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Genocide in Gaza: Context and Conversation

The undersigned at UC Merced deeply grieve and mourn the horrific and appalling loss of innocent lives in the conflict between Israel and Hamas. While much of the immediate reaction has framed Oct. 7 as an unprovoked attack, we call on the UC Merced and wider community to understand that the violence began decades earlier. As scholars who study race, settler colonialism, genocide, state violence, and anticolonial resistance we cannot be silent or leave unchallenged statements from the UC administration, including those here at UCM, that not only fail to properly contextualize the current moment of violence, but also place our Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim students, faculty, and staff in jeopardy. Repeated and vocal opposition by the UC administration to the nonviolent [Boycott Divestment and Sanctions](#) (BDS) movement coupled with their refusal to acknowledge the daily violence of Israeli occupation and apartheid renders their recent condemnations of violence hollow. In our classes, we discuss the horrors of the Holocaust and the realities of historic and contemporary anti-Semitism. We are also adamant in the need to value Palestinian life, history, decolonization, and liberation. We condemn actions that try to [silence](#) peaceful [protestors](#) and the discourse that labels support for Palestinian liberation and anti-Zionism as [anti-Semitism](#).

The roots of violence in Israel/Palestine lie in the decision by European powers in the late 19th century to support Jewish refugees from genocidal violence, first by encouraging Jews fleeing Europe to become [settler colonialists](#), and second (in 1917) by promising a Jewish homeland in Palestinian territory. The Zionist movement and the desire of Jews to emigrate to Palestine was shaped by wide-spread anti-Semitism in Europe, as well as pogroms (especially in [eastern Europe](#) and [Russia](#)), during which not only were Jews massacred, but their livelihoods destroyed. Zionism allowed Europe to avoid confronting its history of anti-Semitism. No thought was given to the Palestinian communities that might be affected by Jewish settlement, as it was considered “a land without people, for a people without land.” The first Israeli-Arab War resulted in the [Nakba](#) (catastrophe) in 1948, the ethnic cleansing that marked the birth of the state of Israel through the theft of Palestinian land, which forced [750,000 Palestinians](#) (more than two-thirds its population) from their homes and villages and into refugee camps in Gaza, the West Bank, and neighboring countries. Since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, millions of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza have lived under [settler colonial](#) and military occupation and apartheid conditions as recognized by [Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), and [B'Tselem](#). Gaza has been described as an “[open-air prison](#)” and a [concentration camp](#).

We hold all innocent life valuable. Thus, we forcefully condemn the [genocidal](#) Israeli attacks on Gaza, the 75-year history of occupation and dispossession in Palestine, as well as the killing of Israeli non-combatants. The techniques of resisting decades of colonial oppression are not the same as the techniques of Israeli state violence, which is backed by the [fourth most powerful military](#) in the world. Indeed, [UN Resolution 37/43](#) “reaffirms the legitimacy of the struggle of peoples for independence, territorial integrity, national unity and liberation from colonial and foreign occupation by all available means, including armed struggle.” The normalization of state violence, means that Israel, as an occupying force, has the only access to legitimate violence, while Palestinian resistance is always framed as illegitimate. Palestinians are expected to be “perfect victims” and to die without responding to the violent colonial occupation under which they constantly live. Otherwise, they are deemed illogical, inhumane, animals, barbarians, savages and most effectively — terrorists — rather than people resisting decades of systematic oppression.

This history of occupation and violence has led to racialized and dehumanizing language from Israeli officials such as defense minister Yoav Gallant who has called Palestinians [animals](#) and Prime

Minister Netanyahu who [claimed](#), “This is a struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness, between humanity and the law of the jungle.” Ezra Yachin, 95, an Israeli army veteran who was involved in the 1948 Deir Yassin Massacre of Palestinian civilians, was recruited to motivate Israeli soldiers as they continue their siege: “finish them off and don’t leave anyone behind. Erase the memory of them. Erase them, their families, mothers and children. [These animals can no longer live.](#)” More recently, when asked about the siege on Gaza, Israeli security cabinet member and Agriculture Minister Avi Dichter stated, “[Gaza Nakba 2023](#). That’s how it’ll end.”

Such dehumanizing language, a time-tested colonial tactic, mirrors the European language around Jews in the 19th century. This version, rooted in racism and Islamophobia, has now constructed Palestinians, Arabs, Muslims, Middle Easterners, and South Asians in the broader history as terrorist subjects. It ignores the past and current colonial and apartheid contexts, past [attempts](#) by Palestinians to [negotiate peace](#), and continual efforts to protest peacefully such as the 2018 Great March for Return, the latter of which have been [routinely met with violence, maiming, and death](#). Terrorism discourse erases these realities in order to justify decades-long occupation and [current genocide](#). While Palestinian resistance, which is broader than Hamas, is uniformly described as terrorism, Israel’s genocide is called self-defense instead of war crimes, rendering Palestinian lives as collateral damage and ungrievable. Yet, in the first six days of the “total siege,” Israel indiscriminately bombed Gaza, an area only twice the size of Washington, D.C., more than 6,000 times (undoubtedly thousands more since then). Those bombs landed on schools, hospitals, shelters, residences, and [refugee camps](#). The airstrikes have killed more than [11,000 Palestinians](#) (65% of whom are [women and children](#)), wounded 28,000, and [displaced](#) 1.6 million. The wounding of Palestinians evokes Jasbir Puar’s notion of the “[right to maim](#)” as a mechanism of control that maintains collective precarity. The “complete siege” by Israel has also cut off life-sustaining and saving sources of water, electricity, food, and fuel to 2.3 million Palestinians living in Gaza. It has forced the evacuation of more than 1 million Palestinians in northern Gaza, while bombing the supposed safety corridor and southern areas. All of these things constitute [collective punishment, which is a war crime](#) under the Geneva Conventions.

Moreover, Israeli state and “citizen” settler violence has increased in the West Bank. A *Ha’aretz* [editorial](#) on Oct. 8 partly identifies government sanctioned ethnic cleansing in the West Bank as one of many reasons for the attack. In 2022, Israeli forces [killed more than 34](#) Palestinians. This year, that number was reached by August. Since the siege, the Israeli military and settlers have killed [more than 185 Palestinians](#) in the West Bank. While these are framed as “[clashes](#),” they are further examples of how the media, government, and the general public use “both sides” language to erase settler violence, that even in the last five years, has [destroyed numerous villages and evicted thousands of Palestinians](#) from their land and homes.

It is clear that the scale of Israel’s response has opened the door for wider discussion of the longer history and current genocidal violence. More people, whether in [Congress](#) or across the [globe](#), realize the full historical scope of violence against Palestinians. Eight of the nine undergraduate student governments at UC campuses have [passed resolutions supporting BDS](#). Such speech and actions have been deemed anti-Semitism by some. We reject conflation of Zionism and Israel with Jewish people as a whole, and we reject anti-Semitism. As many people and organizations have stated with moral clarity, critiques of Zionist settler colonial and apartheid state history and policy are not anti-Semitism. [Jewish people in Israel](#) and the diaspora (e.g. [Jewish Voice for Peace](#) and [If Not Now](#)) support Palestinian freedom, critique Zionism, and condemn the Israeli state’s acts of occupation and genocide.

The United States and others in the international community bear responsibility for years of accepting, supporting, and even funding occupation, settler expansion and land displacement, human rights violations, and war crimes. The unwavering state support and subsequent repression of protests has also emboldened individualized violence such as the case of [Wadea Al-Fayoume](#), a 6-year-old Palestinian boy in Plainfield, Illinois, who was stabbed to death by his family’s landlord. This incident and countless others have created a [state of fear and unsafety](#) that was similarly produced by Post 9/11 anti-Arab and Anti-Muslim discourse and policy.

We have a moral responsibility to denounce not only the anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab, and Islamophobic actions sprouting across the United States but anti-Semitism as well. This statement should not be interpreted as promoting anti-Semitic discourse and should not be weaponized to those ends. We call for liberation for Palestinians, where they can live in freedom with fully equal rights.

Given this history, we call for the UC administration to retract its [one-sided statement](#) and the UC Merced administration to take a stance against the historic and current violence against Palestinians by supporting an immediate ceasefire. We further call on the UC administration to endorse the call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions until Israel ends its occupation and Palestine is a free, independent state. We urge deeper study of Palestinian authors and resistance and Israeli settler colonialism beyond the present moment. We offer additional resources for learning about these issues below. We urge UCM faculty to discuss this topic and share resources with their students. We urge everyone who is a part of the UCM community and who supports liberation for all people, to act in solidarity with Palestinians, to call not just for a ceasefire and humanitarian aid but also for freedom.

Ways you can take action:

- [Do not allow the U.S. to support war crimes: Call Congress - CEASEFIRE NOW!](#)
- Donate to [Middle East Children's Alliance](#)
- [Jewish Voice for Peace](#)

Resources

- [Teaching Resources on Palestine](#) compiled by Global Asia Program at UIC
- [Resources on the Situation in Palestine and Israel](#) compiled by Asian American Studies at UC Davis
- [Gaza Fights for Freedom](#)
- [Visualizing Palestine](#)
- [The Institute for Middle East Understanding \(IMEU\)](#)
- [Jewish Alternatives to Zionism](#)
- Edward Said, ["Zionism from the Perspective of its Victims"](#)
- [Palestine Feminist Collective Digital Toolkit](#)
- [Decolonize Palestine Reading List](#)
- [A Dangerous Conflation: Open Letter from Jewish Writers](#)

Statements on Palestine

Signed:

The Department of History and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies (HCRES)

Disclaimer: The statement should not be taken as a position or endorsement of the University of California, or of the UC Merced campus, as a whole. It represents the will of a supermajority of Senate faculty in the Department of History & Critical Race and Ethnic Studies, following weeks of extensive deliberation, discussion, and collaboration. Moreover, although the statement is issued in the name of the Department of History & Critical Race and Ethnic Studies, this designation does not include non-Senate faculty, the students in our majors, graduate students in the Interdisciplinary Humanities Graduate Group, nor any members of the staff or leadership of the School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts.

The document was developed, discussed, and issued according to the guidelines established by the University Committee on Academic Freedom (UCAF) and [endorsed by the Academic Council](#) on June 2, 2022. See also ["Academic Freedom in Times of War"](#) by the American Association of University Professors.