

# The Gaza War: A Case of Dehumanization

## *Gazze Savaşı: Bir İnsansızlaştırma Vakası*

 İbrahim Akkuç

*Ibn Haldun University, Türkiye*

*ibrahim.akkuc@stu.ihu.edu.tr*

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**Abstract:** The article argues that Israel does not treat Palestinians as equal human beings who deserve similar dignity and honour as an Israeli does. Moreover, to do this, it first dehumanized its rival and then behaved with it accordingly. The aim of this article is to show the main characteristics of dehumanization before and during the Gaza War and how Israel employed this method against Palestinians during the Gaza War. Firstly, the article will talk about the moral status of soldiers and politicians as decision-makers and participants of the war; later, about the process that leads to the dehumanization of Palestinians and its results; lastly, about the possible preventative measures and steps to stop this inhuman practice of war.

**Keywords:** The Gaza War, Israel, Palestine, Dehumanization

**Öz:** Makale, İsrail'in Filistinlilere eşit davranmadığını ve bir İsaillinin hak ettiği saygınlık ve onuru hak etmeyen insanlar olduğunu düşündüğünü iddia ediyor. Ve bunu yapmak için önce rakibini insanlıktan çıkarmış, sonra da onlara buna göre davranışmıştır. Bu makalenin amacı, insanlıktan çıkarmanın ana karakterlerinin neler olduğunu göstermektir. Savaş öncesi ve sırasında İsrail'in insanlıktan çıkışma yöntemini Filistinliler Gazze Savaşı sırasında nasıl uyguladığını gösterecektir. İlk olarak, makale ahlaki durum hakkında bilgi verecek, ardından karar vericiler olarak politikacıların ve askerlerin; daha sonra da insanlıktan çıkarmanın sebeplerine ve sonuçlarına; son olarak da olası önleyici tedbirler ve adımlar bu insanlık dışı savaş uygulamasının üzerinde duracaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler.** Gazze Savaşı, İsrail, Filistin, İnsanlıktan Çıkarma

### 1. Introduction

One of the most dangerous mechanisms in a conflict is dehumanization. This method can function both as a catalyst for the erosion of moral and legal restrictions and as an outcome of strong propaganda. Dehumanization leads to acts of violence that would not be conceivable within the framework of international laws and ethical warfare. The war in Gaza indicates this process with dramatic clarity. Following the surprise attack of

Hamas on Israel, the initial wave of global support for Israel's right to self-defence slowly began to dissipate as the war intensified. When reports of the uneven military campaign and, as a result, the widespread civilian casualties started to appear on the news, international criticism and allegations of war crimes against Palestinians began to rise, as well. The central motivation for this shift was the implementation of dehumanizing discourse and practices that depicted Palestinians as sub-human beings and inferior creatures, which enabled Israel's moral disengagement and excessive use of force. These events not only exacerbated the Palestinian humanitarian crisis but also sabotaged Israel's moral and political legitimacy in the world. When we examine this case, it will be clear how dehumanization, when it is institutionalized within political as well as military discourse, can give profound harm to its victims as well as its perpetrators themselves, eventually making instability normal both in domestic and international orders.

## 2. Who is Guilt for A War and The Gaza War

Under normal conditions, to W. Brough,

*"Although soldiers on all sides of a conflict are morally equal in the sense that they all possess some moral value to be considered, soldiers may also be blamed for the wrongness of their cause: soldiers are potentially responsible here (through conscious participation in an unjust war, or through mere negligence) for furthering an injustice, and soldiers may be moral equals, even while they are criminals due to complicit" (2007).*

In other words, soldiers, as human beings, hold some level of moral principles in their lives, even when they enter into a fight with other people, although what they might do may cause disorder, death, chaos, pain, and suffering due to their negligence or brainwashing. With regard to that, Leshan says:

*"War has a special psychology affecting both sides. When we go to war, our perception of reality, of what we are and what is happening in the world around us, is quite different from that which we commonly use in peacetime. This shift, when it occurs, makes war much more difficult to prevent, or to stop once it has started" (1992).*

To understand the case better, Rodin makes the following analogy: This is an interesting analogy. We may indeed excuse an executioner who kills a wrongly condemned man if the judicial system within which he works is generally fair and the case is genuinely a difficult one. It might then be right for him to suspend his personal reservations for the greater utility of the functioning of the system as a whole. However, suppose an

executioner worked within a system that is radically flawed: He knows that at least half of the men he is asked to kill are innocent because the judges are incompetent and the system is corrupt. A man who continued to kill in these circumstances would be something like a murderer. However, this is precisely the calculus with which we are presented in the case of war (2004).

Nevertheless, in both cases, "soldiers cannot be exempted from responsibility for their involvement in an unjust war" (Rodin, 2004). Hence, soldiers themselves are not one hundred percent free of guilt in a war in which they participate. Next to those soldiers, as policy makers and decision-makers, politicians are very significant players in conducting a war. According to modern war theory, politicians are the archangels of any military company. As Clausewitz puts forward:

*"War was/is entirely... controlled by the dictates of policy or 'interest'" (Waldman, 2009).*

Therefore, if there is wrongdoing in a war, it is shared by the policy makers and the soldiers, the former of which holds a significant portion of the burden, while the latter makes a more minor contribution to it as the implementer of the decisions. Rather, it is significant to figure out that whoever makes an unjust contribution to suffering caused by a war is responsible for the existing wrongdoing.

Furthermore, this collective guilt that is caused by the soldiers and the politicians together can be observed in The Gaza War very clearly. A report published in the BBC says that:

*"In February, the BBC verified a report on IDF soldiers' misconduct on social media during the war in Gaza, which began on 7 October. Moreover, A member of an organisation for former and serving Israeli soldiers, which works to expose alleged wrongdoing in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) – Mr Givati believed that the current far-right political rhetoric in the country is encouraging it further" (Thomas, Ryan, & Brown, 2024).*

In addition to, Oborne and Shalaby assert that:

*"Israeli soldiers have committed widespread abuses in Gaza, including potential war crimes, according to photos and videos they posted, shared, and celebrated on their social media accounts, a new documentary has revealed. The crimes ranged from*

*wanton destruction and looting, to the demolition of entire neighbourhoods and possible unlawful killings" (2024).*

Besides these atrocities, Israeli politicians are also complicit in the same war in a relentless way. Just small example from the Israeli prime minister can show the intensive warring discourse:

*"We will fight to defend our homeland. We will fight and not retreat. We will fight on land, at sea and in the air. We will destroy the enemy above ground and below ground. We will fight and we will win" (Bowen, 2025).*

Thus, it seems that Israeli politicians and soldiers made a great contribution to the suffering that Palestinians have been going through for more than one year. If this is the case, and if we are normal people having a particular set of values before a war, what happens or what changes when a war starts? Why can one side show the intention of eliminating its rival in an inhuman war as in the case of the Gaza War? A possible answer is dehumanization.

### **3. The Process of Dehumanization and Its Results in the Gaza War**

It is possible to give more resources showing the misconduct of Israeli soldiers and their politicians' encouragement in doing so by discussing the process that gives birth to the dehumanization of Palestinians. As it is argued, if this is true, how can a person or an army that thinks of themselves as moral agents get involved in a fight that is deemed to be crossing red lines in a war? The possible answer is the dehumanization of the enemy. Well, what does it mean, and how does this dehumanization function before and during a conflict? To W. Brough, it is:

*"Stirring deep emotions of hate and revulsion against the enemy, inasmuch as it is impossible for most men (the attackers) to embrace passionately an ideal or a concept without passionately hating its antithesis (the attacked). This can be accomplished only by a highly condensed dramatization of the virtues and the immortal greatness of the Allied countries (in this case, Israel) and the loathsome, revolting, and degenerate qualities of the Axis countries (in this war, Palestine)" (2007).*

Put differently, it requires very strong propaganda before the war regarding glorifying the attackers' moral superiority and values, and during the war, the misery and inferiority of the rival's position and values. Therefore, dehumanization is "portrayal of the enemy as something approaching the subhuman: Either base, as an animal or insect, or evil, as a monster or demon" (2007).

It is witnessed that the same mindset has been shown by similar propaganda techniques, denigration, behaviours, and attitudes by Israel to Palestine before and during war. First of all, "when other races are characterized as subhuman, they no longer retain a dignity that is uniquely human. When they are seen as animals (and animals are seen as expendable), they can be butchered as pigs or sheep" (2007). For example, defence minister of Israel, Yoav Gallant says:

*"He has ordered a 'complete siege' of the Gaza Strip, as Israel fights the Hamas terror group... I have ordered a complete siege on the Gaza Strip. There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed... We are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly" (Fabian, 2024).*

Related to that case, Neve Gordon, an Israeli professor, in these comments, claims that:

*"Israel is using a 'dehumanization' strategy to justify its attacks on civilian areas in Gaza... Israel paints Palestinians as 'animals' to legitimize its war crimes... comparisons of Palestinians to 'rats or snakes' on Israeli social media accounts are an effort to 'dehumanize' them and 'legitimize civilian deaths'" (Medet, 2025)*

When politicians as decision makers use such a harsh language against their rivals, what can be expected from the soldiers who serve them. Just mercilessness and hatred. And the Gaza Strip is a scene where the implementations of this harsh language of dehumanization can be observed in a clear way. In this regard, to depict the scene, Taher al-Rantisi says that we:

*"Saw a plane destroying the building, which collapsed on top of the people... and also, the Palestinians sheltering at the school building included innocent children, and elderly people were killed. When the strike hit, all the people and children were torn apart" (2024).*

As it is seen, looking down on the rival camp is a way of dehumanization of it, then what else is put in use to complement the same discourse? W. Brough asserts that nationalism is another important ingredient that feeds the same discourse of dehumanization:

*"Nationalism within a war (or, ostensibly, outside it) distorts reality, making the rightness of one's people dwarf the rightness of others, and requiring the characterization of enemies as inferior" (2007).*

Again, similarly, it is witnessed that Israel's Prime Minister, Netanyahu, refers to Jewish society's superiority over the Palestinians:

*"This is a war between the children of light and the children of darkness... we will not relent in our mission until the light overcomes the darkness; the good will defeat the extremist evil that threatens us and the entire world." Next to that, the Israeli parliament sees the case through the same lens in its bill: "The 'Nation-State Bill' declares that only Jews have the right for self-determination in the 'Land of Israel' and that the Jewish settlement is 'a national value' and the state will act to encourage and promote its establishment and consolidation" (Kopty, 2024).*

Kopty, on the other side, asserts that:

*"These laws limit the rights of Palestinians in all areas of life, from citizenship rights to the right to political participation, land and housing rights, education rights, cultural and language rights, religious rights, and due process rights during detention" (2024).*

These examples reveal how nationalism, particularly when grounded in ethno-religious exclusivity, can institutionalize inequality and reinforce systemic discrimination, ultimately justifying the marginalization of the other. Besides,

*"The objects of dehumanizing treatment are its most obvious, but not its only, victims. When a soldier dehumanizes the enemy, he makes himself more psychologically apt to violate jus in Bello / Just War prohibitions" (W. Brough, 2007).*

In other words, dehumanization can create a psychological impact that has the potential to lead to real-world violations of international humanitarian laws. For instance,

*"Amnesty International's in-depth field investigation of the killing of 229 people in nine unlawful air strikes found that Israel violated international humanitarian law, including by failing to take feasible precautions to spare civilians, or by carrying out indiscriminate attacks that failed to distinguish between civilians and military objectives, or by carrying out attacks that may have been directed against civilian objects" (Amnesty, 2023).*

One example for these atrocities is reported by the same report as follows:

*"Defence for Children International-Palestine reported that Israeli forces killed 110 children in the West Bank, including Jerusalem, in 2023. On 5 June, Mohammed al-Tamimi, aged three, succumbed to his wounds after being shot by Israeli forces in Nabi Saleh, north of Ramallah, as his father drove him to a birthday party. No criminal investigation was opened."*

Regarding what is happening in Gaza in terms of the violation of the rules of war,

*"Omer Bartov, an Israeli-American professor of Holocaust and genocide studies at Brown University, believes what is happening in Gaza is a genocide. He didn't always believe this to be the case. But now, he says, 'I believe that there is no proof that genocide is currently taking place.' But this came with a disclaimer: There is genocidal intent, which can easily tip into genocidal action... There is still time to stop Israel from letting its actions become a genocide. Bartov further explains that "the genocidal intent" he refers to is rooted in "the dehumanizing language and threats of total annihilation from Israeli politicians and influential figures" (Mahawi, 2024).*

All in all, dehumanization is of the capacity of reducing rival groups to a sub-human status in their opponents' eyes during a conflict. This generally rises in the aftermath of intensive and accusing propaganda which exacerbates moral disengagement and hostility. Moreover, nationalism, which is embedded in ethnic and religious context, might institutionalize inequality and prolong systematic discrimination, as well as justify the anarchic international order where rival sides run after their own interest without pondering over the established norms and human rights.

#### **4. What Causes Dehumanization and its Side Effects in the Gaza War**

Dehumanization often follows unexpected and shocking acts of violence, but it does not come without a cost. It can produce side effects that are unforeseen by those who initiate such violence. In other words, the psychological and political ramifications may extend far beyond what was initially anticipated. Namely, "it comes with its cost" (W. Brough, 2007). As Malesevic describes:

*"Although many acts of violence are planned, premeditated and calculated, most violent outcomes are produced unintentionally" (2017).*

This observation highlights how violence can spiral beyond its original intentions, undermining even the attacker's own position.

Besides leading to the immediate and devastating dehumanization of others during war, such processes can also have profound and lasting side effects on those who carry them out. As W. Brough (2007) utters,

*"Even when dehumanization does not result in war crimes (for the attackers), it can still take a psychological toll. Acts that comply with the war convention but are committed in an unfavourable frame of mind can become incredibly damaging for the soldier decades after the war's terminus."*

This psychological burden has been visibly present in the case of some Israeli soldiers involved in the conflict against Hamas. One such account illustrates this vividly:

*"The Israeli military reservist returned a different person, traumatized by what he had witnessed in the war against Hamas in the strip, his family told CNN. Six months after he was first sent to fight, he was struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) back at home. Before he was due to redeploy, he took his own life. He got out of Gaza, but Gaza did not get out of him. And he died after it, because of the post-trauma, his mother, Jenny Mizrahi, said" (Ebrahim and Schwartz, 2024).*

Another report paints a similarly grim picture:

*"The Israeli occupation has revealed it provides care for thousands of soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or mental health issues resulting from their experiences in the war on Gaza. The IOF have not given an official number of how many members have committed suicide, but one medic told CNN anonymously that many 'do not trust the government right now" (CNN, 2024b).*

The numbers recently released with regard to the Israeli soldiers clear the case better:

*"The Defence Ministry's Rehabilitation Department said on Sunday that it has treated some 20,000 wounded soldiers since the beginning of the war on October 7, 2023, more than half of whom are suffering from mental health conditions. And according to the Defence Ministry, some 56% of those treated by the rehab centres amid the war are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health conditions. Moreover, the ministry said that overall, some 45% of the 20,000 are physically wounded; some 35% are suffering PTSD and other mental health conditions; and around 20% are suffering both physical injuries and mental health conditions" (Fabian, 2025).*

Therefore, it appears that engaging in the process of dehumanization without careful consideration of its long-term consequences can ultimately inflict serious harm on those who employ it. In other words, dehumanization may arise in response to a shocking attack and lead the aggressor to act impulsively or recklessly, resulting in grave and irreversible consequences for themselves—as seen in the case of the Gaza War.

## 5. Voices from the International Community

Normally, and according to the international norms, what Israel has been doing in the Gaza War is deemed to be called 'war crime and genocide.' Because, as Baran (2025) articulates,

*"The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court classifies the "starvation of civilians as a method of warfare" as a war crime. The Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits collective punishment, and Additional Protocol I forbids the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare. Moreover, under Article II of the Genocide Convention, deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to destroy a group, including through starvation, may amount to genocide."*

Moreover, recently published report by the Human Rights Council on Gazza War supports the same claim,

*"Having concluded that the Israeli security forces committed crimes against humanity, war crimes and the actus reus of two underlying acts of genocide in Gaza... and the prohibition of genocide is a peremptory norm of international law (jus cogens), an international legal obligation that is accepted and recognised by the international community of States as a whole and from which no derogation is permitted" (UN Commission, 2025).*

However, although this is the case, the existing international system, which had not hesitated in intervening in some regional conflicts in the Middle East in the late 20th century due to the blockage of some global powers, such as the USA, has not been able to produce any resolution to the problem (Carver, 2025).

It seems that the existing international system is not capable of stopping the atrocities taking place in Gaza, but it is not the same for the international communities, including academics, human rights activists, politicians, and religious leaders. These people and NGOs try to rise their voice against the silence and incapability of the international institutions. In other words, "when states fail, humanity sets sail" (Baran, 2025). To show the case better, it is useful to give several examples from these initiatives. In this regard, from a moral perspective, W. Brough (2007) makes his point as following:

*"The religious and non-religious alike should apprehend the signal point here that we are more like our enemies than we sometimes want to imagine. If states and their soldiers can learn to see the enemy as someone fully human and individually morally equal, they will discern the moral landscape more clearly and avert moral disaster for both sides of the war."*

This is a very powerful counterargument against the dehumanization attempt. To this end, as discussed at the beginning of the article, if both sides have certain moral norms that make them equal human beings, it is necessary to emphasize their sameness and

commonalities, such as being different members of the human family. Similar call came from more than 1,400 Israeli academics who signed a petition. In their call:

*"We, faculty and administrative staff at academic institutions in Israel, call on the Israeli government to end the war in Gaza without delay and ensure the immediate return of the hostages. A Call on the Israeli Government to End the War and Ensure the Return of the Hostages. And ending the war is moral imperative and aligns with Israeli interests" (Editorial, 2025).*

There is an international call for a better life, peace and co-existence, as well. Pope Francis, who passed away a few months ago, described the situation as 'the shameful inability' of the international community to end the war in the Middle East, one year after Hamas's devastating attack on Israel. 'A year ago, the fuse of hatred was lit; it did not sputter, but exploded in a spiral of violence.' He also adds that it seems that few people care about what is most needed and what is most desired: dialogue and peace. Violence never brings peace. History proves this, yet years and years of conflict seem to have taught us nothing (De Luca, 2024).

In a similar vein, there is another significant call that came from leftist Jewish American congressman Bernie Sanders. Recently, he had introduced what are called joint resolutions of disapproval, seeking to block the Biden administration's recent sale of \$20bn in US weapons to Israel. But, moves to advance three resolutions all failed, garnering only about 20 votes out of the chamber's 100 members, with most Democrats joining all Republicans against the measures (Salam, 2024). Although the resolution failed, it gave a chance to Sanders to criticise those who support arms sales to Israel by following words:

*"You cannot condemn human rights [violations] around the world and then turn a blind eye to what the United States government is now funding in Israel. People will laugh in your face. They will say to you, 'You're concerned about China; you're concerned about Russia; you're concerned about Iran. Well, why are you funding the starvation of children in Gaza right now?" (Harb, 2024).*

Lastly, a diverse flotilla comprising individuals from 44 countries—among them activists, artists, doctors, politicians, and journalists, including renowned climate advocate Greta Thunberg—has come together with a shared and urgent mission: To deliver vital humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza, who have faced a deliberate and prolonged deprivation of basic necessities for nearly two years. For this civil intuitive and other ones, Baran (2025) states that

*"Where the main pillar of the international community – the states – has failed, transnational civil society, as another component of the international community, has stepped in. The Global Sumud Flotilla is the clearest expression of that intervention."*

All in all, although in the Gazza War humanity witnessed and it is still witnessing atrocities, sufferings, killings, and honour-breaking implications though dehumanization of Palestinians by Israeli authorities, there are some promising calls and developments providing faith and hope for a rule-based international system and just implication of war. Moreover, it is possible to extend the list of the names of people, leaders, academics, and institutions to prove that there is a strong voice calling for peace and goodwill to end the ongoing painful conflict and set the ground for establishing a stable and peaceful environment in which Israelis and Palestinians can live side by side in trust. Nevertheless, states that hold a monopoly on the use of force need to take more responsibility to stop atrocities affecting both sides. Necessary steps are required to be taken by the states to make sure any war is conducted in the framework of war that is now represented by international laws of war.

## 6. Conclusion

Following Hamas' surprise attack on Israel, which has been occupying significant parts of Palestinian territory—an occupation that has been widely recognized as illegal by many states in the international public-, the Gaza War started. Just after the attack, mainly global actors, including even those who are inclined to Hamas and the Palestinian cause, articulated their support for Israel's right to self-defence because of the scale, damage, and casualties. Nevertheless, the wind shifted rapidly in favour of the Palestinians. Immediately, Israeli officials began to respond with dramatic military force, which led international opinion to begin to turn. This attack was seen as excessive, breaching the rules of war and damaging its moral and legal justifications for self-defense. The criticism did not only come from the scale of destruction but also from the nature of the military campaign itself.

The key reason for Israel's loss of legitimacy was its implication of dehumanizing rhetoric and tactics against Palestinians. The Israeli politicians and decision-makers deployed military strategies, used political discourse, and deployed a type of propaganda in all of which Palestinians were depicted as less human and inferior creatures. This dehumanization seemed to be embedded in a broader framework of ideological indoctrination process that aided in justifying actions and to make insensitive both the military and public opinion. Consequently, the position of Israel shifted from being a victim that is defending itself to a state that is accused of committing potentially unlawful actions in the name of security.

As a result, Israel deployed its soldiers to the front lines accompanied by intense propaganda, which contributed to the commission of war crimes, including the killing of innocent civilians—among them the elderly, women, children, and even babies—acts that have placed Israel under scrutiny by the International Criminal Court (ICC). Moreover, the process of dehumanizing Palestinians has had repercussions not only for the victims but also for the perpetrators. This strategy has reportedly caused psychological breakdowns and trauma among some Israeli soldiers. In other words, using dehumanization as a tactic against an opponent not only inflicts harm on the other side; it also has a boomerang effect on those who employ it. That highlights how the consequences of such violence and propaganda extend beyond the battlefield, shaping political, ethical, and psychological realities.

In addition to fuelling resentment among the Israeli public, the process of dehumanization has also triggered strong reactions from various voices within the international community. These voices—including politicians, world leaders, NGOs, and institutions—have called for the restoration of order, security, and peace in a setting where diverse groups can coexist with dignity and respect. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that although Israel has made military advances in Gaza—albeit at the cost of a catastrophic humanitarian crisis—it appears to have lost much of the international support it once enjoyed. Clearly, it will not be easy for Israel to repair its damaged image in the minds and eyes of the global community in the near future.

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