

# Israel's Cruelty Is Concealed by Its Decentralization

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**Like an invisible chemical element, Israel's cruelty has been spread out in time and space, remaining covert because its accomplices are innumerable and mostly anonymous**

*A tent camp housing Palestinians displaced by the Israeli offensive is seen in Rafah, last month. Credit: Hatem Ali/AP Photo*

In the cruelty competition, the prize goes to the side that is better at hiding theirs. This makes Israel the big winner and Hamas and the Palestinians the losers. Israel's cruelty has several traits that conceal it from everyone but its victims. They make it easy for allies like the U.S. and Germany to treat Israel as the victim of the people it subjugates and continue selling arms to it.

Israel's covert cruelty works like a factory assembly line. Its final product – the impoverishment, expropriation, and expulsion of Palestinians as a matter of routine during ordinary times, and the destruction, slaying, expropriation, and impoverishment in wartime – doesn't have one producer in charge. There are many accomplices in creating the final product, all drawing authority from a parliamentarian or divine law, or Supreme Court rulings. Responsibility is dispersed and distributed between each partner behind this assembly line. Because of their multitude, they are all exempt from being characterized as "cruel."

Each Israeli standing along this assembly line and adding another component to the product passing before them is a regular person, often someone who's perfectly pleasant – maybe someone who has a sense of humor, respects his or her parents, and is addicted to science fiction movies. The engineers and administrators who are involved also have positive attributes.

Take the example of the water-storing cisterns that Palestinian communities use (because Israel refuses to connect them to the water grid) and that the Civil Administration, Israel's governing body in the West Bank, [has ordered destroyed](#), or the water tanks it has confiscated. A long chain of strangers created the final product: sand and gravel being poured to fill the cistern in and soaking up the precious water. Or the empty space on which a water tank used to stand.

The bulldozer operator who demolished or moved the offending water tank has to feed his children, after all. Members of the Border Police who ensured that no one interfered with the bulldozer were obeying orders. They didn't manufacture the tear gas canister or stun grenade they threw at children and women who disrupted this upholding of law and order. Those who made them were Latino American or African American workers who also had to feed their children.

The soldier/clerk merely coordinated the deployment of the various units at dawn. The supervisor signed the standard form for an order to demolish structures built without a permit or inside [areas declared military firing zones](#), as though the matter was commanded by God. The jurist who

approved or even wrote the wording of the demolition or confiscation order died long ago, and his grandchildren are doing well in the U.S. or in the IDF's elite intelligence unit.

*A destroyed cistern in the Judean Desert, 2010. Credit: Emil Salman*

The head of the Civil Administration in the West Bank is both a soldier and a law-abiding citizen. Like his predecessors, he won't turn a blind eye to the crime of being thirsty committed by a Palestinian and his flock of sheep as they insolently wander through the sacred Area C, which the Oslo Accords put under full Israeli control that should have ended in 1999. After all, he and his predecessors aren't responsible for [the intense heat in the Jordan Valley](#).

Israel's cruelty is concealed not just because its accessories and perpetrators are too numerous to count, with the state maintaining the anonymity of most of them. The cruelty remains obscured because it is decentralized in both space and time, like an invisible chemical element. There are dozens of kilometers separating Sakhnin, Arabeh, and Deir Hanna - Palestinian towns in the Galilee whose lands were expropriated in 1976 - and the Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan and its ever-increasing home demolitions.

Many years separate the person who signed the order designating Palestinian land in the Jordan Valley as firing zones in the 1970s and the [soldiers who beat up Basel Adra](#) of al-Tuwani, a reporter for 972 Magazine and one of the creators of the award-winning film "No Other Land," in 2022. Other than their identity documents, there's nothing connecting the Supreme Court justices who, in 2022, allowed the military to train with live fire right in the middle of Palestinian villages in the Masafer Yatta area and soldiers in Gaza literally shooting Palestinians hungry for bread. None of these people view themselves as technicians in the assembly line leading to the Palestinians' expulsion. But all of them are horrified by Palestinian cruelty.

*The ruins of a demolished building in Masafer Yatta. Credit: Moti Milrod*

Since the massacre on October 7, Israeli media outlets have incessantly discussed the cruelty of Hamas and its associates. This cruelty was open, documented on camera, concentrated, and dense. It wasn't something abstract, spread between hundreds of thousands of people for decades and hiding in cockpits. Israeli security forces immediately moved to identify the perpetrators and anyone who might have been involved. They have been or will be punished, killed by a guided missile or bomb or [detained in humiliating conditions](#) until a trial in which their guilt is predetermined.

Israel's institutional cruelty, decentralized in years and location, allows hundreds of thousands of law-abiding and order-following Israeli Jews to be cruel without an ounce of introspection or the realization that how much they benefit from it. The spatial and temporal distance from their anonymous partners allows Israeli Jews to attribute Palestinian cruelty to their culture, blood, or religion, and not to Israel's covert, decentralized cruelty.

But some Israeli Jews are aware of this assembly line and understand that we, the privileged, unwillingly add a screw to the final, cruel product. Therefore, activists like Dafna Banai of Machsom Watch and journalists like Yuval Abraham (a friend and partner in Adra's 972 site and film) occasionally try to remove screws to disrupt production. But the assembly line goes on, moving along smoothly, as it has for a long time.

**Amira Hass**

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**P.S.**

• Haaretz. Mar 4, 2024:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-03-04/ty-article-opinion/.premium/israels-cruelty-is-concealed-by-its-decentralization/0000018e-0970-d857-adff-cff9519e0000>