

Understanding Palestine-Israel: A Framework for Political Leadership

Based on the lecture by George Bisharat

Palestine-Israel has emerged as **the defining moral and political test of our time**. This comprehensive analysis examines why this conflict has gained such prominence in contemporary political discourse and provides essential insights for anyone seeking to engage credibly in public life, particularly candidates for public office.

The urgency of understanding this issue has never been greater, as evidenced by hundreds of elderly peace activists being arrested in London and congresspeople across the United States facing angry constituents at town halls over their support for what many characterize as genocide in Gaza. This is not merely an international conflict occurring in a distant land—it has become central to domestic political conversations and voter expectations worldwide.

Why Palestine-Israel Defines Our Political Moment

Four Critical Factors

First, this represents a high-tech genocide unfolding daily on our phones, backed fully by Western governments, that has continued for two years with seemingly no end in sight. The visibility of this conflict is unprecedented—no other genocide in history has been documented and broadcast in real-time with such technological precision and global reach.

Second, the conflict starkly reveals the hypocrisy at the core of U.S. and broader Western approaches to international law. For decades, U.S. officials have championed international law when it suits their interests—as seen in responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022—while simultaneously ignoring or undermining it when it comes to Israel. This double standard has become impossible to ignore and represents one of the primary reasons why Palestine-Israel has become such a potent political issue globally and domestically.

Third, the issue exposes the yawning gulf between the aspirations of people and their political elites in Western states that claim to be democratic. Despite claims of representative democracy, these governments consistently fail to reflect the will of their peoples on this critical issue.

Fourth, Palestine-Israel has become a domestic issue in Western states including the U.S., UK, and Germany because of efforts by political elites to shut down debate. These attempts to preserve unconditional support for Israel often come at the expense of free speech rights, making this fundamentally a question about democratic participation and civil liberties.

The Global Context

This issue exists within a broader international framework where **the world is watching how the U.S. and Western states behave.** Across the Global South and beyond, the United States is widely viewed as complicit in Israeli crimes rather than as the impartial mediator it claims to be. This perception has gravely damaged U.S. credibility on international law—a nation cannot credibly condemn Russian military occupation of Ukraine while simultaneously defending and propping up Israeli military occupation of Palestine.

The Palestinian cause has become a litmus test for moral leadership, both internationally and domestically. Candidates who speak honestly about this issue are aligning themselves with a growing global majority that rejects impunity and colonialism. Within the United States, public sentiment has shifted dramatically over the past two years, with support for Palestinian rights growing rapidly, particularly among younger Americans, Democrats, and communities of color.

What was once viewed as the "third rail of American politics" has become an electoral opportunity. Modern voters value authenticity and independence—they can distinguish between candidates parroting talking points and those thinking for themselves. **Speaking honestly on Palestine-Israel is no longer a political liability but increasingly a mark of integrity, courage, and independence from the billionaire donor class.**

Understanding U.S. Complicity

America's Role as Chief Enabler

It is crucial to understand that **the United States is not a bystander to Israel's actions but rather Israel's chief enabler through massive military, diplomatic, and political support.** This enablement operates across multiple dimensions that collectively create a framework of impunity.

Military Support: The U.S. provides \$3.8 billion in military aid annually to Israel—more than any other country receives. Since October 7, 2023, this number has ballooned to nearly \$22 billion, funding what many experts characterize as Israel's devastating assault on Gaza. This support extends beyond weapons to include intelligence, logistical support, and regional military backing.

Diplomatic Shielding: For decades, the U.S. has shielded Israel at the United Nations, casting veto after veto to block accountability measures. The transcript references voting six times to veto ceasefire resolutions in the UN Security Council within just the past two years.

Political Protection: Both major American political parties have reinforced this protective posture for generations. This bipartisan consensus has international consequences—the U.S. is not seen as a neutral broker but as complicit in Israeli actions. This affects American credibility on international law, human rights, and relationships with the Global South.

The implications extend beyond current policies. Future proposals, such as Trump's "Deal of the Century" plan, would effectively install the U.S. as Gaza's overlord, further entangling America in Israel's occupation and potentially making the U.S. directly responsible for administering what human rights organizations characterize as an apartheid system.

Israel's War on Truth

Historical Patterns of Narrative Control

Understanding current events requires recognizing that **Israel has waged a war on truth from its inception**. This campaign has targeted not only neighboring states but truth itself through deliberate narratives that distort history, justify violence, and secure Western support.

The 1948 Nakba Myth: When three-quarters of the Palestinian Arab population was expelled or fled during the Nakba (Arabic for "catastrophe"), Israel insisted that Palestinians left voluntarily or because Arab generals instructed them to do so. In reality, explosions, massacres, and psychological warfare drove Palestinians from their homes. This "voluntary flight" myth absolved Israel of responsibility for creating the refugee crisis and justified its refusal to allow refugees to return.

The 1967 "Preemptive Strike" Narrative: Israel claimed it launched a preemptive strike to fend off annihilation by Arab armies—a powerful story of Jewish survival that resonated in the shadow of the Holocaust. However, declassified Israeli records and admissions by leaders like former Prime Minister Menachem Begin reveal this was a war of choice, not survival. As Begin stated: "The Egyptian army concentrations in the Sinai approaches do not prove that Nasser was really about to attack us. We decided to attack him".

These moments of massive territorial expansion—when Israel seized the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, Sinai, and the Golan Heights—were accompanied by mass displacement of Palestinians and myths that cast Israel as victim and Palestinians as either aggressors or deserters.

Contemporary Information Warfare

This war on truth continues with renewed intensity during the current assault on Gaza. Information is deliberately controlled through multiple mechanisms:

Journalist Targeting: Israel has barred international journalists from entering Gaza except under military escort and has systematically targeted Palestinian journalists, killing more than 240 in the past 24 months. This represents the deadliest conflict for journalists in modern history.

False Atrocity Stories: Fabricated stories spread at lightning speed—babies beheaded, infants baked in ovens, Hamas command centers under hospitals, journalists as Hamas operatives, aid workers killed by Palestinians themselves. These claims circulated widely, often repeated by top officials including President Biden, who repeated the beheaded babies story before walking it back. As the saying goes, "a lie travels around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes".

Amplification Networks: Pro-Israel networks abroad, especially in the U.S., amplify these narratives. Israeli spokespeople receive endless airtime, often unchallenged, and even after repeated lies, they're invited back as credible sources. This is compounded by civil society actors like the Anti-Defamation League, whose leaders smear critics, including members of Congress, with bad faith accusations of antisemitism.

Four Dominant Myths Blocking Understanding

At the core of U.S. political discourse on Palestine-Israel are **four dominant myths that function as conceptual roadblocks preventing honest engagement and justifying the status quo.** These myths are repeated constantly by politicians, pundits, and media, shaping the parameters of acceptable debate. However, none withstand serious scrutiny.

Myth 1: "Israel Has a Right to Exist"

This platitude rolls off every U.S. politician's tongue daily, sometimes refined as "Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state". However, **no state has a right to exist under international law.**

Individuals have rights, peoples have rights, but states do not have an inherent right to exist.

States split from other states (as Slovakia did from Czechoslovakia in 1993), merge (as Tanganyika and Zanzibar did to form Tanzania in 1964), and dissolve (as did the Soviet Union). Once states exist and are recognized, they have rights to sovereignty, territorial integrity, and self-defense, but there's no special "right to exist".

When people invoke Israel's "right to exist," they usually mean as a "Jewish and democratic state"—but **this is inherently contradictory because maintaining a permanent Jewish demographic majority requires denying equal rights to Palestinians.** This is especially true regarding Palestinian refugee rights of return. Expelling Palestinians was how Israel solidified itself as a Jewish majority state in 1948, and continuing to bar their return is necessary to preserve that majority.

Jewish supremacy is built into Israeli laws, from the complex of laws that legalized the theft of Palestinian land and homes to the 2018 nation-state law declaring that only Jews have national rights in Israel. This myth shields from scrutiny what reputable human rights organizations, from Amnesty International to Israel's own B'Tselem, characterize as apartheid.

Importantly, ending Israel's apartheid regime does not mean ending the state itself or violence against Jews. When apartheid ended in South Africa, the country continued as a more democratic state. When Nazism ended in Germany, Germany survived as a state. Jewish Israelis, as a people, have rights to remain safely and securely where they currently live.

Myth 2: "Israel Is Just Exercising Its Right to Self-Defense"

This claim is invoked constantly regarding Gaza and Israel's bombing of neighboring countries. While all states, including Israel, have an inherent right of self-defense recognized in the UN Charter, **they do not enjoy that right regarding occupied territory.**

The International Court of Justice has ruled that Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza is illegal, and you cannot invoke self-defense to maintain an illegal occupation. Even if Israel could invoke self-defense, it remains bound by international humanitarian law governing the conduct of war.

The principles of international humanitarian law include proportionality, distinction between combatants and non-combatants, and the requirement of military necessity. **Israel has violated all these principles repeatedly.** Over the past 24 months, the Israeli military has killed more than 240 Palestinian journalists (many deliberately targeted), bombed 36 hospitals, attacked bakeries, sewage plants, and water systems, and destroyed all of Gaza's universities. It has repeatedly targeted civilian apartment complexes, wiping out entire families—for example, 132 members of the Abu Nasser family in one strike.

These are not acts of self-defense but acts of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Israel has used the Hamas attack of October 7th as a pretext to make Gaza unlivable for Palestinians—to depopulate it, not to defend itself. Israeli intentions were made clear from the very beginning.

This self-defense claim flips the relationship between perpetrator and victim, presenting Israel as the eternal victim always defending itself against superior hordes with "the most moral army in the world".

This represents a typical settler colonial outlook that construes Indigenous resistance as barbaric and hate-fueled rather than a response to dispossession. Palestinians never chose the ethnicity or identity of their oppressors—they would resist anybody who had done this to them.

Myth 3: "The Problem Is Just Netanyahu"

Many people find comfort in believing that the problem is just Netanyahu and his far-right coalition, and that replacing him would improve things. **This is false. Netanyahu is not an aberration but the product of a decades-long rightward drift in Israeli politics that began well before him.**

Since the election of Menachem Begin in 1977, Israeli politics has moved steadily toward racism, expansionism, and rejection of Palestinian statehood. While internal factors drive this shift, external factors are equally important. **Decades of U.S. and EU military, diplomatic, and political protection have created a cocoon of impunity.**

Israel has received unwavering, unconditional support regardless of its actions—settlements, annexation, apartheid, now genocide. This has reinforced the rightward drift, signaling to Israeli society that there are no consequences. When U.S. politicians give Netanyahu rapturous standing ovations in Congress repeatedly, it sends a clear message: whatever path Israel chooses, Washington will support it.

Netanyahu is not the cause but the most skilled political beneficiary of this environment. Replacing him will not change the structural realities driving Israeli policy.

Myth 4: "The Two-State Solution Is the Answer"

Politicians, particularly in the Democratic Party establishment, reflexively claim the two-state solution is the answer while doing absolutely nothing to bring it to reality. **On the ground, the two-state solution is dead.**

Over 750,000 Israeli settlers now live across the West Bank and East Jerusalem in a dense web of settlements, bypass roads, and infrastructure that fragments Palestinian territory into disconnected enclaves. Nobody has produced a credible plan to remove these settlers, nor is there any political will in Israel to do so. Israeli leaders openly reject two states while continuing to expand settlements and entrench control.

In Washington, the two-state formula persists because it serves a political function. It allows politicians to avoid responsibility, to sound reasonable and balanced, without challenging the occupation or apartheid. By focusing blame on Netanyahu, U.S. politicians sustain the illusion that if he were replaced, two states might be possible. This is a dangerous fantasy.

The reality is that Israeli policy under every government for decades has aimed to prevent a viable Palestinian state. **The two-state solution is not a roadmap—it's a smokescreen.**

The Question of Genocide

What Israel is doing in Gaza goes far beyond self-defense, and **the right of self-defense can never justify genocide.** The statistics are stark: more than 67,000 Palestinians have been killed, including over 20,000 children—equivalent to a classroom of school children killed every day for two years.

The destruction of Gaza's infrastructure has been systematic: 92% of homes destroyed, hospitals and universities reduced to rubble, starvation used as a weapon, and cultural and civil life obliterated. Numerous legal scholars and genocide experts, including Jewish and Israeli voices like Raz Segal, Omar Bartov, Shmuel Letterman, and William Schabas, have concluded that Israel's actions meet the legal definition of genocide.

South Africa filed a genocide case at the International Court of Justice in December 2023, and the court found the case plausible and issued provisional measures, which Israel has ignored. **This is not a vague accusation but a legal and scholarly consensus that genocide is occurring.**

Crucially, this began at the very outset of Israel's counterattack after October 7th, not as a later escalation. From day one, Israeli leaders made clear through words and actions that their intent was to depopulate Gaza. The statements by Israeli leaders that Bernie Sanders recently cited to conclude that Israel is committing genocide were all made in the first week after October 7th.

Three Concrete Policy Changes

To dramatically improve the odds of achieving just and durable peace, three concrete actions could transform the current dynamic:

1. End All U.S. Military Aid to Israel

Not just some aid, not just offensive weapons—all of it. The supposed distinction between defensive and offensive weapons is a dangerous illusion. Recent congressional votes preserved \$500 million in funding for Iron Dome, with figures like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez arguing it's purely defensive.

Iron Dome is not just a shield—it is a political enabler. By intercepting rockets, it lowers the cost of war for Israel, allowing prolonged assaults in Gaza and beyond without domestic pressure to de-escalate. It sustains the political viability of massive, lengthy offensives like those against Gaza in 2014, 2021, and the current 24-month assault.

Iron Dome has enabled Israeli attacks across the region. In one 72-hour period recently, Israel attacked Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Qatar, Tunisia, and Yemen, not to mention earlier attacks on Iraq and Iran. **All U.S. military aid, whether construed as defensive or offensive, directly or indirectly supports aggression.** It funds bombs, intelligence, logistics, and the systems that make war sustainable.

2. End Diplomatic Shielding

The U.S. must end its diplomatic shielding of Israel. For decades, Washington has used its power, especially at the UN Security Council, to block resolutions, water down statements, and prevent meaningful international response to Israel's actions.

This shielding has material consequences, telling Israel that no matter what it does—settlement expansion, annexation, apartheid, genocide—the U.S. will ensure no real repercussions. This sense of impunity has caused deep harm not only to Palestinians but also to Israeli society.

Accountability mechanisms exist. The International Criminal Court is investigating alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in Palestine, despite U.S. sanctions against its personnel. The International Court of Justice has issued provisional measures in the genocide case. However, these institutions are only as strong as the compliance they receive.

A serious change would mean ending obstruction, supporting investigations, and conditioning cooperation with Israel on its compliance with international law. Accountability changes incentives—if Israeli leaders know they will face real consequences, their entire calculus changes.

3. Win the Battle Over Narrative

Candidates for public office must set an example by speaking truth clearly and unapologetically, refusing to be intimidated by bad faith accusations of antisemitism. Criticism of Israel or Zionism is not antisemitic. Zionism is Jewish nationalism and criticizing it is no more antisemitic than criticizing white Christian nationalism is anti-white or anti-Christian.

Candidates should oppose repressive legislation that uses the guise of fighting antisemitism to silence criticism of Israel at federal, state, and local levels. The media landscape is changing rapidly, with pro-Israel forces consolidating control not just in legacy media but emerging platforms as well. Recent examples include Larry Ellison's purchase of a share of TikTok and his son David's takeover of Paramount, where he installed Bari Weiss as news editor of CBS News.

There is strength in numbers—the more public figures who speak fearlessly, the easier it becomes for others to do so. The taboo is breaking, and candidates who lead with honesty can accelerate this shift and inspire others.

Conclusion: The Path Forward

Palestine-Israel has become a defining issue because **it exposes the hypocrisy at the heart of Western approaches to international law and serves as a litmus test for whether candidates are independent, authentic, and morally serious, or servants of the donor class.**

Understanding this issue is no longer optional for public figures—it's essential. The core realities are not complicated; the "it's too complex" line is itself an Israeli talking point designed to discourage engagement. **At its heart, this is simple: Israel is forcefully seizing Palestinian land, and Palestinians are fighting back to preserve their homes, homeland, and way of life.**

The myths that dominate U.S. discourse can be challenged calmly, factually, and effectively. When they are, the space for honest politics expands dramatically. Candidates willing to speak truth, uphold international law, and act for justice will find themselves not isolated but increasingly aligned with the direction of public sentiment at home and abroad.

Indulging Israel, as the U.S. has done for decades, is not an act of true friendship—not to Israeli Jews and not to Jews elsewhere. A caring and responsible approach would coax Israel away from the path it has taken into racism, apartheid, and genocide. In the lecturer's view, Israel today poses the greatest threat to Jewish safety worldwide.

Zionism was a response to the real and enduring problem of Christian European antisemitism, but it has become a tragically mistaken response. If we are serious about combating antisemitism—as we should be, as we oppose any form of racism—we cannot allow Israel to continue abusing Palestinians under the banner of Judaism. **This is not only the morally right path but also politically wise—it's good for Israeli Jews and Jews everywhere.**

This lecture provides a framework for understanding Palestine-Israel as both a moral imperative and political opportunity. The time for evasion and mythmaking has ended. The question facing political leaders is simple: will you align with truth and justice, or with power and impunity?