

Gaza: The Impending Catastrophe and the Urgency of Stopping It

written by Gilbert Achcar | October 20, 2023



In the last few days, Gaza has epitomized the global North-South divide more than any other conflict in contemporary history. The indecent unanimity of Western governments in unreservedly expressing their unconditional support of the Israeli state—at the very moment when the latter had already and quite obviously embarked on a campaign of war crimes against the Palestinian people of unprecedented magnitude in the 75-year-long history of the regional conflict—has been truly sickening. Since the 7th of October, these governments have been outbidding each other in this endeavour—from projecting the Israeli flag on Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate, London’s Parliament, Paris’s Eiffel Tower and Washington’s White House, to sending military hardware to Israel as well as dispatching U.S. and UK naval reinforcements to the Eastern Mediterranean in a gesture of solidarity with the Zionist state, to prohibiting diverse forms of expression of political support to the Palestinian cause, thus curtailing elementary political freedoms.

All this is happening at a time when the usual imbalance in Western media reporting on Israel/Palestine has reached a peak. As usual, grieving Israelis, women in particular, have been profusely shown on screens, incomparably more than grieving Palestinians have ever been. Hamas’s Operation Al-Aqsa Flood occasioned a flood of images of violence against unarmed people, with a special focus on a rave similar to those commonly organized in Western countries, so as to accentuate the “narcissistic compassion ... evoked much more by calamities striking ‘people like us’, much less by calamities affecting people unlike us.” The much larger-scale Israeli violence that has been pounding civilians in Gaza since Hamas launched its operation has been much less reported, let alone condemned. Even as blatant a war crime as the total blockade in water, food, fuel, and electricity inflicted upon a population of 2.3 million and the no less blatant violation of humanitarian law consisting in ordering more than one million civilians to leave their city or face death under the rubbles of their dwellings is all but condoned by prominent Western political leaders and major Western media.

It is as if they had reconstituted the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs for which Joseph Conrad’s fictional Kurtz (in *Heart of Darkness*) had written a report ending with the terrifying postscript: “Exterminate all the brutes!” Kurtz’s prescription has indeed found an equivalent in Israeli minister of “defence” Yoav Gallant’s sinister announcement: “I have ordered a complete siege on the Gaza Strip. There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed ... We are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly.”

Western media have been unsurprisingly echoing Israel’s media in depicting Hamas’s operation as

the deadliest attack targeting Jews since the Holocaust, continuing the usual pattern of Nazification of the Palestinians in order to justify their dehumanization and extermination. The truth, though, is that, however dreadful some aspects of Hamas's operation have been, they are not a continuation of Nazi imperialist violence in any meaningful historical perspective. They are inscribed instead in two very different historical cycles: that of the Palestinians' struggle against Israeli colonial dispossession and oppression, and that of the struggle of the peoples of the Global South against colonialism. The key to the mindset behind Hamas's action is not to be found in Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, but indeed in Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*—the best-known interpretation of the feelings of the colonized by a political thinker who was also a psychiatrist. Fanon reflected on the struggles of the colonized against French colonialism—the Algerians in particular. The parallels are striking:

The colonized, who have made up their mind to make such an agenda into a driving force, have been prepared for violence from time immemorial. As soon as they are born it is obvious to them that their cramped world, riddled with taboos, can only be challenged by out and out violence. ...

The violence which governed the ordering of the colonial world ... will be vindicated and appropriated when, taking history into their own hands, the colonized swarm into the forbidden cities. To blow the colonial world to smithereens is henceforth a clear image within the grasp and imagination of every colonized subject. ...

The outcome, however, is profoundly unequal, for machinegunning by planes or bombardments from naval vessels outweigh in horror and scope the response from the colonized. The most alienated of the colonized are once and for all demystified by this pendulum motion of terror and counterterror. They see for themselves that any number of speeches on human equality cannot mask the absurdity whereby seven Frenchmen killed or wounded in an ambush at the Sakamody pass sparks the indignation of civilized consciences, whereas the sacking of the Guergour douars, the Djerah dechra, and the massacre of the population behind the ambush count for nothing.

Were some of the acts committed by Hamas fighters during Operation Al-Aqsa Flood “terroristic”? If by “terrorism” is meant the deliberate assassination of unarmed people, they certainly were. But then, the deliberate killing of thousands upon thousands of Gazan civilians over the past seventeen years—since 2006, a few months only after Israel evacuated the Gaza Strip to control it from without, in the belief that the cost would be lesser than controlling it from within—that is terrorism too. State terrorism has indeed caused many more casualties in history than terrorism by non-state groups.

Likewise, were some of the acts committed by Hamas fighters acts of “barbarism”? Undoubtedly so, but they were no less undoubtedly part of a clash of barbarisms. Allow me to quote here from what I wrote about this more than twenty years ago, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks:

Taken separately, each barbarous act can be judged equally reprehensible from a moral standpoint. No civilized ethic can justify deliberate assassination of non-combatants or children, whether indiscriminate or deliberate, by state or non-governmental terror. ...

Nevertheless, from the point of view of basic fairness, we cannot wrap ourselves in a metaphysical ethic that rejects all forms of barbarism equally. The different barbarisms do not carry the same weight in the scales of justice. Admittedly, barbarism can never be an instrument of “legitimate self-defence”; it is always illegitimate by definition. But this does not change the fact that when two barbarisms clash, the stronger, the one that acts as the

oppressor, is still the more culpable. Except in cases of manifest irrationality, the barbarism of the weak is most often, logically enough, a reaction to the barbarism of the strong. Otherwise, why would the weak provoke the strong, at the risk of being crushed themselves? This is, incidentally, why the strong seek to hide their culpability by portraying their adversaries as demented, demonic and bestial.

The most crucial issue with Hamas's conception of the fight against Israeli occupation and oppression is not moral, but political and practical. Instead of serving Palestinian emancipation and winning over to its cause an increasing number of Israelis, Hamas's strategy facilitates the nationalist unity of Jewish Israelis and provides the Zionist state with pretexts for increased suppression of Palestinian rights and existence. The idea that the Palestinian people could achieve its national emancipation by way of armed confrontation with an Israeli state that is far superior militarily is irrational. The most effective episode in Palestinian struggle to this day was unarmed: The 1988 Intifada provoked a deep crisis in Israel's society, polity, and armed forces, and won for the Palestinian cause massive sympathy in the world, Western countries included.

Hamas's latest operation, the most spectacular attack it ever launched on Israel, has provided an opportunity for much more than the usual pattern of brutal murderous retaliation in a protracted cycle of violence and counter-violence. What looms on the horizon is nothing less than a second stage of the Nakba—the Arabic word for "catastrophe" that is the name given to the forced displacement of most of the indigenous Palestinian population from the territories that the newborn Israeli state managed to conquer in 1948. The present Israeli government, which includes neo-Nazis, is led by the leader of Likud and heir, therefore, of the political groups that perpetrated the most infamous massacre of Palestinians in 1948: the Deir Yassin massacre. Benjamin Netanyahu led the opposition to Ariel Sharon and resigned from the Israeli cabinet run by the latter in 2005, when Sharon opted for Israel's "unilateral disengagement" from Gaza. Soon after, Sharon quitted Likud which Netanyahu has been leading ever since.

The Israeli far right led by Likud has been relentlessly pursuing its goal of a Greater Israel that encompasses the entire territory of British-mandate Palestine between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, including both the West Bank and Gaza. Only a few days before Hamas's operation, Netanyahu, during his speech at the UN General Assembly, brandished a map of Greater Israel—a deliberate signal that did not go unnoticed. That is why the injunction given to the population of Northern Gaza to move southward is much more than the usual hypocritical excuse for the deliberate destruction of civilian-populated areas, while laying the blame at Hamas's door by accusing it of hiding among civilians (an absurd accusation indeed: how could Hamas exist in the wilderness, out of urban concentrations, without being wiped off by far superior Israeli remote warfare means?).

What we are witnessing is in all likelihood the prelude to a second round of displacement of Gazans toward the Egyptian Sinai, in the intention of committing the second major act of territorial conquest combined with ethnic cleansing since the Nakba, under the pretext of eradicating Hamas. The Palestinians immediately remembered the 1948 exodus, when they fled war only to be prevented from returning to their towns and villages. They have understood that they are now facing in Gaza a second instance of forced displacement preluding to further dispossession and settler-colonization. This second stage of the Nakba will be much bloodier than the first: The number of Palestinians killed until the time of writing is already nearing the number of those killed in 1948, and this is but the beginning of the Israeli onslaught. Only massive popular mobilization in the United States and Europe to bring Western governments to pressure Israel into stopping before it fulfils its sinister war aims could prevent this dreadful outcome. This is extremely urgent. Make no mistake: the impending catastrophe will not be contained in the Middle East but will certainly spill over into Western countries as has been happening for several decades—on a yet more tragic scale.

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