The Hard Truth of Israel’s Endgame in Gaza

Peter Beinart warns that the country is committing a sin that “cannot be atoned for.”

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There is a concept in Judaism called “Chillul Hashem.” It’s one of the greatest sins that a human being can commit. And it is to do something that would bring God’s name itself into disrepute. It seems to me that forcing Palestinians in Gaza into a situation where their choices are either death or expulsion is Chillul Hashem, a sin for which there, actually, in Jewish law, cannot be atoned for.

In a more historical vein, it strikes me as a profound and deeply disturbing irony that a people whose own history has been marked by mass expulsion now has a state that is speaking in our name and enacting policies that are very likely going to create mass expulsion of other people.

My name is Peter Beinart. I’m the author of “The Beinart Notebook” on Substack. I’m also editor-at-large of Jewish currents. And I’ve been writing for The Times about the war in Israel and Gaza. The conventional wisdom in the United States is that Israel doesn’t have a plan for what it wants to do in Gaza after it succeeds in toppling Hamas from power.

But if you listen to Israeli government officials and you look at the consequences of this war on the ground, you can see that at least some in Israel’s government do, indeed, have a strategy, or at least a preference. That strategy is not only to depose Hamas from power, but it is to force many Palestinians in Gaza to leave the territory themselves. Israel’s conduct of the war since Hamas’s massacre on October 7 has virtually made the Gaza Strip unlivable.
85 percent of people have been forced from their homes. Close to 70 percent of the homes themselves have been damaged or destroyed. And a very large percentage of people are now at risk of famine. So Gaza has become a place that’s extraordinarily difficult to live in.

Within six days of Hamas’s attack on October 7, there was a paper that was issued by Israel’s intelligence ministry that suggested that Israel should try to force Gazans out of the Gaza Strip into the Sinai region of Egypt. Egypt has not opened its borders so that people from the Gaza Strip in any significant number can leave the Gaza Strip, but Egypt faces a massive international debt that it needs to pay this year. It owes $28 billion to international creditors. And that economic weakness, according to some reports, makes Israeli leaders believe that Egypt is vulnerable to international pressure to open its border.

These population transfers would mean that Palestinians in Gaza, most of whom are already from the families of refugees that were expelled or who fled in fear in 1948, that their descendants or even they themselves would be forced to become refugees a second time. Palestinians know in their bones that they could be expelled because they were expelled at least once before. Israel was created through the expulsion of more than half of the Palestinians who were then living in the territory that became Israel.

That’s why the Gaza Strip is so overcrowded, because most of the people who live there, their families are not originally from Gaza. They’re from what’s now parts of Israel, and their parents or grandparents or great-grandparents were expelled to what is now the Gaza Strip. And Israel has continued expulsion since then. There was another large scale expulsion when Israel conquered the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967. There are expulsions taking place in the West Bank to this day.

Palestinians know because of their family and national history, that Israel has tried to solve its Palestinian problem by forcing Palestinians out. And the Biden administration has said, clearly, that it does not want this to happen. But there is a contradiction between the Biden administration’s rhetoric and its actions, because its policy is actually giving Israel the green light, which is to say that the massive US military aid to Israel, which has been ongoing through this war, and diplomatic support at the United Nations, has been unconditional.
I would like to see the United States go beyond mere words of condemnation and make it clear that the United States will not fund the expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza. I want US diplomats to understand that the forced expulsion of a population or part of a population is a war crime. It is the kind of thing that will stain the conscience of every nation that is complicit in it and stain the legacy of every US government official who is complicit in it.

I want US government officials to fear that this will be their legacy and to ensure that it’s not. And I would like Jews in Israel and the United States to think about how our ancestors who endured the kinds of things that Palestinians in Gaza are enduring now might think about what we are doing today.