

The Gaza Solidarity Debates

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Introduction

This article looks at some of the ways in which issues of colonialism, resistance, and history were tackled in debates surrounding the events of October 2023 and follow-up developments in Israel/Palestine. It examines different perspectives on the Hamas attack and the Israeli military campaign against Gaza, with a focus on the role that notions of historical context, colonial domination, and anti-colonial resistance played in them. However, it does not deal directly with the military offensive itself and regards it as rather a background to intellectual and activist attempts to understand these developments in their context. These attempts mostly fall on the left side of the spectrum; mainstream Israeli and Palestinian perspectives are not addressed here. The article is not meant to cover all points of view but to highlight those that share some common foundation in progressive politics, despite their differences.

The Hamas attack on the 7th October 2023 and its aftermath are used here as a starting point for the discussion, not because the armed conflict began on that day but because the current round of debate has focused on the historical context that frames these events and the terms that guide us in analyzing them. In particular, the question of how to look at the conflict – as a case of clashing nationalisms, colonialism and resistance, settler violence and indigenous response, or a combination of the above – is addressed through a review of some perspectives that informed current debates engaged by different groups of activists and intellectuals.

I argue that we need to focus on both nationalism and colonialism in making sense of the current Gaza war and its historical context. Anti-colonial resistance is central to the analyses and debates that have followed these events, but the notion of indigeneity – as understood in recent academic discourses, especially in the Western Hemisphere, to include not only prior residence in a particular location, but also distinctive attitudes towards land, nature and the environment, cosmology, power and identity, knowledge production, inter-personal and communal relationships – has played a very limited role.¹

In other words, looking at Israel/Palestine through a colonial framework of analysis does not mean the adoption of indigeneity, in the specific sense above, as an essential concept. This is not to deny, of course, that Palestinian Arabs were indigenous to the country, having formed more than 90% of the population when the Zionist movement began its settlement project in the late 19th century. But, their struggle for independence and sovereignty has rested on the modern notions of democratic representation and national self-determination that apply to all groups in principle, and not on claims to any special indigenous civilizational, cosmological, and ecological status as compared to Israeli-Jewish settlers and co-residents of the country.

¹ See, for example, the definitions of indigeneity used here: <https://www.queensu.ca/indigenous/decolonizing-and-indigenizing/definitions> There have been scattered attempts to adopt this concept in line with global trends (<https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/using-indigeneity-in-the-struggle-for-palestinian-liberation/>), but these have been driven mostly by young academics based overseas rather than activists/movements on the ground.

Initial Reactions

On the same day that the Islamic militant movement Hamas launched a large-scale attack on Israeli military bases and border communities in October 2023, Palestine Solidarity groups at Harvard University released a statement about the attack. The precise circumstances were not clear yet, and the number of casualties was not known at the time, but the students' statement showed no hesitation in holding Israel "entirely responsible for all the unfolding violence". That violence was derived from the context of two decades of siege on Gaza, the statement said, and a long history preceding that: "The apartheid regime is the only one to blame. Israeli violence has structured every aspect of Palestinian existence for 75 years". The statement ended with a call for "a firm stand against colonial retaliation" and for "action to stop the ongoing annihilation of Palestinians".²

In essence, this reaction to the events and their anticipated aftermath saw them as a violent response to decades of violent Israeli oppression framed in colonial and apartheid terms, of Gaza in particular and Palestinians in general. This situation went back all the way to 1948 – the year of Israel's independence and the ethnic cleansing of Palestine known as the Nakba. In a similar vein, a statement by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) on the same day, titled "End the Violence, End the Occupation, Free Palestine", considered the events as "a direct result of Israel's apartheid regime". Unlike the Harvard students who mentioned only Palestinian casualties and ignored Israeli civilians, the DSA condemned "the killing of all civilians" but without specifying who they were. It noted a similar context to that of the Harvard statement: "the Israeli state has systematically denied Palestinians the right to self-determination for decades ... For over 60 years, Palestinians have faced ethnic cleansing, torture, bombings, and housing demolitions. Gaza is still under a blockade".³

These early responses were gut reactions by activists who did not or could not present an in-depth discussion of the issues involved, but within less than a week more nuanced reflections from the same general direction were offered by Berkeley academic Judith Butler. She started by condemning 'without qualification' the violence committed by Hamas as "a terrifying and revolting massacre" and continued with a criticism of those who deployed the history of Israeli violence in order to excuse Hamas, using in the process "a corrupt form of moral reasoning to accomplish that goal". Israeli violence against Palestinians was overwhelming and it was waged against people subject to "apartheid rules, colonial rule and statelessness". But, Butler continued, it was wrong to blame the Israeli regime alone: "nothing should exonerate Hamas from responsibility for the hideous killings they have perpetrated". Doing that denied Palestinians their agency and prevented people from recognizing that there were different ways to fight colonial rule. It was crucial to understand the past though, to debate whether the Israeli regime was "racial apartheid or colonialism", and to develop a new political morality.

Condemning Hamas was not enough to bring an end to violence, however. To achieve that, there was a need to understand that Hamas grew out of the failure of the Oslo peace process of the 1990s to deliver on its promises. Overall, Hamas fitted within Palestinian history and aspirations for "freedom and the right of political self-determination, for release from colonial rule and pervasive military and carceral violence". Such contextualization was

² "Joint Statement by Harvard Palestine Solidarity Groups on the Situation in Palestine", 7th October 2023, <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1654370>.

³ "End the Violence, End the Occupation, Free Palestine", 7th October 2023, <https://www.dsasusa.org/statements/end-the-violence-end-the-occupation-free-palestine/>.

essential, Butler said, not in order to shift blame or to exonerate perpetrators of violence, as the Harvard students had done, but to place “the horrors of the last days” in a context of “radical injustices” endured by occupied Palestine and Palestinians – as well as “the humanitarian disaster and loss of life happening at this moment in Gaza”.

The terms used for the contextualization were important: was it a ‘war’ between two equal parties, a national conflict, or a colonial-type situation? Was Gaza ‘under occupation’ or an ‘open-air prison’? Choices made in this regard were a matter of political perspective and of identity too. Butler wrote: “I am also a Jew who lives with transgenerational trauma in the wake of atrocities committed against people like me. But they were also committed against people not like me. I do not have to identify with this face or that name in order to name the atrocity I see. Or, at least, I struggle not to”. Of particular concern was the language used by Israeli and American officials, which evoked notions of bestiality and savagery: “this is surely not the first time that a group of people seeking release from colonial shackles has been figured as animals by the coloniser”. This framing reinforced “the colonial opposition between the ‘civilised ones’ and the ‘animals’ who must be routed or destroyed”, in order to save civilization.

The history of injustice must be considered because “we are right to deplore that violence [by Hamas] and to express our horror”, but we must mourn all lives lost, in Israel and in Gaza, “without getting bogged down in debates about relativism and equivalence”. Learning about “the history of colonial violence” was critical, but “not for the purposes of rationalising existing violence or authorising further violence”. Rather, it was essential for the future: “liberation struggles that practise non-violence help to create the non-violent world in which we all want to live ... without equality and justice, without an end to the state violence conducted by a state, Israel, that was itself founded in violence, no future can be imagined, no future of true peace”. Such a future requires opposition to all violence, “including Israeli state violence in all its forms”, without fear of being accused of antisemitism, because supporting Palestinian self-determination was in line with “the deepest desires of all the inhabitants of those lands to live together in freedom, non-violence, equality and justice”.⁴

Butler’s opposition to violence in general and to the Hamas attack in particular was clear, but it did get bogged down precisely in those debates about relativism and equivalence it sought to avoid. On the one hand, condemning all violence as equally unacceptable clashed with the notion that anti-colonial indigenous resistance was justified ‘by any means necessary’. That notion was used by some solidarity activists, but it was rarely expressed explicitly in a written form. Those who saw Hamas’s violence as a response to prior Israeli violence and oppression usually sought to contextualize it politically rather than pass a judgement that violence was morally justified when carried out by indigenous people. On the other hand, progressive Israeli intellectuals took Butler and others like her to task for framing the conflict in explicit colonial terms, thereby implicitly justifying the Hamas attack but not necessarily its tactics.

A couple of days after Butler’s article appeared online on the London Review of Books site, a group of ‘Israel-based academics, thought leaders and progressive activists’ expressed their pain, shock and concern at the response of ‘certain American and European progressives’ (who remained unnamed) to the targeting of Israeli civilians by Hamas. This reflected, they said, “a disturbing trend in the global left’s political culture”, which undermined the struggle

⁴ Judith Butler, “The Compass of Mourning”, *London Review of Books* (45, 20), 13th October 2023, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v45/n20/judith-butler/the-compass-of-mourning>.

“against oppression and violence and in pursuit of full rights and equality for all residents of Israel-Palestine”. The reaction of the global left should have been solidarity and “an unequivocal call against indiscriminate violence towards civilians on both sides”, but many activists reacted rather with “indifference to these horrific events and sometimes even justified Hamas’s actions”. Others refused to condemn the attack, “claiming that outsiders have no right to judge the actions of the oppressed” or argued that Israeli society brought this upon itself. Still others “shielded themselves from the moral shock through historical comparisons and rationalization”. All this was a display of “extreme moral insensitivity and political recklessness”.

For these Israeli intellectuals, it was important to gain support from the global left, a diffuse group that they always regarded themselves as being part of but now felt excluded by it. There was no contradiction, they asserted, between opposition to “Israeli subjugation and occupation of Palestinians” and unequivocal condemnation of “brutal acts of violence against innocent civilians”, regardless of the origins of that violence. A consistent leftist position, they concluded, should adhere to both principles and thus assist local activists in the struggle “to break the cycle of violence and destruction”.⁵

On the face of it, this call was similar to Butler’s but with crucial differences: it mentioned Israeli oppression of Palestinians but did not regard it as the context for the October 2023 events or as the root cause of the overall conflict. Rather, it defined it as part of a ‘cycle’, a notion that implies constant attacks and counter-attacks between two equivalent sides without attributing clear responsibility to a single factor or starting point. And, it condemned Israeli violence but did not see it as ‘colonial’ in nature, in Gaza specifically or in reference to the 1967 occupation or to the situation since 1948.

Of particular interest here is the notion that historical comparisons and rationalizations were problematic. This was a reference to the argument that the Hamas attack must be seen in its historical context. Contextualization is an essential operation for any social and historical enquiry, of course, as signatories to the statement know well. But in this case, mentions of context were taken by them to mean attempts at mitigation if not condonation of crimes committed against Israeli civilians on the border with Gaza. Calls to lament civilian casualties that did not explicitly mention the Israeli victims of Hamas were regarded in the same light.

This approach applied to a letter issued shortly after the Israeli statement by ‘the Arts Community’, signed by many thousands (including Judith Butler), which asserted support for Palestinian liberation and for “an end to the killing and harming of all civilians, an immediate ceasefire, the passage of humanitarian aid into Gaza, and the end of the complicity of our governing bodies in grave human rights violations and war crimes”. Referring to the Israeli

⁵ “Statement on Behalf of Israel-based Progressives and Peace Activists Regarding Debates over Recent Events in Our Region”, 16th October 2023, drive.google.com/file/d/1pmm1N3XXX97uQKusnBnrg0zptS9xJaa6/view. References to left-wing expressions are mostly to social media posts by activists. Examples in: Ethan Nechin, “How Can Left-wingers Hail Hamas Atrocities Against Israelis as ‘Palestinian Resistance’?”, 11th October 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2023-10-11/ty-article-opinion/.premium/how-can-left-wingers-hail-hamas-atrocities-against-israelis-as-palestinian-resistance/0000018b-1e0b-df31-a99f-7fcb56df0000>; Michelle Goldberg, “The Massacre in Israel and the Need for a Decent Left”, 12th October 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/12/opinion/columnists/israel-gaza-massacre-left.html>; Joshua Leifer, “Towards a Humane Left”, *Dissent*, 12th October 2023, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/toward-a-humane-left/; Ryu Spaeth, “Israel, Gaza, and the Fracturing of the Intellectual Left”, *New York Magazine*, 20th November 2023, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/israel-gaza-nplusonemag-dissent-jewish-currents.html>.

offensive as an unfolding genocide, the signatories rejected “violence against all civilians, regardless of their identity” and called for “ending the root cause of violence: oppression, and the occupation”.⁶

Three aspects here were bound to arouse criticism by the Israelis who had signed the earlier statement: that there was no specific mention of Israeli civilians killed on 7th October; that the root cause of violence, human rights violations, and war crimes was attributed in its entirety to Israel, its oppression and occupation; that the letter was framed as support for Palestinian liberation rather than in more universal terms that would promote peace and justice for all sides. The Arts Community letter clearly was an active political intervention on the side of the oppressed rather than a general expression of support for non-controversial principles. That the authors of the letter added days later – in response to criticism that they ignored “the bloodiest day in Jewish history since the Holocaust”⁷ – their “revulsion at the horrific massacres of 1400 people in Israel conducted by Hamas” and called for the release of hostages taken on that day, did not really help matters as far as most Israelis were concerned.⁸

Two prominent intellectuals who signed the Israeli statement expressed concern with this way of looking at the situation. Hebrew University historian Yuval Noah Harari accused the radical left of pursuing “some fixed vision of justice” that led to alignments with “very brutal movements and regimes” (Stalin in the past, Hamas in the present), based on the “belief or fantasy that absolute justice is possible [where] one side is absolutely to blame for everything, including the crimes of the other side”. But reality was more complex, Harari said: “the same people can be victims and perpetrators at the same time. In most conflicts the blame for crimes and atrocities is not shared 100% but somewhere in between”. Failing to see that harmed the cause to which the left was nominally committed, he concluded.⁹

Much harsher was the verdict of sociologist Eva Illouz of the same institution, who claimed to have joined the ranks of the Palestinian struggle against Israeli government policies but then became disillusioned with the response of the global left to the atrocities and war crimes committed by Hamas: “A good part of the international left – which has for two centuries defended equality, freedom, and dignity – either celebrated news of the massacre as an uprising against colonizers or dismissed it with embarrassing intellectual strategies. The left scoffed, deserted, ignored, and marked with the mark of Cain vulnerable Jews all over the world”. Harvard students led the way, she said, and “the reaction of universities, intellectuals, and artists worldwide repeated the same position with a dull uniformity. Israel was the real and only culprit”.

The problem for Illouz was the attempt to look at events in context while in reality narratives coexisted in a state of tension and even clash: “there are several, intersecting narratives interpreted simultaneously without any strong or circumstantial connection at all. We have,

⁶ “An Open Letter from the Art Community to Cultural Organizations”, 19th October 2023, <https://www.artforum.com/columns/open-letter-art-community-cultural-organizations-518019/>.

⁷ “A Response to the Open Letter of October 19”, by Dominique Lévy, Brett Gorvy, Amalia Dayan, 20th October 2023, <https://www.artforum.com/columns/response-open-letter-october-19-518144/>

⁸ See also a similar statement by academics titled “Philosophy for Palestine” in <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1N22Q0oCpwmIrCiW6yZYe1JunyPr1Tt0r/view> and the response by Seyla Benhabib on 4th November 2023 in <https://medium.com/amor-mundi/an-open-letter-to-my-friends-who-signed-philosophy-for-palestine-0440ebd665d8>

⁹ Robert Booth, “Yuval Noah Harari backs critique of leftist ‘indifference’ to Hamas atrocities”, 24th October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/24/yuval-noah-harari-backs-critique-of-leftist-indifference-to-hamas-atrocities>

for example, an ugly colonial struggle taking place between Jews and the native Arab Palestinians for the past century, and, alongside it, the genocidal intent of Hamas, a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which has developed a rabid antisemitism and brutalizes its own Palestinian population”. These narratives opposed each other, rather than provided a single integrated story or two mirroring narratives, which is why we could condemn the 7th October massacre and support Palestinian independence at the same time. The ‘there’s a context’ strategy was lazy, she argued, “because it doesn’t envision the possibility that narratives may be severed from one another, that one does not explain the other”.

In fact, Illouz rejected the logic of historical contextualization altogether by flipping it on its head. She asked: should we invoke “the context of murderous antisemitism, which has given rise to Zionism, thereby making it drastically different from all forms of settler colonialism? Should we include in our contextualization the fact that the Jerusalem mufti Amin Al-Husseini supported the Nazis and their Final Solution and that, as such, losing Palestine was a part of the redrawing of maps after World War II?” Her answer was an emphatic ‘no’. The Palestinian loss and Israelis’ pain must be appreciated in their own terms, and for that we need to suspend the context, not counterpose the narratives or explain one through the other.¹⁰

The Question of Context

It must be admitted that there is a valid point here, *not* because the context can be suspended – that is neither feasible nor desirable – but because the questions of *who* determines the boundaries of the context in time and space, and *how*, have no obvious answers. There is more than one relevant context that shapes the meanings people attach to historical events, and within which they decide how to act. Choosing the context is a matter of political commitment as much as it is driven by social positioning and personal identification. Contexts are not mutually exclusive, but they call for different emphases. And, once an event takes place it modifies the context further for any subsequent developments.

For Palestinians and their global allies, the context that explains and (for a few) justifies the 7th October attack is the siege on Gaza imposed by Israel since 2007, seen within the older contexts of the 1967 occupation, constant encroachments on land and rights, dehumanization and shrinking liberties, all the way back to the 1948 Nakba. The majority of Gaza residents trace their origins in the territory to that early period, when their ancestors were forced out of their villages and towns in the southern part of the country during the events that created Israel, fragmented Palestine, and established the parameters of the conflict which remain to this day. That Hamas chose to call its incursion ‘Al-Aqsa Flood’ endows the context with an additional Islamic religious overtone, but that aspect seems of little relevance for external activists.

Many Israelis have been aware of this context, of course. A famous speech by Moshe Dayan, the celebrated military hero known for his brutal honesty, has been invoked over the years in discussions of Gaza. In April 1956, six months before Israel occupied Gaza during the Sinai Campaign (only to withdraw from it in early 1957 and return a decade later), Dayan said in a eulogy for a Kibbutz member who was killed by Palestinians from across the border: “Let us not blame the killers. How can we complain about their deep hatred for us? For eight years they have been sitting in the refugee camps of Gaza, while in front of their eyes we have been

¹⁰ Eva Illouz, “The Global Left’s Reaction to October 7 Threatens the Fight Against the Occupation”, 2nd November 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2023-11-02/ty-article-opinion/.premium/the-global-lefts-reaction-to-october-7-threatens-the-fight-against-the-occupation/0000018b-8b8d-d7a8-afcf-abaf5d670000>

transforming the land and villages where they and their ancestors had resided into our own inheritance”. Dayan did not use that insight to challenge Israeli policy, however. On the contrary, he asserted: “We are a generation of settlement, and without the steel helmet and the muzzle of the cannon we would not be able to plant a tree and build a home ... This is the fate of our generation. This is the choice of our lives: be ready, armed, strong, and tough; or let the sword drop from our fist, and our lives would be cut down”.¹¹

The Palestinian predicament is embedded within a broader context: the global decolonization campaign that saw much of the colonized world gaining political independence at the same time that Palestinians lost control over their homeland. For movements and activists involved in historical anti-colonial campaigns there is a clear link between their own efforts and the Palestinian national struggle. Solidarity with that struggle does not constitute identification with any specific tendency within the movement, such as Hamas, or a necessary endorsement of the tactics it used. Rather, it means looking at the Gaza war as one episode in the long-term struggle between the colonizer and the colonized, the settler and the indigenous, and perhaps also between global white domination and black resistance, and the West and the Rest.

The context for the majority of Israelis is different: it is the historical memory of millennia-long Jewish vulnerability and persecution. The attack on border communities is seen as a link in a long chain of anti-Jewish violence, from medieval blood libels and massacres through the 1903 Kishinev pogrom to the Holocaust, despite the vast differences between conditions in pre-1945 Europe and post-1948 Palestine. That Israel was established three years after the Holocaust, in a move many regarded at the time as redress for the Nazi genocide of the 1940s, reinforces this link. In this view, Israel’s creation was an act of justified compensation even if it came at the expense of non-Jewish residents of the country. From this perspective, opposition to Israel and its right to exist and defend itself (but not all criticisms of its policies) reaffirms the ages-long hatred towards Jews and denial of their rights and perhaps their very existence. Their quest for security thus takes precedence over all other considerations.

There is another context that matters to some Israelis, those of a more liberal-left inclination like the signatories of the October statement above. Reality for them is shaped by a global context governed by the norm of national self-determination, which should apply to Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs equally. Both are seen as legitimate national groups that deserve recognition and statehood as promised by the UN partition resolution of 1947. Palestinians have no valid claim on Israeli territory and vice versa. The conflict between these groups can be resolved when an agreement on borders and security arrangements is reached. The Hamas attack violated that norm: invading Israeli territory was an illegitimate act of aggression that could not be justified in the name of the struggle against the 1967 occupation or as part of an anti-colonial campaign.

In this view, Israel’s response was an act of self-defense, provided it was not excessive and did not re-establish permanent control over Gaza. Liberal-left Israelis usually acknowledge the history of Palestinian displacement as a result of Israeli ‘placement’, but they regard that as an outcome of a national-territorial conflict rather than a colonial-existential one. The 1948

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moshe_Dayan%27s_eulogy_for_Ro%27i_Rothberg There are several different versions of the speech in written and recorded forms. The Kibbutz in question – Nahal Oz – was founded in 1951 as a military/agricultural outpost and was transferred into civilian hands in 1953. It was attacked on 7th October 2023 and suffered two dozen casualties among its members. The Gaza neighborhood facing it was turned into a pile of rubble and its residents displaced in the course of the subsequent Israeli attack.

Nakba is thus seen as a regrettable but irreversible stage in the conflict, which cannot be undone without causing even worse moral and human catastrophe.

The Question of Violence

The colonial analogy is prevalent though. American author Adam Shatz, quoting Frantz Fanon's observation in *Wretched of the Earth* that 'the colonised person is a persecuted person who constantly dreams of becoming the persecutor', argues that on 7th October 2023 that dream was realized for Palestinian militants: "finally, the Israelis would feel the helplessness and terror they had known all their lives". In colonial wars, he quotes Fanon again, 'good is quite simply what hurts *them* most'. This is why in many countries that had been subjected to colonial rule, white domination, and apartheid, "the Palestinian struggle for independence, in conditions of grotesque asymmetry, strikes a powerful chord". Shatz is scathing though of so-called 'decolonial' left activists based at Western universities, who consider themselves as following in Fanon's footsteps by praising or condoning the Hamas violence as a form of anti-colonial justice. He puts it thus: 'Decolonisation is not a metaphor', "the groupies of Al-Aqsa Flood intoned".¹²

Having just completed a highly-regarded intellectual biography of Fanon, Shatz argues that Fanon looked at murderous forms of anti-colonial violence as a psychiatrist who diagnosed "a vengeful pathology formed under colonial oppression", rather than as an activist who offered a prescription for political action: "evoking the phenomenological experience of anti-colonial fighters, he noted that in the early stage of revolt, 'life can only materialise from the rotting cadaver of the colonist'." But Fanon also wrote of the harmful effects of war trauma, including the trauma endured by anti-colonial rebels who killed civilians.

For Fanon, Shatz says, anti-colonial fighters in Algeria needed to "overcome the temptations of primordial revenge" and resentment, and embrace all residents: not only Muslims who were "freeing themselves from the yoke of colonial oppression", but also European settlers and Jews who were willing to join the liberation struggle. But of course, that is neither the Hamas vision, nor that of Western solidarity activists who indulge in the "ethno-tribalist fantasies of the decolonial left, with their Fanon recitations and posters of [Hamas] paragliders", who were at the forefront of the attack. The price for such rhetorical excess is paid by the people of Gaza.

Shatz concludes on a note that *does not* equate Israeli colonial oppression with Palestinian anti-colonial liberation but *does* equate the entitlement of both groups to freedom and justice: "the inescapable truth is that Israel cannot extinguish Palestinian resistance by violence, any more than the Palestinians can win an Algerian-style liberation war: Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs are stuck with each other ... [potentially saved only by] a political solution that recognises both as equal citizens, and allows them to live in peace and freedom, whether in a single democratic state, two states, or a federation. So long as this solution is avoided, a continuing degradation, and an even greater catastrophe, are all but guaranteed".¹³

¹² This is a reference to Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's article, "Decolonization is not a Metaphor", *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* (1, 1, 2012), pp. 1-40, which argues that restoring indigenous land, rather than symbolic gestures, is key to decolonization. The article itself offers little more than a series of symbolic and verbal gestures, and affirmation of its authors' self-proclaimed superior credentials as activists.

¹³ Adam Shatz, "Vengeful Pathologies", *London Review of Books* (45, 20), 19th October 2023, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v45/n20/adam-shatz/vengeful-pathologies>.

Similar points were made by Canadian public intellectual Naomi Klein, who lamented the fact that “in their desire to celebrate the powerful symbolism of Palestinians escaping the open air prison that is Gaza – which occupied people have every right to do – some of our supposed comrades on the left continue to minimize massacres of Israeli civilians, and in some extreme cases, even seem to celebrate them”. This expression of opposition to Israeli domination was “a gift to militant Zionism”, because it reinforced its core notion that Jews would always be hated and unsafe without their own state and independent power, which must be wielded without restraint to ensure survival at all costs. How could this violent ideology be confronted, she asked. For a start, her answer went, by recognizing that when Israeli Jews were killed in their homes and that was “celebrated by people who claim to be anti-racists and anti-fascists”, that response was experienced as antisemitism by many Jews, and such antisemitism was hateful in itself and also because it was “the rocket fuel of militant Zionism”.

The way out is solidarity, a “humanism that unites people across ethnic and religious lines. Fierce opposition to all forms of identity-based hatred, including antisemitism”. The global left must be grounded in “values that side with the child over the gun every single time, no matter whose gun and no matter whose child. A left that is unshakably morally consistent, and does not mistake that consistency with moral equivalency between occupier and occupied”.¹⁴ In a similar manner to Butler and Shatz, Klein makes a distinction between taking a clear political position in support of Palestinian rights and the liberation struggle against the colonial occupation (in other words, rejecting neutrality in the conflict), and at the same time, adopting a moral position that rejects violence against all civilians regardless of their background. That Israeli Jews may be regarded as settlers in the context of a Palestinian struggle against land dispossession and for freedom from colonial domination does not make their violent killing by armed militants any less of a violation of universal moral and legal principles than if they were indigenous people.

With the passage of time and unfolding of events, the initial impact of the Hamas attack inevitably receded, and the enormity of the brutal Israeli retaliation moved to the forefront of public attention, but not everywhere – it remained as the new context that shaped subsequent events in two key settings: Israel and the USA. In December 2023, Congressional hearings targeted university presidents for their responses to the protests waged by students at elite American universities in solidarity with Palestinians under attack, and the boundaries of freedom of political speech were questioned. The focus was on the slogans raised by some students – ‘there is only one solution, Intifada revolution’, ‘globalize the Intifada’, and ‘from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free’ – all of which were evident in protest events and were presented by right-wing US politicians and Israel supporters as amounting to calls for the elimination of Israel and for a genocide against Jews.¹⁵

Nothing in these slogans reflects genocidal or antisemitic attitudes, though of course they do express clear political opposition to the State of Israel and its policies. Rejecting Israel’s legitimacy as a Jewish state, referring to it as an apartheid state, regarding it as a colonial imposition on the region, calling it a racist endeavor, or using terms such as genocide and

¹⁴ Naomi Klein, “In Gaza and Israel, Side with the Child over the Gun”, 11th October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/11/why-are-some-of-the-left-celebrating-the-killings-of-israeli-jews>

¹⁵ Republican Representative Stefanik led the hearing on this point: <https://stefanik.house.gov/2023/12/icymi-stefanik-demands-answers-from-harvard-president-claudine-gay-on-harvard-s-failure-to-condemn-antisemitism-and-anti-israel-attacks-on-campus>.

ethnic cleansing to refer to impact of its policies, are controversial and a matter for intense debates. But, similar language can be (and has been) used in whole or part in other situations: against the apartheid regime in South Africa, the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara, Myanmar's policies towards the Rohingya, the conflicts in Darfur and South Sudan, the 1994 Rwanda massacre, Turkish repression of Kurds, Chinese policies towards Tibet, Indian policies in Kashmir, the Russian invasion of the Ukraine, and so on. Jews and Israelis are not singled out in this respect.

There is something distinctive about Israel/Palestine though. These names for the country are co-extensive: there is no separate Israel which is distinct from Palestine and vice versa. The terms people choose to use reflect different ethno-cultural histories, identities, and political beliefs, rather than mere geographical realities. The Palestine that is to be free, 'from the river to the sea', is the same territory that Jews have referred to historically as the Land of Israel (*Eretz Israel*), and that is governed today by the State of Israel. In this sense, the slogan is indeed incompatible with the existence of Israel as a Jewish state and perhaps its existence as a state, period. Calling for the freedom of *Palestinians* (as individuals and as a political community) is a just demand that should not be controversial and is compatible with the freedom of Israeli Jews too. However, calling for the freedom of *Palestine* (as a territory) can and frequently is interpreted in exclusive ethnic terms as a call for sole control by one group of people. This interpretation is supported by the omission of any mention of Jewish residents of the country and their rights.

This can be contrasted with equivalent slogans of an explicitly inclusive nature raised by the anti-apartheid movement: 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white' in the words of the Freedom Charter of the 1950s, or 'one person, one vote' as the main call of the 1980s' United Democratic Front.¹⁶ The mainstream Palestinian national movement itself called since 1970 for 'A Secular Democratic Palestine', in which Muslim, Christian, and Jewish residents will live equally.¹⁷ In this sense, the current solidarity call 'from the river to the sea' is a regression towards claiming an exclusionary Palestinian-Arab identity for the country, and a move away from the more inclusive trend that preceded it historically.

The democratic alternative to Jewish domination in apartheid or colonial Israel/Palestine is power sharing, equal rights for all, justice, and redress. This goal can be realized only on the basis of rejection of ethnic and religious privileges that establish the supremacy of one group of people over others. Defining Israel as a Jewish state is a violation of the principle of political equality, of course, but that is also the case for defining Palestine as an Arab or Islamic country. There is nothing progressive about replacing one type of ethnic domination with another, even when such domination is to be exercised by an indigenous movement.

The question of methods of struggle is equally important. The term Intifada is used to refer to the unarmed Palestinian uprising of the late 1980s (retroactively, the first Intifada) as well as the armed uprising of the early 2000s (the second Intifada). It means insurrection, resistance that can be peaceful or violent depending on the circumstances, and may involve popular mobilization but also vanguard actions, conducted with or without weapons, targeting armed opponents or civilians or both without distinction. In itself, it does not mean killing civilians and suicide attacks, or mass killings of anybody. Under no reasonable interpretation does it

¹⁶ This is not to deny that unofficially, at the grassroots level, especially among militant youth, other sentiments were also powerful, as expressed in the chants, 'kill the boer, kill the farmer', and 'one settler, one bullet'.

¹⁷ A call marred, however, by recognizing Israeli Jews as a religious community only and not as a national group as they define themselves.

mean genocide of Jews. But, it could possibly mean – as was the case with Hamas during the second Intifada – attacks against Israeli civilians, seen as legitimate targets, which are in fact war crimes even when those civilians are citizens of a colonial or occupying power.

In reality, the militant slogans used by solidarity activists today play the same symbolic role in student politics as was played in the 1960s and 70s by the images of Ho Chi Minh or Che Guevara, Black Panthers carrying weapons, Angela Davis raising her fist, and Leila Khaled wearing a keffiyeh, armed with an AK47 – showing off your radical credentials with minimal effort and no risk. However, when careless use of language is seen together with the refusal of many petition-signers (academics, artists, cultural activists) to condemn explicitly the Hamas attacks on civilians, or their choice of passive-evasive formulations such as ‘we regret the loss of innocent lives on all sides’ (which sounds like ‘all lives matter’), it is problematic. Not only because it blurs the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate means of struggle, but because it indirectly provides an excuse for retaliatory violence by the more powerful Israeli side. The unprecedented scale and ferocity of the Israeli military response, and the high level of support for it internally, cannot be understood without the triggering impact of the 7th October attack.

Further Responses (Butler and critics)

Re-introducing notions of colonialism into the discussion in a later contribution, Judith Butler interpreted these slogans as rejection of silence “in the face of colonial violence, an effort to throw off the shackles of colonial rule”. This was not support for genocidal violence; in fact, decolonization would prevent genocide: “if the rage of intifada, however, is directed against colonial rule, then decolonization will more likely produce another emotion: emancipatory joy, a sense of freedom, the release from shackles that have only tightened over the seventy-five years of their imposition”. For violence to end, Butler said, Israeli state violence had to end, a step that would lead to “a new possibility for cohabitation, whether in a one- or two-state solution or another form of governance”. There would be no need for armed struggle “were there not an ongoing and insufferable infliction of state violence by a colonial power against the besieged and dispossessed”. The October attack must not be seen as a starting point, then, “effacing the seventy-five years of occupation, detention, dispossession, and land theft that came before it”.¹⁸

A few things stand out in Butler’s account: the relevant timeframe is 75 years, which means that the issue is the State of Israel since its inception in 1948, rather than only the occupation of 1967; the notion of reciprocity – violence breeds violence – that refuses to place one side or the other as superior on *moral* grounds; the notion of equal co-habitation of Israelis and Palestinians, regardless of their historical provenance (indigeneity, immigration, settlement). Butler is not politically neutral, of course, clearly siding with Palestinians as the oppressed and dispossessed who are fighting for freedom from colonial rule. But, they are not granted a different moral standing and their claim to political rights is not elevated above that of Israeli Jews due to their prior residence or indigenous status. Decolonization therefore does not mean here reversal of roles but rather overcoming the boundaries between the indigenous and the settler, treating this distinction as irrelevant for purposes of granting political rights and making future arrangements.

¹⁸ Judith Butler, “There Can Be No Critique”, *Boston Review*, 13th December 2023, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/there-can-be-no-critique/>.

Looking at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a colonial analytical framework is one consequence of linking the local and the global, but there are other ways of creating a linkage between these different levels and going beyond them. Israeli scholar Haviva Pedaya argues that the global left ignores the regional dimension (involving broader Middle Eastern alliances beyond Palestine, and conflicts that have nothing to do with the European colonial legacy), and the theological dimension with roots that go back millennia and are currently inserted into a global framework of the rise of radical political Islam as a force pushing for apocalyptic outcomes: “Palestine as a political entity – yes, immediately. Hamas as a global terrorist body featuring crimes against humanity, a discourse of extermination of Israel and harming world Jews – no, under any circumstances”.

The call for globalizing the Intifada introduces a binary division between good and evil and conflates complex local conflicts with simplistic global solutions, Pedaya says. The result is that Jews are being targeted wherever they are, and crimes against humanity are condoned because supposedly “anything done by the insurgent native against colonialism is justified”. She attributes the hostility of leftist intellectuals towards Israel, and implicitly towards Jews, to their guilt feelings about the legacy of Western colonialism, even though the global scene today cannot be understood in terms of the West and the Rest. The eruption of unrelated conflicts in many different locations (the Ukraine, Yemen, Sudan) has disrupted standard dichotomies long used by Intellectuals. That reactionary Islamic zealots and progressive Western leftists could coalesce around the same political program regarding Israel/Palestine means that the old certainties that shaped the universalist left agenda are no longer valid, Pedaya maintains.¹⁹

This is not to deny the realities of occupation and colonial practices as features of Israeli policies towards Palestinians, and the human catastrophe caused by the ongoing Gaza War that may lead to genocide. Rather, Pedaya argues, it is to insert these realities into a context that goes beyond the 20th century indigenous/colonial divide in order to include other crucial developments: the breakdown of the global order, tribal wars, the spread of epidemics, the rise of murderous Islamic fanaticism, and the re-emergence of global antisemitism. Pedaya takes Butler to task for adhering to obsolete binary notions of oppressors and oppressed seen in a one-dimensional manner. She calls on critical intellectuals “to formulate new paradigms that account for changing global conditions”, and reject “the discourse of religious zealotry, annihilation and revenge, a discourse that creates symbolic enemies that must be destroyed, a discourse that negates the existence of Israel, or seeks revenge for Gaza, or identifies Palestine with Hamas in order to block a political solution”.

If the world were indeed multi-dimensional as Pedaya argues, rife with conflicts that do not cohere along a single line of division, then the settler/indigenous distinction can no longer function as the core principle of moral and political demarcation, separating people and regimes clearly into right and wrong sides. Solidarity then would become a complex notion with no easy choice of actors with whom to identify. Within such broader regional and global contexts, indigeneity is not straightforward: millions of Israeli Jews may not be indigenous to the country in the same way Palestinian-Arabs are but they and their ancestors are indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, as the examples of Pedaya herself (her parents were born in Iraq) and the Moroccan-born Illouz illustrate. While such origins cannot

¹⁹ Haviva Pedaya, “We are in a New Era, with no Correspondence between Reality and Discourse”, 14th December 2023, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/2023-12-14/ty-article-opinion/.premium/0000018c-6800-dbd5-a39c-ff73f6600000>.

be used to deny the oppressive nature of Israeli rule over Palestinians, they do challenge the framing of Israeli domination in terms derived solely from European colonial history.²⁰

Further rejection of binary thinking is provided by Shatz, after the publication of his book, offering reflections on Fanon's possible reaction to current trendy approaches such as Afro-pessimism or decoloniality, which replace history with ontology: "Instead of seeing these [racial, colonial] identities as products of history and as entities that can be unmade, they view them as fixed and essential. Thus, the person who is the child, the grandchild or the great-grandchild of a colonized nation is somehow eternally colonized. Right? The notion is that anti-Black oppression is something that can never be transformed; it's simply an irreducible, ontological part of societies under Western domination". Shatz adds: "I think Fanon was very skeptical of this style of thought – which, by the way, has a lot in common with Zionism ... [for which] a Jew in exile is living in a kind of hell, where it's always possibly 1939".²¹ Of course, Fanon saw anti-colonial violence as the inevitable outcome of colonial violence, but understanding the historical source of action is not the same as justifying it or regarding it as morally and politically legitimate, even if the distinction may not always be drawn clearly.

This ambiguity between analysis and justification, between morality and politics, became evident when Judith Butler said more recently: "It is more honest and historically correct to say that the uprising of October 7th was an act of armed resistance. It is not a terrorist attack and it's not an antisemitic attack. It was an attack against Israelis ... I did not like that attack ... It was anguishing, it was terrible. However, I would be very foolish if I then decided that the only violence in the scene was the violence done to Israeli people. The violence done to Palestinians has been happening for decades. This was an uprising that comes out, that comes from, a state of subjugation and against a violent state apparatus".²²

Regardless of precise wording, Butler's point is that the violence that Hamas inflicted on civilians on 7th October came in reaction to Israeli state violence. In that sense, it was neither a terrorist attack (which targets civilians at random) nor an antisemitic attack (which targets Jews at random). Calling it 'an act of armed resistance' means it was undertaken as part of a political struggle in historical circumstances that provide a necessary context for the events. Of course, calling the attack 'armed resistance' does not constitute support for it, let alone for any specific acts undertaken in the course of the overall campaign, such as instances of sexual violence. Butler was not saying anything explicit in support of such acts, obviously, but in France, where she was speaking, the term *Résistance* is clearly associated with opposition to the Nazi occupation and therefore has an undisputed positive connotation. Further, her insistence on seeing 'documentation' that proves rapes were committed in the course of the

²⁰ Haviva Pedaya, "In a Catastrophic Triangle", *Hazman Hazeh*, December 2023, https://hazmanhazeh.org.il/multi-dimensional_knot/. It must be noted that Pedaya and Illouz do not mention their own regional positionality in their writing, though it may shape their perspectives implicitly, beyond their Jewish and Israeli identity that is shared by others like Harari.

²¹ Etan Nechin, "Would Frantz Fanon Have Supported the Oct. 7 Massacre? His Biographer Isn't So Sure", 2nd February 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/life/books/2024-02-02/ty-article-magazine/premium/would-frantz-fanon-have-supported-the-oct-7-massacre-his-biographer-isnt-so-sure/0000018d-63eb-d480-adbd-ebfbaa3a0000>

²² Taken from a recorded discussion, 3rd March 2024, as quoted in Cary Nelson, "'We can have a debate about whether Hamas did the right thing': Judith Butler's Moral Relativism", *Fathom Journal*, March 2024, <https://fathomjournal.org/we-can-have-a-debate-about-whether-hamas-did-the-right-thing-judith-butlers-moral-relativism/> The quote in the title of the article is inaccurate, as many of the renditions of Butler's words are, but that is also the result of wording that is – perhaps deliberately – ambiguous at times.

attack before condemning them, provided critics with additional ammunition for the accusation that she was acting as an apologist for Hamas.²³

Curiously, just as Butler became the *bête noire* of Israeli liberals for not empathizing enough with their anguish in her criticism of Israeli policies, she was attacked by a fellow US-based academic for being too critical of Palestinians and their leaders. Jodi Dean of Hobart and William Smith Colleges called for an explicit support for Hamas as the vanguard of global anti-imperialist resistance. Instead of placing the Nakba and resistance at the center of analysis, Dean said, Butler criticized Harvard students and thus displaced attention “from the reality of genocidal violence in Gaza and onto the affective environment of safe and privileged US universities”. By insisting on “equal grievability and rights to mourn”, as well as calling for new forms of politics that excluded Hamas, Butler focused on violence regardless of its origins and aims. This means, Dean said, that “the liberation struggle of a colonized, occupied, and oppressed people is ruled out in advance”. But, she added, Hamas was the leader of the struggle for a free Palestine, and thus was essential to a united front of resistance to imperialism. Oppressed people fought against their oppressors by any means necessary. They chose the strategies and tactics they needed in order to win. Those in solidarity with their struggle must make a clear decision: “there are two sides and no alternative, no negotiation of the relation between oppressor and oppressed”, she concluded.²⁴

Dean, of course, is no less part of the safe environment of privileged US institutions than Butler and the Harvard students, though her perspective of explicit support for Hamas is rare among her colleagues. It is notable that she formulates such support as part of a global anti-imperialist front (whatever that means under conditions of disparate struggles that do not and cannot cohere around a single axis), and the uprising of an oppressed group, while the notion of their specific rights as an indigenous group native to the territory is relegated to the margins in her comments. Palestinians are fighting indeed for their freedom from oppression and deserve support from the left, but that Israelis are foreign ‘settlers’ is not an issue that seems to require specific attention. They are rightly condemned for denying independence to their subjects, but the presence or absence of indigeneity is not an issue in itself in much of the discourse of the left, including the contribution by Dean. How does this issue feature in Hamas’s own perspective, however, is a crucial question.

Hamas and Its Alternatives

In a document published by the movement’s media office three months after the beginning of the war, the only instance to date in which it has outlined its position in writing in a comprehensive manner, the 7th October operation is discussed against a long historical background, from 1918 when the British established their rule over the territory of Palestine. At that time, the document asserts, over 90% of the population were Palestinians who held most of the land. During the following 30 years, by the end of the British Mandate, “the Jews, who were brought to Palestine in mass immigration campaigns in coordination between the British colonial authorities and the Zionist Movement”, had acquired more land and had

²³ Eva Illouz, “How the Left Became a Politics of Hatred Against Jews”, 15th March 2024, <https://k-larevue.com/en/illouz-butler/>. Versions of this article were published in the European press. See the sharp response to Illouz by Palestinian intellectual Azmi Bishara, “On Antisemitism and Student Protests”, 21st May 2024, <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/ResearchAndStudies/Pages/on-antisemitism-and-student-demonstrations-israeli-sociologist-resorts-subconscious-instead-rational-inference.aspx>

²⁴ Jodi Dean, “Palestine speaks for everyone”, 9th April 2024, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/palestine-speaks-for-everyone>

grown to become over 30% of the population. When Israel was established in 1948, “the Zionist gangs engaged in an ethnic cleansing campaign against the Palestinian people aimed at expelling them from their lands and areas”. As a result, they seized control of 77% of the land, expelled 57% of ‘the people of Palestine’, and destroyed over 500 Palestinian villages and towns. In 1967 they finished taking over the rest of Palestine.

It is clear that the terms ‘Palestinians’ and ‘the people of Palestine’ here refer to Muslim and Christian residents only, and not to Jews (whether they had arrived in the country as part of the Zionist settlement project or at any time before that, regardless of circumstances). This can be read as a rejection of any Jewish presence in the country. The document also lists a series of more specific issues: “75 years of relentless occupation and suffering” (since the 1948 Nakba), the 1967 occupation and Jewish settlement activities in the West Bank, the 2007 siege on Gaza, and more recent provocative actions in relation to the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. Against this background, the 7th October operation was “a necessary step and a normal response to confront all Israeli conspiracies against the Palestinian people and their cause. It was a defensive act in the frame of getting rid of the Israeli occupation, reclaiming the Palestinian rights and on the way for liberation and independence like all peoples around the world did”. It took place in the context of many cases of “struggle against colonialism and occupation ... [that show] that in the same level of oppression committed by the occupier, there would be an equivalent response by the people under occupation”.

Hamas claims it does not wage “a struggle against the Jews because they are Jewish but wages a struggle against the Zionists who occupy Palestine”. It is the Zionists rather “who constantly identify Judaism and the Jews with their own colonial project and illegal entity”. What this says about Israeli Jews, most of whom identify with Zionism as their national movement, is not clear. Hamas regards itself as a national liberation movement that derives legitimacy from the right to “self-defense, liberation and self-determination”, and whose struggle takes place in “the occupied Palestinian territory” in line with international law and UN resolutions. It ends its ‘narrative’ with a call for “keeping the popular pressure around the world until ending the occupation”, and “standing against the normalization attempts with the Israeli entity and for a comprehensive boycott to the Israeli occupation and its backers”.²⁵

Three things in particular are important to note here. First, Hamas asserts that Palestinians are native to Palestine and that Jews/Zionists are not. But, they derive the right to resist and to claim their freedom and independence *not* from their specific status as indigenous people but from the universal notions of national self-determination and freedom from foreign rule. These notions apply in anti-colonial struggles but also in settings where all sides are equally indigenous to the land (such as the Yugoslavian conflicts, Ukraine/Russia, India/Kashmir, Sudan, and so on). Indigeneity does not play a specific role in that. This approach is not new: it was central to the Palestinian national movement’s strategy since its inception. Palestinians claimed the land as theirs, and regarded Jewish settlers as a foreign imposition, but did not claim special status as indigenous people. On the contrary, their main demand was to be treated like others in the region – Egyptians, Iraqis, Syrians, Lebanese – who were granted political independence after the First World War, following brief periods of living under British and French Mandatory rule, in accordance with international norms of national self-determination.²⁶

²⁵ Hamas Media Office, “Our Narrative: Operation al-Aqsa Flood”, 21st January 2024, <https://www.palestinechronicle.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/PDF.pdf>

²⁶ See extensive discussion in Ran Greenstein, *Anti-Colonial Resistance in South Africa and Israel/Palestine: Identity, Nationalism, and Race* (Routledge, 2023), pp. 79-99, 148-219.

Second, they provide justification for their specific tactics of resistance by focusing on the political and tactical circumstances of the struggle, *not* by using easy but vacuous slogans such as ‘by any means necessary’ that provide blanket immunity from criticism. They make claims that may be contested factually, about targeting Israeli armed personnel only and sparing civilians. But, they do not invoke any special exemption for their actions as anti-colonial fighters in this regard, as could possibly be derived from a Fanonite reading of the situation, a reading that Shatz rejects but many others consider as legitimate. The shadow of Fanon is evident though when they present their actions as a response equivalent to the oppression experienced under the occupation.

Third, they keep the boundaries of their central target – ‘the occupation’ – deliberately vague: is it a reference to Israeli control over Gaza, or more broadly to the 1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, or even further to Israel since 1948? The text allows all these possible interpretations to co-exist, most likely deliberately so as to accommodate different readings: ‘from the river to the sea’ is *not* a notion that is found here because it projects a flat view of the situation with one simple definition and one simple solution. The official position of Hamas in this regard, which predates the current stage of the conflict by several years, is worth quoting: “Hamas rejects any alternative to the full and complete liberation of Palestine, from the river to the sea. However, without compromising its rejection of the Zionist entity and without relinquishing any Palestinian rights, Hamas considers the establishment of a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital along the lines of the 4th of June 1967, with the return of the refugees and the displaced to their homes from which they were expelled, to be a formula of national consensus”.²⁷

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in all these respects the rhetoric of Hamas (at least when they address the international community in English) is more subtle than that of radical protesters at US universities. The ambiguity of the boundaries of ‘the occupation’ parallels the distinction between colonial and nationalist definitions of the conflict. The Israeli liberal-left, which regards the conflict as a clash between two national movements, accepts the need for bringing the 1967 occupation to an end, but rejects the notion that the legacy of 1948 (the creation of Israel, the fragmentation of historical Palestine, the Nakba) should be reversed through anti-colonial struggle targeting Israel as a whole, which most Israeli Jews regard as an existential threat. As Harari puts it, “every time demonstrators in London or New York chant ‘From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free’, Israelis conclude that ‘they really do want to exterminate us’ ... Ideally, each side should give up its fantasy of getting rid of the other”. A peaceful solution to the conflict is technically feasible, he argues, given that there is enough land between the River and Sea to build houses, schools, roads and hospitals for everyone, “but it can be realised only if each side can honestly say that, even if it had unlimited power and zero restrictions, it would not wish to expel the other”.²⁸

The problem with this liberal perspective is that without explicitly tackling the colonial legacy, in particular the 1948 Nakba and the persistent campaigns of ethnic cleansing ever since, which became known as the ‘ongoing Nakba’ and have intensified since October 2023, no such harmonious outcome is likely. The political balance Harari seeks to strike between two legitimate movements ignores the lopsided impact of one on the other, and the centrality of land dispossession and demographic engineering to the formation of relations between the

²⁷ As quoted in Khaled Hroub, “A Newer Hamas? The Revised Charter”, *Journal of Palestine Studies* (46, 4, Summer 2017), p. 102.

²⁸ Yuval Noah Harari, “Is There a Way Out of the Israeli-Palestinian Trap”, *Financial Times*, 15th March 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/459c1bad-a121-42da-8685-d639d6ca4073>

groups. As prominent Palestinian-American historian Rashid Khalidi says: we are living now in the last stage in a century-long development, “a multi-stage war” waged on Palestinians by “great power patrons of the Zionist movement – a movement that was both settler colonialist and nationalist, and which aimed to replace the Palestinian people in their ancestral homeland”. He adds that throughout this century-long history, “the Palestinians have fiercely resisted the usurpation of their country”.

Khalidi reaches pessimistic conclusions from the current events: “ Hamas’s philosophy of armed resistance is unlikely to disappear as long as there is no prospect of an end to military occupation, colonisation and oppression of the Palestinian people, or of a political horizon promising true Palestinian self-determination and equality. Thus, an upheaval that might have been a catalyst of change may in fact produce continuity of colonisation and occupation, of the Israeli establishment’s exclusive reliance on force, and of armed Palestinian resistance”. Talk of a ‘two-state solution’ by US and European leaders remains hollow rhetoric. The current military campaign reflects “the underlying lineaments of previous ones in this 100 years’ war”, but its intensity is unique, “and it has created deep new traumas”. No end to the carnage is in sight: “we seem to be further than ever from a lasting and sustainable resolution, one based on dismantling structures of oppression and supremacy, and on justice, completely equal rights and mutual recognition”.²⁹

Khalidi combines an emphasis on the indigenous/settler colonial divide when accounting for the history of the conflict, but less so when it comes to the solution, which is phrased in terms of mutuality and equality, but also redress. How to redress the legacy of ethnic cleansing, occupation, dispossession, and oppression is not obvious, however, especially now when the immediate horrors of Gaza overwhelm any attempt to look at the overall situation. Regarding the Nakba – the single most important formative event – options range from mere symbolic recognition (along the lines of the ‘land acknowledgements’ that have become popular in Australia and Canada and also increasingly the USA), which clearly would be insufficient, to implementation of the refugees’ Right of Return, which has no chance of gaining traction in Israel and has very limited support globally beyond token gestures.

Palestinians adopt a colonial definition of the conflict, and seek redress, but they see themselves primarily in nationalist terms. Their status as indigenous people is real, of course, but it is not central to their discourses of identity and resistance, which are focused on the quest for freedom from oppression and – right now – sheer survival. Those aspects of the situation that move the definition beyond a ‘normal’ national-type conflict over power and territory can potentially be handled over time in a staggered manner. The solution need not be formulated in an ‘all or nothing’ terms. The point is that raising the issues of colonialism, settlement, and land, is a crucial first step, even if a thousand miles remain for the journey to reach its destination.

The key question then is how to reconcile an *analytical* focus on colonialism and its legacies, which is essential for an understanding of the conflict on all its dimensions, and a *political* focus on nationalism, which is essential for beginning to make progress on a practical

²⁹ Rashid Khalidi, “‘A New Abyss’: Gaza and the Hundred Years’ War on Palestine”, *The Guardian*, 11th April 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/11/a-new-abyss-gaza-and-the-hundred-years-war-on-palestine>. Also see the discussion by Israeli progressive academic Oren Yiftachel who places current events within a modified colonial analytical framework in “Colonial – and Counter-colonial: The Israel/Gaza War through Multiple Critical Perspectives”, *Palestine/Israel Review* (1,1, 2024), pp. 228–236.

solution for it. We need both. In the debate over the Gaza war and solidarity, the Israeli participants tend to see only the national dimension, and solidarity activists tend to see only the colonial dimension. An integrated approach, such as Khalidi's, may emphasize one or the other of these at different times for different purposes, but it must keep both of them at play in an attempt at a balance that may never be reached to the satisfaction of all sides.

The South African Model

Over the years, one issue has been raised repeatedly in an attempt to provide a model for the Palestine solidarity movement, and that is the example of the South African anti-apartheid campaign. This is the case for the current round of solidarity efforts as well. But are the two cases similar enough to justify the use of the South African model, with the expectation that results would be similar too? Historical patterns of dispossession and political oppression in both cases are similar indeed, but this does not necessarily mean that strategies of solidarity and resistance would work in similar ways.³⁰

The following discussion examines the question with a focus on four dimensions: (1) The global political context; (2) The target – is it the state, the regime as a whole, its policies, the dominant ideology? (3) The discourse of the movement – is it framed as a racial, national, or a colonial-type contestation? Is the settler/indigenous distinction used to define goals and practices? (4) The role of a local leadership in providing guidance to overseas activists and links to constituencies on the ground.

On all these dimensions there are substantial differences between the South African and the Israeli/Palestinian conditions, as will be outlined below.

The Global Political Context

The period between the 1960s and the 1980s provided a context for the global anti-apartheid campaign. The 1960s saw the rise of the New Left and associated movements against the war in Vietnam, in favour of racial equality in the USA and gender equality everywhere, and in support of guerrilla campaigns for social change in Latin America. Liberation movements in southern Africa fit this pattern, and so did the Palestinian resistance movement by creating a popular alternative to oppressive, corrupt and inefficient Arab regimes. The following decade presented a more mixed picture. The early 1970s saw the American retreat from South-East Asia, as well as the first serious military setback to Israel in 1973. The rise of radical forces continued with the Ethiopian revolution of 1974, the Portuguese flower revolution of the same year that led to the liberation of Portugal's colonies in Africa, and the Soweto uprising of 1976, all the way to the victory of the Sandinista Front in Nicaragua, the Iranian revolution in 1979, and Zimbabwean independence in 1980.

The anti-apartheid movement continued to ride this wave to 1990, when formal negotiations between the South African government and the ANC opened up. It was seen as both a liberal and a radical cause, advancing human rights, national liberation, and social transformation. Adopted by centrists and leftists alike, it was sustained over a period of flux in international relations. That was not quite the case with the Palestinian movement though.

³⁰ Ran Greenstein, "What Lessons Can Palestinians Really Take from the Struggle of Black South Africans?", 11th September 2022, <https://www.972mag.com/lessons-palestinians-struggle-black-south-africans/>.

The 1973 recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people by the Arab League, and its chairman Yasser Arafat's speech at the UN general assembly the following year, were important in establishing Palestinians as a legitimate international player. This was accompanied by the growing de-legitimation of Israel: most African countries broke off diplomatic relations with it following its occupation of Egyptian territory in 1973, and it found itself isolated in the UN and other international forums. The growth of resistance in the Palestinian Occupied Territories and in Israel itself, especially the Day of the Land in 1976, were part of this process.

These positive developments, from a Palestinian perspective, positioned it along a similar course to that of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, but they were accompanied by counter-developments too: Black September 1970 in Jordan forced the relocation of the Palestinian resistance organizations to Lebanon, and the resulting disastrous civil war in that latter country; the defeat of the armed Left and the installation of military regimes in the Southern Cone of the Americas and, above all, the 1978 Camp David accords, which gave Israel the most important diplomatic victory in its history: peace agreement with Egypt, the biggest and most important Arab country. This allowed Israel to embark on the massive settlement enterprise that dominated its policies in subsequent years.

Followed by the rise of the Thatcher and Reagan governments in the UK and USA, the anti-imperialist tide was halted and even reversed. The Sino-Vietnamese conflict, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and the Iran-Iraq war shattered hopes for any global alliance of forces opposed to US domination. By the early 1990s, Israel's diplomatic fortunes had changed dramatically, with the renewal of relations with most African countries, Eastern European countries, India, China, and Russia. The rise of 20 new states in the same period, with the collapse of Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union, gave the principle of national self-determination a boost, enhancing the legitimacy of both Israeli and Palestinian independent statehood.

In such a changed environment, opposition to the State of Israel, not merely to its policies in the Occupied Territories but to its dominant ideology, its legitimacy, and its very existence, began to look increasingly anachronistic. The international consensus adopted the view that a negotiated solution should result in two states peacefully coexisting alongside each other, in line with the principle of national self-determination. The PLO itself adopted that position in the Declaration of Independence for the State of Palestine in 1988,³¹ and it participated in subsequent diplomatic processes that culminated in 1993 with the Oslo Accords and mutual recognition between itself and Israel. It has not revoked this basic stance despite the series of armed hostilities that have plagued the country over the last two decades.

With the exception of a few countries such as Iran, and some Palestinian forces – notably Hamas – rejectionist positions became marginalized. There is global support for a two-state solution that would result in the creation of an independent Palestinian state in the 1967 Territories, but *not* for replacing Israel with a Palestinian state on the entire territory of historical Palestine, nor for replacing the Israeli regime with a new non-ethnic democracy. This pro-Israeli trend became stronger in the last decade, with the rise of a reactionary populist wave that brought to power the likes of Viktor Orban, Narendra Modi, Rodrigo Duterte, Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Boris Johnson, and Javier Milei. And of course,

³¹ Palestine National Council, "Declaration of State of Palestine", 16th November 1988, <https://www.un.org/unispa/document/auto-insert-178680/>

throughout the period, Israel continued to enjoy almost unconditional diplomatic and military support from the US administration, backed by an even less restrictive Congress.

To what extent have things changed since the 7th October 2023, the Hamas attack, the Israeli onslaught, the ongoing Gaza war, and the developing Palestinian solidarity movement? There is no doubt that the scale and ferocity of the Israeli onslaught, and the global revulsion with which it was met, damaged Israel's reputation and diminished its popular and diplomatic standing. Accusations of practices of apartheid and genocide, war crimes and ethnic cleansing abound, as are calls for boycotts and sanctions. But are these directed at the state of Israel as a whole, its policies in the 1967 Occupied Territories, or specifically at the current onslaught on Gaza? Have these protests led to a questioning of the legitimacy of the Israeli regime itself or only its policies and practices towards Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza?

At this point in time, it is difficult to say that there has been a major shift towards targeting the entire set of institutions and practices that go under the name of 'State of Israel', as opposed to mere intensification of the criticisms of its policies towards occupied Palestinians and its brutal indiscriminate attacks on civilians. Such intensification is important in its own right, of course, and may lead in the future to delegitimization of the regime but this is not the case now, at least not yet. To use imperfect analogies, Israel's international standing is shifting towards that of a state widely condemned for its policies, similarly to Russia with regard to the Ukraine, Myanmar with regard to the Rohingya, or Serbia with regard to Bosnia and Kosovo. All these cases gave rise to global opprobrium and harsh condemnation, including the imposition of sanctions, but without challenging the legitimacy of the state as a player in the international arena. In this sense, these cases were/are different from South Africa under apartheid, especially in the last stage of its existence during the 1980s.

The Target

The main reason for the contrast between *support* for a unitary non-racial South Africa to replace apartheid and *opposition* to (or at least, lack of active support for) unitary statehood in Israel/Palestine, is the way in which the respective conflicts are defined. In essence, South Africa was seen as a society divided by race – an invidious distinction that was the historical product of colonialism and slavery, and which served to elevate one group of people socially and politically over others, on the basis of imaginary biological differences. Israel/Palestine was and still is seen rather as the setting for a national-type conflict between two groups, each with a distinct historical identity, language, culture, and religion. The groups are separated from each other due to their own self-definition – which predates their encounter on the land of Palestine from the late 19th century onwards – rather than through an imposition by some (European, colonial, and settler forces) on others (Africans, indigenous people).

Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs define their identities in national-territorial terms, which are considered legitimate, even normative, globally, rather than in illegitimate racial terms. This makes their relations *potentially* reconcilable through territorial partition. But there are other terms that fit the conflict too. Nationalism has been combined with colonialism and settlement in a process whereby one of the groups emerged, grew, and expanded territorially by displacing and replacing members of the other group. The current population distribution that may form the basis for partitioning the land – with Israeli Jews as a majority within the pre-1967 boundaries – is an outcome of the forcible dispersal of millions of people who had become refugees in their own and neighboring countries as a result of the Nakba of 1948.

Further, the settlement of hundreds of thousands of Israeli Jews in the midst of the 1967 Territories has made a solution by way of partition very difficult. The definition of the State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people and theirs alone includes Jews who *do not* live there at present and have never lived there and excludes non-Jews who *do* live there. This introduces another complication into the picture.

And yet, the dominant perspective globally remains that of a solution consisting of an Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza and the creation of an independent Palestinian state there. This solution is premised on regarding the 1948 Nakba as irreversible and regarding the post-1967 settlement process as reversible. It thus conflicts with the views of many people affected directly by such a solution – Palestinian refugees and Jewish settlers respectively. It treats the 1967 occupation as illegitimate and temporary and thus, by implication, the rest of Israel as legitimate and permanent. It removes ‘Israel proper’ in its original post-1948 boundaries from consideration of sanctions and leaves its policies of occupation and settlement as the target, including of course the current Gaza war.

Importantly, the ongoing case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), lodged by South Africa against Israel, is focused entirely on policies currently pursued by Israel in relation to Gaza, with hardly a mention of the regime or state as a whole. In passing, it is noted that 80% of the population of Gaza consist of refugees and their descendants “from towns and villages in what is now the State of Israel, expelled or forced to flee during the mass displacement of over 750,000 Palestinians or ‘Nakba’ during the establishment of the State of Israel”, a fact that “features prominently in the history and consciousness of Palestinians in Gaza, as it does for the wider Palestinian people”.³² But this historical background does not affect the rest of the application, nor does it play a role in the measures of intervention sought from the ICJ.

This approach has been expressed more recently in a series of bans and sanctions imposed by Western countries on individual Israeli settlers and their allies accused of violent actions against Palestinian residents. It is also manifested in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) July 2024 ruling, that “Israel’s continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is unlawful; the State of Israel is under an obligation to bring to an end its unlawful presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory as rapidly as possible; the State of Israel is under an obligation to cease immediately all new settlement activities, and to evacuate all settlers from the Occupied Palestinian Territory”.

The ruling calls on international bodies not to recognize the legality of the situation and says that the United Nations General Assembly and the Security Council “should consider the precise modalities and further action required to bring to an end as rapidly as possible the unlawful presence of the State of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory”. The ICJ observed that “Israel’s legislation and measures impose and serve to maintain a near-complete separation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem between the settler and Palestinian communities”. This constitutes a breach of Article 3 of the 1965 Convention on Eliminating Racial Discrimination that prohibits racial segregation and apartheid. However, it applies only to the Occupied Territories and not to Israeli territory.³³

³² “[Proceedings instituted by South Africa against the State of Israel on 29 December 2023](https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20231228-app-01-00-en.pdf)”, International Court of Justice, 29th December 2023, <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20231228-app-01-00-en.pdf>.

³³ ICJ, “Advisory Opinion: Legal Consequences Arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem”, 19th July 2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/186/186-20240719-adv-01-00-en.pdf>

In all this there is clear conceptual distinction between Israel as a state, the existence and legitimacy of which is not contested, and the occupation regime that is challenged as illegal. This rests on the assumption that the two sides of the Green Line (the pre-1967 boundary) are separate, as if the policies of occupation and settlement were not inherently linked to the crucial features of the Israeli regime itself – the ethnic cleansing of 1948 and the definition of Israel as the exclusive and exclusionary nation-state of the Jewish people. This regime grants ownership rights to all non-resident Jews and denies them to all resident non-Jews, including Palestinian citizens (20% of the population) who may enjoy rights as individuals but are not recognized as a collective with an equal stake in the state, which belongs only to Jews.

The focus on the 1967 Occupied Territories is crucial because it identifies the most pressing problem that requires immediate action. At the same time, it clearly is linked to other features of the regime and therefore is difficult to address adequately without attending to them both conceptually and practically. How to retain that focus on the regime's most vulnerable aspect without losing sight of its other dimensions is a challenge. The BDS movement has sought to meet this challenge by putting forward three demands for Israel: "Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall; Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194". These demands respectively address the 1967 occupation, the exclusive Jewish nature of the state, and the legacy of the 1948 Nakba.

The comprehensive nature of the BDS call avoids the failure of international bodies, the ICJ included, to target the Israeli regime beyond the 1967 occupation. It thus provides a useful corrective to the global consensus on Israel/Palestine *in theory*. But, by treating the issue as merely one concern among others, giving it no priority, it fails to capitalize *in practice* on the centrality it acquired in discourse critical of Israel and its policies. Of course, the BDS call does not require that all three concerns be addressed jointly, or that they receive the same degree of attention always. The BDS label has been deployed in different ways by local campaigns that do not need to receive a seal of approval from any central authority. The key question is whether the focus on the illegality of the occupation and the need for sanctions on Israel in order to bring it to an end, can shift to a focus on the illegitimacy of the regime as a whole. This would mean imposing sanctions on the State of Israel to change fundamentally from the inside, in the way it defines citizenship and rights in ethno-religious terms.

This is the dilemma facing critical activists and intellectuals: for an overall understanding of Israel/Palestine they need to incorporate notions of colonialism and apartheid into their conceptual framework, and thereby move beyond the national framing of the conflict with its focus on the 1967 occupation. In that way, they would be able to address the Nakba of 1948 and the exclusionary structural features of Israel as a Jewish state. But, when they campaign concretely, using calls for sanctions among other strategies, they *do* need to focus on the occupation as an issue that mobilizes large numbers of governments and people globally around a common target in a powerful way. This focus does *not* require abandoning the other concerns, merely regarding them as less urgent at this point in time.

This may be formulated perhaps as a rule of thumb of *political action*: the more focused the campaign is on clearly identifiable and contained issues – in other words, on a minimalist program – the more likely it is to appeal to a wider constituency and gain large-scale support. This usually comes though at the expense of a more far-reaching program that seeks to address many different concerns at the same time. A trade-off is inevitable because a radical

program cannot unify many people of diverse backgrounds, interests, and priorities. With that said, the logic of *political education* is different: a comprehensive understanding of social and political issues is essential in providing a context for engaging with more limited and well-contained questions.³⁴

The application of this rule to the Palestine solidarity movement would mean that immediate issues would be likely to gain support and see results: mobilization around Gaza, the calls for a ceasefire and putting an end to the Israeli military offensive, have found widespread support in the USA, Europe and large parts of the world. Calls for Israeli withdrawal from the 1967 Occupied Territories and in favor of Palestinian self-determination enjoy support too but have not given rise to militant and enthusiastic action as those related to the current Gaza situation, with the humanitarian catastrophe caused by the Israeli onslaught. They can and should be pursued, of course, but not as an immediate focus of attention as long as the war continues.

In contrast, calls for action to promote the 1948 refugees' right of return and to transform Israel from a Jewish state into a non-ethnic democracy are much less common outside of small groups of young activists and are almost unknown at the official level. The implications for sanctions and other means of solidarity are obvious: there is a need to target carefully by mobilizing on the largest scale possible on issues of immediate concern which can generate more public and official support and lead to concrete action, even if this means relegating other demands to the back burner. This does not mean keeping silent – education remains essential regarding all issues of concern, whether in the short or long term. But action must follow clear priorities.

The Discourse

The prospects of such mobilization and the likely audiences for solidarity actions depend on the discourse adopted by the movement. This means the way in which the issue may be posed in the name of a particular claim or rather a universal principle, in terms that are potentially inclusive of different sides to the conflict or are exclusive to one of them. The anti-apartheid struggle was waged in the name of a general cause – human and political rights for all people in the country. It was not a campaign conducted on behalf of a specific racial or ethnic group. And even though it addressed a colonial conflict, it aimed to reconcile indigenous people and settlers, black and white people, on the basis of shared national identity and equal citizenship. The nation in that context consisted of all South Africans regardless of their background.

This is not to deny that sectional identities played a role, but the dominant discourse took the 'anti' in anti-apartheid seriously, rejecting the use of ethnicity and race for divide and rule purposes: 'UDF unites, Apartheid divides' was a core slogan of the 1980s, thus opening the gates to all citizens potentially. Obviously, historical, social, and political circumstances of groups in the population differed sharply, but the task was to bridge over divisions, through joint action and conscious rejection of the legacy of apartheid, not to entrench differences. The inclusive discourse of the movement aimed to serve that goal.³⁵

³⁴ What is needed to expand understanding of the nature of the conflict is the opposite of what is needed to expand the solidarity efforts, contrary to Samer Jaber, "Solidarity with Palestine must be about Decolonisation, not just Ceasefire", 18th August 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/8/18/solidarity-with-palestine-must-be-about-decolonisation-not-just-ceasefire>

³⁵ "Speech by Rev. Dr. Allan Boesak at the launch of the United Democratic Front", 20th August 1983, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/speech-rev-dr-allan-boesak-launch-united-democratic-front-20-august-1983-rocklands-civic>.

How does this approach compare to that of the Palestine solidarity movement? The general BDS call of 2005, issued in the name of Palestinian civil society, aimed to put pressure on the State of Israel and it invited “conscientious Israelis” to join the effort “for the sake of justice and genuine peace”. The specific calls for cultural and academic boycotts targeted institutions rather than individuals, so potentially created space for Israeli activists to participate as well. But, in contrast to the South African campaign, these calls have been made by Palestinians in the name of their struggle for political independence and equality rather than in the name of a ‘nation’ or an imagined political community sharing an identity to which all people, whatever their ethnic, racial, and religious background, could belong equally. That Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews are distinct groups is a notion that is widespread and deeply entrenched; some of their members may work together on specific projects, but they are organized on a separate basis that is expressed above all in different and opposed nationalist consciousness.

The tension between national and nationalist discourses is crucial: the one is potentially unifying in the name of a shared territorial and civic identity, while the other is effectively divisive in the name of a distinct identity, defined through history in ethnic, linguistic, or religious terms. Israelis and Palestinians share a territory of course, but they give it different names and attach different meanings to its history, which they tend to interpret in incompatible nationalist terms. Parts of that territory fall under political arrangements imposed against the wishes of the local Palestinian population, and boundaries of settlement and residence are subject to legal and political challenges between the two groups and, to some extent, within them too. Global and local discourses treat membership in these groups as mutually exclusive: you belong to one or the other, with very few cross-cutting affiliations.

Thus, the struggle is conceptualized as being waged by one group to liberate itself from the domination of the other. This allows limited space only for alternative conceptualizations (not necessarily contradictory) that focus on shared concerns about civil rights, democracy, social and political freedoms. Israeli Jews are called upon to show solidarity with the Palestinian struggle for independence and justice but are not asked or expected to embrace it as their own and join it as partners. They remain external to it, even though their attitudes and actions are central to its prospects of success.

In contrast, white South Africans were invited to see the struggle as their own and join it as partners, thus moving from being part of the problem to becoming part of the solution. Of course, most white South Africans did not actively join the liberation struggle, but the inclusive discourse of the anti-apartheid movement served largely to neutralize their opposition to change and to generate good will that facilitated the transition process of the 1990s.

It is important to recognise that the dominant Palestinian nationalist discourse since 1970 defined the ultimate goal of the struggle as the formation of ‘a secular democratic state’ for Muslims, Christians, and Jews in all of historical Palestine. That goal regarded Israeli Jews in religious rather than national terms, as they see themselves, but it was an important shift towards recognising and accepting their presence as legitimate. The distinction between indigenous Arab people and foreign Jewish settlers that had been central to Palestinian nationalism in earlier periods was laid to rest. The demand that Israeli Jews had to renounce Zionism before they were eligible for citizenship in a liberated Palestine was also abandoned. In that sense the Palestinian movement took a crucial step forward, albeit one that was marred

by the retention of an Arab nationalist framework that Israelis regarded as incompatible with their own deep sense of distinct national identity.³⁶

By the mid-1980s the mainstream of the Palestinian movement had started shifting its attitude towards accepting – first implicitly and then explicitly – that Israelis had a distinct national identity (not only an ethnic or religious identity), and that Israel/Palestine could be divided on that basis between the two national groups, regardless of their different historical origins and the indigenous/settler distinction. Initial progress towards such a solution was made with the 1993 Oslo Accords, but that process stalled as a result of continued Israeli settlement in the Occupied Territories and denial of independent statehood to Palestinians residing there. The outcome of this failure to satisfy even the basic demands of Palestinians was a revival by the global solidarity movement of the 21st century of the discourse of an irreconcilable conflict between indigenous people and settlers – not just those in the 1967 Territories but in the entire country. This is captured in the recent focus on Zionism as settler colonialism and the adoption of the call ‘From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free’.

This move is problematic from a perspective that seeks to mobilize broad support for the campaign against Israel’s occupation. The slogan ‘From the river to the sea’ does not mention Israeli Jews or acknowledge their place that is defined exclusively as Palestine. It is obvious why Palestinians would focus on their own quest for freedom – all groups do – but a view to the future cannot exclude, even if implicitly, the other major group in the population as if the struggle aimed to replace one type of domination with another. This is a retreat from the shift made by the Palestinian movement in the 1980s towards a bi-national Israel/Palestine. The retreat is evident in the identification of the abstract and vaguely defined ideological notion of ‘Zionism’ and its proponents – ‘the Zionists’, seen as a cohesive group – as the enemy, rather than concrete agents: the Israeli state, its military and civilian institutions and policies, and their supporters.

Of course, these slogans have been raised primarily by some activists in the global solidarity movement rather than by organizations active in the country itself. What are the implications of this hardening of the discourse for the discussion of sanctions? We need to consider that these changes in the discourse are taking place at the same time that conditions on the ground are worsening dramatically, with the intensification of Israeli occupation and settlement practices and, especially, with the brutal Gaza War and its devastating impact on civilians in that area. The result is a growing gap between the immediate demands for a ceasefire and withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza, focused as they are on concrete and limited goals, and the far-reaching discourse of total liberation from Israeli domination in all of Palestine.

In the tension between immediate and long-term goals, the task of addressing the occupation and its effects on the population in the 1967 Territories is in danger of being overlooked – if Zionist settler colonialism is indeed prevalent in the entire country, why focus on any specific area within it? If we focus on Gaza or 1967, are we not neglecting all other issues that can be traced ultimately to the same source – the nature of the State of Israel since its inception? Would we not be dealing with symptoms only instead of the underlying problem?

And yet, the 1967 occupation continues to offer the best prospects for a coordinated global campaign, including sanctions. Moving away from more comprehensive and radical demands towards a more focused and measured campaign is not easy, though. It inevitably runs against

³⁶ See Greenstein, *Anti-Colonial Resistance* (2023), pp. 183-93.

the logic of militant political activists. It was instructive to witness the April 2024 clash between veteran activist Norman Finkelstein who emphasized the need to mobilize a broad constituency, and protesting students at Columbia University who had no patience for any suggestion to dilute their language. Finkelstein proposed: “Amend the slogan to: ‘From the river to the sea, Palestinians will be free’. It doesn’t endorse one state, it doesn’t endorse two states. It doesn’t say: ‘All Jews have to go’. It doesn’t say: ‘Jews can stay’. It just doesn’t imply: ‘We’re trying to get rid of Jews’. For me, the ideal slogan would actually be: ‘From the river to the sea, one person, one vote, Palestinians will be free’.”³⁷ The Columbia students responded immediately, of course, by doubling down on their call.³⁸

Finkelstein’s criticism was echoed by Adam Shatz, when he compared calls celebrating the Intifada and ‘From the river to the sea’ to ‘Defund the police’: they were appealing in their absolutism, but also “dangerously ambiguous, fuel for right-wing adversaries looking for evidence of calls for ‘genocide’ against Jews”. There was, he said, “a theatrical dimension to the protests, with some students imagining themselves to be part of the same drama unfolding in Gaza, confusing the rough clearing of an encampment (‘liberated zones’) with the violent destruction of a refugee camp”.

But, Shatz added, the attacks on the protesters were not a fair portrayal of a broad-based movement that managed to draw attention to crucial issues: “the obscenity of Israel’s war on Gaza; the complicity of their government in arming Israel and facilitating the slaughter; the hypocrisy of America’s claim to defend human rights and a rules-based international order while giving Israel carte blanche; and the urgent need for a ceasefire”. He predicted that “The destruction of Gaza will be as formative for them as the struggles against the Vietnam War, apartheid in South Africa and the Iraq War were for earlier generations”.³⁹

Shatz may well be right about the likely impact of the campaign on the protesters, but the crucial question rather is the impact on the cause they seek to serve. Is it a coincidence that radical demands become more common precisely when the chances of their realization recede? One reason for that is the sense of despair about the prospect of making gains under oppressive conditions by using more diplomatic and strategic approaches. The feeling among activists may be that there is nothing to lose from ramping up rhetorical militancy because keeping it low key does not result in growing support among establishment political forces. The opposite may also be true, that people get carried away by rhetoric and ask themselves, why stop, why not go all the way? This is unlikely though to result in practical achievements beyond drawing public attention – an important goal – of limited and temporary nature.⁴⁰

³⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/may/17/university-protests-gaza-norman-finkelstein>

³⁸ On the need to build alliances with forces inside the political system see Waled Shahid, “What the Movement for Palestine Can Learn from the Fight Against Apartheid”, *The Nation*, 18th October 2024, who says: “Yet, the lesson remains: Protests alone don’t shift US foreign policy. It takes strategic legislative moves, coalition building, and inside engagement”, <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/anti-apartheid-movement-south-africa-palestine/>

³⁹ Adam Shatz, “Israel’s Descent”, *London Review of Books* (46, 12), 20th June 2024, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v46/n12/adam-shatz/israel-s-descent>. In a similar vein, see Musa al-Gharbi, “Behind the Ivy Intifada”, 9th May 2024, <https://www.compactmag.com/article/behind-the-ivy-intifada/>

⁴⁰ “Pro-Palestinian Group Is Relentless in Its Criticism of Israel, and It Isn’t Backing Down”, *New York Times*, 5th October 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/05/us/within-our-lifetime-pro-palestinian-activism.html>; “Pro-Palestinian Group at Columbia Now Backs ‘Armed Resistance’ by Hamas”, *New York Times*, 9th October 2024, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/09/nyregion/columbia-pro-palestinian-group-hamas.html>. Rhetorical excess is not restricted to student politics, as evident in the 12th May 2024 statement by a solidarity conference titled “Johannesburg Declaration on Israel’s Settler-Colonialism, Apartheid and Genocide:

There is no doubt though, that the broad protests changed the debate in the USA and were a reason for the (qualified) rhetorical distancing of the Democratic Party from its traditional support of Israel and its policies. Limited as the criticism is, it is notable against the background of the Biden administration's unqualified military and diplomatic support for Israel's military offensive.⁴¹

Current discussions of sanctions continue to focus on Israeli settlers and practices in the 1967 Territories and on the Gaza war. This campaign is likely to gain more support internationally since the Israeli regime has no intention of relinquishing control, even if the intensity of the Gaza war may decrease over time. However, there is no move now, nor is such move likely in the near to medium future, to extend sanctions to the Israeli regime as a whole, let alone use them to establish Palestinian sovereignty over the entire territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Given the reluctance in the USA and Europe to consider even such limited steps as sanctioning the Israeli government (not the state/regime) for its current policies, the road ahead will continue to face serious obstacles.

The Local and the Global

To enhance the impact of the global campaign it needs to link up to local mobilization. That was the case for the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Throughout its history, and in particular since the mid-1970s, the dynamics of global solidarity were shaped by local action and activists (even while many of them were in exile). Anti-apartheid diplomatic and popular efforts, including boycotts and sanctions, started in the 1950s already, and gained momentum in the 1960s and early 1970s. But it was only through the rise and growth of the internal mass movement – independent trade unions, the Black Consciousness movement, the Soweto uprising, and eventually the UDF alongside other movements – that the solidarity campaign expanded and became a powerful global force. It was guided by the ANC as the overall political leadership, but local initiative largely reflected the concerns expressed by mass constituencies inside the country. There were inevitable tensions between local and global activists, but they managed to maintain a unified campaign against the common enemy.

The case for Palestine solidarity is different: there is no unified national leadership to the struggle, nor are there mass constituencies inside the country itself that shape the overall campaign. It is largely determined by unaffiliated and uncoordinated global activists in different places, who generally adhere to the BDS call but decide on their agendas according to their own disparate circumstances. This gives their initiatives an essential local flavour but deprives them of the power of unity and coherent direction of the anti-apartheid movement. In this sense, they are at a disadvantage compared to their South African counterparts. This is one important reason why European governments and others have proceeded with their initiatives to sanction illegal settlers and their state enablers independently of the solidarity campaign and without even mentioning it.

This is the perhaps most crucial difference between the solidarity movements in the two places. The absence of a unified and powerful local movement makes global activists less

Towards a Global Anti-Apartheid Movement for Palestine”, <https://www.hic-net.org/johannesburg-declaration-on-israels-settler-colonialism-apartheid-and-genocide-towards-a-global-anti-apartheid-movement-for-palestine/>

⁴¹ On the Biden administration policy see Franklin Foer, “The War That Would Not End”, *The Atlantic*, 25th September 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2024/09/israel-gaza-war-biden-netanyahu-peace-negotiations/679581/>

effective in the case of Palestine. Sanctions against oppressive regimes work optimally if they enjoy widespread support among constituencies on the ground and they can be boosted further by their own efforts on the ground. Pressures from the inside and the outside need to be combined for a positive outcome. External activists cannot create an internal movement, of course, but they do need to think about their actions and campaigns with this absence in mind, and devise strategies to overcome its impact, without deluding themselves about their own impact and contribution.

Ultimately, only Palestinians can liberate themselves from Israeli domination. Global solidarity is essential for this goal to be achieved, but it cannot be a substitute for local initiative and action, led by Palestinians as the main stakeholders, (hopefully) enjoying support from critical Israeli-Jewish activists and movements as well. The last year has seen progress in the spread and visibility of the solidarity movement overseas, but also a reversal of any prospect for joint action between progressive activists inside the country. Whether this reversal is temporary or long-term is impossible to determine right now, but without an end to the military campaign there is little chance of a positive change in the situation in the foreseeable future.