

# Israel, Palestine, and the Language of Genocide

[Mark Levine and Eric Cheyfitz](#) May 17, 2017



*A New Occupation "Fouad Agbaria | Courtesy of Zawyeh Gallery"*

THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip has now reached the half-century mark. There is little, if any, chance in the foreseeable future that Palestinians will achieve even a small measure of independence, sovereignty, or statehood; never mind a measure of political rights in a Greater Israel.

As Israel intensifies its control over the Occupied Territories, the violations of international law that have long been at the heart of the Occupation continue to grow in number, kind, and scope. At the same time, Israeli religious, political, and military leaders make increasingly racist statements that call into question the possibility of the Zionist state ever coming to terms with Palestinians.

The list of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by Israel

includes torture, kidnapping, human shields, theft (of land, money, and resources), denial of education, collective punishment, detention without trial, home demolitions, extrajudicial executions, imprisonment of minors, a massive settlement complex, and even worse from the perspective of international law, persecution on political, racial, ethnic and religious grounds, and racism. Even Apartheid is increasingly accepted as a legitimate legal description of Israeli rule in the Occupied Territories.

But there is one label that still elicits intense opposition even among progressive critics of Israel—genocide. We know the reason why. For Jews, genocide was, is, and will always be primarily associated with the Holocaust. Only crimes involving the highest level of death and destruction justify such a judgment. Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur, perhaps the Yazidis. But Israel? The Occupation might be brutal, but who besides an anti-Semite would suggest Israel has committed genocide against Palestinians?

This understanding of genocide as encompassing only extreme levels of mass murder is why last year's invocation of the term by the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), in criticizing the Occupation in the explanatory text of its manifesto, caused a firestorm of criticism. And yet not all Jews oppose the use of the term. Jewish Voice for Peace, the Jews of Color Caucus, historian Ilan Pappé, and the Center for Constitutional Rights (headed until his death about a year ago by attorney Michael Ratner), among others, have all supported, to a greater or lesser degree, the use of the term in the Israel/Palestine case, as have some of the world's leading scholars of international humanitarian law.

With the 50th anniversary of the Occupation now upon us we believe it is crucial to assess the accusation of genocide in a dispassionate and objective manner. The problem with engaging in such an assessment is that for all its power—indeed, because of it—the term genocide does not have one agreed upon meaning. Rather, its legal, sociological, political,

and polemical meanings overlap at points while also diverging significantly today and over time.

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Tikkun 2017 Volume 32, Number 2:50-55