

As the ICC seeks arrests, I ask those who facilitated the Gaza slaughter: what were you thinking?

Owen Jones

As the international criminal court's prosecutor, **Karim Khan**, officially seeks arrest warrants for Israeli and Hamas leaders, a question must be asked of the politicians and media outlets that legitimised Israel's western-backed destruction of Gaza, which is **one of the great crimes of our age**: what were you thinking?

While Hamas's crimes were obscene and indefensible, the prosecutor's proposed charges against the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and his defence minister, Yoav Gallant, describe atrocities that were directly facilitated by cheerleader politicians, most notably in the US, UK and Germany, and legitimised by multiple media outlets.

Starvation, wilfully causing great suffering, murder as a war crime, intentionally directing attacks against a civilian population and, crucially, "extermination" as state policy: the culpability for these horrors is not theirs alone. It was obvious – as the prosecutor details – that Israel was intentionally and systematically depriving the civilian population of the essentials of life, and that it sought to "**collectively punish the civilian population of Gaza**, whom they perceived as a threat to Israel". So why did those politicians, those outriders, refuse to call out crimes of historic proportions for what they clearly were?

That the US president, **Joe Biden**, decries the prosecutor's application as "outrageous". In a global order weighted in favour of western states and their allies, this was not supposed to happen. "This court is built for Africa and for thugs like Putin," as one leader told the prosecutor. Whether Netanyahu ends up in the dock or not, Israel's once seemingly impregnable impunity is no more, and western leaders have more cause to fear consequences for their actions than ever before.

Indeed, such leaders know they are damned by association. **Biden** promised "ironclad" support for Israel and a limitless supply of weapons, including 2,000-pound bombs that ripped apart bodies in so-called safe zones. The UK's foreign secretary, **David Cameron**, repeatedly refused to suspend arms sales. And what of **Keir Starmer**? Asked if Israel had the right to cut water and power supplies, he declared **it had "that right"**, after it stopped food, fuel and medicines entering Gaza in October. He later claimed to have never said what he had, claiming misinterpretation, but note how the ICC prosecutor specifically presents Israel's decisions to cut off water pipelines and electricity supplies as key planks of his case. It is something that **lawyer Starmer** must have known was an intrinsically criminal act.

Ignorance is no defence. Rarely has a state been so open about its criminally murderous intentions. The statements of Israeli government ministers, politicians, generals, soldiers, journalists and other public figures in support of mass slaughter and indiscriminate destruction would fill a book. They led the Israeli-American associate professor of Holocaust and genocide studies Raz Segal to declare only nine days after 7 October: “We’re seeing the combination of genocidal acts with special intent. This is indeed a textbook cause of genocide.”

When Gallant declared “a complete siege” with “no electricity, no food, no water, no fuel” on the grounds that “we are **fighting human animals** and we are acting accordingly” – language later flagged by the international court of justice as potentially risking the right of Palestinians to be protected from genocide – why was he not taken at his word? Did our politicians and commentators believe that Gallant telling his soldiers he had lifted all “restrictions” and “restraints” on them wasn’t to be taken literally? When the Israeli major general Ghassan Alian specifically addressed “the citizens of Gaza” as “human animals”, and lauded a “total blockade” with the words “you wanted hell, you will get hell”, what room was there for interpretation?

To the politicians and commentators who spent months repeating mantras about self-defence with occasional hand-wringing platitudes: what were you thinking? Like the rest of us, they spent seven and a half months watching a military superpower detonate explosives equivalent to several Hiroshima bombs in one of the world’s most densely populated areas, no bigger than east London. They witnessed most civilian infrastructure being severely damaged or destroyed, so that Gaza now looks a different colour and texture when viewed from space. They are aware that tens of thousands of Palestinians have been suffocated to death under rubble, many of them children; that the medical system was obliterated, so babies were having limbs amputated and women having caesareans without anaesthetics; that Israel was systematically blocking the means of survival, precipitating the fastest drop in the nutritional status of a population ever recorded.

We have had front-row seats to some of the worst crimes of the 21st century, livestreamed on a daily basis. Rarely do such horrors have so much overwhelming documented evidence. The Israeli state repeatedly promised an atrocity of biblical proportions – literally, in the case of Netanyahu, as he invoked the story of Amalek, in which God orders the Israelites to “put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys” – and they delivered to the letter.

And what of the media? There have been courageous examples of reporting, but overall, I see this as one of the biggest journalistic failures in history.

What were they all thinking? Well, it is all too obvious. Palestinian life has been treated as having no meaningful worth at all. This sordid saga is a depraved story of dehumanisation at its most flagrant. We have witnessed, too, the dire consequences of the failure to hold to account the architects of previous catastrophes – not least Iraq. And Israel’s cheerleaders clearly believed that the state’s impunity was a collective insurance policy that protected them, too.

Well, that impunity is disintegrating in real time. This is a crime scene, covered in so many fingerprints. Unless all the guilty men and women and their cheerleaders are held to account, we are doomed to a future of escalating horror and suffering.

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