

## **Israel-Palestine: The Conditions of Lasting Peace**

Article by Konrad Bleyer-Simon, Leena Dallasheh, Yoav Shemer-Kunz

January 21, 2025

The ceasefire deal will bring some respite to the people of Gaza and the war-ravaged Middle East. But lasting peace can only be achieved by granting Palestinians the right to self-determination, and ending Israel's colonial expansion. A conversation with Palestinian historian Leena Dallasheh and Israeli-born political scientist Yoav Shemer-Kunz.

**Konrad Bleyer-Simon: What has the conflict in Gaza really been about? There are people who see the war as a response to the attacks on 7 October 2023, while others consider it an attempt from the side of Israel to eradicate an enemy or to commit genocide.**

**Leena Dallasheh:** I think the first point that needs to be made clear is that the conflict did not start on 7 October 2023 – this is only claimed by Israeli propaganda. In fact, the conflict started with the Zionist movement's intention to replace the Palestinian population, who has been living in this land for centuries, with people who came from Europe. This was done with a programme of enforcing a particular type of Jewish sovereignty in Palestine that is tied to European colonialism and nationalism.

I say this in a careful way, because there were Jews who lived in Palestine prior to the emergence of the Zionist movement. They immigrated to Palestine throughout the centuries and lived in Jewish holy cities alongside Palestinians. The conflict only started with the introduction of a colonial project, consolidated by the British colonial system in Palestine – initially in 1917 during the occupation and then in 1922 with the introduction of the Mandate. During the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the settler community captured over 78 per cent of the territory of historical Palestine, and in the process depopulated and dispossessed the vast majority of the Palestinians. 750,000 Palestinians became refugees, either in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, or in neighbouring Arab states. The Palestinians call this the *Nakba* ("catastrophe") and Israel calls it the War of Independence. Ever since, Israel has been dominating the small minority of Palestinians who remained within the State of Israel – who became Palestinian citizens of Israel, like me.

In 1967, Israel continued to occupy the rest of historic Palestine and forcefully dominate the remaining Palestinians, many of whom were and are descendants of refugees forced out in 1948. Even though there has been a so-called disengagement in the Gaza Strip since 2005, the occupation did not end there, it just changed form. It turned Gaza into what has been widely referred to as the world's largest open-air prison. Israel still tightly controls everything, including access to food and medication. So, if you frame it this way, the conflict started with Israeli aggression, a long time ago.

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**Konrad Bleyer-Simon: What did 7 October 2023 mean in this context?**

**Leena Dallasheh:** It was a horrendous crime. The killing of innocent people is never acceptable – I, as a Palestinian, reject it. At the same time, we should understand the context. It was a Palestinian attempt to break out of the impasse created by Israel's continued domination of the Palestinian population and the escalation of the aggression that has been led by the Netanyahu government, which included deepening and increasing the settlement of the West Bank. Israeli policies can be seen as an attempt to *de facto* annex the West Bank and to further sideline and undermine any Palestinian attempt to change the current situation.

In the past decades, Palestinians were willing to negotiate and give up most of historic Palestine. Israel was constantly undermining Palestinian efforts for statehood, and the so-called normalisation agreements with Arab states (Abraham Accords) completely disregarded the issue of Palestine. This created distress in Palestinian society, which Hamas decided to respond to with an atrocious attack on Israeli civilians.

**Yoav Shemer-Kunz:** The Israeli narrative is significantly different. It is almost completely the opposite of what the Palestinians experience and think.

Most Israelis would agree that the conflict didn't start with the 7 October attack, but they see other dynamics in the background. They bring with them the trauma from previous wars and conflicts: from the first and the second Intifada, the Yom Kippur War, and the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. They feel that the Arabs – they don't usually refer to them as Palestinians – never accepted the presence of Israel in this land. In fact, for Israelis, the narrative is about the existence of the state of Israel in the Middle East. Members of society get indoctrinated with this message when they go through the Israeli education system and later serve in the Israeli army.

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Until 7 October, life seemed normal for Israelis. Most of them didn't really care about the human rights violations [against Palestinians], so they lived their life quite comfortably. They felt there was relative peace, and even believed that there was improvement: Israel had good relations with the West and was normalising its relations with some Arab states. However, the Abraham Accords ignored the settlement violence and the apartheid policies in the West Bank. The state was managing the never-ending conflict, and it seemed it was doing so successfully. For many Israelis, 7 October was the start of a new world, but not the start of the conflict. This was, in fact, the day when Israelis paid the price for repression, and now there is an increased feeling of insecurity and instability in society.

**Konrad Bleyer-Simon:** In the public discussion, there is no clarity on who has been fighting whom in Gaza. On one side, it could be Hamas, the Palestinian community, or a coalition of Iran, Lebanon, and terrorist groups, and, on the other side, it could be the Jewish Israelis, the state of Israel, or the administration of Netanyahu.

**Leena Dallasheh:** Unfortunately, the last year has proven that a lot of Israeli Jews are willing to be fully complicit in the war crimes against the Palestinians and the genocidal war in Gaza. Still, I think that the framing has to be the struggle between the Palestinians as the indigenous people of this land and the Israeli state as a settler colonial project.

**Yoav Shemer-Kunz:** Israelis see their state as the great success of the Zionist movement and the

Zionist ideology. Most of them want to keep Israel as it is, they are loyal to the state, and they wave the flag of the State of Israel with pride. Israel is not the kind of dictatorship that we see in many other parts of the world. It is a state with many loyal citizens, who voluntarily serve in the military. Of course, they are obliged to do so, but many of them do more than the minimum. They encourage their children to do the same. In this sense, the conflict is indeed against the Palestinians as a whole – it is not against Hamas, or before that, against the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). For many Israelis, the opposing parties are all the Palestinians, wherever they are. That includes the refugees, the people living in East Jerusalem, and also the Palestinian citizens of Israel.

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**Leena Dallasheh:** The year 2021, when Netanyahu lost power after 12 years, and the “change government” was formed, was, in fact, the deadliest year for Palestinians since the war in 2014. According to the human rights organisation B'Tselem, Israel killed 319 Palestinians in the occupied territories; and in five years of house demolitions, 895 Palestinians lost their homes. This trend continued in 2022 and 2023, before 7 October. So, the Netanyahu government is not the only one to blame on the Israeli side. The human rights violations were accelerated by the Netanyahu government, but Israelis didn't feel the problems at all: there was a rave party at the borders of Gaza. This shows the extent to which the Israeli population disregarded the situation of Palestinians, particularly the dire situation in Gaza.

**Konrad Bleyer-Simon: What would a long-term solution look like? Would it be possible to coexist in this land – is it large enough to provide a home to the Jews who live there and all the Palestinians, including the millions of refugees who have a right to return?**

**Leena Dallasheh:** Talking about long-term solutions is not conducive to a conversation that should be held right now. The first thing that needs to happen is to stop Israel's genocide against the Palestinians. We need to end the starvation and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, and then also stop the violence in the West Bank.

The future solution is not up to us who are having this discussion here. The Palestinians are the ones who have the right to self-determination, which has not been achieved until today. They should lead the conversation about how this can be achieved.

That being said, Israel keeps declaring itself a state of the Jewish people rather than the state of the people who live in it. That is a part of the settler colonial framework. If Israel thinks that all the Jews in the world can come and live here, then there should be sufficient space for the Palestinian refugees too. There are more Jews in other countries than Palestinians. That leaves us to ask what the issue is, and the issue is the rejection of the Palestinians' right to live in Palestine. According to international law and according to international declarations, the Palestinians have the right to return – as recognised by United Nations Resolution 194, rejected only by Israel and its staunch backers.

Is it going to be a one or two-state solution? I don't know, but right now a one-state solution is the farthest from imagination. Most Israelis and Palestinians don't want to live together, as most Israelis essentially want the Palestinians to disappear. They have accepted by silence, or often by outspoken

support, the genocide against the 2.2 million Palestinians living in Gaza. In parallel, the Palestinians, over and over since the 1970s, have expressed willingness to live side by side with Israel, in a state in a small part of historic Palestine, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. They do not relinquish the right of return for their refugees, nor can any leadership do so, because according to international law, the right of return is an individual one.

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What we should agree on and demand is justice and the rights of the Palestinians being protected. In addition, something that is not talked about is the protection of the physical safety of Palestinians. In the West, everyone is concerned with the fears and the security of Israelis. 7 October was a vicious crime, but Israel has killed and injured tens of thousands of Palestinians in each round of aggression over the years. It has imprisoned thousands of Palestinians and continues to hold them. Many of them are in prison without due process.

**Yoav Shemer-Kunz:** I totally agree. Europeans like this question of the long-term solution instead of focusing on what is happening on the ground. I've been discussing solutions for many years – federal solutions, one state or two states, but I had to realise that it doesn't lead anywhere, as long as the occupation and ethnic cleansing continue. The reality on the ground is that, as long as the colonial expansion of Israel continues, we cannot jumpstart a discussion about peace, reconciliation, and transitional justice.

This is a mistake that we have made for three decades now in Europe. We organised conferences about peace between the two peoples and forgot about the fact that every day we have more and more settlers on Palestinian territory, more Palestinians in prison, and unlawful killings.

We need to focus on stopping the massacres. Then, the solution starts with accountability for the genocide. The International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants against the Prime Minister and the Defence Minister of the State of Israel. These warrants should be implemented and respected by all Western countries. For now, we have seen hesitation in Europe. We also have the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice from 19 July 2024, stating that Israel should withdraw from the West Bank to the 1967 borders "as rapidly as possible". The United Nations General Assembly voted on that in September, giving Israel one year. But it doesn't seem like Israel is going in that direction. Instead of talking about solutions for the future, we need to see how the international community, the European Union, and its member states push for the respect of international law. It's obvious that Israel has a lot to accomplish in that field.

We have a very radical, fundamentalist government in Israel. Talking about a solution is very far-fetched, but in case the discussion can start, we need self-determination for both peoples – we cannot have a state only for the Jewish Israelis.

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Clearly, the Palestinians have a right to this land, but the Jews do as well. In the 1970s, the PLO clearly recognised the presence of Israeli Jews as legitimate in Palestine. The security of both people should be guaranteed. But for now, we have a situation that resembles apartheid.

**Konrad Bleyer-Simon: Why didn't the international community manage to stop or de-escalate the conflict in 2023 and 2024? Were there any relevant attempts from the United States or European countries?**

**Yoav Shemer-Kunz:** The level of violence is much worse than in previous years, but the impunity of Israel is nothing new. Despite UN resolutions, we saw the *de facto* illegal annexation of the West Bank; already in 1981, we saw the *de jure* annexation of East Jerusalem, and the international community didn't do anything. Israel is left to do whatever it wants. Every wave of settlement construction was accompanied by an official statement of concern by European governments or the US administration. But that's it. There was never any action.

But I would go even further: the State of Israel does not only benefit from negligence or ignorance, it is also supported by the West, through weapons trade or UN vetoes. Western states continue what they always did, it is all statements and rhetoric. Joe Biden was not different. Already in 2023, his administration could have stopped this war by not vetoing the UN Security Council resolution.

**Leena Dallasheh:** The Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi has referred to the US as “brokers of deceit”. It has been undermining Palestinian aspirations for decades, it has actually been part and parcel of the prevention of the creation of a Palestinian state. So, if we look at it through the prism of long-standing US policy priorities, we can understand why the last administration's policy did not radically deviate from the past US policy against the Palestinians. Biden did not fail to prevent the conflict – he played an active role in enabling the continuation of the genocide in Gaza.

There is also the issue of racism and the colonial past of Europe, which we need to confront. On 7 October and immediately after, the Western media and Western leaders reverberated many Israeli claims that have since been debunked – about beheaded children, for example – and they have done so in a language that resonated with colonial tropes about the savage, colonised people. This narrative, in turn, became part of the support of European leaders for Israel's “right to defend itself”. While the Israeli victims of 7 October get to have the sympathy and the support of Europe and the US, the tens of thousands of Palestinian victims do not gain the same attention. It took months for the Palestinians to be able to push back, and to make the world realise that there was a genocide happening against them.

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**Yoav Shemer-Kunz:** At the same time, we have witnessed the use of international law to advance the Palestinian cause. There are human rights organisations in Palestine, like Al Haq, that are doing amazing legal work, and many NGOs in Gaza have been documenting crimes and holding Israel to account. The main international law responses in this situation have been through the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC). The ICC arrest warrant and South

Africa's application to implement the Genocide Convention are important international efforts. If the states in the West ignore the ICJ and the ICC, that can lead to a massive crisis of international law.

**Konrad Bleyer-Simon: How should European nations, especially Germany, deal with their historical guilt? Due to the crimes perpetrated 80 years ago, they feel responsible towards Israel, but in practice, this has meant unconditional support for Netanyahu's actions. In your opinion, what should this historical responsibility entail?**

**Yoav Shemer-Kunz:** There is still a strong feeling of guilt and responsibility, and many people in Europe mean well and want to help. Nevertheless, Europe's nations don't behave like good friends of Israel. They act as if they don't care. And Israel seems to be exploiting this guilt in a cynical way. It is not a healthy relationship for either side.

I would also emphasise that a friend of the Israelis should help the people, not the regime. In fact, many Jews around the world start to distance themselves from Israel and start to think that our present and our future are unrelated to the State of Israel. Many of us think that it's not something we want to be part of, we don't go visit, we don't think of living there, and we feel like our life is threatened because this state speaks in the name of all Jews and feeds this false perception that the Israeli position is the Jewish position.

**Leena Dallasheh:** If Europe indeed learned something from the Holocaust, it should be a humanist message that you cannot allow crimes against humanity to happen to any group. It's a slippery slope when you start distinguishing between whose rights you can protect and whose you cannot. In the current context, especially left-leaning audiences in Europe should be able to notice that the greatest supporters of the current Israeli settlement project and the genocide in Gaza are the parties of the European extreme right. Many of these parties are clearly antisemitic, and enemies of the Jewish people in Europe. It is really hard to believe that their support is genuine.

**Konrad Bleyer-Simon: What can Greens or progressives in Europe do?**

**Leena Dallasheh:** The Greens have a lot of influence, and they are, for now, part of the government in Germany. They should push for sanctions, an arms embargo on Israel, and protection of the Palestinians. They also need to protect pro-Palestinian speech in their countries.

**Yoav Shemer-Kunz:** Many far-right parties in Europe try to whitewash themselves by posing as good friends of Israel. Greens need to propose an alternative. Instead of supporting Israel with some reservations, they need to clearly stand up against illegal settlements and war crimes. That would mean that they support the Palestine solidarity movement, as well as speak out for Palestinians' freedom of expression and assembly. They should also stand with Jews – but that should not mean the state of Israel, but those Israelis and people of the diaspora who are against violence. There are, for example, Israeli citizens who call for international pressure and sanctions.

**Konrad Bleyer-Simon: How have 7 October and the following conflict impacted your life?**

**Leena Dallasheh:** I'm a Palestinian who lives in Haifa, in rocket range from Lebanon, and have had to run to shelter many times; but I'm also still very privileged because I have a shelter to run to – unlike the Palestinians in Gaza and the Lebanese under Israeli aggression. At the same time, I'm also a citizen of Israel who's been now subjected to extreme exclusionary measures – these are a part of the historical Israeli attitude towards Palestinians, but have taken a sharp extremist turn in the last two years with this government. Four hundred Palestinian Israeli citizens have been arrested since the start of the war in

Gaza for incitement to terror and violence – in most cases based on social media posts. So, there's been a lot of fear among Palestinians. There's also repressive new legislation, including steps to further exclude Palestinians from elections.

**Yoav Shemer-Kunz:** The conflict has impacted my life much less than it has impacted Leena's. I live in France now, far from the missiles. Still, it is overwhelming to see the footage of all the violence, and to accept that my own people – family and friends – are supportive of the war or are indifferent about the genocide. Part of Israeli society has become extremely violent, and that makes life for many others unbearable. We've seen many Israeli Jews who decided to leave the country in the past year. We, Israelis who live abroad, are mourning the illusion of a country where people could have fun with friends, enjoy a beer at the beach, hang out with tourists, or visit the Old City of Jerusalem. This Israel was nice until it lasted, but now it is gone.

**Leena Dallasheh:** In fact, such an Israel never existed, because the illusion was created at the expense of the repression of Palestinians.

**Yoav Shemer-Kunz:** Yes, it took a lot of denial to enjoy the beach in Tel Aviv or to go to a rave party a few kilometres from the wall of Gaza. So, this might be a nostalgia for something that never really was – but it is still emotional.

This last year gave me a push to think about ways of becoming more engaged politically. I am still learning more about this conflict, learning the Arabic language, and trying to better understand the Palestinians' point of view. There is so much to do, and it is overwhelming.

*This discussion took place before the ceasefire deal was sealed on 17 January 2025.*

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Leena Dallasheh is an independent scholar. Her research focuses on the history of Palestine and Israel, with a particular interest in Palestinians who became citizens of Israel in 1948. She is currently finishing a manuscript on the social and political history of Nazareth from 1940 to 1966, tracing how Palestinians who remained in Israel in 1948 negotiated their incorporation into the state, affirming their rights as citizens and their identity as Palestinians. She received her PhD in the joint History and Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies programme at New York University. She is a Palestinian citizen of Israel, based in Haifa.



Yoav Shemer-Kunz is a political scientist, affiliated faculty member of Syracuse University in Strasbourg. He published his academic research on Israel's de facto annexation of the West Bank and its normalisation. His current research is on EU policy in the fight against antisemitism. In 2017 he was in charge of EU lobbying for the Joint List parliamentary group in the Knesset opposing the Jewish Nation-State Law. Yoav is a member of the coordination team of European Jews for Palestine (EJP). He was born and grew up in Jerusalem. Photo credit: Miles Fischer

Published January 21, 2025

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/israel-palestine-the-conditions-of-lasting-peace/>

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