

Gaza: Into the Abyss

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Gaza and the wider world are heading into an abyss. With the announcement and preparation of Israel's invasion of Gaza in response to a massacre by Hamas, longstanding fears appear to be on the verge of realisation. The collective West remains eager to absolve itself of its historical guilt for the Holocaust, which shades into its enduring dehumanisation of (ex-) colonial subjects, Palestinians. It affirms that it will stand by Israel.

There is little clue or indication that policymakers grasp the enormity of what is happening. The old bromide that "Israel has the right to defend itself" has obscured the reality that what is occurring is nothing short of a slow-moving annexation, if not potential ethnic cleansing^[i] and even genocide^[ii]. Whether that occurs through 'surgical' amputation or wholesale destruction of the Palestinian people, the moral consequences for humanity will be no less dramatic. The primary analogy for recent events is less the worst surprise attack on Israel since the Yom Kippur War, than the possibility of a second, and potentially conclusive, *Nakba*^[iii].

Of course, there are many layers to the conflict. Anyone who seeks to wade into it with a position must apparently justify themselves by the reams of literature they have read, no less than their own physical experience on the frontlines. Yet in our case, the appeal to moral authority through proximity to the ground cannot deflect the world historical consequences of Israel's impending invasion of Gaza for practically everyone on the planet.

Those who prioritise solidarity with Palestine have often been accused of antisemitism for 'singling out' Israel, insofar as other States may commit even worse abuses. But the reality is that the question of Palestine produces a critical reading on our political barometer. It crystallises many issues on account of both its strategic primacy, and its weight within the story the West tells about itself.

If the whole of modern European history has been defined precisely by the Jewish question – then it is nothing less than a complete abdication of responsibility

to isolate Palestine, compartmentalise it, and see it as only one among a range of issues on which progressives must campaign, to be viewed as 'even-handed'.

In fact, the reality is that throughout the whole evolution of the struggle of oppressed peoples, what we are witnessing now anticipates a much darker period in world history. It is on no less than the scale of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At the very least, the latter shook the Left to its core and produced a tremendous amount of soul-searching on the growing dangers of non-Western imperialisms. But the impending attack on Gaza does not appear to provoke anything close to a similar level of self-reflection within the Western establishment. It continues to target and harass^[iv] progressive movements of solidarity with Palestine.

The reality, however, is that authoritarian regimes have no trouble coordinating with each other, regardless of their geopolitical stripe. While the West sees in Israel its eternal ally, the truth is that the years-long sharpening of racism within the body politic along with the Netanyahu government's most recent actions now threaten to upend the world order to an unprecedented degree.

What other aspiring regional powers are waiting to see what the consequences will be, if any, for Israel? Is it not likely that the Modi regime, for example, will be emboldened by Israel's solution to the Palestinian question when considering its own plan of action against, for example, the Kashmiri Muslim community? The potential global scenarios are frightening to contemplate.

Already, revanchism has erupted to the surface in recent years in otherwise disconnected places, from Kashmir to Nagorno-Karabakh, as Noa Landau noted in a prophetic article, 'How Israel Shaped the Era of Annexation'^[v]. It was published only weeks before the current upheaval. The world, like a clenched fist squeezing a razor, appears to be releasing new gushes of blood with every pump.

At the same time, the Left often romanticises struggle. No doubt, there have been many thoughtful responses^[vi] that have disrupted our assumptions by asking us to carefully consider how we frame the Palestinian question, ensuring that we do not undermine the struggle with

coarse rhetoric. Reverend William Barber II^[vii], for example, powerfully invoked the legacy of Black Americans' freedom struggle to condemn Hamas' butchery of Israeli Jews, while resisting dehumanising attempts to conflate Palestinians with Hamas.

But there is an unavoidable fear that what we are watching right now has no exact parallel in history. It cannot be reduced to a heroic struggle for civil rights or even decolonisation. The whole population of Gaza, and by extension the rest of Palestine, is under immediate existential threat. The haunting words of Gandhi, who even after World War II, argued that "Jews should have offered themselves to the butcher's knife"^[viii], acquires renewed menace in this context.

For those around the world who cannot accept the wilful destruction of a people but who can only watch helplessly on the sidelines, the demand remains simple: freedom for Palestine *now*.

Of course, the path forward is incredibly complex. Nevertheless, the point remains that acknowledgment of the trauma caused by Hamas' massacre should not become a tool to rationalise the underlying aggression of Israel's occupation. The latter is becoming a full-blown threat to the collective existence of Palestine.

While the Biden administration and the wider Western establishment fall back on the assumption that Israel has a right to defend itself, the clear need instead is to avert further tragedy. *That cause can only be strengthened by withholding any form of military, political, economic, or ideological support to Israel until it ends its occupation, including through the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement*^[ix]. More than a nuclear-armed power, it is the Palestinian people who face an actual existential danger today.

Moreover, the Left's temper must be carefully calibrated in response. What is happening is not a global moment likely to lead to a great outburst of 'freedom struggles' in sympathy with Palestine. We are far from the world of the Battle of Algiers. Instead, the world is already approaching a point of no return^[x]. Interlocking 'defensive' alliances between hegemonic powers are likely to produce only a greater degree of conflict. The trajectory has its nearest parallel with World War I in terms of the potential for sheer, meaningless destruction. The tripwires are being set. If there is any moral clarity to be obtained in this stomach-churning situation, it must come from painful yet clear acknowledgment that the Palestinian struggle has entered a new phase. The very existence of an entire group of people is once again at stake. In this context, insight comes from mourning, not chest-thumping.

The Armenian genocide and the Holocaust represented the scourge for which the West promised "never again". It is in this moment that the free peoples of the world—especially in the Southern periphery, where the West claims to want to rehabilitate its image—must hold it to the same collective pledge. Emerging popular movements of resistance are compelled to demand that the West truly recognises the Palestinian people by withholding support for Israel. They have been written off its ledger for far too long. If not, the West itself will come to rue its decision to back Israel's war with dramatic regional consequences.

The need to avert this outcome becomes even more urgent in today's context. Far-Right forces elsewhere around the world—unabashed in their antisemitism—are primed to find twisted inspiration in the glowing embers of bombed-out apartment complexes and mangled bodies in Gaza.

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Notes

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[ii] Segal, Raz. (2023). "A Textbook Case of Genocide". *Jewish Currents* (13 October). Available at <https://jewishcurrents.org/a-textbook-case-of-genocide>; Englert, Sai. (2023). "Impending Genocide". *New Left Review (sidecar)* (16 October). Available at <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/impending-genocide>

[iii] Pappé, Ilan. (2006). "The 1948 Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine". *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 36(1): 6-20.

[iv] Reuters. (2023). "France uses teargas on banned pro-Palestinian rally as Macron calls for calm" (13 October). Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/france-bans-pro-palestinian-protests-citing-risk-disturbances-public-order-2023-10-12/>

[v] Landau, Noa. (2023). "Israel Helped Shape the Era of Annexation". *Haaretz* (1 October). Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2023-10-01/ty-article-opinion/.premium/israel-helped-shape-the-era-of-annexation/0000018a-e741-d3af-a3ce-e7c367080000>

[vi] LeVine, Mark. (2023). "Fanon's conception of violence does not work in Palestine". *Al Jazeera* (10 October). Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/10/10/fanon-s-conception-of-violence-does-not-work-in-palestine>; Klein, Naomi. (2023). "In Gaza and Israel, side with the child over the gun". *The Guardian* (11 October). Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/11/why-are-some-of-the-left-celebrating-the-killings-of-israeli-jews>

[vii] Barber, William. (2023). "We must say an emphatic 'no' to Hamas a thousand times". *The Guardian* (13 October). Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/13/hamas-no-moral-justification-william-barber>

[viii] AP News. (2019). "Unearthed Gandhi WWII letter wishes Jews 'era of peace'" (24 September). Available at <https://apnews.com/general-news-f40d8c2c7d8d4ffeadd576ded89acc0c>

[ix] Barghouti, Omar. (2023). "Why I believe the BDS movement has never been more important than now". *The Guardian* (16 October). Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/16/why-i-believe-the-bds-movement-has-never-been-more-important-than-now>

[x] Achcar, Gilbert. (2023). "Gaza: The Impending Catastrophe and the Urgency of Stopping It". *Gilbert Achcar (blog)* (16 October). Available at <https://gilbert-achcar.net/impending-catastrophe>