

In tune with their time

Nasser Abourahme

This threatening atmosphere of violence and missiles in no way frightens or disorients the colonized. We have seen that their entire recent history has prepared them to ‘understand’ the situation. Between colonial violence and the insidious violence in which the modern world is steeped, there is a kind of complicit correlation, a homogeneity. The colonized have adapted to this atmosphere. For once they are in tune with their time.

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961¹

There will be time to bury the dead. There will be time for weaponry. And there will be time to pass the time as we please, that this heroism may go on. Because now we are the masters of time.

Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness*, 1982²

Israel is a defeated project. I don’t mean this as a moral indictment. I take it to be, at this stage, quite simply a historical fact. An Israel that has normalised its status in the world and region, rules stably over subject populations, ceases to practice apartheid, closes its open frontier, declares borders, no longer relies on extra-legal discretionary settler violence, and transitions out of a permanent war footing will never happen. It is already finished. It is at best a badly frayed, but lethal, fantasy. The kind you hold onto more out of spite than genuine anticipation. In a certain but important sense – one that needs plain stating – we already live in a world *after* this possibility, after Israel. This Israel is already a future-past. The persistence of Palestinian life and its refusal to simply die and disappear has already achieved this. And *any* vision of a noncolonial mode of cohabitation in historic Palestine must begin with this recognition.

What we are living through today is Zionism’s en-

dgame. This is not to be sanguine. Colonial endgames can last a long time; they are almost always utterly brutal. But the brutality is as much a sign of their defeated denouement as much as anything else.³ Colonial endgames are defined by a diminishing range of options and the fact that each move leads exponentially faster toward the end. Zionism’s endgame is not born simply of the Israeli project’s immanent contradictions rising to the surface. It is born decisively out of the persistence of Palestine’s long century of anticolonial struggle that has over the last two decades amounted to the most sustained challenge in a renewed war of national liberation in generations. About this we should be clear and unapologetic: the Palestinian war of national liberation is posing an intractable challenge to the colonial order. Zionism is not failing. Zionism is being defeated.

The headfirst charge into a frenzied genocidal campaign in Gaza can only be understood if parsed in the full historical arc of struggle over Palestine that reaches this current inflection point. That is, this conjuncture can only be understood if it is located in the *foundational impasse* of the Zionist project. Zionism is at an impasse because it is defined by the stunted drive of its conquest. It is a project that when faced with a resilient arc of refusal finds itself temporally stuck, unable to transition beyond its foundational moment, unable to make permanent and finalise dispossession in stable regimes of property and law, unable to move past the past. Political orders that cannot close their moments of foundational conquest and consign that conquest’s violence to the political unconscious are vulnerable orders. They are unsettled orders.



Zionism's entire purpose, its *raison d'être*, has always been the establishment of a racially pure or majoritarian Jewish state in Palestine, and yet it finds itself today, governing and ruling over seven million native Palestinian subjects – over half the population it controls – that it has no intent or ability of ever absorbing as members of its national body politic. This is simply an irreducible contradiction. From the standpoint of the racial state, it is an immunological disaster; one that not only means the state must remain formally or legally defined in racial terms (and can never transition to the devices of liberal democratic formal equality) but also dooms it to a constant reenactment of the violence of conquest. In the long-term historical sense – and it is precisely this temporal sense and horizon that now imposes itself – Zionism only has two options in front of it: equality (and thus self-negation) or genocide. That it opts so clearly for genocide, underlines just how much the elimination of the Palestinians is Zionism's master-desire, the primary object of its drive.

From the standpoint of a stalled project of colonial

settlement, genocide is neither irrational nor simply vindictive. For Zionism, it is a corrective return to a blocked pathway. It is clamoured for and *felt* as vitally necessary because it might be a way out of the impasse, beyond the challenge. In truth, genocide is never far from the surface in settler colonial orders. And though it is but one among many instruments of elimination and the negation of indigenous peoplehood (alongside: removal, assimilation, native citizenship), historically speaking, it rises to the surface when the frontier is still open and contested. In Palestine, genocide, understood even within the narrow confines of the UN convention not as the mass killing of individuals (which is the rarer case) but as the intentional destruction of a people's capacity to exist, has always been the condition of possibility for political Zionism – the *Nakba* was in many ways a clear case of genocide, even if it almost still cannot be named as such.⁴ But that genocide-as-event returns, that it moves from latent to actualised logic, is an effect of the magnitude of the challenge posed by Palestine's renewed war of liberation to an already stuck settler project.

It is precisely this sense of the moment as both *impasse/frustration* and *exit/freedom* for the colonial regime that explains things like the sheer volume of open genocidal incitement across both Israeli society and state. I mean here the generalised will to discourse in the almost daily calls to flatten, to wipe out, to level, to finish them; or in language that more directly indexes the immunological anxieties of a threatened racial order: to erase (*l'mchok*) or to purify/disinfect (*l'tahir*); or, possibly even more tellingly, in language that codes the incitement in calls for a completion of the foundational conquest: 'Nakba 2.0'. 'rolling out the Gaza Nakba', 'the second war of independence'. This dual sense of impasse and exit is also there in the affective discharges so regularly displayed in Israeli social media around images of the death and destruction in Gaza: the glee, the mockery, the rancour, the cruelty, the need to humiliate; it is hard otherwise to explain the entirely excessive amount of circulated images and videos of soldiers looting homes, wasting food, mockingly playing with the toys of dead or displaced kids, or posing with the underwear of dead or displaced women. This generalised collapse of the repressive barrier and inhibition in speech cannot be explained simply by the new permissiveness of tabooed desire; it is also an effect of the deep frustrations of the stunted libidinal drive of this project as it is checked by a people it 'knows' to be inferior in every possible way, and yet cannot somehow decisively defeat but *can* now humiliate and punish. Frustrations that are marked even now in the ubiquitous retort that this is not really a genocide because, 'if it wanted to Israel could wipe Gaza off the face of the earth'. A retort that, of course, only betrays how much Israel's supporters want precisely that but are unable (for now) to achieve it.

This mixture of frustration and freedom is also the only way to understand the nature of the total, obliterating and frenzied violence that has been meted out to Gaza. Violence that is often called indiscriminate but is actually targeted and intentional and aimed not only at widespread destruction but at the very basis of collective habitable life. Violence that includes the imposition of total siege, the active engineering of conditions of starvation and epidemic disease, and mass summary executions.⁵ How else can one understand the obliteration of most of Gaza's housing and the demolition of entire residential blocks by the army's engineering corps *after* fight-

ing? Or the hundreds of two-thousand-pound bombs, some of the largest conventional munitions on earth that kill or destroy everything within hundreds of feet, dropped not just on densely populated neighbourhoods, but on those neighbourhoods designated as 'safe zones'? Or the systematic devastation of the entire public health system in Gaza, with almost every single hospital being besieged, invaded or bombed multiple times, and with two hospitals, including Shifa, the largest in the Strip, effectively turned into death camps?⁶ Or the over 80 attacks on aid distribution?⁷ Or the wholesale erasure of the universities, municipalities, libraries, and archives? Or the systematic targeting of Gaza's professional classes, its doctors, medical practitioners, journalists, academics and poets and writers? Gaza City, Palestine's last remaining coastal city and the hub of the Strip's life-supporting infrastructure, has been all but destroyed. This active production of the uninhabitable, this will to rubble, cannot be explained simply as momentary 'blood-lust' or vengeance. It has to be understood, historically and affectively, as the release of long pent-up exterminatory energies that in the project's highest moment of vulnerability feel free to pursue the threatening object of their desire.

The time of initiative/*Zaman al-Mubadara*

Yet it would be a mistake to read the conjuncture only from the vantage point of a settler order that feels besieged and senses a way out. A deeper reading has to recognise that at some level this siege – the siege of the fort, the siege of the siege – is real and not just a figment of settler society's narcissistic attachments to fears of injury and reversal. That is, it is not simply that Israel, like any colonial order, is haunted by the prospect of the reversibility of its relations of force, but that this reversal has over the last two decades become increasingly possible, if not likely. The Zionist regime has managed its contradictions over the last two decades (since the collapse of the façade of a forward-moving 'peace process') essentially by biding time, by lethal conflict management in a drawn-out suspended temporality: siege, permanent counter-insurgency, mass arrest and detention, deepening apartheid and segregation, economic pacification and economies of humanitarian aid, and the use of forms of native authority on the Bantustan model. In Gaza, this

has been accompanied by regular bombing campaigns and massacres that were tellingly described by the state as ‘mowing the lawn’, indexing not only the idyllic rot of suburban Americana at the heart of Israel’s self-image, or the reduction of Palestinian life to an unruly mute nature, but also the utterly banal and repetitive nature of this violence for its orchestrators – mowing the lawn is something you do routinely and almost unthinkingly.

But the problem with biding time is that forms of resistance don’t stay still, they expand and grow in depth, penetration and sophistication with every year. The last two decades have seen the most pronounced growth of the Palestinian liberation movement since the end of the Palestinian Revolution in the siege of Beirut in 1982, and the capture of its main political parties as the effective facilitators of Israeli occupation in the West Bank a decade later. This is clear if we consider the forms of resistance in their full and global gamut: civic activism, the boycott and divestment campaign, sustained forms of direct action, the growth of the Palestinian solidarity movement and the deepened ties with left parties, labour unions and movements for Black and Indigenous liberation globally, and armed struggle in Palestine and the region.

It is the armed struggle and its rootedness in resilient forms of life that remains illegible or unapproachable to so many contemporary observers. And yet there is no chance of grasping this conjuncture without reading it within a historical arc of a renewed war of national liberation that has begun to pose insurmountable challenges to the very logic of settler colonial power in Palestine. An arc that starts with the liberation of South Lebanon in 2000 – an event of singular historical significance, being the only time land was liberated from Israeli occupation without a broader recognition of the Israeli state – and includes the routing of the Israeli army in the 2006 War in Lebanon, and the growing capacities of the Palestinian resistance in Gaza in the 2008/9, 2014 and 2021 wars. These were buttressed by the Great March of Return in 2018, a wave of popular protests that challenged the siege of Gaza but were met with overwhelming lethal violence, and the Unity Intifada in 2021 that saw, for the first time in a generation, simultaneous mobilisation in every part of historic Palestine. The Unity Intifada was also the cue for a renewed organisation of the armed resistance in the West Bank into self-defense zones around the major refugee camps. If the settler

colonial project has in this period sought to close time in what a senior Israeli political advisor called in 2004 a formaldehyde solution that would ‘freeze the political process’,⁸ resistance factions have sought to make and open time, to set its rhythms and tempos, in what they call ‘the time of initiative’.

Yet there remains, even among those of us dedicated to the liberation of all peoples in historic Palestine, a certain incapacity or unreadiness to read this historical arc, to recognise its historicity. An incapacity that stems from, on the one hand, a misunderstanding or a forgetting of what anticolonial national liberation wars are about, such that we are often told, in ways that internalise a mythology of Israeli military supremacy, that armed struggle here is futile, counterproductive, or at best symbolic. And on the other, an incapacity stemming from the capture of our grammars in liberal politics of respectability and recognition that are fundamentally incapable of processing anticolonial political violence in anything other than flat moral frames that invariably privilege state power and reify the legal categories of colonial history.⁹ Here armed struggle is read *only* at the point of its transgression of a moral limit, and we end up with a kind of performative moral disavowal that folds entire anticolonial struggles into the pathologies of sadism and vengeance (only a short step away from the language of ‘barbarism’ and ‘savagery’). This incapacity dogs large sections of a global left seemingly unable to do its own revolutionary histories any justice in the present.

These are both serious mistakes. The power of anticolonial national liberation war is not in any final decisive confrontation. There is rarely a final battle or a storming of the palace. It is about the incremental upending of colonial power’s modalities of rule; its temporality is the long *durée* and it is never simply a question of material arithmetic. It is always about the opening of *political* possibility through overturning relations of force – it is as such a fundamentally different logic of war to genocidal colonial war.¹⁰ But here we need to understand the particularity of colonial power to grasp the stakes. The most primary organising logic in colonial order is separation. This separation is not simply physical or spatial. It is ontological and psycho-affective. It is a separation between subject and object, between the living body and the ‘body-things’ around it.¹¹ Colonialism, then, takes the entangled intimacies, the dependencies

on native bodies, labour, land, energies and presences, and transforms them into separations and a refusal of mutuality or any kind of commonness.

The exercise of colonial domination in turn is premised most fundamentally on the logic of *non-reciprocity*. It is an ability to wage constant penetrative violence into native society without the core of colonial life being touched, without any kind of response in kind. Its essence is not simply that it is raw and arbitrary, but that it is *untouchable*. This is how it dehumanises, because it refuses any kind of mutuality at the very point of intimacy, precisely where it intrudes deepest into bodily integrity. Essentially, in the tactile terms through which colonial power understands and imposes itself, it is the ability to touch and not be touched in return. In Algeria, it was precisely this logic that connected the systematic torture regime with the push to unveil Algerian women; both were understood as part of counter-insurgent and civilising practices that sought to touch the depth of the intimate interiorities of the indigenous – corporal, psychic, domestic, familial – from a position that foreclosed any touch in return.



Nadine Fraczkowski

In a settler order, this untouchability has to extend to the social body as a whole. The body of the settler and the settler body politic are co-constituted in the violence of immunisation. And what we can think of as the settler social contract is built precisely on this (non)relation: a core of settler good life in the interior that remains untouched even as the elastic colonial frontier is a space of total violence and ruination. Gaza as a concentration camp of dispossessed refugees that can be killed at will is the unsaid condition of Tel Aviv as the

laid-back global city of Bauhaus architecture and night life. But the structure only works if the regime of violence is unquestionable and unconditional.

This unconditional non-reciprocity is why for colonial order, every act of resistance, armed or not, is experienced as violent. Because every act of resistance questions this divide between the untouchable super-human and the disposable sub-human (in Fanon's terms, it mutually humanises). Colonial violence, in turn, always has to be entirely excessive. All the wrangling about proportionality by people still invested in international law misses the point entirely. When challenged, colonial power has no choice but to be totally disproportionate. It *has* to carpet bomb neighbourhoods. Not for any military reason, but because it has to constantly strive to re-establish non-reciprocity. This is why the Israeli state understands the restoring of deterrence as an exercise in destruction. It measures its political achievements in scales of rubble. It expresses its political aesthetic in the dissemination of almost sublime images of ruination. 'Gaza' as a lesson in total obliteration has to be mediated and displayed on every screen. The scale and reach of destruction has to be so severe, so total, and so visible that it reimposes the fact of the untouchability of the colonial sovereign in the very consciousness of the objects of its violence. The declared aim of many of Israel's bombing campaigns in Gaza of 'restoring quiet' is exactly a euphemism for this non-reciprocity – the periods of 'quiet' are when the colonial state can kill, imprison, dispossess and displace at will without riposte, without relations in kind.

The last twenty years of struggle have challenged this logic, even upended it in places. What has been achieved in Gaza alone has been immense. A refugee people driven from their homes, encamped, militarily occupied for decades and entirely besieged in a tiny strip of flat coastal land without a single mountain or valley, without jungle or forest, and pummeled routinely from the air, have been able to puncture the skies and subterranean depths of a nuclear-armed garrison state. In a very real way, Gaza has in moments reversed the logic of the siege. They have taken the very munitions dropped on their homes and turned them into a capacity for indigenous weapons-making and self-defense – when some say that in anticolonial struggle 'every bullet is a bullet returned', in Gaza this is meant quite literally. In other

words, they have institutionalised a base of cumulative indigenous knowledge and organisational capacity. When in the early days of the siege, the resistance factions fired rockets that were by all accounts dubbed ‘primitive,’ people rushed to point out that this did not warrant the intensity of the Israeli bombardment, that the rockets were effectively a kind of ‘fireworks’ and best understood as ‘symbolic’. This missed the point. The colonial regime understood it much more clearly: even the smallest prospect of an indigenous capacity to develop military technology, no matter how ‘primitive’, is a threat to the logic of non-reciprocity.

These are the capacities defining the terms of battle today. Penned in entirely by an almost total blockade on all sides and without a single inch of territorial depth or rear supply lines, the Palestinian resistance has nonetheless developed an ability to confront and repel the armoured invading columns of one of the most equipped and ruthless armies in the world, over months of warfare. It is hard to find any historical precedent for what the resistance in Gaza has so far withstood and achieved. The Algerians had their supply lines through Bourguiba’s Tunisia and the Atlas Mountains of the interior; the Vietnamese had Maoist China and Cambodia and acres of dense jungle. The Palestinians in Gaza have no territorial rear depth at all but their own resilience and ingenuity. Regardless of what happens, it is unquestionable to my mind that the battles waged against this genocide will eventually be recognised historically up there with the great feats of anticolonial history, with the battle at Dien Bien Phu or, for that matter, with the Battle of Bint Jbeil in the 2006 War in Lebanon, even if we still don’t quite have the language to talk about it as such.

Yet there is no final battle here. No analogue to the fall of Saigon or the storming of Santa Clara is on the horizon. Palestinians can never muster anywhere near the magnitudes of violence the colonial state has at its disposal. But what they can do is refuse the order of colonial non-reciprocity. They can open and make time in a war of national liberation that denies the settler order its transition beyond the impasse. And here it bears reminding that the bedrock of any war of national liberation is ordinary people’s capacity to keep rejecting the terms of defeat and insisting on life at all costs. This insistence is there in the mother who buries her dead child in a mass grave and in the same moment declares that she won’t be

moving anywhere; it’s there in the image of a young man pulled out from the rubble, face barely discernible under the grey cover of dust, taken out on a stretcher, who somehow finds the strength to sit up and throw up a victory sign; it’s there in the doctors who refuse to leave their patients even as inevitable death encroaches; it’s there in the elderly man who returns to inhabit the ruin of his home in a makeshift tarp tent so that he can search for the bodies of his children and grandchildren beneath the rubble. In the spring of 2024, the Israeli army re-invaded areas in the north of Gaza it had claimed it had cleared *not* because the resistance factions remained standing, but primarily because people insisted on returning to inhabit the ruins. This insistence on habitable life and its ordinary rhythms – that is, the refusal of the wasteland Zionism has always sought to engender in/as Palestine – is the basis of the broader challenge to the settler regime. There’s nothing to romanticise in this; the point is not to fold it into some image of sacrificial heroism. We know better than most that images of selfless muscular armed insurgency are deficient. They’ve let us down before. The grief is immeasurable, and nothing can fold it back onto a symbolic plane. But to remove this grief from the temporality of a war of liberation is to remove it from political meaning entirely, to render it in the only language liberalism will allow: a strictly personal injury. Palestinian political community, by contrast, has always – out of sheer necessity but with political effects – hinged on its capacity to turn grief into defiance.¹²

These are forms of struggle entirely illegible to most of the liberal-left in the west. And yet so much of the contemporary advocacy for Palestine remains premised on the notion that the Palestinian struggle for liberation will succeed if only we appeal to certain conventions of recognition or legitimacy in the west. This misreading should have been the first victim of this genocidal war. The issue is not *how* we make or articulate our demands for freedom; it is that the very demand for Palestinian freedom is fundamentally objectionable.¹³ There are no politics of persuasion that will change that. Even in our mass death, our humanity is denied; even as nameless numbers, we are subject to suspicion. This humanity is constitutively exclusive of us and always has been. It is not simply that our life is valued differently, but that it is in fact incommensurate with value entirely. There are no performances of racial innocence, no choruses of

condemnation that are going to buy membership into the club. At best, the liberal-left formation in the west might see Palestinians as righteous victims, but never as historical actors capable of and justified in waging a war of national liberation. The allies we have won, we have won not by appealing for recognition, but by refusing to roll over and die, by situating our struggle, and that struggle's principles, within the global histories and inheritances of revolutionary anticolonialism.

None of this is to skirt over the questions of the ethical limits of anticolonial violence. Nor to imply that these limits haven't been breached in the history of Palestinian anticolonialism, or indeed that they weren't breached in the al-Aqsa Flood operation on October 7th. Less still that these breaches should not be reckoned with and criticised. Palestinians have long thought about and grappled with these questions, not as an exercise in publicity, but as part of their own political dialogue. Because nowhere do the colonised owe these limits to their colonisers, or the editors of western journals, or the mythic object that is the international community. The colonised owe it to themselves, and only to themselves; they owe it to the horizons of futurity and cohabitation their struggle will perform, to the world their children will inherit.

Fanon's plea at the end of *The Wretched of the Earth* to '...leave this Europe which never stops talking of man yet massacres him at every one of its street corners, at every corner of the world',¹⁴ has never been more urgent. It has also never been more achievable. Israel is the regional outpost of an imperial order that is reeling. Yemen, one of the poorest countries on earth, moves oceans and defies empires to join the struggle. South Africa turns international law on its head, breaching the unspoken colonial boundaries around the charge of genocide.¹⁵ But more still, millions of people globally are interpellated by the genocidal violence in Gaza; millions are called out by and recognise themselves in it. They look at Gaza and see not just a hundred years of colonisation in Palestine, but the last five hundred years of Euro-American racial colonial domination. The campaign in Gaza is like a condensed restaging of every colonial war in history, bearing every hallmark: the pummeling of dispossessed and besieged peoples by an overwhelming military power in the name of self-defense and 'western civilisation and values;' the demonology and language of savagery, zoology

and bestiality; the devaluation of life in racial taxonomies that actively produce disposability as the condition of value elsewhere; the presentism and the refusal of any claims of a historical past or historical injustice. All of these are immediately recognisable to millions of people in the world, not simply as the persistence of a common past and history but also as the ominous sign of an imminent future on a warming planet that we are again being told is 'overpopulated'.



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Palestine, in this sense, is the living archive of our future. But it is also the name of a renewed planetary consciousness. It has been the cause for the largest global student movement in generations, the biggest manifestations of left internationalism the west has seen in decades, and probably the largest mobilisations of Jewish anti-Zionist activism America has ever seen. These gains have not been won despite Palestine's war of liberation but *because* of it; without the challenge of Palestine's anticolonialism, without the ability to upend the colonial

logic of rule and refuse the entire imperial arrangement, all of this would be a moot point. None of the diplomatic, legal or ideological gains would have been made without the armed struggle ensuring there was still something on the ground worth fighting for.

This too is Zionism's impasse. Its utter dependence on imperial patronage has never been clearer. But so too has its function as both moral-ideological and geopolitical-military pillar of a crumbling US-dominated imperial capitalist order, and the genocidal extent to which that order will go to keep that function operative. The stakes of the conjuncture, then, are global and could not be bigger – Palestine is everywhere because it names a political subject of radical universal emancipation.¹⁶ If Zionism has come to stand in for the 'rights' of settler colonialism and ethnonationalism *everywhere*, that is for the rights to close any kind of reckoning with ongoing colonial injustice and dispossessive violence anywhere in the world, then Palestine's war of liberation today carries the anticolonial idea globally. If Zionism has become one of the points that brings together (and exposes the deep elective affinities between) late liberalism and late fascism, then Palestine carries the task of not just renewing the common heritage of the left's revolutionary history where no one else will, but also bringing it into lived time, into the 'time of initiative'. It is at once an awful and beautiful weight to carry.

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Notes

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