

The West cannot escape the extension of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

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For Gilbert Achcar, specialist in the contemporary Arab world at the University of London, the West cannot escape the extension of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on its lands. But how can we understand this quasi-global solidarity within the Muslim world? Interview.

The Israeli response to the offensive led by Hamas generated the uprising of a large part of the Muslim world, from Baghdad to Tehran via European capitals. How can we not fear a conflagration in relations between East and West, when the solidarity of Muslims with the Palestinian people is powerfully heard, between peaceful demonstrations of support and acts of terrorism? Elements of response with Gilbert Achcar, professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, specialist in the contemporary Arab world and author of various works on the subject, including *The Clash of Barbarisms. The Making of the New World Disorder* (2002).

How should we understand solidarity reactions of the Muslim world after the Hamas attack?

These reactions highlight the North-South divide that exists in the perception of the conflict in the Middle East. Certainly, the assault carried out by Hamas was particularly violent, but there were similar reactions to September 11. After that absolutely monumental shock, the Western world identified with the United States, as it is doing today with Israel. However, in the countries of the Global South, many people rejoiced at the fact that, for once, the United States had “taken the heat”.

Is this how Muslim countries feel about Israel today?

There is, within the Muslim world, a large gap between Arab governments which establish relations with the State of Israel and public opinion, which takes up the cause of the Palestinians. The latter considers, rightly on a historical level, that in Palestine, the victims are not the Jews, but the Palestinians. In the world of European culture, people tend to see Jews as victims because of the

incomparable historical horror that was the Shoah. And they tend to project this same reading grid onto current events.

And that isn't the case?

References to pogroms and the Holocaust are precisely inadequate. What Hamas did is barbaric. But what Israel constantly does by bombing hospitals, buildings, civilian concentrations, is also barbarism. So, outside the Western world, we do not see Israelis – I am not talking about Jews in general, but Israelis – as victims, but as settlers, protagonists of settler colonialism. We must therefore move away from this Western vision a little and try to see things as others can see them – these others who are the majority of the planet.

So are we then facing a clash of visions between the Western world and the Global South?

As I already wrote in the aftermath of September 11, we live in a world where each civilization produces its own forms of barbarism, which depend on its means. The United States committed unspeakable barbarities in Vietnam, Iraq, etc. And the September 11 attacks were eminently barbaric. But, in this clash of barbarities, we cannot be neutral.

That's to say?

We cannot wrap ourselves in a moral attitude that would send everyone back-to-back. This would be unfair, because the main responsibility falls on the strongest, on those who are oppressors. I obviously condemn any act of barbarism. But if we add up, there have been over the years many more Palestinian than Israeli victims. And this is what people in the Muslim world record. And that is why, despite the atrocity of what happened, they continue to see the Palestinians as the fundamental victims.

Doesn't the support given to Israel since this attack risk further inflaming tempers?

Yes, of course, and that is why the Hamas attack is madness. 9/11 was a big blow to America's arrogance, but it enormously served the administration of George W. Bush, who was previously at rock bottom in the polls. He suddenly found himself with 80% popularity and launched into wars: Afghanistan and Iraq. Members of his administration had been toying with the idea of occupying Iraq for a long time, and Bin Laden offered them the perfect opportunity. We are seeing the same thing today: Netanyahu, who was against the withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 and who resigned from the Israeli government for this reason, will now be leading a new occupation of Gaza. This is clearly his plan, but this time with a massive and forced displacement of the population, which he wishes to push across the border into Egyptian Sinai.

In this spirit of intra-Muslim solidarity, how can we understand that the doors of Egypt remain closed?

The Egyptians understand very well that Palestinians who leave Gaza will probably not be allowed to return. Everyone has in mind the pattern of what happened in 1948 when the Palestinians fled the fighting. They abandoned their homes, taking their keys with them, because they thought they would return. However, they were never allowed to return and that is how they became refugees. This is exactly what is likely to unfold before our eyes.

How can we understand that this solidarity is expressed not only in the Muslim world, but also among Muslims in Europe or America?

Because they come from the colonized world and see things very differently in fact. Obviously, we

should not generalize when talking about the West, Muslims, and Jews. There are, for example, in Europe and America, many people of Jewish descent who are very critical of the State of Israel. These people clearly see the paradox: this state was created by military means in 1948 with the ambition of offering a safe haven to Jews. But is there anywhere in the world where Jews are less safe today than in Israel? It is a terrible historical failure.

How did we get here?

Since 1967, the West Bank and Gaza have been under occupation. And Israel continues to violate international law and build settlements in the West Bank. It's an infernal dynamic. But make no mistake: what will happen there will be terrible and will have repercussions on the Israeli population itself, but also on Europe and the United States, which will be regarded as complicit. The international community is guilty of letting the situation deteriorate, starting with the United States which has the most influence over Israel, followed by Europe.

Therefore, should we expect a resurgence of terrorist attacks?

I fear this is what awaits us. The cycle of violence in the Middle East has continued to spill over into Europe, and even reached the United States in spectacular fashion in 2001 in what remains the largest terrorist operation in history.

How can we prevent this conflict from spreading to our country?

Maybe I'm naive or idealistic, but I believe in international law. I believe that the UN is a precious achievement for humanity and the only framework that can shape a peaceful world. But the UN charter continues to be violated. Only its integral application can achieve the very reason for which it was conceived: universal peace.

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