

On Violence in Fighting Occupation: The Case of Palestine

written by Gilbert Achcar | October 4, 2026

Author's note: The following text is a postscript, dated February 22, 2026, to recent editions - Arabic, German, and Spanish - of my 2025 book, *Gaza Catastrophe: The Genocide in World-Historical Perspective*. The postscript discusses Palestinian liberation strategy and its various manifestations since the completion of the Israeli occupation of Palestine in 1967. In this regard, it is important to bear in mind the results of the most recent public opinion poll conducted in Gaza and the West Bank on August 20-25 by the Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre (JMCC). Asked about the "best method to achieve the Palestinian people's goals of ending the occupation and establishing a state," only 13.3% chose "military means" (9.7% in Gaza and 15.7% in the West Bank), while 17.8% were in favor of "non-violent resistance," and a majority of 55.8% in favor of "peaceful negotiations." This bears witness to the degree of exhaustion of the population of the 1967-occupied Palestinian territories, with 58.6% trusting no Palestinian personality and 55% trusting no political faction. Rebuilding a sustainable Palestinian popular emancipatory struggle in those territories will require a lot of patient effort.

The farther we move from what has befallen the Palestinian people since the Hamas-led operation on October 7, 2023, the clearer becomes the magnitude of the disaster triggered by what I have described as "the most catastrophic miscalculation ever in the history of anticolonial struggle." Seizing the opportunity provided by that fateful operation and the apparent war crimes that it involved, the far-right government of Israel felt unrestrained, even widely supported, in launching the most murderous and devastating war ever waged against the Palestinian people - one that has rightly been recognized as genocidal by many scholars, human rights organizations including the well-known Israeli organization B'Tselem, and various international bodies.

The massive death toll and the total human cost resulting from Israel's onslaught, the full extent of which won't be known for some time, are compounded by the unprecedented intensity of destruction of all means of life in the Gaza Strip: buildings, infrastructure, natural environment. The main aim of this mass destruction is the forced displacement of the Gazan population, i.e. the furthering of the ethnic cleansing of the land of Palestine between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea that has been core to the Zionist settler-colonial enterprise since the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948. In parallel, creeping ethnic cleansing and annexation have intensified to an unprecedented level in the West Bank.

Consequently, the Palestinian people are farther from self-determination today than at any time since the unarmed popular uprising, known as the First Intifada, that started in December 1987 in the territories seized by Israel in the June 1967 war, i.e. the West Bank and Gaza, usually designated as the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs). The Palestinian movement now faces a long period of retreat under duress. In this most tragic period of its history, the question of how it can secure its survival and go on to fight back with any chance of success must be prioritized.

Stages of Struggle

The assessment must necessarily start from the peak impact that the Palestinian people's struggle

achieved in the late 1980s. Indeed, the Intifada provoked a deep crisis in Israel's society, polity, and military. A strong opposition to the continued occupation of the OPTs emerged. The "Labor" wing of Zionism came back to power in 1992, defeating the Zionist far-right Likud party. They engaged with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) – which Israel had hitherto castigated as "terrorist" – in the negotiations that led to the 1993 Oslo Accords.

The Israeli army withdrew from the densely populated areas of the 1967-occupied Palestinian territories and handed rule over them to the PLO-based Palestinian Authority (PA). But the PLO leadership had committed the major error of not insisting on including in the accords the freezing of settlements. This issue led to the collapse of the Oslo "peace process" by the end of the century. The expansion of Zionist settlements and the increase in oppressive measures against the Palestinian population led to growing popular anger that the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas (Arabic acronym for the Movement of Islamic Resistance, originally a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood) capitalized on by waging a series of indiscriminate suicide attacks against the Israelis. This contributed to renewed polarization through which Israel's society and polity shifted back rightward.

It is against this background that the PLO leadership made another major error in what was called the Second Intifada, in allowing for the use of the light weapons that the Israeli occupation had authorized PA troops to possess for the purpose of policing the Palestinian population. This episode started in the autumn of 2000 in response to the provocation staged by rightwing Zionist leader Ariel Sharon at the Al-Aqsa compound in Jerusalem and in protest against the betrayal of the hopes created seven years earlier. The effect, however, was the opposite of that of the First Intifada. The Second Intifada saw the return of Likud to power under the leadership of Sharon – the military commander of Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the man condemned for his role in supervising the horrible massacres at the Sabra and Chatila camps in Beirut. This was followed in 2002 by the most violent Israeli onslaught on the OPTs until that year.

Since then, a much-crippled Palestinian Authority has ruled part of the OPTs under the thumb of the Israeli occupation. Benefiting from popular disgust with the PA's subservience and corruption, Hamas won the Palestinian parliamentary election of 2006. Clashing with the PA, which refused – with Western encouragement – to abide by the election's outcome, Hamas took over Gaza in 2007, two years after Israel's withdrawal from the Strip, leading to a partition of the semi-autonomous parts of the OPTs. Today, Hamas's semi-autonomous government of Gaza under Israeli oversight has been wiped out, most of the Strip has been reoccupied by Israel, and a quasi-colonial administration is being put in place in the remaining part under the direct supervision of U.S. president Donald Trump in person. The PA, in turn, is under intense pressure from the United States to abide by Israel's requirements in furthering its subservience to occupation authorities.

The setback from the aftermath of the First Intifada until today's disastrous state of affairs for the Palestinian people is enormous. This series of defeats of armed struggle episodes, after the major success achieved by an unarmed popular uprising, provides clear and important lessons for the Palestinian struggle, stemming from a general strategic reflection on struggles against foreign occupation with regard to the means they resort to. This is a pragmatic discussion: except for war crimes, such as the deliberate killing of children and non-combatants, armed resistance to foreign occupation is an undisputable right in international law. Whether violent means are effective in each specific case, however, is another question entirely. Here again there is no general rule: the history of struggle against colonial domination and foreign occupation has witnessed successful cases of each of violent and non-violent struggles, as well as of combinations of both.

Liberation Strategies

When a foreign army occupies a land whose population is hostile to it and from where withdrawal is

an option for the invader, a great imbalance in military strength can be successfully compensated by asymmetric means, such as guerilla operations harassing the occupying army, in order to bring it to conclude that the cost of continuing occupation is higher than whatever benefit is derived from it. This dynamic is very much compounded by the ability of the liberation struggle to win over the minds, if not the hearts, of a major section of the aggressor country's population.

The Vietnamese resistance against U.S. occupation, combined with the antiwar movement in the United States, achieved that result in 1973. The Lebanese resistance to Israeli occupation achieved it in 2000 on a background of opposition by a significant portion of Israel's population to continued occupation. When the Israeli army was occupying the densely populated areas in the OPTs from 1967 until 1993, guerilla attacks harassing it made strategic sense. Ultimately, however, it was the non-violent Intifada and its impact on the Israeli population that proved decisive in getting Israel's military to favor withdrawal from those areas, leading to the Oslo Accords.

The situation is fundamentally different when confronting a state entrenched in a territory that it sees as its one-and-only land, inhabited by a population that overwhelmingly sees that state's armed forces as their own. There is no way under such circumstances to compensate for the enemy's overwhelming military superiority by asymmetric military means: it is not going to surrender or withdraw its forces under the impact of transborder guerilla attacks. Indeed, it will rather retaliate with all the power of its superior military to achieve deterrence, inflicting brutal devastation on the attackers' territory to deter them from repeating their attacks.

Thus, when Hezbollah carried out a guerilla operation across Lebanon's border with the Israeli state in 2006, it was met with devastating retaliation that destroyed whole areas inhabited by its sectarian-cum-political popular constituency. Never again did Hezbollah resort to such cross-border attacks. Yet, when it launched a self-limiting bombing exchange with Israel in solidarity with Gaza in October 2023, it eventually paid a huge price, with Israel decapitating the organization and destroying much of its military capabilities a year later. Hezbollah had believed that it had accumulated enough deterrent means - rockets and missiles provided by Iran after 2006 - to keep the mutual bombing within limits. This proved to be a fatal miscalculation.

Hamas's miscalculation in October 2023 was far worse, in that its consequences have been much more dreadful. In October 2023, Israel had been governed for less than a year by the most extreme far-right coalition in its history, the farthest to the right of any freely elected government in the world - a coalition that included openly racist groups advocating the annexation of the OPTs and expulsion of their population. To any rational assessment, it was obvious from the very morning of October 7 that Israel's retaliation would be hugely murderous and devastating, way beyond anything it had done in all its many wars since its foundation in 1948. For anyone concerned, unlike Hamas, with the strategic impact of the Palestinian struggle on the Israeli population, it was obvious likewise that the effect of the attack would be a massive swing toward the most extreme hatred of Palestinians.

Breaking the Zionist Consensus

What, then, could a rational and efficient perspective for Palestinian liberation consist of? Given the realities on the ground, it should necessarily involve a strategy of popular struggle aimed at dividing Israeli society and changing Israeli politics. Despite the growing hegemony of the extreme right, Israel's political regime is still based on proportional electoral representation of its citizens, one-fifth of whom are Palestinian citizens of Israel (PCI). This means that, were about two-fifths of Jewish Israelis to be convinced of the need to end the occupation of the 1967 territories and accept Palestinian rights, this would be enough to provoke a major rupture of the Zionist consensus.

For years, however, the Palestinian resistance in the OPTs has been torn between subservient collaboration on the part of a PA relying upon Arab and international pressure on Israel to improve its lot, and armed confrontation led by Hamas, consisting in successive rounds during which Israel would confront Hamas's low-tech rockets with much more murderous and destructive bombing. None of the two Palestinian administrations – neither the PA in the West Bank nor Hamas in Gaza – have shown the least interest in addressing the Israeli population and winning over a significant section of it to the support of Palestinian rights. Both remain deeply suspicious of any alliance with political forces independent from them – be they Arab or Jewish or, most importantly, mixed – within Israel's pre-1967 boundaries, and fear losing control of the territories under their administration, a control that is very much antithetical to the type of local self-organization that was the First Intifada's strength at its peak in 1988. New initiatives toward popular mobilization only came from the grassroots of Palestinian society, pointing to what kind of popular resistance is possible.

In March 2018, independent activists in Gaza initiated what they called the Great March of Return, i.e. weekly demonstrations toward the fence surrounding the Strip. This went on powerfully for a year and then continued with a reduced impact until the end of 2019. The initial popular success of that endeavor led the Hamas leadership to take control of it and steer it toward a deal with Benjamin Netanyahu's government in March 2019, easing the blockade imposed on Gaza and allowing an increase in Qatari funding of the Hamas administration. This cooptation, along with Israeli forces' murderous firing on the marchers (over 200 killed and thousands injured between March 2018 and March 2019), the setting of an unrealistic goal (the implementation of the Palestinian refugees' right of return to their 1948 territory of origin), and most crucially the lack of simultaneous similar mobilization in the West Bank, where neither the PA nor Hamas favored extending it, ultimately curtailed the effectiveness of the endeavor. Nevertheless, it demonstrated what kind of pressure mass, non-violent resistance can unfold.

The next significant experience was more spontaneous. It was the beginning in May 2021 of a popular uprising in the West Bank, as well as among Palestinian citizens of Israel, ignited by the eviction of Palestinians in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem. The important popular mobilization that unfolded within a few days was stifled by Hamas's interference, when it started launching rockets from Gaza, thus initiating an exchange of bombing that resulted, as usual, in many more Palestinian casualties than Israeli, and quickly dampened the popular uprising's momentum. What we have seen over the last two-and-a-half-years in Gaza represents a catastrophic culmination of the same pattern.

In the face of the present disaster, it is to be hoped that the Palestinian people will find its way to new popular non-violent resistance struggle throughout the OPTs, in order to mobilize maximum international pressure as well as split off at least a significant minority of Israel's Jewish population from the Zionist consensus. Only by such struggle, combined with international solidarity and the global Boycott-Divestment-Sanctions (BDS) movement, the natural complement of a non-violent popular strategy, can Palestinian rights be efficiently asserted. This prospect is reinforced by the surge – in reaction to the Gaza genocide – of Palestine solidarity in Western countries, including the United States, and most crucially among American Jews, especially the younger generations. Continuing to resort to reactive violence – however legitimate and humanly understandable it is, especially after the Gaza genocide and in the face of ever more brutal aggression against the Palestinian population in the West Bank – would inevitably be used as a pretext by Israel and its U.S. sponsor, now the quasi-colonial overseer of Gaza, to unleash yet more mayhem with a view to speeding up the ethnic cleansing of Palestine.