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Op-Ed Analysis

**Analysis of Omer Bartov's "What I Believe as a Historian of Genocide"**

Language holds immense power in framing conflicts and influencing international perceptions of atrocity. Words like "genocide," "war crimes," and "crimes against humanity" evoke powerful imagery and moral weight, yet their misuse can dilute their significance. In his Op-Ed, "What I Believe as a Historian of Genocide," Omer Bartov explores the nuances of these terms within the context of the Israel-Gaza conflict. He cautions against prematurely labeling Israeli actions in Gaza as genocide while acknowledging the severe humanitarian crisis unfolding. Bartov emphasizes the importance of early warnings to prevent atrocities from escalating.

Bartov's approach is rooted in his background as a historian of genocide, drawing parallels to past atrocities, such as the Holocaust, to contextualize his argument. However, while Bartov's analysis demonstrates depth and precision, it falls short in addressing the structural and systemic dynamics underpinning the crisis, raising critical questions; *does his focus on rhetoric sufficiently address the structural conditions driving the crisis and/or does his cautious approach risk delaying necessary interventions?* His narrow focus on rhetorical evidence from Israeli leaders neglects the broader geopolitical and socio-economic complexities that contribute to the ongoing violence.

This paper analyzes Bartov's Op-Ed, evaluating its strengths and limitations while drawing on some relevant class discussions and scholarly works to contextualize and critique his claims. Ultimately, while Bartov offers valuable insights into the language and warning signs of

genocide, his analysis could benefit from a more holistic approach that considers systemic factors, counterarguments, and actionable solutions.

### **Key Concepts in International Law**

The terms “genocide,” “war crimes,” and “crimes against humanity” are frequently invoked in discussions of mass violence, yet they carry specific legal definitions under international law. The 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention defines genocide as acts committed “*with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group*” its sole focus on intent has been criticized for its narrow scope, as it excludes systemic conditions that contribute to mass harm. Such a limited definition hinders timely intervention, as proving intent is often challenging (Ratner, Abrams, & Bischoff, 2009). War crimes, codified in the Geneva Conventions, include *violations such as targeting civilians, using prohibited weapons, and attacking non-combatant infrastructure* while Crimes Against Humanity, as outlined in the Rome Statute, *encompass acts like murder, extermination, and persecution when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack on civilians*.

Bartov draws particular attention to the distinction between genocide and ethnic cleansing, the latter involving the forced removal of a population from a territory. He argues that while ethnic cleansing is not recognized as an independent crime under international law, it can escalate into genocide, as seen during the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide. Christopher Browning (2005) illustrates this evolution in his analysis of Nazi policies from 1939 to 1941, showing how forced migration and ghettoization created conditions that culminated in the Holocaust. Browning’s insights underscore Bartov’s emphasis on vigilance but highlight the need to address systemic conditions that can lead to such escalations.

## **The Israel-Gaza Conflict: An Overview**

The Israel-Gaza conflict has deep historical roots, encompassing decades of territorial disputes, occupation, and intermittent warfare. Following the 2005 Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, the territory has been governed by Hamas, a militant organization designated as a terrorist group by Israel and many Western nations. The ongoing blockade, combined with frequent military escalations, has resulted in dire humanitarian conditions in Gaza.

The recent crisis began with Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack, which left over 1,400 Israelis dead and sparked a massive Israeli military response. Bartov highlights the disproportionate toll of this response: over 10,000 (and now over 45,000) Palestinians killed, including thousands of women and children according to the Israel-Gaza war in maps and charts by Al-jazeera. He questions whether this scale of violence reflects genocidal intent or constitutes war crimes and crimes against humanity under international law. A. Dirk Moses's (2020) concept of "**permanent security**" provides a lens for understanding how states rationalize such actions under the guise of protecting their populations/existence. This framework critiques the reliance on proving intent, as it allows states to justify violence through security doctrines, a dynamic evident in the ongoing conflicts.

### **Analysis of Bartov's Argument**

#### **1. Strengths of Bartov's Argument:**

One of Bartov's primary strengths is his insistence on the precision of legal terminology. He argues that conflating genocide with other forms of mass violence risks undermining the integrity of international law. This caution is well-founded; the term "genocide" carries profound moral and legal implications, and its misuse can hinder effective responses to actual genocidal

acts. Bartov's historical perspective enhances this point, as he draws on examples such as the Holocaust to illustrate the importance of distinguishing between genocide and other atrocities.

Bartov also effectively highlights the role of dehumanizing rhetoric as an early warning sign of genocide. He cites statements from Israeli leaders, such as Defense Minister Yoav Gallant's description of Gazans as "human animals," as indicative of genocidal intent. This aligns with genocide studies, which identify dehumanization as a precursor to mass violence. By linking these statements to historical patterns, Bartov underscores the need for vigilance in identifying and addressing potential genocidal dynamics. Also, Framework of rhetorical adaptation further supports Bartov's analysis, showing how states use norm avoidance and signaling to obscure accountability for violence (Dixon, 2017).

## **2. Weaknesses of Bartov's Argument:**

Despite its strengths, Bartov's analysis is limited by its narrow focus on rhetorical evidence. While he provides compelling examples of dehumanizing language, his argument does not sufficiently address the structural and systemic factors driving the crisis. For instance, the long-standing blockade of Gaza, which has created conditions of extreme poverty and dependency, is a crucial context for understanding the dynamics of the conflict. By neglecting these systemic issues, Bartov's analysis risks oversimplifying the situation and missing key drivers of the violence. Ratner et al. (2009) argue that structural conditions often contribute to mass harm, even when intent cannot be proven, emphasizing the need for a broader framework in genocide prevention.

Additionally, Bartov's critique lacks balance in its assessment of the roles of various actors. While he scrutinizes Israeli actions and rhetoric, he downplays the role of Hamas's

strategies, such as embedding military infrastructure within civilian areas and using civilians as human shields. This omission weakens his credibility as an impartial observer and limits the scope of his analysis. Another limitation of Bartov's critique lies in its insufficient engagement with the role of leadership decisions and political dynamics in shaping the trajectory of violence. Scott Straus (2012) emphasizes that leadership in asymmetric conflicts is instrumental not only in framing narratives but also in mobilizing resources and setting agendas that either escalate or mitigate violence. This insight is particularly relevant to the Israel-Gaza conflict, where leadership on both sides has strategically leveraged rhetoric and policies to achieve broader political goals. For example, Hamas frequently frames its actions as resistance to occupation, embedding military infrastructure within civilian areas to garner domestic and international sympathy while deflecting accountability for civilian casualties. On the other hand, Israeli leadership invokes existential threats to justify disproportionate military actions, positioning them as acts of national defense.

Straus's framework highlights that such leadership strategies are not merely reactive but central to perpetuating cycles of violence. This interplay extends beyond the immediate conflict, influencing international responses. As Straus argues, global actors often hesitate to intervene or hold parties accountable due to the narratives crafted by leaders, which shape perceptions of legitimacy and urgency. This dynamic is evident in the ongoing blockade of Gaza, which remains unaddressed in Bartov's analysis despite being a critical structural factor that sustains the crisis. By integrating Straus's perspective, Bartov's argument could adopt a more holistic approach that examines not only the language of conflict but also the strategic decisions and political mechanisms that underpin it. This would allow for a more balanced critique that moves

beyond rhetorical evidence to address the systemic and leadership-driven dimensions of the crisis, ultimately offering a more comprehensive framework for prevention and intervention.

### **3. Ethical and Normative Dimensions**

Bartov's emphasis on the ethical implications of dehumanizing rhetoric is a significant contribution to the discourse on atrocity prevention. His call for institutions like Yad Vashem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to speak out against the escalating violence is a powerful reminder of the moral responsibilities of historical and educational institutions. However, Bartov's recommendations lack specificity. While he urges international actors to intervene, he does not outline concrete steps for mitigating the crisis or holding perpetrators accountable. This omission limits the practical applicability of his argument and raises questions about the feasibility of his proposed interventions.

#### ***Potential Counterarguments***

Critics might argue that Bartov's cautious approach to labeling the crisis as genocide risks enabling inaction. By insisting on the absence of genocidal intent under the strict legal definition, he may inadvertently downplay the severity of the crisis and delay urgent interventions. Furthermore, his reliance on rhetorical evidence could be perceived as selective, ignoring broader geopolitical dynamics and the international community's complicity in sustaining the status quo. Others might contend that Bartov's focus on Israeli rhetoric neglects the existential threats faced by Israel, including Hamas's charter, which calls for the destruction of Israel. These critics could argue that Bartov's analysis lacks a nuanced understanding of the security dilemmas faced by states in asymmetric conflicts.

While these counterarguments highlight important gaps, they do not fully undermine Bartov's central thesis. His insistence on precise terminology is crucial for maintaining the integrity of international law and preventing the misuse of powerful terms like genocide. However, Bartov's analysis would benefit from greater engagement with systemic factors and countervailing evidence to present a more balanced and comprehensive critique.

## **Conclusion**

This op-ed offers a timely and thoughtful analysis of the Israel-Gaza conflict through the lens of genocide prevention. His emphasis on the precision of legal terminology and the dangers of dehumanizing rhetoric provides valuable insights into the complexities of mass violence. However, his narrow focus on rhetoric and limited engagement with systemic factors weaken the scope and applicability of his analysis.

To address the crisis effectively, it is essential to adopt a more holistic approach that considers the structural dynamics of occupation and blockade, the roles of various actors, and the broader geopolitical context. Bartov's call for vigilance and early intervention remains critical, but it must be paired with actionable solutions to mitigate harm and foster accountability. As the international community grapples with the escalating crisis, the lessons of history must guide its response. Precision in language and proactive measures are not mutually exclusive; they are complementary tools for preventing atrocities and promoting justice. Bartov's analysis serves as a valuable starting point, but the path forward requires deeper engagement with the systemic realities of the conflict and a commitment to upholding the principles of human dignity and international law.

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