

US, Israel, And Gaza: A Failure Of International Systems Of Governance



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Gaza is facing a humanitarian catastrophe as Israel continues its massive assault across the besieged region. More than 11,000 people have already been killed and most of Gaza's infrastructure is destroyed. Even hospitals have not been spared from the Israeli rage. Yet, the international community is unwilling to act and force Israel to stop the killings. This is a failure of grand proportions for the international systems of governance, argues political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist *C. J. Polychroniou* in an interview with the French-Greek journalist *Alexandra Boutri*. Polychroniou also objects to the idea that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is unique in history and explains why. In this context, he contends that the US bears immense responsibility for the plight of Palestinians under Israeli occupation.

Alexandra Boutri: Since the end of the Cold War, the international system has undergone fundamental changes. Liberal democracy spread around the world, economic globalization deepened, and the nature of the "security problem" changed. Yet, the end of the Cold War did not bring the end of armed conflict, there was little impact on international law, and the collective problem-solving mechanisms of the United Nations remained ineffective. In addition, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has raised again the specter of nuclear war while even an ultranationalist junior minister in Netanyahu's government suggested dropping a

nuclear bomb on the Gaza Strip. How do you assess the international order erected after the Cold War? Is it collapsing, as some suggest? And how does it relate to what's going on today in Gaza?

C.J. Polychroniou: The so-called “liberal international order” erected after the end of the Cold War was flawed from the start and, in fact, started to crumble by the late 2010s. It was flawed because it came to signify nothing more than a new era of US hegemony and the “imitation of American ways.” From politics to economics, the US had the upper hand, faced no competition, and sought to spread its own version of the *ideal* politico-economic order around the globe, especially since it had [“utterly unrivalled advantages in global power-projection capabilities and the tools and aptitude needed to control the global commons.”](#) In fact, some thought that since the US had emerged victorious in its ideological battle with Soviet Communism, and capitalism and liberal democracy had won, that history had come to an end.

To avoid simplifications, it should be said that Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis did not mean to imply that history as such had reached an end point but, rather, that there was nothing to surpass liberal capitalist democracy. In other words, there were no systematic alternatives left to liberal capitalist democracy and the expectation was that “peace” would break out in many regions of the world.

However, things turned out quite differently and rather quickly. So many crises erupted shortly after the end of the Cold War (the Gulf War, the Yugoslav Wars, the Chechen Wars, the 9/11 attacks, and the Afghan and Iraq Wars, to name just a few) that it became immediately obvious that the post-Cold War order was already unravelling as it was not about fundamental principles but geopolitics as usual. As for the spread of capitalism, the Washington Consensus dogma and the economics of shock therapy that were implemented in eastern Europe, Russia, Latin America, and Africa produced oligarchs, weak states, massive inequalities, and social decay. Moreover, the “unipolar moment” of US hegemony soon came to be faced with a far more complex global strategic environment on account of the rise of great powers such as Russia and China, while the Washington Consensus encountered global backlash. The latter development was yet another strong indication that the capitalist liberal international order envisioned by the United States during its “unipolar moment” was fraught with inherent contradictions. In any case, by the early 2000s, the US had lost whatever international credibility it

may have gained in the early years after the end of the Cold War. For example, Obama's drone murder campaign was so notorious that, as former CIA director [Michael Hayden](#) put it at the time, "there isn't a government on the planet that agrees with our legal rationale for these operations, except for Afghanistan and maybe Israel." Unsurprisingly enough, from the early 2010s onwards, people worldwide have come to regard the [US as the biggest threat to world peace](#).

More recently, we have seen the global expansion of authoritarian rule, including in the US with the rise of Donald Trump to the presidency and his complete control of the Republican Party, Brexit, the advance of far-right parties across western Europe and in many other parts of the world, and the delegitimation of international governance—all of which are strong indicators that the post-Cold War order is in fact over. We are living in the times of interregnum—in a time of transition from one world order to another.

Unfortunately, what's happening in Gaza right now is a continuation of a global order in which international systems of governance simply do not work, and that includes the UN architecture.

Alexandra Boutri: The Middle East is one region of the world where major geopolitical shifts have taken place in recent years, yet peace in the Israeli-Palestinian remains elusive. Why is that?

C.J. Polychroniou: It's true that we have recently seen a seismic geopolitical shift taking place in the Middle East, starting with the Saudi-Iran reconciliation. Equally important is the fact that the normalization of ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran was brokered by China. Why is that important? Because it's not merely about China's rising influence in the Middle East and its interest in positioning itself as an international mediator in a troubled region. This move must be seen in the context of China's global initiatives to remake the world order—i.e., to forge an alternative international order, one away from the "liberal international order" that was established in the aftermath of the Second World War and its post-Cold War variation. Egypt and Iran are also moving toward a closer relationship. Economic considerations seem to be at the heart of the rapprochement between Cairo and Tehran, but so are security issues. Of course, both the Saudi-Iran deal and the prospects of close relations between Egypt and Iran may be something of a nightmare for Israel as these developments could shake up the Middle East, but only time will tell what the future holds.

The question as to why the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved can be viewed from several different perspectives. It is a conflict with a long and complex history which cannot be addressed here. Essentially, however, it is about territory — disputes over borders, competing claims on Jerusalem, and security — while religious ideologies among ultra-orthodox Jews and radical Muslim Palestinians tend to stoke tensions and spark violence. Israel itself is a divided society over political values and the role that religion should play in politics. Many years ago, Israeli activist [Uri Avnery and Ariel Sharon](#) had a friendly discussion. Avnery told Sharon that he is “first of all an Israeli, and after that a Jew.” Sharon responded heatedly that he is “first of all a Jew, and only after that an Israeli.” Indeed, [polls](#) indicate that secular Jews in Israel see themselves as Israeli first and Jewish second, while most ultra-orthodox Jews see themselves as Jewish first and Israelis second. Similarly, secular Jews assign priority to democratic principles over religious law, while the opposite is true for a large share of ultra-orthodox Jews.

But not everything in life is black and white. Many orthodox Jews worldwide have expressed strong support for Palestinian hardship under Israeli occupation. Holocaust survivors have condemned Israeli actions and the unprecedented scale of destruction in Gaza where the Palestinian death toll has surpassed 11,000 people. And some Israeli citizens are protesting the war and calling for a ceasefire. We shouldn't ignore these courageous voices and make sure that we condemn antisemitism along with islamophobia and racism.

One basic perspective as to why peace has remained an elusive goal in the Israel-Palestine issue suggests that it is because the two sides simply hate each other so much that they are willing to do inhuman things to one another. Sure, Israeli leaders have frequently used dehumanizing language toward Palestinians, the Israeli regime imposes a system of oppression and domination in the occupied territories, and the latest assault on the occupied Gaza Strip is simply barbaric. On the other hand, Hamas also revealed its true colors with the horrific attack inside Israeli territory which killed about 1,200 people (the Israeli foreign ministry revised downwards the death toll from the October 7 Hamas attack), mostly civilians, including many women and children. [Ismail Haniyeh](#), the leader of Hamas who lives in luxury in Qatar and Turkey, said this on the day that his fighters were massacring young people at a music festival and at Israel's kibbutz communities: “We have only one thing to say to you: get out of our land. Get out

of our sight. Get out of our city of Al-Quds [Jerusalem] and our al-Aqsa mosque. We no longer wish to see you on this land. This land is ours, Al-Quds is ours, everything [here] is ours. You are strangers in this pure and blessed land. There is no place of safety for you.”

Another perspective, apparently a bit more sophisticated, suggests that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is unique, perhaps unlike any other in modern history, which is why it is nearly impossible to resolve. I beg to differ with both perspectives.

Firstly, over the course of human history, many different ethnic, racial, and religious groups hated each other with as much passion as some Israeli Jews and Palestinians hate each other today. Think of Catholics and Protestants in early modern English history, Greeks and Turks, the English-Irish conflict, Hutus and Tutsis, to offer just a few examples. Think also of Nazi indoctrination and the extreme anti-Semitic beliefs in Germany, which ultimately led to the pursuit of one of the greatest evil plans in the history of humankind, i.e., the “final solution,” and how beliefs toward Jews were eventually modified after the war through policy intervention.

Secondly, what exactly is unique about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? [Looked at from a comparative and historical perspective](#), neither the level of civilian destructiveness nor the scale of indiscriminate violence makes the Israeli-Palestinian conflict unique. In terms of civilian destructiveness, hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed in places like Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, and so on. In terms of indiscriminate violence, which both parties in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are guilty of, there are scores of cases where aerial bombardment of areas inhabited by civilians (US in Vietnam and the Battle for Fallujah, for example) and indiscriminate attacks on civilians (the armed struggle in Algeria for independence from France involved indiscriminate attacks on civilians, abductions and killings of foreigners) hold far greater significance in the modern history of human violence.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict dates back to the end of the 19th century, and while the creation of Israel (with the Holocaust playing a central role, though there are historians who claim that the establishment of Israel would have been possible without the Holocaust due to the role of the Zionist movement) sparked the first Arab-Israeli war, the situation becomes especially complicated after 1967 as the

six-day war redrew the region's landscape in many and fundamental ways and also shifted the nature of the armed conflict. Arab states at the time showed no interest in recognizing Israel or in peace with Israel, but this position was shattered with the 1979 Israel-Egypt peace treaty, followed by the Israel-Jordan treaty of 1994, and ultimately reversed by the Saudi-led peace plan that was adopted by the Arab summit in Beirut in 2002. But as Arab state positions toward Israel became more flexible, the Israeli position, which was at first somewhat flexible, became more unyielding: no two-state solution, no freezing of settlements, no Palestinian sovereignty in East Jerusalem, no to return of Palestinian refugees. And this position really hardened as Israeli society began a rightward turn.

Nonetheless, the position of Israeli leadership wouldn't have become so unyielding if the US had exerted pressure on Israel by threatening to end military aid. However, the US had no interest whatsoever in pressuring Israel to make any kind of concessions that might indeed have produced tangible results towards peace between Israel and Palestinians. Washington's primary objective was maintaining US hegemony in the region and that required the use of Israel as a satellite state. As Harvard professor of international relations [Stephen Walt](#) recently argued, the US is primarily responsible for the lack of progress towards a political solution on the conflict between Israel and Palestinians and, as a matter of fact, "a root cause" of the latest war.

For decades now, every US administration, whether Democratic or Republican, has said the same thing: namely, that the United States is "committed to a negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." However, in practice, US policy toward Palestine has been driven by one and only one objective, which is to maintain the status quo. The US has always looked the other way when it came to Israeli crimes and violations of international law. To take one example, Israel has a long-running policy of settling civilians in occupied Palestinian territory. From Ford and Carter to Biden today, every US president has gone on record opposing the expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory. But this has been a completely meaningless "criticism" since it has not been accompanied by any pressure on Israel to cease settlement activities which are illegal under international law. Pillage is also a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. To add insult to injury, over the past several decades, the US has opposed more than 53 UN Security Council resolutions

critical of Israeli policies.

The same can be said about the two-state solution. The US has paid only lip service to the two-state solution. In fact, since the Oslo Accords, the two-state solution has become “an open joke in the corridors of the United Nations,” according to ex-UN official [Craig Mokhiber](#).

In sum, it's impossible to grasp why the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved if we do not add into the picture the essential role that the United States has played in accommodating, to the greatest extent possible, Israel's objectives. Washington needs Israel for its own geostrategic interests in the Middle East. This is why Israel plays such an outsized role in US policy and why Israel is “[the largest cumulative recipient of U.S. foreign assistance since World War II.](#)” This is also why Washington tolerates Israeli war crimes and crimes against humanity, which of course makes the US fully complicit in the horror in occupied Palestine. But never mind complicity. The US has launched numerous wars, committed atrocities, and created black holes in many places around the world. It is guilty of many war crimes.

Alexandra Boutri: Human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have issued reports describing Israel as an apartheid state. Many legal experts also agree with the characterization of Israel as an apartheid state, including UN-appointed rapporteurs. Of course, Israeli officials and pro-Israeli groups in the US have denounced reports labelling Israel an apartheid state as antisemitism, while recently the House also passed a resolution saying Israel isn't a racist or apartheid state. What's your take on the issue?

C.J. Polychroniou: First, let me say the idea that all criticism of Israeli policies is inherently antisemitic is beyond ridiculous and is only intended to silence criticism and debate. As for the House resolution, that should have come as no surprise to anyone who understands the dynamics of US politics and US policy toward Israel. Let's also not forget that the United States supported the white apartheid government of South Africa apartheid and opposed Mandela. So, when it comes to human rights and international law, the US is the last country in the western world that anyone should be listening to what it says. As for Israel being an apartheid state, I don't think that what goes on inside Israel is comparable to what was going on in South Africa under apartheid. Under apartheid, the South African regime enforced rigidly racial laws. Blacks were controlled by racist laws

that forced them into poverty and hopelessness. Everything was segregated while policemen with barking dogs and armed soldiers patrolled townships. Palestinians living in Israel, and that's about a fifth of Israel's citizens, have second class status and their rights have surely eroded since Netanyahu began his second term as prime minister, but South Africa's apartheid is a poor analogy for Israel. On the other hand, as [Noam Chomsky](#) has repeatedly pointed out over the years, what goes on in the occupied Palestine territory is worse than South Africa's apartheid. I think his point that apartheid South Africa needed black labor while the Israelis simply have no use for Palestinians in places like Gaza is spot on.

Alexandra Boutri: So, if the international systems of governance in today's world are incapable of dealing even with a horrendous humanitarian crisis like the one unfolding in Gaza, what hope is there for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

C.J. Polychroniou: I wish I had the answer to this question, but I don't. The fact of the matter is that we are still in the age of the dominance of the nation-state and where, unfortunately, Thucydides' maxim "the strong do as they wish, and the weak suffer what they must" still applies in international relations. Putting pressure on the US government to compel Israel to respect international law and end the occupation is the only thing American citizens can do. On the other hand, hopefully Israelis will also come to their senses and elect a decent government that will pursue in earnest the two-state solution as this is the best alternative for Israel's own security.

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