

Gendering Genocide: Gaza, the Resistance of Palestinian Women, and the Limits of Western Feminist Solidarity

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The Israeli attacks on Gaza have resulted in the mass slaughter of Palestinian women and children; this violence is part of the state's genocidal strategy. Reported daily in the Arab media but either neglected or minimized in mainstream western media, the violence directed toward Palestinian women and their children is clearly neither an unintended consequence in the 'fog of war' nor an unfortunate effect of oversight by the Israeli army. The Israeli political leadership has repeatedly and very publicly articulated its clear genocidal intent, which includes the particular targeting of Palestinian women. In the case of Gaza, the Israeli state has deliberately bombed sites where large numbers of women and children are known to be seeking shelter. No mere acts of omission, these are rather acts of commission.

The stability of every settler society depends upon its ability to destroy the colonized people's power to resist and their capacity to reproduce future generations. Gaining control over the women is crucial to this process, and Israeli officials have made no secret of their intent to accomplish exactly this. Ayelet Shaked explicitly called for the extermination of Palestinian women when she termed their children "little snakes:"¹ "They should go, as should the physical homes in which they raised the snakes. Otherwise more little snakes will be raised there," she stated.² She was subsequently appointed Justice Minister in 2015. Deputy Defence Minister Dahan called Palestinians "beasts" in 2013, going on to claim

“they are not human.”³ This was ten years ago. These were senior politicians with the highest political ranks speaking.

To dismiss such declaration of intent as the ravings of ultra-right racists is to miss how the dehumanization of Palestinians—upon which the destruction of their peoplehood relies—is racialized as well as gendered and folded into the very structure and religio-racial logics of the Zionist nation-state. One can find similar examples of such dehumanization right from the Nakba onward, including Golda Meir’s comments that “[t]here is no Palestinian people” only Palestinian refugees and that the Palestinian “terrorist” subscribes to a “ghoulish nationalism.” Meir designated the Palestine Liberation Organization “exultant murderers of the innocent” as she continued to claim “[w]e dispossessed no Arabs.”⁴ This was a woman Prime Minister who is celebrated as a (proto)feminist, the first woman Prime Minister in the western world, and whose career is often presented as attesting to Israel’s superior commitment to gender egalitarianism.⁵

The history of the Israeli woman politician who actively disappears the presence of Palestinian women in political as well as existential terms in order to claim legitimacy for the Israeli state—and her own place within it—has yet to be accounted for. Tzipi Hotovely, the Israeli Ambassador to the UK, most recently echoed Meir’s view that “there is no Palestinian people” as she denied there is a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, one that has disproportionately killed Palestinian women and children. For good measure, she dubbed UNRWA schools “terror schools” and called for Gazans to be “re-educated” as she rejected outright the idea of any peace with the Palestinians on the basis of the two-state solution.⁶ Hotovely is reported to have supported the destruction of the Palestinian village Khan al-Ahmar as well

as of the al-Aqsa Mosque Compound.⁷ The ongoing representation of Israel's women politicians, who call for the erasure of the Palestinian people and who disappear Palestinian women and children from the political field, as symbols of gender egalitarianism demonstrates how deeply saturated with gender politics is the project of settler colonialism: exaltation of Israeli women in the nation-state's gender politics goes hand in hand with its racial-political 'disappearing' of Palestinian women *even* as it brutalizes them for being the obstacle to the realization of the Zionist project.

In keeping with this foundational logic, Defence Minister Gallant ordered "a total siege of Gaza" following the Hamas attacks of October 7, proclaiming to the world "we are fighting human animals and will act accordingly;" just so there would be no doubt as to what this 'fight' would actually mean, he clarified "[t]here will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed."⁸ Not to be outshone, the Prime Minister described Palestinians as the "children of darkness" to justify this horrific slaughter with the stated objective of "destroying Hamas," an objective that even the Biden Administration, Israel's most powerful political backer, recognizes cannot be realistically achieved, notwithstanding Biden's ardent expressions of total support.

The objective that *is* being achieved on the ground in Gaza is the slaughter of Palestinian women and children, the destruction of their homes, schools, mosques, bakeries, shops, churches, and hospitals—in short the infrastructure that sustains their everyday lives and livelihoods. The numbers in Gaza demonstrate this. Well over 20,000 Palestinians have been killed since October 7. The numbers are rising hourly and will undoubtedly be much higher when the actual toll is taken after the assault ends. Of those killed, 70% are women

and children.⁹ The UN estimates that 50,000 pregnant women are due to give birth in these catastrophic conditions. An estimated 180 women give birth every day, reports *Al Jazeera*, with no access to clean water, no painkillers, no electricity, no medical supplies or access to healthcare services. Mothers are giving babies formula using contaminated water; mothers go hungry to feed their children.

Gaza is on the verge of famine, warns UNICEF, and all children under the age of five are “at high risk of malnutrition and preventable death.”¹⁰ Israel, however, has ordered yet another evacuation, this time from Bureij and Nuseirat along what Palestinians call the “death corridor.”¹¹ Gazans, including wounded and injured women and children, have been ordered to travel via what Israel pronounces to be ‘safe routes’ along which its soldiers then proceed to arrest, shoot, and kill many on the move.

These facts on the ground are not unknown to the Israeli state, its military, its nationals, nor to the Euro-American states who provide the arms facilitating the carnage. In addition to those killed, thousands more women and children are being injured, maimed, and disabled by the relentless bombings. Azhaar Amayreh, a young mother and an interpreter and translator, recounts a day in her and her child’s lives as she struggles to find water, bread, and care for her family under the terror of the Israeli state. Amayreh then states “It seems all the more likely, almost assured, that we will not make it alive from here, given the barrage of weapons and bombings directed at us from every imaginable direction.” The message she wants the world to understand and remember is short, clear, and devastating; it is also an indictment: “what kept me going till the very last are three things: my faith in Allah, my love for my young daughter, and the Palestinian blood in my veins.”¹²

Gazan women are losing their children, family members, support systems and yet, as the world witnesses daily, they keep going on in these desperate conditions, salvaging whatever they can of their children and families, their lives and belongings, holding their communities together even under the threat of immediate death. And their spirit of resistance remains undaunted, as demonstrated daily in the interviews, social media posts, and news reports coming out of Gaza.

A woman recently released from an Israeli prison spoke to the media saying, “God bless the resistance. Without them, we would have never been released. Our freedom is because of them. Our honor is because of them. We hold our heads up high because of them. Without them, no prisoner will have been released.” She continued,

While we were getting released, a captain called ‘Diab,’ who is a loser, came to me. I told him today that you imprisoned me for no reason, but we were victorious at the end. He said: “Celebrations for your release are illegal.” I told him all Palestinians will celebrate my release. The Palestinian people are amidst a revolution. He told me that he would arrest me again, but no one can break my will.¹³

The younger generation of Palestinian women are learning from their elders, from women who lived through the Nakba as well as through Israel’s previous attacks on Gaza. From founding the Palestinian Women’s Congress in 1910 to oppose the British Mandate, to storming the prison where Palestinian men were held in 1936, to leading the First Intifada (beginning in 1987) after large numbers of Palestinian men were arrested, killed or deported, and to organizing mass boycotts as well as struggles for the right of return, Palestinian women have been both the backbone and at the forefront of the resistance.¹⁴ Together they

have survived expulsion; they have been detained, imprisoned and subject to constant surveillance.¹⁵ They have had their homes demolished, sometimes multiple times over; they have survived the punishing blockade of the Gaza Strip designed by Israel to keep the population at bare subsistence level. The shrinking spaces where these women and children seek shelter, including the UN centers—which, like all the other civilian spaces are determined to be out of bounds for attacking armies by international law—are being deliberately and systematically destroyed. Gaza is being turned into “a graveyard for thousands of children” warns the United Nations.¹⁶ Israel continues to drop the bombs. Yet the women of Gaza resist. When Israel burns down the bakeries and the fishing boats, Gaza’s resourceful women make, trade in, and use, traditional clay ovens.¹⁷

I make these points not because I want to discount or dismiss the violence done to Palestinian men. They too are being killed, injured, maimed, terrorized, and traumatized indiscriminately in this violence. Just recently, dozens of men sheltering in UN schools were rounded up, stripped to their underwear, publicly humiliated, and taken by Israeli soldiers.¹⁸ The point I want to emphasize here is that it is the women who, in the resistance against Israeli attempts to erase Palestinian existence, hold the family and community together, who are the mothers of future generations, and who, as was the case in every other anti-colonial revolution, keep the spirit of resistance alive and pass it on to their children.

Young men and teenage boys in Gaza who join the resistance and become fighters speak of how they are inspired by their mothers and sisters in the struggle. As they emerge from the rubble, they grieve the loss of these mothers and sisters, whom they describe as heroes and martyrs. Women are central to shaping this culture of resistance; they are

critically influential in their communities and in their movements. In Frantz Fanon's *A Dying Colonialism*, he describes how the decision of Algerian women to join the resistance revealed the gendered violence of the French Occupation and transformed the Algerian family by opening up possibilities for the reshaping of gender roles and relations: "The Algerian woman is at the heart of the combat. Arrested, tortured, raped, shut down, she testifies to the violence of the occupier and his inhumanity. As a nurse, a liaison agent, a fighter, she bears witness to the depth and density of the struggle."¹⁹ The decision of the women to join the resistance became the collective decision of the family as they supported her. This organic transformation of the Algerian family united the population in their common objective, ending the French occupation.

Palestinian women are playing a fundamental role in the resistance of their people. This is abundantly evident in Gaza, and in the mobilizations of the pro-Palestinian people's movements across the Middle East, across the US, Canada and Europe, indeed around the world. Gaza is today the frontline against the US-led imperialist order with its Israeli outpost in the Middle East, and Palestinian women are at the forefront of this resistance.

The stakes are high indeed for Israel and the US. After the defeats of the US-led alliance in Afghanistan and Iraq comes this exposure of the political, intelligence, and military failures of the Israeli state, its ability to keep destabilizing the region and thus advance US foreign policy interests now suddenly up for questioning. The US was already an empire in decline; its foreign policy in the region is now in tatters as the popular support for the Palestinian cause across the Middle East and North Africa has upended the drive for normalization of Israel's relations with the Arab states. Compounding the crisis, the UN has

been explicitly shown to be utterly incapable of bringing about a ceasefire in Gaza, despite its best efforts and the strong consensus around the world that this carnage must end. Not only was the US empire weakened by the global war on terror, the international institutional arrangements in place since the end of World War II have been exposed as utterly powerless to hold to account the US-Israel-European alliance.

In these conditions, it is striking to witness how different has been the western feminist response to the violence in Gaza—mostly silence—than to the earlier US-led ‘war on terror’ in Afghanistan. Western feminists have always been more interested in the violence done to colonized women by colonized men, to Palestinian women by Palestinian men, than they have been in the violence done to Palestinian women (and men) by the Israeli state and the settler communities it has emboldened.²⁰ This is nothing new; colonized and enslaved women everywhere are familiar with these politics of ‘feminist solidarity’ that direct animosity toward the men from these communities.

Racism, underwritten by this politics of feminist recognition, has shaped western feminist solidarities for decades; this racism has been confronted by Indigenous, Black and other women of colour. But the contours of the racism directed at Palestinian women today is especially revealing when comparing the siege of Gaza to the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan (2001).

During the twenty-year Afghan war, the construction of the Afghan woman as helpless and in need of rescue by western feminists racialized the Muslim woman as passive object, oppressed by her men, family, religion, and culture. This demonization of the Muslim man and Islam became the basis for the making of the Afghan/Muslim woman into a

‘worthy’ victim. As many of us argued then, western feminists made common cause with their states by working to ‘save’ Afghan women, gendering Islamophobia to advance the interests of their states.²¹ The grounds for such ‘feminist solidarity’ during the war on terror was the feminist demonization of Islam as inherently misogynist and of Muslim men as essentially woman-hating, as well as the exaltation of western-secularism as orientated toward egalitarianism and hence essentially superior.²² The imposition, or even better, willing embrace, of western-secular-feminist gender norms and values by the Afghan/Muslim woman thus became the condition of her salvation.

That such collusion with the imperialist state offered western feminists opportunities for their own advancement was not an insignificant factor during the global war’s two decades, a prominent example of which was the use of what western feminists called ‘the plight of the Afghan woman’ to develop their own brand of ‘feminist foreign policy’ for this state.²³ What then does that feminist foreign policy offer in this moment of crisis?

In the case of Palestinian women, we see a different kind of racism and Islamophobia at work. Anti-Palestinian Israeli propaganda has long been invested in Islamophobic tropes and caricatures of Palestinian/Muslim men *as well as* women as not even human, hence non-existent in political terms. Moreover, the Islamophobic discourses of the US-led war on terror that were explicitly institutionalized across western institutions, particularly the law, the university, and the media, are now being reiterated to attack any opposition to the genocide unfolding in Gaza. The merging of Israeli propaganda with the war on terror’s Islamophobia permeates the governing practices, policies, and cultures of these institutions. So thoroughly have Palestinian women been dehumanized in the Israeli-

western imaginary that their mass killing, even when reported live on a daily basis and directly attested to by their families in the diaspora, has provoked only censorship and retaliation from these institutions, much as is the case within western feminist politics, organizations, and movements.

Gaza is a case of settler colonialism, and like every other colonial endeavour, it is a matter of race. Gaza is also an issue of Islamophobia. On each one of these counts—colonial genocide, racial dehumanization, and Islamophobic demonization—western feminist movements have turned their back on Palestinian women’s resistance, on their struggle for justice and for an end to the occupation. It is the steadfastness of Palestinian women themselves, whether in Gaza, the rest of Palestine, or in the diaspora, that is energizing the resistance today. And they are a critical force in the collective resistance against not only Israel, but also against the western institutions that are making common (but ultimately ineffective) cause in their efforts to silence and punish—against their own stated mandates—those opposing the genocide that seeks to erase Palestinian existence.

“Israel has effectively destroyed every single requirement for life in the Gaza Strip while the entire world is watching,” pointed out Riyad Mansour, the Palestinian Envoy to the UN, in an assembly on the Rome Statute, on which is founded the International Criminal Court.²⁴ But international law was not developed to protect colonized populations.²⁵ Today, as the world bears witness to the Euro-American powers thwarting every attempt to stop the Israeli state’s defiance of international law, one sees more clearly than ever the integral linkages between race, gender, colonialism/imperialism, and

international law. International law today is what the most powerful, the most militarized states decide that it is.

A new generation of women around the world is learning from and speaking out against this cruel and catastrophic Israeli violence. For these women, the assault on Gaza will be among their formative political experiences, a vital lesson in how racial-gender violence organizes the international order, how it shapes the workings of international politics and law. They are also learning a vital lesson from Palestinian/Muslim women in the meaning of resistance, from Islamic as well as secular political perspectives. And in response, these young women are standing in solidarity, saying “Ceasefire Now.” They are saying “End the Occupation Now.” They are saying “No Justice, No Peace.” They are redefining the meaning of women’s solidarity from the ground up. And their own activism is being shaped by centering the struggle of Palestinian/Muslim women.

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² “Israel’s Leaders: In Their Own Words,” Palestine Advocacy Project, <https://www.palestineadvocacyproject.org/quotes/>.

³ “Israel’s Leaders”

⁴ Golda Meir, “Golda Meir on the Palestinians: Original NYT Op-Ed Text,” *Aish*, November 5, 2023, <https://aish.com/golda-meir-on-the-palestinians/>.

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¹⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Studies in A Dying Colonialism*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967): 66.

²⁰ See Gayatri Spivak. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Nelson and Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1998), 271-313.

²¹ See, for example, Sunera Thobani, “War Frenzy,” *Meridiens* 2, no. 2 (2002); Lila Abu Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015). See also Sunera Thobani, *Contesting Islam, Constructing Race and Sexuality* (New York City: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

²² The singular western feminist focus on individual male violence is evident in the debates on ‘femicide’, a concept readily brought into the picture when it comes to individual acts of misogynist violence, figured in this discourse as ‘the honour killing,’ ‘FGM,’ ‘dowry death,’ but conspicuously not raised with regard to the Israeli state killing of women in Gaza. See Dr. Birgit Sauer, “Defining and Identifying Femicide: A Literature Review,” 2021, European Institute for Gender Equality, Publications Office of the European Union.

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²⁴ Farah Najjar and Joseph Stepansky, “Israel-Hamas War Updates: UN Chief Invokes Rare Article 99 over Gaza War,” *Al Jazeera*, December 6, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2023/12/6/israel-hamas-war-live-gaza-death-toll-climbs-as-israel-pounds-enclave?update=2538711>.

²⁵ See Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).