

GENOCIDE IN GAZA AND THE POLITICS OF FALSE EQUIVALENCIES

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The condemnation of the killing of civilians and children cannot be addressed through the lens of false equivalency, suggesting all sides are equally guilty in the war on Gaza. What Hamas did on October 7th 2023, however horrendous, is not equivalent to the suffering and terror imposed by the Israeli state on Palestinians both historically and in light of the current escalating scale of what amounts to massive, unthinkable, and unconscionable violence. The relentless killing of children by Israeli Defence Forces and its elimination of the most basic needs of the Palestinian people in Gaza is far from an abstraction or a sound bite that can be buried in the language of equivalence, or for that matter, the cravenly appeal to balance. The killing of innocent children has continued in shockingly accelerated numbers with Israel's policy of collective punishment. As of February 22nd 2024, over 12,300 Palestinian children have been killed in Gaza '(43% of the total death toll), more than 1,000 children [have] one or both legs amputated', thousands remain missing, and over nine thousand are injured (Haiven, 2024; Aljazeera, 2024). It is estimated that one Palestinian child is killed every fifteen minutes or over a hundred a day (Alsaafin and Osgood, 2024).

The International Court of Justice reinforced South Africa's claim, however tempered, that Israel is waging genocide and must 'take all measures within its power' to uphold its obligations under Article II of the Genocide Convention (CBC News, 2024). The United States' (US) Campaign for Palestinian Rights stated rightly that 'One thing has been made clear on the world stage: There is vastly documented evidence that Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians' (Ayyash, 2023). While the International Court of Justice judgment should be welcomed, it is hard to imagine why there isn't an immediate call for a cease-fire and a full-fledged acknowledgment of Israel's committed war crimes and acts of genocide.

Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu's war only has one endpoint, the complete destruction of the Palestinian people along with the land they still possess. The long legacy of Israel's colonialism and politics of disposability and extermination/elimination cannot be hidden behind the false claims of defence and sovereignty; this is a project of massive cruelty and dispossession boldly proclaimed endlessly by Netanyahu and his right-wing criminogenic associates (Graham-Harrison and Helm, 2024). Their dark impulses and mobilising passions of murderous violence are no longer hidden. The death machine rolls on with a smirk, boast and a sickening smile, boldly announced by Netanyahu and his far-right associates. In the war's wake, the bodies of the dead – mostly women, children, and civilians add up – nearly 30,000 thus far (Reliefweb, 2024). Jeffrey St. Clair (2023a) movingly captures the merging of the crimes against the people of Gaza and the pathological openness, if not pleasure, of the Israeli state in affirming its criminal rampage. He writes:

“In contrast to other historical atrocities, the crimes against the people of Gaza – mass murder, manufactured famine, dispossession, looting of property, demolition of cultural and religious heritage, and forced expulsion – have all been committed in the open, the genocidal plans have been written about in newspaper columns and freely expounded on talk shows. You won't have to excavate through secret archives, the evidence of these grotesque crimes is there for all to see. What they've said and what they've done is on the record. There can be no hiding from it. And those who've armed, funded, abetted, and justified these genocidal measures should be condemned for their complicity”.

The suffering of children in Gaza is visceral and way out of proportion to Hamas's crimes and this war of revenge is conducted in a way that echoes crimes of a totalitarian past, with its colonial legacy of dispossession and elimination. Blood flows every day in Gaza, and it comes largely from the bodies of the most vulnerable: women and children. This was made particularly clear in a post provided by Dr Seema Lilani, describing the first three hours working at Aqsa Hospital in central Gaza. She writes:

“In my first three hours working at al-Aqsa hospital, I treated a one-year-old boy with a bloody diaper, and his right arm and right leg had been blown off. There was no leg below the diaper. He was bleeding into his chest. I treated him on the ground because there were no stretchers and no beds available, and when the orthopedic surgeon came to wrap his stumps up to stop the bleeding, I would’ve imagined in the US this would’ve been a straightforward case that went immediately to the OR because of the severity, but instead, the impossible choices inflicted on the doctors of Gaza have made it such that he wasn’t ‘the emergency of the day’, there was a waiting list and the OR was already full with other more pressing cases; and so I ask myself, what’s more pressing than a one-year-old without an arm, a leg and who is bleeding in his chest and choking on his blood. And that will tell you a little about the scale of devastation that the people of Gaza are suffering” (quoted in St. Clair, 2023b).

This is just one example of the horror the Israeli state is inflicting on Palestinians as part of its right-wing war of revenge. This is a horror magnified thousands of times. The smell of needless destruction, death, and untold misery in this case is only matched by the cowardly collapse of conscience, especially among the United States and other nations who refuse to call for a ceasefire and are supplying Israel with military weapons. Surely, a den inhabited by barbarians and cowardice. The war on Gaza and the Palestinian people makes clear what the death of humanity looks like through the lens of militarisation, extermination, colonialism, and war.

How else to explain, not only the terror waged by Israel against women and children in Gaza, but also what Arwa Mahdawi (2024) writing in *The Guardian*, calls President Joe Biden’s ‘clear disdain for Palestinians, his dehumanization of Arabs, and his complicity in what many experts have termed a plausible genocide’. She states that ‘there is not a single university left. The health system has basically collapsed. 1.9 million people have been forcibly displaced. The UN has said 100,000 people in Gaza have been killed, injured, or are missing’ (Ibid.). Gaza now faces a humanitarian crisis as diseases are spreading, hospitals are destroyed, children are starving to death. At the same

time, Israel spins out empty propaganda covering up what appears to be war crimes. For example, Megan K. Stack (2024) writes in *The New York Times* that 'Israeli officials have said there was no shortage of food in Gaza and denied that they were responsible for people going hungry, accusing Hamas of pilfering aid bound for civilians and saying the United Nations failed to distribute food'. These are the words of officials who have blood in their mouths as they wage a form of totalitarian terror that is both unthinkable and unimaginable.

Higher education may be one of the few sites left where prominent issues such as the genocidal war on Gaza can be analysed, engaged, and subject to the rigours of history, a comprehensive analysis, and relevant evidence. It should be a place where students are given the knowledge to make informed judgments, deal with unsettling knowledge, and engage in pedagogical practices in which the search for truth is matched by a sense of ethical and social responsibility. Put simply, it should be a place where the habits of citizenship and critical agency should be allowed to bloom. Education in a time of crisis should reject attempts at censorship, especially aimed at those fighting for Palestinian rights, and refuse to run away from topics that are controversial, especially in a moment of disaster, war, and mass suffering. Instead of refusing to address such topics in the classroom, educators and other cultural workers must take on the role of engaged intellectuals who make visible the history, crimes, and neo-colonial war machine of elimination that is now engulfing the Middle East and other parts of the globe.

If we remain silent in the face of this war and refuse to act individually and collectively to bring it to an end, more children will die, and the bombs and violence that define the politics of right-wing racists, antisemites, and Islamophobes will prevail. Before long, the scourge and darkness of authoritarian politics will drown out whatever hope lies in the promise of a strong democracy and the calls for peace. The morally reprehensible killing of children in Gaza is part of a larger problem that haunts the modern period: the merging of colonialism and neoliberal capitalism. Regardless of the diverse forms it takes in various parts of the world, it is a dehumanising politics of greed, disposability and extermination. Its allegiance is not to human dignity but to the rewards of militarism, war, state violence, dispossession, and the repression of dissent and broader struggles for economic and social justice. Pressing the claims for truth,

justice, freedom, and equality is no longer simply a political objective; it is an ethical imperative at a time in which democracy across the globe is struggling to survive.

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