

The economy of genocide – Estonia's part in it

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Last week, Israeli President Isaac Herzog was welcomed by President Alar Karis and Prime Minister Kristen Michal in Tallinn, and the day concluded with an Estonian-Israeli business forum hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹ The visit came as a big surprise to me, and while pondering on the reason for it, it made me think of the recently published report (June 30) “From Economy of Occupation to the Economy of Genocide” by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territories occupied since 1967, Francesca Albanese², which she submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council.³ In this report, the Special Rapporteur investigates the corporate machinery that sustains the Israeli settler-colonial project. As a reminder, the mandate for the Special Rapporteur was created after the 1993 United Nations Human Rights Committee resolution and is specifically tasked with the investigation of Israel's violations of international law, international humanitarian law and the upholding of the principles of the Geneva convention, particularly in relation of the protection of civilians in the Palestinian Territories illegally occupied by Israel since 1967 (Gaza strip, East Jerusalem, West Bank).⁴

The Special Rapporteur's previous report from October 2024 has identified Israel's actions in Gaza as genocide⁵ and lays out without a doubt that what we are witnessing is “not happening in a vacuum, but is part of a long-term intentional, systematic, state-organised forced displacement and replacement of the Palestinians”. In a recent interview, Albanese also assessed that this project is not limited to Gaza, but can also be seen in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, albeit with a different pace and rhythm, yet with the same goal.⁶ Her report is not

¹ Estonia-Israel Business Seminar <https://www.vm.ee/en/estonia-israel-business-seminar>

² Albanese, an international lawyer and scholar, is an independent expert that receive no salary or compensation for fulfilling the role of the UN special rapporteur.

³ From economy of occupation to economy of genocide. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, Francesca Albanese. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session59/advance-version/a-hrc-59-23-aev.pdf>

⁴ Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-palestine>

⁵ A/79/384: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, Francesca Albanese - Genocide as colonial erasure.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/a79384-report-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights-palestinian>

⁶ Let's Talk Palestine. #26 The economy of genocide ft. Francesca Albanese.

<https://creators.spotify.com/pod/profile/lets-talk-palestine/episodes/26---The-Economy-of-Genocide-ft--Francesca-Albanese-e35tvm>

the first document that identified Israeli activities in Gaza after October 7 (and even before⁷) as genocidal. Almost immediately after the outbreak of Israel's devastating revenge, Palestinians and genocide scholars have made it clear what it is that we are seeing⁸. Of course, the West, as a collective, has not believed them and has mostly berated and attacked them. This should not come as a big surprise, as Edward Said already diagnosed decades ago in his unfortunately still so current book *Orientalism* that the Palestinians are not allowed to narrate their own destruction⁹. For those who still do not trust the victims and scholars and need somebody with "authority" to tell them, even the perpetrators see no other way but to call it a genocide. The Israeli NGO B'Tselem has just come forward and called Israel's actions in Gaza "our genocide"¹⁰. They found evidence for it in the systematic erasure of cities, healthcare systems, educational, religious and cultural institutions destroyed with an "explicit attempt to destroy Palestinian society in Gaza and create catastrophic living conditions that prevent the continued existence of this society in Gaza. That is precisely the definition of genocide". Slowly, the West is catching up to that realisation, seemingly not Estonia, to which I will get below.

From economy of occupation to economy of genocide

After this contextual sorting, let us return to the Special Rapporteur's report on the economy of genocide. The report starts with the reminder that all colonial endeavours and associated genocides have been enabled and driven by the corporate sectors and economic interests. Evidence for this line of argument can be found, for example, in the United Kingdom's colonisation of Africa and South Asia, in the South African Apartheid regime, and it is no different in the case of Israel and its occupation of the Palestinian territories. Many scholars who have studied colonial economies have found this special mode of domination, which has been coined "racial capitalism"¹¹—embedded in global capitalist and racist structures that aim at the exploitation of racialised, mainly brown and black people. Further, the report finds that in the case of a settler-colonial context¹², such as Israel/Palestine, it also contains an explicit focus

⁷ Nijim, M. (2022). Genocide in Palestine: Gaza as a case study. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 27(1), 165–200. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13642987.2022.2065261>

⁸ Gaza: UN experts decry bombing of hospitals and schools as crimes against humanity, call for prevention of genocide <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/gaza-un-experts-decry-bombing-hospitals-and-schools-crimes-against-humanity> and Norman Finkelstein (2023) <https://therealnews.com/norman-finkelstein-on-israels-final-solution-in-gaza> or in the Estonian media <https://www.delfi.ee/artikkel/120242467/ule-saja-eesti-uhiskonnategelase-nouab-valitsuselt-gaza-tsiviilelanike-ini-moiguste-est-seismist>

⁹ Said, Edward. (1978). *Orientalism*.

¹⁰ B'Tselem. *Our Genocide* https://www.btselem.org/publications/202507_our_genocide

¹¹ The term goes back to Robinson, C.J. (1983) *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*.

¹² On settler colonialism: Khalidi, Rashid (2020) *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine. A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017*.

on “displacement and replacement aimed at dispossessing and erasing Palestinians from their lands”. Albanese’s report clearly states that corporations are directly involved in this process and are therefore also committing crimes of apartheid and genocide and violating international law.

The report finds involvement in nearly all imaginable sectors, ranging from arms manufacturers, tech firms, building and construction companies, extractive and service industries, banks, pension funds, insurers, universities and charities. The report highlights over 60 companies and shows that the value of the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange has increased by 200 per cent since the start of the Gaza invasion. Next to military and defence-related companies, the report finds tech giants such as Microsoft, Alphabet, IBM and Amazon as integral enablers of the mass-surveillance systems and therefore of the genocide. There is also a lot of heavy machinery needed to bulldoze Palestinian housing and erect settlements, which benefit Caterpillar, Hyundai and Volvo. Perhaps most shocking is the enrichment of rental platforms such as Booking and Airbnb that list properties in Israeli-occupied territory. Albanese herself describes the findings “not as a list [of companies but as] a system” and adds that “weapons and data systems brutalise and surveil Palestinians”¹³. Furthermore, the settlements and the apartheid regime and now the genocide are “financed by banks and insurers, powered by fossil fuels, and normalised by tourism platforms, supermarket chains and academic institutions”.

In the context of Estonia, I will zoom in only on the two most prominent yet most applicable areas, the military sector and the “dark side of the ‘start-up nation’ as the report aptly puts it. The report finds that militarised violence not only created the State of Israel, but it remains the core engine of the settler-colonial project.”¹⁴ Furthermore, the military-industrial complex has become the economic backbone of Israel, and the prolonged occupation has offered them a “testing ground” for cutting-edge technology such as AI-powered targeting tools, air defence platforms and allows them to slap the tag “battle-tested” on sales if they have been used to kill Palestinian civilians¹⁵. Estonia has been a good customer of these weapon systems, having signed a contract with Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) valued at over EUR 100 million as early as May 2023.¹⁶ Furthermore, the Estonian Centre for Defence Investment (RKIK) signed another contract in 2023 for approximately 1,000 Negev NG7 machine guns, which will be used by the Estonian Defense Forces (Kaitsevärgi) and Estonian Defense League (Kaitseliit).¹⁷ With Estonia's

¹³ Albanese, Francesca. “Profiting from occupation”: UN expert urges countries to cut trade, financial ties with Israel. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eN-WA5JPaYE>

¹⁴ From economy of occupation to economy of genocide – (A/HRC/59/23) Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967
<https://www.un.org/unispal/document/a-hrc-59-23-from-economy-of-occupation-to-economy-of-genocide-report-special-rapporteur-francesca-albanese-palestine-2025>

¹⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/11/17/israels-weapons-industry-is-the-gaza-war-its-latest-test-lab>

¹⁶ <https://www.iai.co.il/estonia-has-signed-contract-israel-aerospace-industries-acquire-long-range-loitering-munitions>

¹⁷ <https://news.postimees.ee/7729023/estonian-defense-forces-kaitseliit-to-get-new-machine-guns-this-year>

new increased defence budget of over five per cent of the gross domestic product, I expect that the Israeli military industry will benefit greatly from it.

In the realm of tech companies, Albanese highlights the automation of the repression of Palestinians that is being propelled by the data collection and surveillance infrastructure built and developed by tech companies. The tech companies, on the other hand, benefit from using the occupied territories as a testing ground and invest in research and development centres in Israel and develop abilities by collecting, storing and using governmental biometric data of Palestinians. Microsoft, Google, and Amazon are set to earn billions by providing cloud storage services for this. Perhaps most dystopian are the AI systems “Lavender”, “Gospel” and “Where’s Daddy?” that generate lists of targets for drone warfare and looming above them all, Palantir’s automatic predictive policing technology that is capable of making automated battle decisions, which some define as “extrajudicial kills”. Palantir’s CEO, Alex Karp, while pressed in April 2025 whether Palantir could have killed civilians, responded, “mostly terrorists, that’s true”¹⁸. These technologies are finding their way back into civilian life: European countries, including Estonia¹⁹, are using the same drones to observe public gatherings with plans to identify and surveil people. This is the start-up ecosystem with which the Estonian government wants to intensify collaboration and meeting points. When President Karis visited Israel in February of this year, he also attended an event by Startup Nation Central in Tel Aviv focused on “cooperation in innovation, the digital economy, and relations between the Estonian and Israeli tech sector and universities”²⁰.²¹ This was preceded by an event in Tel Aviv on January 21, 2024, co-hosted by the Estonian Embassy in Tel Aviv and StateUp, a leading Israeli research and data firm. At this event, Ambassador Veikko Kala highlighted “Estonia’s advanced digital infrastructure and its strategic position as a gateway to Europe for Israeli enterprises”.²² Perhaps even more worrisome is an earlier agreement between Estonia and Israel signed in November 2018, under which the countries will cooperate to develop DigiDoc ID software and the X-Road platform (the data exchange technology that is the backbone of e-Estonia) for Israel. I am wondering, is the Estonian tech sector prepared for having its technologies used to play a part in the surveillance and incarceration of Palestinian civilians? It seems that at least Bolt, Estonia’s global mobility company and flagship unicorn, would be uncomfortable with this. Martin Villig, Co-Founder of Bolt, took to his social media account during the visit of the Israeli President and demanded that

¹⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=uQCazCld_9o

¹⁹ <https://tartu.postimees.ee/8115757/pea-igal-suururitusel-toob-politsei-alla-keelatud-drooni>

²⁰ Albanese’s report also stresses the complicity of the Israeli universities in the genocide. This has been shown by others already:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/9/10/israeli-academia-is-directly-complicit-in-the-crimes-of-the-state>

²¹ <https://news.err.ee/1609603703/president-alar-karis-on-official-visit-to-israel-and-palestine>

²² <https://www.stateup.co/resources/estonian-and-israeli-business-leaders-discuss-cooperation-and-national-resilience>

“Israel should end genocide in Gaza today!”²³ and that he expects that the “Estonian President and Estonian Prime Minister [send] a clear message: we want Israel to stop killing civilians”.

What is Estonia's game plan?

Returning to the visit of the Israeli President. The timing of the visit struck me as so surprising, as the international community is slowly turning away from Israel²⁴, something also felt in Jerusalem, where Herzog's visit is justified to find allies in the “increasingly hostile EU”²⁵. The Jerusalem Post is among other things gesturing towards the joint declaration of 15 foreign ministers (most notably Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain) to recognise Palestine at the UN General Assembly in September. The Estonian leaders have no plans to recognise Palestine.²⁶ On the contrary, the announcement by Margus Tsahkna to open an Israeli Embassy in Tallinn²⁷ “this will lift Israeli-Estonian relations to a new level,” as he explained. There is a complete disregard for the real situation when Tsahkna states that “[a]s frontline countries, we share similar security challenges.”, where one is the aggressor (Israel) and one the potential victim of aggression (Estonia). Instead of changing course, Estonia is doubling down.

Where is Estonia going with this? Does it want to be one of the few countries standing with Israel when the International Court of Justice inevitably confirms that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza?²⁸ Even Germany, plausibly Israel's greatest friend, has now halted military

²³https://www.linkedin.com/posts/waldec_on-the-topic-of-israeli-president-visiting-activity-7358874919218085888-pDza?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAABLWRk8BE2yF3Dc1G3GhH5bWhSUyPcv_e12I

²⁴ For example, by the suspension of Israel's association with Horizon Europe.

https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-proposes-partial-suspension-israels-association-horizon-europe-2025-07-29_en

²⁵ Jerusalem Post. Herzog heads north: Israel's Baltic outreach in increasingly hostile EU.

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-863230>

²⁶ Prime Minister: Estonia has no plans to recognize Palestine. ERR.

<https://news.err.ee/1609759785/prime-minister-estonia-has-no-plans-to-recognize-palestine>

²⁷ Tsahkna Israeli kolleegile: saatkonna avamine Tallinnas viib Eesti ja Israeli suhted uuele tasemele..

Välisministeerium.

https://www.vm.ee/uudised/tsahkna-israeli-kolleegile-saatkonna-avamine-tallinnas-viib-eesti-ja-israeli-suhted-uu_ele

²⁸ I feel rather certain about this based on the fact that Israel has completely ignored the advisory opinion of the ICJ that was issued on January 26, 2024, after the court had assessed the legitimacy of South Africa's bid that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza. In this opinion, it indicated a long list of measures, none of which Israel has complied with. Here is a summary of some of the provisional measures demanded by the court: 1) immediately suspend military operations in Gaza, 2) Israel needs to take all reasonable measures to prevent genocide, 3) desist from killing Palestinians, causing serious bodily or mentally harm to Palestinians, deliberately bring physical destruction to the group, impose measures to prevent births of Palestinians, 4) restrict or prohibit expulsion and forced displacement of Palestinians, need to ensure access to food and water, humanitarian assistance and medical supplies, 5) ensure effective preservation of evidence related to the allegations of genocide to which end Israel shall not restrict access of fact-finding missions. For the full report:

<https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240126-ord-01-00-en.pdf>

experts that could be used in Gaza.²⁹ Is economic growth and tech cooperation worth it to be in this position? Perhaps we can examine it from a security perspective, where Estonia recognises the need to access Israeli weapon systems in order to defend itself in the event of Russian aggression. Is such an agreement worth it if it means kicking international law and treaties to the curb? Surely, there are other manufacturers ready to provide this military technology. And will it make Estonia safe to begin with? As I have argued elsewhere³⁰, upholding international law anywhere in the world is the best defence for small states that are afraid of aggressive neighbouring states; not buying weapons that have been “tested” by killing civilians with them.³¹ Why would the international community care about breaches of international law if Estonia finds itself in a position of need, if it actively ignored crimes in the past?

I hope that the Estonian political response is just a sign of diplomatic clumsiness. Of being afraid to cancel pre-made plans. It might also have grown out of a feeling of flattery – that Israel wanted to meet with small Estonia, praise it for its great tech sector, but use it to gain a foothold in a Europe that is slowly closing its doors. Above all, I hope that the friendly welcome of the Israeli President is not based on the desire to continue to get a piece of the genocide economy cake that Albanese describes. It is, however, my fear that it is exactly that.

In the report, the Special Rapporteur urges Member States of the United Nations to “impose sanctions and a full arms embargo on Israel, including all existing agreements and dual-use items such as technology and civilian heavy machinery (...) and to suspend/prevent all trade agreements and investment relations”. It is now time to see whether the Estonian political elite has any interest in international law, human rights, or morality and can prioritise these over economic and national interests.

²⁹<https://www.euronews.com/2025/08/08/germany-stops-military-exports-that-could-be-used-in-gaza-chancellor-merz-says>

³⁰ Poopuu, Birgit and Klasche, Benjamin. TLU Teadlased: Eesti tegi õigesti, kui hääletas Palestiina poolt. See aitab ka Eestil pikas plaanis paremini ellu jääda. <https://epl.delfi.ee/artikkel/120326203/tlu-teadlased-eesti-tegi-oigesti-kui-haaletas-palestiina-poolt-see-aitab-ka-eestil-pikas-plaanis-paremini-ellu-jaada>

³¹ Poopuu, Birgit and Klasche, Benjamin. TLU Teadlased: Eesti tegi õigesti, kui hääletas Palestiina poolt. See aitab ka Eestil pikas plaanis paremini ellu jääda. <https://epl.delfi.ee/artikkel/120326203/tlu-teadlased-eesti-tegi-oigesti-kui-haaletas-palestiina-poolt-see-aitab-ka-eestil-pikas-plaanis-paremini-ellu-jaada>