

# Antisemitism in Online Communication

Transdisciplinary Approaches to Hate  
Speech in the Twenty-First Century

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Matthias J. Becker, Laura Ascone, Karolina Placzynta, and Chloé Vincent (eds),  
*Antisemitism in Online Communication: Transdisciplinary Approaches to Hate Speech for the Twenty-first Century*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024,  
<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0406>

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<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0406#resources>

We acknowledge support by the Open Access Publication Fund of Technische Universität Berlin

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-260-0

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-261-7

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-262-4

ISBN Digital eBook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-263-1

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-265-5

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0396

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# 4. “More Like Genocide”

## The Use of the Concept of Genocide in UK Online Debates About Israel

*Matthew Bolton*

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Accusations that Israel has committed, or is in the process of committing, genocide against the Palestinian population of the Middle East are a familiar presence within anti-Israel and anti-Zionist discourse. In the wake of the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023 and the subsequent Israeli military invasion of Gaza, claims of an Israeli genocide reached new heights, culminating in Israel being accused of genocide by South Africa at the International Court of Justice. Such claims can be made directly or indirectly, via attempts to draw an equivalence between Auschwitz or the Warsaw Ghetto and the current situation in the Palestinian territories. This chapter examines the use of the concept of genocide in social media discussions responding to UK news reports about Israel in the years prior to the 2023 Israel-Hamas war, thereby setting out the pre-existing conditions for its rise to prominence in the response to that war. It provides a historical account of the development of the concept of genocide, showing its interrelation with antisemitism, the Holocaust and the State of Israel. It then shows how accusations of genocide started being made against Israel in the decades following the Holocaust, and argues that such use is often accompanied by analogies between Israel and Nazi Germany and forms of Holocaust distortion. The chapter then qualitatively analyses comments referencing a supposed Israeli genocide posted on the *Facebook* pages of major

British newspapers regarding three Israel-related stories: the May 2021 escalation phase of the Arab-Israeli conflict; the July 2021 announcement that the US ice cream company Ben & Jerry's would be boycotting Jewish settlements in the West Bank; and the rapid roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine in Israel from December 2020 to January 2021.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In December 2023, South Africa formally issued proceedings against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). This court was set up following World War II as one of the principal organs of the new United Nations, as a means of settling legal disputes between member states. South Africa claimed that Israel was committing, and intended to commit, genocide against the Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip, as part of the Israeli military's response to the Hamas attacks in southern Israel on 7 October 2023. It called for the court to enforce a series of "provisional measures" against Israel, principally the cessation of military activity in Gaza. In January 2024, the ICJ made an initial ruling, which did not adjudicate on the question of whether Israel had committed, or was committing, genocide. Rather, it recognised—as Joan Donoghue, President of the ICJ for the hearing, later explained—that "the Palestinians had a plausible right to be protected from genocide, and that South Africa had the right to present that claim in the court" (BBC Hardtalk, 2024). The court did order that Israel should apply some "provisional measures" to prevent the possibility of genocide, primarily securing access to aid and basic services, and preventing statements from Israeli politicians and public figures which could be viewed as incitement to genocide (International Court of Justice 2024). However, the court did not rule that Israel should cease its military activity in Gaza, a "provisional measure" that would presumably be of the utmost urgency if Israel was indeed viewed as being in the process of committing genocide.

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1 The chapter was conceived before Hamas attacks on 7 October and subsequent Israeli military actions in Gaza, but has been significantly revised since.

The ICJ's initial ruling did not, then, back up the claim of Israeli genocide in Gaza. While the final ruling is not expected for a number of years, the absence thus far of any legally certified allegations of genocide did not prevent the idea of an Israeli "genocide" becoming a widespread, if not dominant, way of depicting the war by pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel supporters, particularly online.<sup>2</sup> This chapter seeks to show that the choice of the concept of "genocide" to describe Israel's response to the 7 October attacks was not based on a disinterested appraisal of the actual situation on the ground in Gaza, nor a universally applied concern with genocide. As the Holocaust historian Tal Bruttman notes, there has been a clear disparity in the use of "genocide" in relation to the 2023–24 Israel-Hamas conflict. While Israel's critics wasted no time in "jump[ing] over the "war crime" and then "crime against humanity" boxes to label Israel's actions as "genocide", Hamas's indiscriminate violence against any Jew or Israeli they could find on 7 October—precisely the marker of genocidal intent—remains for such observers only at the level of "war crime" (Bruttman and Bou 2024). Moreover, one need only note that on 4 January 2024, the South African President Cyril Ramaphosa warmly welcomed Sudanese militia leader General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) for a "courtesy" visit to the country. In 2023, Hemedti was accused of leading a genocidal attack on the Masalit group in Western Darfur, in which at least 15,000 died. He has also been implicated in genocidal acts in the early 2000s (Copelyn 2024). Similarly, in 2015, South Africa refused to arrest the then-president of Sudan Omar al-Bashir when he visited the country for an African Union summit—despite his being subject to an International Criminal Court arrest warrant for crimes against humanity and genocide in Darfur (International Criminal Court 2017). These incidents seem to call into question South Africa's universal concern with preventing and/or punishing genocide.

This disparity in the use of the concept of genocide in discussions of the recent war, driven by what might appear as a singular, *a priori* desire to associate Israel with genocidal actions, can be better understood once the history of the concept of genocide and its relation to Israel is placed in historical context. The charge of genocide has been made of Israel for

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2 See for example, UK political commentator Owen Jones' claim that Israel was in the grip of a "genocidal mania" made a week after the initial ICJ judgement (Jones, 2024).

decades, and in response to all manner of Israeli actions, long before the 2023 war. The concept was, as it were, already lying “at hand” for use in debates about the Israeli response to the Hamas atrocities, having been in preparation for years. As this article shows, hanging over the history of accusations of Israeli genocide is the spectre of the Holocaust—and the opportunity to accuse Jews of committing the very crime to which they were subjected by the Nazi regime.

This chapter will explore the uses of the concept of “genocide” in online discussions in the UK regarding the State of Israel in the two years preceding the 7 October attacks. In retrospect, these discussions can be seen as laying the discursive groundwork for the concept’s ubiquity in 2023 and 2024. The premise of the chapter is that framing the Arab-Israeli conflict through the concept of genocide radically distorts that conflict’s origins, historical development and current state. Despite its broader, universal applicability, the concept of genocide is inextricably entwined with antisemitism, the Holocaust and the State of Israel. As such, no use of the concept is free of these historical resonances. This means that charging Israel with committing, or seeking to commit, genocide against the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza is one of the most inflammatory and provocative claims that can be made against Israel as a Jewish state. Moreover, such claims are often accompanied—as frequently seen in online debates about the current conflict—by attempts to equate the Holocaust with the events of the 1947–49 Arab-Jewish/Israeli war, or Auschwitz and the Warsaw Ghetto with contemporary Gaza. The chapter suggests that such comparisons amount to a form of Holocaust distortion, erasing its exterminatory antisemitic character and reducing it to a generic form of state violence.

The chapter begins by summarising the meaning and historical development of the concept of genocide throughout the 1930s, until its adoption by the United Nations in 1948. It then shows why the charge of genocide against Israel is factually unsound, and briefly outlines the political factors which have led to its frequency today, exploring how its adoption by some political leaders and influential academics lends authority to its use by social media commenters in online discussions of Israel. The latter half of the chapter explores the use of the concept online, through qualitative analysis of online responses to three separate UK news stories involving Israel: the escalation phase of the Arab-Israeli conflict in

May 2021, the July 2021 announcement that the US ice cream company Ben & Jerry's would no longer permit their products to be sold in Israeli settlements on the West Bank, and the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine in Israel in December 2020 and January 2021. The analysis shows how the concept of GENOCIDE (Bolton 2024a) is used as a means to delegitimise Israel's existence, and often articulated in combination with other antisemitic concepts—such as making analogies between Israel and Nazi Germany (Becker 2024c), the idea of Jewish or Israeli EVIL (Bolton 2024b), and CALLS FOR VIOLENCE (AScone 2024) or DEATH WISHES against Israelis and/or Jews (Placzynta 2024a).

## 2. The concept of genocide, the Holocaust and the State of Israel

The concept of genocide was gradually constructed over the 1930s and 40s by the Polish legal scholar Raphael Lemkin. As the Nazi persecution of German Jews ramped up to become the attempted extermination of Jews across Europe, including 49 members of his own family, Lemkin drew parallels with previous incidents of state-led murder of national and ethnic groups, such as the Ottoman Empire's attempt to wipe out the Armenians and the slaughter of Christian Assyrians in Iraq. Arguing that such mass murder based on group identity was a distinct crime from the mass murder of individuals, Lemkin contended that existing legal and political concepts were unable to grasp the specificities of the Nazi persecution and extermination of European Jewry (Lemkin 2012). He struggled for over a decade to convince international legal bodies to make the "destruction of national, religious and racial groups" a crime in international law. In 1942 he coined the neologism "genocide" to describe what had hitherto been a "crime without a name"—"geno-" derived from the Greek *genos*, meaning tribe, and *-cide* from the Latin *caedere*, "to kill". In 1948, the UN adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, outlawing "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such".

The experience of the Holocaust clearly hung over both the forging and juridical adoption of the concept of GENOCIDE, while the State of Israel was established the same year as the Genocide Convention was adopted. Although Israel's founding was neither a direct consequence

nor cause of the legal recognition of genocide, the experience of the Holocaust had given a new moral urgency to the Zionist project for a Jewish nation-state. The failure of other states to allow Jews to escape their fate via immigration, and the need to provide a home for thousands of Jewish displaced persons, seemingly made the case for a Jewish state in Mandatory Palestine inarguable.

The concept of genocide thus carries the history of Jewish persecution and attempted extermination within it as a “sedimented layer” (Koselleck 2018), such that it is not possible to use the concept without evoking, in some sense, that history. In the same way, the existence of the State of Israel and the Jewish experience of genocidal violence are, in historical terms, inextricably entwined. Nevertheless, that concept was not a mirror image of the Holocaust: from the outset, Lemkin sought a broader concept that was able to contain a multiplicity of historical experiences, with each able to shed light on the others. There were downsides to this abstraction: something of the historically unprecedented nature of the Holocaust is lost when it is reduced to the concept of genocide. But there are upsides too. By seeking to make visible a mode of state violence against groups that had previously been hidden, Lemkin’s concept acts as what Walter Benjamin described as kind of temporal “shock” (1999: 262). It explodes the ceaseless forward march of “homogenous, empty time” (262) and opens up a new vantage point upon experiences and memories of suffering previously lost in the depths of a forgotten or repressed past. This potential to “arrest [...] the flow of thought” (262) and bring the past to the present remains potent. Today, an accusation of genocide against a state continues to be one of the most powerful and morally charged that can be made, bringing all of that retrieved history to bear. Despite recent critiques of its prominence (Moses 2021), genocide is still widely regarded as the “crime of crimes” and claims of genocide continue to carry a grave weight.

Given this history, and the interrelation of the concept with the Holocaust and the State of Israel, the claim that Israel has committed, is committing, or intends to commit genocide upon the Palestinian population across the Middle East—that Israel seeks to “wipe the Palestinians from the face of the earth”—is one of the most incendiary charges that can be made of the Jewish state. It is true that claims of genocide are, to an extent, a routine presence within passionate online political debate in the UK—witness



the claims that Boris Johnson’s Conservative government was seeking to commit genocide by delaying the introduction of Covid-19 lockdowns (Shaw 2020). But when aimed at Israel—so that the victims of the most extreme genocide in history become the perpetrators—it represents an aggravating factor which goes beyond the frenzied hyperbole that characterises much political discourse online. The accusation of Israeli genocide is often combined with disapproval of Jews’ supposed moral failure to “learn the lessons” of their past (Placzynta 2024b).

Claims that Israel has perpetrated or is perpetrating a genocide upon the Palestinians can be debunked on a purely empirical basis. As Philip Spencer notes, they are “without foundation in relation to what the Genocide Convention specifies; there is no evidence of an intent on the part of the Israeli state to annihilate the Palestinians as a group” (Spencer 2010: 146). The Palestinian population has not shrunk or disappeared over the course of Israel’s existence—quite the opposite. According to the World Bank, in 1990 the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza was around two million. By 2019, it stood at around 4.9 million—more than a 100% rise over a period which included the Second Intifada and numerous violent conflicts between Israel and Palestine (World Bank 2019). No political party in Israel advocates for the extermination of the Palestinian people—there are extreme factions which argue for the transfer of the Palestinian population, but this has never been a serious policy, nor has it gained any serious support amongst either Israeli politicians or public. There is no programme for the removal of Palestinian children from their parents to Israeli families, as was the case in colonial genocides such as that of Aboriginal Australians. There is no systematic destruction of Palestinian, Arab or Islamic cultural or religious artefacts, as would be needed to substantiate the weaker claim of “cultural genocide”.

A description of the 2023–24 Israeli military actions in Gaza as “genocidal”—that is, a military campaign with the express intent to destroy the Palestinian population as such—relies on a similar distortion of the historical record. In the first place, it means downplaying or ignoring what could rationally be depicted as the genocidal nature of Hamas’s 7 October attacks themselves, in which the clear purpose was to kill as many people as possible—regardless of civilian or military status, age or sex—in the time available (van Aaken et al. 2023). If Hamas’s actions are, on the contrary, understood as being motivated by genocidal intent,

then Israel would fall foul of the Genocide Convention by *not* taking action against the group (Mor 2024). Second, it means redescribing what is a war between the Israeli army and Hamas military units as a one-sided bombardment of civilians by Israel. It further entails ignoring Israeli attempts to warn civilians prior to attacks and to encourage them to move out of targeted areas, and failing to examine whether Hamas is preventing them from doing so. Third, it means dismissing without consideration the Israeli claim that the ratio of civilians to combatants killed by Israel in Gaza is much lower than other equivalent conflicts, and a long way from the total destruction implied by the concept of genocide—while accepting at face value the death figures provided by Hamas-run health agencies (Aizenberg 2023). Fourth, it means ignoring any role Hamas has played in commandeering food and aid meant to be distributed to civilians. Finally, it means removing any responsibility for the continuation of the war from the leaders of Hamas, who could immediately end the fighting by releasing the remaining Israeli hostages and handing themselves in to the International Criminal Court. Thus, as with the more general accusation of Israeli genocide, the specific accusation in the case of 2023–24 war can only be made through a long series of historical and conceptual distortions—although the final ICJ decision may, of course, impact this analysis.

Understanding the origins and spread of the idea of a supposedly genocidal Israeli state therefore entails leaving the world of empirical fact behind and entering the realm of political and symbolic orders. The concept of Israeli genocide sits within a constellation of related antisemitic stereotypes and analogies, particularly those which seek to posit an equivalence or identity between Israel or Zionism and Nazi Germany (Becker 2021). One strain of origin lies in the reception of the Holocaust within the Arab world in the post-war period, as tensions between the Jewish and Arab populations of Mandatory Palestine rose with the prospect of partition and a Jewish state on the horizon, eventually spilling over into war. As Esther Webman and Meir Litvak (2012) have argued, across the post-war period Arab politicians, intellectuals and publics generally regarded the Holocaust as solely a European affair, for which Arabs have paid the ultimate price through the establishment of Israel. Some went a step further and suggested that Jews had exaggerated or fabricated the Holocaust in order to

justify a Jewish state (Becker 2024a). This latter position was often combined with comparisons or analogies between Israel and the Nazis, underpinning narratives in which "the Palestinians are [...] represented as the Holocaust's true victims" (Webman and Litvak 2012: 2). The building blocks were thus set in place for "the transformation" of Jews "from victims" of genocide "to culprits" (2).

The shifts in narratives around the Nakba, or "the catastrophe"—the expulsion and flight of Arabs from what would become Israel during the Jewish-Arab war of 1947–48—were marked by the impact of these ideas. While the "catastrophe" in the immediate post-war period was understood in terms of the failure of the collected Arab armies to defeat the Israeli military forces (Mor 2023), over time "the Nakba" become the foundation upon which was built a "politics of memory" clearly "modelled [...] after Israeli Shoah commemorations" (Bartov 2014: 19). By seeking to make a direct equivalence between the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the State of Israel and the Holocaust, a path is opened not just to the delegitimisation of Israel but to HOLOCAUST DISTORTION and even DENIAL (Troschke 2024). The Holocaust here is reduced to an abstract universal (Fine and Spencer 2018), drained of its specific content so that it can be conflated with any number of other forms of political and state violence, thereby making claims of a "Palestinian Holocaust" possible.

The same tendency to equate Israel with the Nazis in order to demonise the former reappears in the narratives of the political left across Europe and the US, particularly in periods of intensified conflict in the Middle East. As Izabella Tabarovsky has shown, much of the conceptual architecture used by the Western left today to demonise Israel—from claims of apartheid to genocide and analogies between Israel and Nazi Germany—originated in the antisemitic anti-Zionist campaigns instigated by the Soviet Union from the 1950s onwards, the terms of which were taken over wholesale by European Communist parties and their "fellow travellers" in the 1970s and 80s (Tabarovsky 2022). By the time of the Second Intifada, claims that Gaza represented a continuation or return of Auschwitz, or was akin to the Warsaw Ghetto, were a frequent presence in Palestinian solidarity movements and marches—again, radically distorting the historical reality of the gas chambers and of the Ghetto (Bob from Brockley 2014). Accusations

of Israeli genocide continue to be made in response to Israeli military attacks within the West Bank and Gaza, while the international isolation of Hamas, after their takeover of Gaza following Israeli withdrawal in 2005, is often framed as a step on the road to genocide. This is despite that isolation being a result of Hamas's refusal to agree to the conditions for recognition (most notably full acknowledgement of Israel's right to exist) set out by the Middle East Quartet, as well as Hamas's continued indiscriminate rocket fire at Israeli towns and cities (Reuters 2007).

Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, left-led campaigns in the UK sought to abolish Holocaust Memorial Day, or rename it "Genocide Memorial Day", winning support from leading politicians including Jeremy Corbyn, the now former leader of the British Labour Party. The campaigns' ostensible argument was that by focusing on the Holocaust alone, the history and experiences of other genocides were being blotted out. This argument is on shaky ground given that Holocaust Memorial Day events and literature do not solely focus on the Holocaust, but rather commemorate and provide educational information on the history of genocidal violence from the Armenians and the Sinti to atrocities in Cambodia, Srebrenica, Rwanda and Darfur. Indeed, to a great extent the only time when these events gain any public traction in Britain is through Holocaust Memorial Day publicity. Rather, the underlying motive for the campaigns against the name "Holocaust Memorial Day" was the desire to make an equivalence between the Holocaust and the Israeli treatment of Palestinians, a desire in clear evidence when Corbyn hosted an event entitled "Never Again for Anyone: Auschwitz to Gaza" in Parliament on Holocaust Memorial Day in 2010 (Zeffman 2018).

These narratives have been lent legitimacy by the academic discipline of Genocide Studies itself. In order to condemn Israel in the language of the "crime of crimes", some scholars have sought to extend the concept of genocide so that it now includes the Allied bombing of Dresden during World War II, the forced transfer of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the German defeat, and multiple partition and population transfer policies of the post-colonial era, including, crucially, those of the wars that led to the establishment of the State of Israel (Shaw 2010). In so doing, the concept of genocide is deprived of its specific meaning and, as Omer Bartov notes, it becomes impossible to distinguish between different modes of violence "in a manner that

would help us understand similarity and difference" (2010: 252). Much as with the use of the apartheid and colonial analogies to describe contemporary Israel by leading NGOs (see Bolton et al. 2023) then, by providing spurious claims of Israeli genocide with the imprimatur of scholarly authority, such works bolster the confidence of those who wish to wield the concept of genocide as a weapon in online debates about Israel. It is likely that the ICJ case on the 2023–24 Israel-Hamas war, and the way its initial judgement has been (mis)interpreted by anti-Israel activists and web users, will only intensify this process of authorisation. Given the proximity of the genocide concept to that of the Nazi analogy, it is at least possible that the latter will be the next concept to be granted scholarly and institutional authority in this way.

### 3. Qualitative analysis

To explore in more depth the way that the concept of genocide is used in online debates around Israel, and to see how the conceptual history laid out above impacts upon the contemporary use of the concept, the rest of this chapter will focus on the online reactions to three Israel-related new stories over the course of 2020 and 2021. Given that these stories and reactions took place prior to the 2023–24 war, analysing this discourse provides an opportunity to trace the pre-conditions for the concept of genocide's rise to prominence following the war.

To this end, three separate corpora were built of comments posted on the *Facebook* pages of major British newspapers in response to reports of:

- a. The May 2021 escalation phase of the Arab-Israeli conflict, sparked by a long-running legal dispute over housing in the Sheikh Jarrah area of East Jerusalem conflict, sparked by a long-running legal dispute over housing in the Sheikh Jarrah area of East Jerusalem;
- b. The US ice cream company Ben & Jerry's July 2021 announcement;<sup>3</sup>
- c. The rapid roll-out of a Covid-19 vaccine across Israel from December 2020 to January 2021.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.benjerry.com/about-us/media-center/opt-statement>.

These stories were chosen because they cover a range of angles on Israel: one directly related to the conflict with the Palestinians; another focused on political campaigns against Israel; and the last a story that was not directly conflict-related, and which drew significant positive coverage of Israel.

Each corpus consisted of 10–15 *Facebook* threads. These threads were analysed qualitatively using the MAXQDA content analysis programme with the antisemitic stereotypes, analogies and linguistic structures used by commenters classified according to the guidelines set out in the Decoding Antisemitism project's "guidebook" (Becker et al. 2024). All comments coded with the "genocide" code were then analysed. In the following, I will set out details of the data set and results of the analysis for each of the three discourse-triggering events in a separate section.

### 3.1 The May 2021 escalation phase of the Arab-Israeli conflict<sup>4</sup>

In May 2021, a long-standing legal case regarding the ownership and tenancy of properties in Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah district descended into violence. After protestors at the Al-Aqsa Mosque clashed with Israel police, Hamas militants in Gaza sought to capitalise on the unrest by firing hundreds of rockets at Israeli towns and cities. Israeli forces retaliated through airstrikes on targets in Gaza, leading to many civilian casualties. Intercommunal violence spread within Israel itself, while large anti-Israel demonstrations took place across Europe and the US. These were followed by multiple incidents of physical and verbal attacks on Jewish people, Jewish-owned businesses and synagogues. The escalation phase received substantial coverage in the UK media, and a large number of web-user comments posted in response. As an event directly concerned with the conflict, emotional and at times extreme language and argumentative strategies are to be expected (Becker, Ascone and Troschke 2021).

The corpus for this event consisted of 10 threads taken from the *Facebook* pages of a range of British newspapers across the political spectrum, from *The Times*, *Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* to the *Guardian* and *Independent*. In total, 1,504 comments were analysed. Of these, 422 were

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4 For a more general analysis of online reactions to this event, see Becker et al. 2021.

classed as antisemitic, either directly or in the context of the thread—28% of the total comments. Within the antisemitic comments, 26 expressed or activated the accusation of an Israeli genocide, equalling 6% of the antisemitic comments.

The relatively small number of comments invoking genocide might be explained by the nature of the "discourse trigger"—very few observers, even those most ideologically committed to the Palestinian cause and/or highly distorted images of Israel, could fail to notice that Israeli attacks on Gaza were responding to a barrage of rockets aimed at Israeli cities from Gaza. In the popular interpretation of the concept of genocide, the notion that a group is undergoing genocide sits uneasily with that group's political and military wing engaging in military activity that poses a serious threat to the supposed perpetrators of that genocide. Thus, to use the concept of genocide in such a context entails downplaying the success or effectiveness of the "resistance", something which it appears many pro-Hamas commentators are loath to do.

- (1) "Totally deserved and appropriate!!!!Israel deserves MUCH more than this. Fascist, Genocidal state!!!!" (IND-FB[20210511])

(1) was posted in response to a report of more than 80 rockets being fired at Tel Aviv from Gaza by Hamas militants. Such rocket attacks are indiscriminate and are directly targeted at civilian populations. The web user not only praises such attacks on civilians as being "deserved" but calls for further and more effective attacks, using a capitalised "MUCH" to emphasise the extent of the destruction and death that Israelis supposedly deserve to suffer and for which they hope. The justification for this death wish appears in the final line of the comment, where Israel as a state is described in essentialised terms as both "Fascist" and "Genocidal".<sup>5</sup> Exclamation marks reaffirm the strength of the web user's destructive feelings towards Israel.

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5 'Essentialised' here means presenting an ascribed characteristic as inherent, without any specification or limitation. Thus, a comment describing a particular Israeli politician as 'fascist' would not automatically be classed as antisemitic. Describing the state of Israel as 'fascist' in its totality makes fascism an innate (and therefore not temporally limited) characteristic of Israel as such, and this is regarded as an antisemitic ascription.

- (2) “Not sure you can call it ‘full scale war’ when only one side is properly armed? More like genocide”. (MIR-FB[20210511])

Here the web user disputes another commenter’s description of the escalation phase as tipping into “full scale war”, arguing that because only “one side”—i.e. Israel—is “properly armed”, the conflict is in fact no such thing, but rather “genocide”. Denying that the Palestinians have access to arms—often by portraying Iran-supplied weapons as almost child-like “homemade rockets”—is a common means of attributing SOLE GUILT FOR THE CONFLICT (Vincent and Bolton 2024) to Israel. Similarly, denying that there is a conflict between Israel and Palestine at all, or rejecting the idea that there are “two sides”, and instead using one-sided terminology such as “oppression”, and, at its extreme, “genocide”, to describe the situation in the Middle East is an increasingly popular framing device within social media discussions. This logic is precisely that which has been at play in discussions of the 2023–24 Israel-Hamas war, in which, as notes above, the nature and significance of the 7 October attacks is downplayed or ignored, and use of the term “war”—which signifies two combatants—is replaced by “genocide”, which, in popular usage, implies a binary aggressor-victim relation.

- (3) “Sick telling only one side of the story, and it is the story of the oppressor, genocidal occupier. The Independent deserves being gagged. Sick”. (IND-FB[20210511])

(3) aims its ire at the media reporting of the escalation—in this case, reports of rocket fire from Gaza. The web user describes reporting of the experience of Israelis under rocket fire as “sick”, and the—presumably distorted, if not fictional—“story of the oppressor, genocidal occupier”. The comment implies that the news outlet is deliberately suppressing the Palestinian “story” and as such should be “gagged”, i.e. censored. While such comments can often come close to attributions of JEWISH POWER AND INFLUENCE (Becker 2024b) over the media, here the implication is rather that the media are, through their own political choice, servile to Israeli interests.

- (4) “you do realise Palestine was there before Israel. Is real was created after ww2. So the people persecuted in ww2 have gone on to persecute others the same way. You really need to educate yourself. Actually do some history you plank” (TEL-FB[20210511])



- (5) "The fact remains that they are commuting genocide on Palestine what in turn has caused the conflict. Israel wasn't there before ww2" (TEL-FB[20210511])

Both of these comments were posted in quick succession by the same web user in response to reports of Israeli airstrikes on Gaza. The first (4) implies that the creation of Israel following World War II marks the point at which "the people persecuted in ww2" have begun "persecute[ing] others the same way". This not only implies an accusation of genocide and creates an analogy between Israel and the Nazis, but through the use of "the same way" amounts to a form of HOLOCAUST DISTORTION or relativisation. The second comment, (5), makes explicit what was implicit in the first, by directly accusing Israel of "commuting [sic] genocide on Palestine". The entire conflict is explained by the supposed "genocide" and the fact that Israel did not exist as a state prior to World War II, thus attributing all guilt for the conflict onto the Israeli side.

- (6) "So if some one come and take ur home and ask u to leave .will u . Just leave ? . Or fight back ? . And I already know your answer isn't how white America built with taking ppl home and killing 80 million america native . So I'm not surprised you back isreal crimes ". (TEL-FB[20210511])

(6) begins with a rhetorical question aimed at a previous commenter, asking how they would respond to "some one...tak[ing] ur home", and suggesting that "fight[ing] back" is an appropriate response. The idea of "fighting back" here is broad, with no distinction being drawn between, for example, non-violent civil disobedience and suicide bombings targeting civilians. The comment then makes the genocide accusation implicitly, through an analogy with the destruction of the Native American population during the European colonisation of North America. The deaths of "80 million america native" are cited as an equivalent to Israeli "crimes", effectively accusing Israel of a genocide that in numerical terms surpasses the Holocaust.

### 3.2 Ben & Jerry's boycott of Israeli settlements on the West Bank

On 19 July 2021, the American ice cream producer Ben & Jerry's announced through its website that it would no longer sell its ice cream in Israeli settlements on the West Bank, saying that it was inconsistent with its values. Priding itself on its politically radical image, the company's decision had been influenced by criticism of its continued operation in the region from "fans and trusted partners". The move was met with a positive reception from sections of Israel civil society and pro-Palestinian groups, but also fierce criticism, including from Israel's foreign minister Yair Lapid, who called it "capitulation to anti-Semitism, to BDS, to all that is evil in the anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish discourse".

The claim that the Ben & Jerry's boycott was antisemitic seems to elide the difference between the State of Israel (as such) and the settlements—an elision that in other contexts could itself be categorised as antisemitic. Indeed, Ben & Jerry's openly declared that they were not boycotting Israel as a state, nor did they support the BDS movement, but rather distinguished between the State of Israel and settlements in the West Bank.<sup>6</sup> As such, in contrast to comments like Lapid's, within this analysis the event itself was not considered to be an act of antisemitism. This had an effect on the classification of comments responding to reports of the boycott—comments which merely stated support for the boycott were not classed as antisemitic.<sup>7</sup>

This corpus consisted of 12 threads taken from the *Facebook* pages of *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *The Independent* and *The Spectator*. A total of 794 comments were analysed, with 176 (or 22%) categorised as directly or contextually antisemitic. Of the antisemitic comments, 12—or, as with the May escalation corpus, just

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6 Ben & Jerry's decision led to a prolonged conflict with its parent company, *Unilever*, over whether the Israeli licence could be separated from the rest of the business. The dispute was reported as being "settled" in December 2022, although the details remain opaque (<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/dec/15/unilever-ben-and-jerrys-ice-cream-israel-west-bank>, last accessed on 11 July 2023).

7 By contrast, a comment affirming the author Sally Rooney's boycott of Israeli publishers and translators – which she explicitly linked to BDS and the state of Israel as a whole, rather than just the settlements, would be classed as antisemitic. See Karolina Placzyn'ta's chapter in this volume, and Becker et al. 2021b.

over 6%—expressed claims of, or references to, Israeli genocide. The majority of these references appeared in *Facebook* threads responding to articles in *The Guardian*. The relatively low level of references to genocide in this corpus might be explained by the innocuous or even faintly comical image of an ice cream company seeking to intervene in a complex conflict. Nevertheless, the above average level of antisemitic comments overall—the average proportion of antisemitic comments in UK comment threads examined across the course of the Decoding Antisemitism project is around 10–12%—clearly shows that substantial numbers of web users looked to capitalise on the story in order to make antisemitic statements, with the concept of GENOCIDE part of the topoi utilised to that end.

- (7) “Settlers? I think you mean perpetrators of genocide 🙄”  
(GUARD-FB[20210723])

Responding to a report on the reactions of residents on an Israeli settlement on the West Bank to the boycott, (6) reframes their identity from “settlers” to “perpetrators of genocide”, in a question-and-answer format laden with irony. The ostensible world-weary calmness of the comment is emphasised by the use of an eye-rolling emoji, yet disguises an attribution that creates a monstrous, murderous image of the “settlers” which moves far beyond legitimate critique of the practice of settlement.

- (8) “The genocide of Palestinian will never be forgotten and when time change israel will pay for every brutality it’s committed and committing against poor Palestinians... and Anti Israel is not anti semitism the whole world know they can’t hide any more behind this “. (GUARD-FB[20210723])

In (7), the Israeli “genocide” of the Palestinians is presupposed, such that the comment’s focus is on the future consequences Israel will suffer in response. The web user predicts that Israel will “pay for every brutality” when “times change”—an indirect threat, with an undertone of approval for violent reprisals. This message is combined with an attempt to pre-empt the accusations of antisemitism the web user seems to expect, writing that “anti Israel is not anti semitism”—but they go further, implicitly making an accusation that Israel INSTRUMENTALISES ANTISEMITISM (Becker 2024a) by making false claims to deflect legitimate

criticism of their actions. As with the supposed genocidal actions, the web user suggests that this strategy no longer works as it presumably once did, as “the whole world know they can’t hide any more behind” such claims.

- (9) “ Hamas is just an excuse for the genocide of Palestinians women children’s and men’s. Where on earth you can see that ghaza is live human jail made by terrorist israel and then even there Israel killing innocent humans. Israel illegally grabbed Palestinians lands houses and farms and made many Palestinians homeless. And after all that terrorist israel supporters blaming Palestinians. Only humans can understand this”. (GUARD-FB[20210723])

Here, the web user argues against other commenters who sought to highlight Israeli security concerns in the face of the fundamentalist, authoritarian and indiscriminate violence of Hamas. (8) contends that references to the nature of Hamas are merely “an excuse” for the Israeli “genocide” of Palestinian society—women, children and men. Gaza is presented as a “live human jail” created by “terrorist” Israel, thereby again removing any political or moral responsibility for the current state of the region from Hamas, the rulers of Gaza. The comment ends by declaring that “only humans can understand this”, implicitly attributing a form of immorality and/or evil to Israel and its supporters, depicting them as inhuman and thus morally deficient.

- (10) “I think we’re well past the point of solely defending human rights there. The very existence of an entire people is at stake so every little bit helps” (GUARD-FB[20210720])

This comment expresses urgency in the face of the imminent destruction of “the very existence of an entire people”—the comment itself is based on an allusion which in the context, is a clear reference to the Palestinian population, and thus an implicit reference to Israeli genocide. Actions and campaigns to defend human rights in the West Bank and Gaza are declared insufficient, implicitly suggesting support for violent resistance. Given that “every little bit helps”, there is no distinction made here between boycotts by an ice cream company, violent resistance against the Israeli military, and the targeting of Israeli civilians. This offhand comment therefore implies support for any form of “resistance” against Israel, however indiscriminately violent—a reaction that was, indeed, commonplace in the wake of the 7 October attacks (Becker et al. 2023).

### 3.3 The roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine in Israel<sup>8</sup>

In December 2020, Israel launched its Covid-19 vaccination programme, the first state in the world to do so. The speed of Israel's roll-out of the vaccination programme across its population drew plaudits and positive media coverage, with other countries looking to see what could be learnt from the Israeli experience. But this generally favourable coverage was swiftly followed by media stories focusing on the question of Israel's supposed responsibility for distribution of the vaccine to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. For some, Israel as an occupying power in the West Bank was obliged to distribute the vaccine to Palestinians in the area over which they hold control. Israeli ministers argued that the Oslo Accords gave responsibility for healthcare to the Palestinian Authority, and that it was legitimate for Israel—as for any other nation-state—to prioritise its own citizens (including Israeli Arabs) before donating vaccines elsewhere (Trew 2021). In the event, Israel did donate 5,000 vaccine doses to Palestinian healthcare workers in January 2021, and further donations and swap deals followed later in the year (BBC 2021).

The corpus consisted of 15 threads of comments taken from the *Facebook* pages of all major British national newspapers, with a total of 1,522 comments analysed. Of these, 259 (or 17%) were classified as antisemitic. Out of the antisemitic comments, 32 (or 12%) articulated claims of genocide against Israel.

These results therefore stand out from those of the previous two corpora. Reports on the speed and success of the vaccine roll-out were, unlike the other two discourse events, not directly connected to either the Israel-Palestine conflict or political campaigns against Israel, and this may explain why the overall level of antisemitic comments was significantly lower, dropping by around 5–10%. Yet despite the lower overall level, the percentage of the comments referencing Israeli genocide within those classed as antisemitic was almost double that within the escalation phase and Ben & Jerry's threads.

Reasons for this surprising result—which would need to be explored in further research—might include a general increase in references to genocide and/or deliberate state killing during the most intense and

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8 For further analysis of the reactions to this event, including those from France and Germany, see Becker et al 2021.

fear-ridden periods of the Covid-19 era, or that positive, non-conflict-related stories about Israel motivated some web users to draw on more extreme concepts to express their antipathy to Israel. On the other hand, stories specifically focusing on the question of Israel's responsibility for Palestinian healthcare did open up a potential pathway to speculation about Israel's motives for not immediately supplying Palestinians with the vaccine. It is possible that the medieval antisemitic depiction of Jews as "well-poisoners", while a rarity in contemporary antisemitic discourse, may have played a more-or-less unconscious role here. For those already motivated by anti-Israel or anti-Jewish animus, it thus only took a small step to begin accusing Israel of deliberately withholding the vaccine for political ends—including, at its most extreme, the end of genocide.

- (11) "How is the world silent about this continued genocide. Its insanely inhumane!" (IND-FB[20210108])

This comment presupposes Israeli genocide, and as such portrays the absence of an immediate vaccine distribution programme to the Palestinians as a mere "continuation" of an ongoing extermination policy. Via the use of a rhetorical question, the web user evokes ideas of Jewish privilege or a "free pass" by bemoaning "the world[']s" silence about this supposedly self-evident genocide. The comment concludes with an indeterminate claim that either the genocide itself, or the silence about it, is "insanely inhumane"—implicitly presenting Israel as standing opposed to humanity as such.

- (12) "Yet another Israeli crime .... if this isn't intended genocide I don't know what is!!!!!" (IND-FB[20210108])
- (13) "They just want the Palestine people dead and gone shame on them" (IND-FB[20210108])
- (14) "The only time Zionists wanna be hands-off is when it leads to the genocide of the native Palestinian population" (TEL-FB[20210124])

Each of these comments present the decision of the Israeli government to vaccinate its own population before distributing vaccines elsewhere as a deliberate, "intentional" attempt to kill (if not entirely wipe out) the Palestinian population. Example (12) begins with the identification of "yet another Israeli crime", accompanied by an ellipsis which

indicates graphically the never-ending series of supposed crimes. The self-evidence of the supposed "intended genocide" represented by the dispute over vaccine distribution is then indicated by the web user through the claim that if it is not "genocide" then nothing can be classed as genocide. Comment (13) makes a similar argument in more direct fashion, positing that Israel (or Israelis) "just want[s] the Palestinian people dead and gone". Comment (14) approaches the issue from an act/omission angle, suggesting that "Zionist" inaction in this case stands in contrast to a presupposed over-intervention that characterises Israel's normal position vis-à-vis the Palestinian territories. The only explanation, according to this web user, is that through this omission, "Zionists" hope for the genocide of the "native" population—here perhaps alluding to the colonial genocides that accompanied the founding of the US and Australia.

- (15) A: "it would only cause a conspiracy that israel is trying to poison them".  
 B: "they probably where" (DM-FB[20201230])

In the first comment of this interchange, a web user justifies Israel's decision to not immediately distribute Covid vaccines to the Palestinians by suggesting that doing so would only lead to a conspiracy theory that Israel was trying to "poison" the population of the West Bank and Gaza—in effect, that even distributing vaccines would lead to accusations of Israeli genocide. In response, B replies by confirming the proposed conspiracy theory (which carries echoes of the aforementioned "well-poisoner" calumny), writing that "they"—the Israelis—"probably where [*sic*]". In so doing, they express the GENOCIDE concept indirectly through affirmation of a conceptual frame initially presented as a form of critique.

- (16) "That way they wont have any foreigners there to watch them commit more mass genocide on the Palestinians". (DM-FB[20210125])  
 (17) "How to be a racist apartheid state that commits genocide on the indigenous people, commits daily war crimes, and human rights abuses. But the tories already do that". (TEL-FB[20210112])

Both of these comments respond to two news stories that are not directly related to the conflict or to the question of Palestinian vaccine

distribution—the first responds to a report of Israeli plans to close their borders to foreign travel; the second to an opinion piece asking what other countries could learn from the Israeli roll-out of the vaccine. Despite the benign nature of both stories, these web users nevertheless use them as a vehicle to accuse Israel of genocide. In (16) the comment suggests that there is an ulterior motive to the border closures, namely that Israel will be able to “commit more mass genocide” safe from the prying eyes of foreign observers. (17) combines the concepts of Israel as an innately “racist state” and the apartheid analogy with the claim of genocide, adding to this depictions of Israeli evil (“war crimes” and “human rights abuses”). The final sentence of the comment suggests that the same phenomena are characteristic of the British government, demonstrating how concepts such as genocide, war crimes and abuse of human rights are routinely deprived of concrete meaning through frequent use as generic intensifiers in everyday online communication.

(18) “you clearly support the genocide and holocaust of Palestinians too”. (TIMES-FB[20210103])

(19) “so you’re denying the Palestinian Holocaust?” (TEL-FB[20210124])

Both (18) and (19) use news stories about the success of the vaccine roll-out to draw a direct equivalence between Israel’s treatment of Palestinians and the Holocaust. Example (18) accuses a previous pro-Israeli commenter of “clearly support[ing]” genocide and “holocaust of Palestinians”. And, (19) uses language normally associated with the identification of HOLOCAUST DENIAL to suggest that denying that Israel’s relations with the Palestinians are comparable to the Holocaust is akin to Holocaust denial. In so doing, both comments indirectly distort the Holocaust themselves. By using the terminology of the Holocaust as a linguistic weapon against Israel—or rather against those, potentially Jewish, web users who support or do not automatically condemn Israel—such comments amount to an aggravated form of antisemitic harassment.

(20) “Genocide started after the birth of Israel and this is the Jewish peoples thanks to all those people who sacrificed their lives to liberate them in the second world war”. (DM-FB[20201230])



This comment again evokes the image of the Nazi genocide to demonise Israel as genocidal—but adds to this a further attack on “the Jewish people” more broadly. The web user suggests that by supposedly committing genocide—and thereby replicating the Nazi crimes against the Jews—“the Jewish people” have displayed an immoral ingratitude to “all those people who sacrificed their lives to liberate them” in World War II. This gross historical falsehood—no nation entered the war to “liberate” Jews, and many refused entry to Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution—is evoked solely in order to magnify the genocide charge and create an implicit Nazi analogy.

(21) “apologists for slow genocide like you make my skin crawl. Pure demonic evil” (TEL-FB[20210112])

Responding to an opinion piece on what the British National Health Service could learn from the Israeli experience, comment (21) describes Israel as committing a “slow genocide”, and uses dehumanising language—“you make [my skin] crawl” to demonise those who refute such a depiction of Israel. This ascription is intensified by a final clause in which either the posited “slow genocide” itself, or those who support such actions—or both—represent “pure demonic evil”. In so doing, the comment activates classical Christian antisemitic stereotypes which associate Jews with the DEVIL and the presence of EVIL.

## 4. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the uses of the concept of GENOCIDE in online discourse about Israel in the UK. It traces the concept’s history, showing how it has been deeply connected with antisemitism, the Holocaust and the State of Israel from the outset. As such, it represents one of the most incendiary concepts that can be used in disputes about Israel. The chapter sets out why the concept of GENOCIDE in relation to Israel is factually inaccurate and distorts the historical reality of the conflict. Moreover, it is often a gateway to forms of HOLOCAUST DISTORTION if not outright DENIAL. Qualitatively analysing comments posted online in response to three separate events involving Israel across 2020 and 2021, it has found that references to a supposed Israeli GENOCIDE are a continual, if relatively minor, presence within antisemitic comments.

In both the May 2021 escalation phase and the Ben & Jerry's boycott corpora, comments referring to Israeli GENOCIDE made up just over 6% of the antisemitic comments. In the Covid-19 vaccine roll-out corpus, 12% of antisemitic comments referenced genocide. In each corpus, comments referencing Israeli GENOCIDE also expressed other antisemitic concepts, including notions of Jewish/Israeli EVIL and IMMORALITY, NAZI ANALOGIES, and DENIALS OF JEWISH SELF-DETERMINATION.

While the data set analysed here—comprising a total of 3,820 comments—is not large enough to draw concrete conclusions, it is nevertheless striking that, rather than a story directly related to the Arab-Israeli conflict, it was the one unambiguously positive news story—the speedy roll-out of the Israeli vaccine—that contained the highest percentage of usage of the GENOCIDE concept, more than double the level of the other two corpora. This may be due to the heightened emotional atmosphere during the most intense periods of the Covid-19 era, but it may also be that the generally positive nature of the coverage of this event meant web users were forced to reach for more extreme concepts to express their antipathy towards Israel. Further research comparing the uses of the concept in response to different non-conflict-related stories about Israel would be needed to test this hypothesis. Other potential research questions raised by this analysis include testing how levels of HOLOCAUST DISTORTION in online discussions relate to the frequency of attributions of Israeli GENOCIDE.

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