

Gaza, the West, and the Rest

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[Editors' note: A major American liberal daily solicited from Gilbert Achcar an article about the ongoing Gaza war, but ended up rejecting his submission as "not a good fit for us."]

Since Hamas's October 7 assault across the fence that surrounds the Gaza Strip, that open-air prison holding 2.3 million inmates, a flood of horror has invaded the world's TV screens. Scenes of slaughter across the fence were soon surpassed by scenes of massacre within. The killing of Israelis (close to 1,400) stopped with the end of Hamas's incursion by the end of the same day, bar the small number of victims of later rockets launches from Gaza and the unknown fate of the Israeli hostages. The mass murder of Palestinians by the intensive bombing of urban civilian concentrations within Gaza has been increasing at high speed ever since October 7, with bodies piling up in thousands upon thousands at a frightening rhythm.

Hamas is known to believe that all Israeli citizens of voting age are responsible for their state's oppression of the Palestinian people, invoking a highly reprehensible notion of "collective responsibility." The killing of non-combatant people is a crime—not only the murder of civilians indeed, but also the killing of surrendering soldiers and war prisoners. The same notion of "collective guilt" has obviously been guiding Israel's successive sequences of bombing of the Gaza Strip since its army evacuated it in 2005. Over the past fifteen years until the eve of October 7, the ratio of Israeli to Palestinian fatalities was 1/20.8 according to UN figures. Applied to the present situation, this ratio would lead to the killing of over 29,000 Palestinians. There are legitimate fears that the final toll may be even worse.

Statements made by Israeli officials have gone out of bounds. Minister of defense Yoav Gallant's sinister announcement caused a stir: "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." An open violation of international law constitutive of a war crime was thus being justified by dehumanizing a whole population. Israeli president Isaac Herzog blatantly invoked collective responsibility: "It is an entire nation out there that is responsible. It's not true this rhetoric

about civilians not aware, not involved. It's absolutely not true. They could have risen up, they could have fought against that evil regime...." By a tragic irony, this statement, which Herzog later tried to walk back, replicates Hamas's line of argument with yet lesser validity since Israelis elect their government whereas Gazans don't.

Can one imagine Western leaders making such statements after a terrorist attack on their territory? Could George W. Bush have said about the Afghans, in the wake of 9/11, that their entire nation is responsible because they could have kicked out Usama bin Laden and his men or risen up against the Taliban who hosted them? Could the U.S. president have decreed a total blockade of Afghanistan while calling its people animals? Why then were such statements tolerated, when not straightforwardly condoned, by Western leaders in their profusive expressions of unconditional solidarity with Israel in the wake of October 7? The only possible explanation is also related to collective guilt, this time as a self-accusation. The participation in the destruction of European Jews as well as the lack of action to prevent it have become the original sin of the Euro-Atlantic West, born as a geopolitical entity in the aftermath of World War Two.

This original guilt has been weaponized by the Israeli state from the prelude to its foundation in 1948 until today. It has been intensively used immediately after October 7, especially in the statement that it constituted the bloodiest day for Jews since the Holocaust, a description that became rapidly ubiquitous in Western media. The obvious function of this characterization is to establish a continuity between Nazism and Hamas—"modern-day Nazis" in the words of Israel's ambassador to the UN—and by the same token between Nazi Germany and Gaza. This is indeed the perception that has been dominant in the West. It is based on a distortion of reality: most Israelis killed on October 7 were Jews. That much is true. But they were not a persecuted minority systematically exterminated by a mighty state that occupied most of Europe, but members of a privileged majority in an apartheid state that has been occupying the West Bank and Gaza for 56 years, inflicting upon their population a continuum of oppression. Add to this that this state is ruled by a far-right government that includes neo-Nazi ministers and you will realize how incongruous the analogy of October 7 with the Holocaust is.

There is the West and there is the rest. Most of the world—especially in the Global South, as reflected at the emergency session of the UN general assembly—sees the Israel-Palestine issue from a very different perspective: not as a continuation of World War Two but as a continuation of the long history of colonialism. They see Israel as a settler-colonial state, the outcome of a colonization process that is still ongoing in the West Bank. They see the Palestinians as victims of colonialism, desperately fighting against a much more powerful colonizer in a disproportion of forces that is closer to that of European invasions of North America or Australasia than to those of other colonial territories. And they therefore see Hamas's deed as one more instance of those indiscriminate excesses of violence with which the history of anticolonial struggle is scattered, excesses that pale in comparison with the much heavier toll of colonial violence.

The discrepancy between the West and the rest is aggravated by the fact that not only did Western governments express their compassion for the Jewish victims of October 7 while dismissing, if not condemning, any hint at the context—the fact that Hamas's attacks "did not happen in a vacuum" as UN Secretary-General António Guterres put it, eliciting a call for his resignation from the Israeli ambassador. They also appeared as condoning the war crimes that Israel's government had embarked on, starting with the blockade imposed on Gaza's population, its forced displacement and the bombing of vast swathes of urban civilian agglomeration in the strip. As former senior U.S. and U.N. official Jeffrey Feltman put it: "What better way to reinforce perceptions in the so-called Global South of American double standards than comparing Washington's condemnation of Russian destruction of Ukrainian civilian architecture with Washington's relative silence about Israel's destruction of Gazan civilian infrastructure?"

It is thus that Gaza has come to epitomize more than any conflict in modern history the dichotomy between the global North and South, as well as a “clash of civilizations” that turns out to be a clash of barbarisms. This is extremely serious, for it exacerbates tensions that translate in the spillover of conflicts from South to North—a blowback of which the 9/11 attacks remain the most spectacular manifestation, to this day. As everybody knows, 9/11 unleashed in return a cycle of U.S.-led wars in the Global South with devastating consequences for Afghanistan and Iraq and beyond. There is no way to prevent this bloody spiral from escalating in intensity and scope other than the observation and enforcement of international law and the demonstration of qualitatively equal and quantitatively proportional consideration for all victims—be they Jews or Ukrainians or Palestinians.