Strip into an international [investment opportunity](#). While the coastline would be dominated by prime real estate made up of mixed-use towers seemingly for foreign purchase and tourism — providing profits for developers — Palestinians will almost certainly be priced out of housing on what used to be their land. The plan will not only all but eradicate Gaza's history and society, but also transform it into a free-market economy for foreign corporations being [offered](#) "amazing investment opportunities," as Mr. Kushner put it.

Building Mr. Trump's so-called Riviera would depend on Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states putting up vast amounts of money on the promise of ensuring even tighter strategic and economic links with the United States. For now, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as Turkey, Egypt and Indonesia, have signaled interest by joining Mr. Trump's Board of Peace. Israel, as the Board of Peace consolidates control and Gaza is redeveloped, would take another step in its long-term objective of obliterating Palestinians' hopes for an end to the Israeli occupation of their territories.

Other nations, by declining to hold Israel accountable, will also benefit. Germany is Israel's second-biggest supplier of arms after the United States and has signed major contracts

purchasing military technology from Israel. Germany is defending itself at the I.C.J. against accusations by Nicaragua of facilitating genocide in Gaza by funding Israel and cutting aid to the U.N. Palestinian refugee agency, UNRWA, so it has every political and economic interest in taking the issue off the table. (Germany has denied the allegations.) The United Kingdom is believed to have used its military bases in Cyprus to support Israel, and is laboring to improve its relations with the United States. France is trying to maintain its political influence in the Levant and to move on from the question of genocide in Gaza, which, according to President Emmanuel Macron, will be determined by “historians, in due time.”

Israel, too, is profiting. Even though some European governments have canceled weapons deals and sanctioned Israeli defense firms in response to Israeli violence in Gaza, business has remained brisk for Israel’s arms industry. Israeli export arms sales rose by 30 percent last year over 2024, to a record \$19.2 billion, [according to Calcalist](#), an Israeli financial news site, and the battle-testing of weapons systems in Gaza serves as a selling point, Calcalist reported. In other words, wreaking destruction brings profits.

For now, Israel’s impunity will enable its Jewish citizens to continue to ignore the genocide, the [consequences](#) of which will be a deepening [degradation](#) of Israeli [ethics](#) and morality, erosion of the rule of law, internal police violence against the state’s Palestinian and Jewish citizens and the undermining of whatever is left of Israeli democracy. Beyond being deprived of any justice and accountability for their suffering, the Gazan victims of Israeli actions will continue to live in dire conditions, under military supervision and with very limited future prospects.

Since Defense Minister Israel Katz reportedly [proclaimed](#) last July that Israel was planning to establish a “humanitarian city” in the southern part of the Gaza Strip, actual conditions on the ground have only deteriorated. It appears conceivable that Trump’s plan will be facilitated by an international force aided by Palestinian security personnel and the I.D.F. to enclose the population in such cities, from which they will be able to emerge only to service the wealthy residents of the so-called New Gaza. In those extensive [parts](#) of the Strip remaining under Israeli control, new flourishing Jewish [settlements](#) are likely to be [planted](#).

Mr. Trump has said that the Board of Peace behind this transformation will at some point collaborate with the United Nations, but many fear that it will undermine the world body. One effect of this shift in the postwar order would be the gutting of international humanitarian law and of the two international courts set up to preserve it, ensuring that any hopes to bring Israeli policymakers to justice will remain nothing more than a pipe dream and signaling to other nations that impunity will be open to them too.

Some may argue that the case of Gaza is singular because Israel enjoys a unique international position thanks to its tight alliance with the United States and its reliance on the legacy of the Holocaust. Perhaps other states cannot expect to be rewarded and may even be punished for genocide. Yet what we are seeing today sets an extraordinary precedent, one that has the potential of undermining the entire premise of genocide as a crime punishable under post-World War II international law.

If the plans that are currently being elaborated for Gaza go forward, genocide may come to be seen by some nations as the legitimate and lucrative extension of politics by other means. At the least, other nations that will have benefited in some way from the genocide may be less likely to hold future perpetrators accountable. Raphael Lemkin, the man who coined the term in 1944 and fought for the adoption of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide four years later, had hoped to prevent exactly this outcome. It may well be the future of genocide.