

Netanyahu claims the war on Gaza is like World War II

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Tel Aviv, December 26 (RHC)-- Israel's campaign of relentless bombardment against the Gaza Strip had been raging for three weeks when the country's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was asked to address the heavy civilian death toll in the Palestinian enclave.

Netanyahu, who had earlier evoked the 9/11 attacks on New York's Twin Towers and the Pentagon in 2001 to describe the deadly Hamas assault on southern Israel on October 7, looked to the second world war for validation, on this occasion.

The hawkish Israeli premier referred to the time in 1945 – he mistakenly mentioned 1944 – when a British air raid, which had been targeting a Gestapo site, erroneously hit a school in Copenhagen killing 86 children. “That is not a war crime,” he told reporters. “That is not something you blame Britain for doing. That was a legitimate act of war with tragic consequences that accompany such legitimate actions.”

Since then, the Allied campaign against Nazi Germany and Japan during World War II has become something of an historical precedent for an Israeli state seeking to justify the large-scale killings of the people of Gaza as it ostensibly pursues Hamas fighters. Israel's ambassador to the United Kingdom, Tzipi Hotovely, has compared Israel's campaign with the devastating Allied bombing of Dresden, which, conducted over three nights in 1945, was intended to force the Nazis into surrender, and led to the deaths of some 25,000-35,000 Germans. Non-state affiliated advocates of Israel have also drawn similar comparisons.

Yet, these attempts erase the roots of the Israel-Palestine conflict in the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from their land during the creation of Israel in 1948, the destruction of 500 towns and villages at the time, and the subsequent illegal occupation of Palestinian territory. They also ignore how World War II led to a new international law regime, and serve to dehumanize Palestinians while justifying Israel's decades-long violence and discrimination — described by many international rights groups as akin to apartheid — against Palestinians, say historians and analysts.

Israeli historian and socialist activist Ilan Pappé told Al Jazeera that these efforts by Israel are aimed “as a justification for its brutal policies towards” Palestinians and that they represent an old playbook used by the country.

He cited the instance when former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin compared the then-leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Yasser Arafat, to Hitler, and war-torn Beirut to Berlin, following Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

“I feel as a prime minister empowered to instruct a valiant army facing ‘Berlin’ where, amongst innocent civilians, Hitler and his henchmen hide in a bunker deep beneath the surface,” Begin said in a telegram to then-United States President Ronald Reagan in early August 1982.

But Begin's words prompted criticism from many in his own country, with Israeli novelist Amos Oz writing that “the urge to revive Hitler, only to kill him again and again, is the result of pain that poets can permit themselves to use, but not statesmen”.

Reaching into the past to legitimise modern-day conflicts can also be ahistorical. Scott Lucas, a specialist in US and British foreign policy at the University of Birmingham, said the relentless use of World War II by Israel and its supporters to mitigate criticism of its bloody war on Gaza suggests that Israel wants to “wish away the post-1945 pledge – by lawyers, NGOs, activists and politicians – to say we need a better system so civilians do not suffer needlessly in war zones”.

He added that Israel's decision to opt out of membership of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and its attempts to “actively ... undermine [the authority] of the United Nations”, founded after the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust, make its claims to be part of an Allied-like struggle disingenuous.

Israel has repeatedly accused the UN's agencies and its officials, including Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, of bias because they have called for a ceasefire. Meanwhile, Israeli bombs have killed more UN staff members in Gaza since October 7 than in any conflict in the history of the organization.

“Civilians will be killed in wartime,” Lucas acknowledged, but added that Israel appeared to be breaching the international law requirement of proportionality. In essence, a military whose war leads to civilian deaths, including through attacks on hospitals, schools and shelters – targets Israel has repeatedly struck during this war – must be able to show proportionate military gains through those strikes. That's a bar

Israel hasn't met, according to many experts.

"You are currently having an excessive number of civilians who are being killed because there are not adequate protections that are being applied by the power that is carrying out the attack," Lucas said. "And that's what the Israelis should be judged by. Bringing in World War II and other narratives is [just] peripheral."

Israel's supporters continue to argue that the parallel with World War II holds. Jake Wallis Simons, editor of the London-based Jewish Chronicle, said that there were "two points of similarity" between the conflicts.

"The first is a sense of existential threat both during World War II and in the attacks by Hamas upon Israel," claimed Wallis Simons. "The other is the nature of the aggressor." He described Hamas's actions as "barbarism".

But UN experts, international human rights groups and many nations around the world have warned that it is Israel's actions since October 7 – more than 20,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, and almost the entire population of 2.3 million people has been displaced – that could constitute modern-day genocide. Earlier this week, Human Rights Watch accused Israel of using food as a weapon of war. Israel has maintained a blockade on Gaza since 2007, and since the start of the current war, has made it even more difficult for aid to enter the Strip. Right at the start of the current war, Israel also imposed a strict block on the entry of fuel and water – a restriction it has largely kept in place.

Against that backdrop, it's useful for Israel to project World War II onto the conflict with Palestine, suggested German-Palestinian academic Anna Younes. It helps Israel dehumanize Palestinians and blunts sensitivity towards their suffering.

"By conflating Israel with Jewishness, it's easy to project Nazism ... onto Palestinians, but also onto all of their supporters," Younes told Al Jazeera. "Nazism has thus become a globalized Eurocentric rhetorical vessel for everything ... which doesn't deserve empathy and context, and is free to be killed."

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