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The World Says That Israel's Unlawful Occupation of Palestine Must End



Image by Ash Hayes.

On September 18, 2024, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) passed a resolution that demanded that Israel immediately withdraw from the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) of East Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank. The resolution used strong language, saying that “Israel’s continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is unlawful” and that it is “under an obligation” to end its “unlawful presence” in the OPT “as rapidly as possible.” The resolution was submitted by the State of Palestine, which was recognized as a bona fide part of the United Nations only in June of 2024 as part of the global disgust with

Israel's genocide in Gaza. The result was predictable: while 43 countries abstained, 124 voted for the resolution and only 14 voted against it (with the United States and Israel at their head). It is now perfectly legal to say that Israel's occupation of the OPT is illegal and that this occupation must end immediately.

The UNGA resolution follows the ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in July 2024. This ICJ ruling argued that Israel's continued seizure of the OPT is illegal and that it must be ended immediately. The language of the ICJ is very strong: "The sustained abuse by Israel of its position as an occupying Power, through annexation and an assertion of permanent control over the Occupied Palestinian Territory and continued frustration of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, violates fundamental principles of international law and renders Israel's presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory unlawful." There is no ambiguity about this statement, and none in the UNGA resolution that followed.

Rains of Heaven

Going from one village to another in Palestine's West Bank, I was shown broken water cistern after broken water cistern. Each time the story was the same. Palestinians, starved of water by the illegal Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestine Territory (OPT) and by the Israeli military, try their best to harvest rainwater in cisterns. But each time the Israelis find out about this ancient human practice, the Israeli military shows up and destroys the cisterns. It has become part of the ritual of the Israeli occupation. After the 1967 war, the Israeli government issued Military Order 158 (November 1967) and Military Order 498 (November 1974) which forced Palestinians to seek permits from the Israeli military before they could build any water installation.

During one of these visits, an elderly Palestinian man asked me if I had read either the Torah or the Bible. I told him that I had read bits and pieces of the Bible, but not systematically. He then proceeded to tell me a story from Deuteronomy about the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, where they had been enslaved. Egypt, they are told, was a land of milk and honey, while the land before them—Palestine—is a land that suffers from a lack of water. The Jews would have to rely upon the "rains of heaven" and not the rivers that irrigated Egypt. These rains of heaven, said the elderly Palestinian man, "are denied to us."

Israelis who live in the illegal settlements in the West Bank consume on average 247 liters of water per person per day, while the Palestinians can access at most 89 liters per person per day (the World Health Organization or WHO minimum amount is 100 liters per person per day). It bears repeating to say that the Israelis live in illegal settlements. This illegality is not

made in moral terms but in terms of international law. Several United Nations Security Council resolutions have said that Israel is in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention as it extends its settlements in the West Bank: [Resolution 446](#)(March 1979), [Resolution 478](#) (August 1980), and [Resolution 2334](#)(December 2016). The 2024 ICJ ruling and the new UNGA resolution underlie the illegality. We did not need more laws to clarify the situation, but it does help that the new statements are unequivocal.

Water in Gaza

A decade ago, the only time I was in Gaza, I was horrified by the lack of basic water supplies. Wadi Gaza, which runs through the Gaza Strip, is the culmination of rivers that stretch into the West Bank (Wadi al-Khalil) and rivers that run into the al-Naqab desert (Wadi Besor). It would be an act of foolishness to drink from Wadi Gaza or from the coastal aquifer, most of which was polluted by insufficient sewage services in Gaza long before this genocidal war. Most people in Gaza, even in 2014, bought water from expensive private tankers. There was no other choice.

If the situation in Gaza was objectionable a decade ago, it is now beyond belief. The average Palestinian in Gaza, who has been forcibly ejected from their homes (most of them bombed), now survives on an average of 4.74 liters of water per person per day (that is 95.53 liters less than the WHO-mandated minimum for a person to survive). Since October 2023, the daily use of water amongst the Palestinians of Gaza has declined by 94 percent. The scale of the destruction of Gaza's infrastructure is overwhelming (as shown by the [UN Satellite Centre](#)). In April 2024, only 6 percent of Rafah's water and sanitation infrastructure showed signs of damage, but by June, the Israelis had destroyed 67.6 percent of all the infrastructure. It has been clearly demonstrated that the Israelis are targeting the basic elements of life, such as water, to ensure the annihilation of the Palestinians in the OPT.

And so, this is precisely why the UNGA voted overwhelmingly for Israel to exit from the OPT and cease its annexationist policies. The Israeli government responded with defiance, saying that the resolution "tells a one-sided, fictional story" in which there is no violence against Israel. However, what the Israeli government ignores is the occupation, which frames the entire conflict. A people who are occupied have the right to resist their occupation, which makes the violence against Israel important to register but not central to the argument. The ICJ and the UNGA say that Israel's occupation must end. That point is not addressed by the Israeli government, which pretends that there is no occupation and that they have the right to annex as much land as possible even if this means ethnic cleansing. Cutting access to water, for example, is one of the instruments of that ceaseless, genocidal violence.

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Vijay Prashad's most recent book (with Noam Chomsky) is *The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and the Fragility of US Power* (New Press, August 2022).

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