

The Exaltation of Israel, the Power of Palestinian Resistance

Sunera Thobani

Across western countries Palestinians, pro-Palestinian activists, and all who support their struggle against Israeli settler-colonialism are under attack for speaking out against the atrocities being committed in Israel's total war on the population of Gaza. This injunction against public statements of support for the Palestinian cause, however, reveals more about the anxieties of the pronouncers, advocates, and enforcers of this ban than it does about the anti-colonial struggle for which Palestinians are fighting, dying, and living. Such an injunction signifies the total bankruptcy—political, moral, and intellectual—of the Israeli project in whose defense the commandment is enacted. In other words, the enforcement of such a ban is based on an implicit recognition that its supporters do not have any intellectual, moral, or political ground on which to stand, no persuasive arguments in which they themselves believe to offer in defense of the Israeli war on Gaza. It is the loss of their own certainty in the legitimacy of the Israeli project that can be read in their vociferous attacks on any and all expressions of political opposition, intellectual critique, or moral condemnation of this Israeli war.

After all, what defense could possibly be mounted of Israel's self-declared commitment to the indiscriminate bombing of civilians, the starving of those who survive, the destruction of residential buildings, the targeting of hospitals, schools, mosques, churches—everywhere that those fleeing the violence are seeking shelter? Especially so in the face of Israel's repeated pronouncement to the world of its intention to obliterate all the sites of daily social life of the Palestinians. Indeed, Israel claims this imposition of death and destruction to be its fundamental 'right.' The only defense of such a right is, of course, Israel's foundational claim that the people they are attacking and seeking to exterminate are 'human animals.' These are the words of the Israeli Defense Minister.¹ Not to be outdone, the Prime Minister described his political philosophy in terms that likewise allow for no ambiguity about what is driving this war: "This is a struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness, between humanity and the law of the jungle."² There the world has it, as succinct a rationale for genocide as western powers have ever produced.

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, the Hamas attack on the Israeli military establishment and Israeli civilians that began on October 7, 2023 challenged the morality, legitimacy and legality of the settler colonial society that has condemned Palestinians to dispossession, brutalization, and rightlessness. As stated by a Hamas leader to *The New Yorker*,

We rolled down all of the pathways to get *some* of our rights – not all of them. We knocked on the door of reconciliation and we weren't allowed in. We knocked on the door of elections and we were deprived of them. We knocked on the door of a political

document for the whole world—we said, ‘We want peace, just give us some of our rights—but they didn’t let us in... We tried *every* path. We didn’t find one political path to take us out of this morass and free us from occupation.’³

With no other avenue available to escape the slow death imposed on Gaza’s population, the desperation that drove Hamas to break out of the confines of the *de facto* prison that has been the condition of its existence has now transformed not only the Middle East, but also shifted the political ground for the future role of western states in the region.⁴

Israeli retaliation to the Hamas attacks—total siege of the population of Gaza, barring them access to food, fuel, shelter, water, and urgently needed medical supplies—that continues with devastating consequences ironically ripped off the fig leaf of morality, legitimacy, and legality with which settler colonial regimes have historically attempted to cover themselves. Pronouncing themselves progressive and civilizing, these regimes consider themselves exemplary democracies, committed to the rule of law and the protection of human rights. The actuality that by the ‘rule of law’ they mean the enforcement of a colonizing power structure, and by ‘human rights’ they mean rights only for those sectors of the population they recognize as their legitimate citizenry, remains apparently incomprehensible to these states, their nations, their international allies, and to the growing army of advocates of the injunction against speaking these truths. To be placed in a position of no options—other than succumb to slow death—is a terrible condition in which to trap a people. It is a *de facto* as well as *de jure* erasure of their humanity, even in the polite legalese preferred by liberal democracies.

Colonialism, as Frantz Fanon argued, is founded on a form of violence that works not only to dispossess colonized peoples of their territory but also to brutalize their humanity by attacking them psychologically.⁵ Reducing the colonized subject to the status of a mere ‘thing,’ Fanon argued, led to the permeation of colonial logics with racial logics as the processes of dehumanization they deploy become inextricable from the practices of physical control. Colonial subjugation is as reliant on the destruction of native values, languages, cultural practices, and historical consciousness as it is on the militarized control of colonized bodies. Territorial and economic exploitation goes hand in hand with the psychic assault and cultural destruction which produces alienation and rage among the colonized people at the dehumanizing conditions of their existence. Colonial states destroy not only the sovereignty of the colonized, but also strip away their very status and dignity as human, Fanon found in his psychiatric practice and revolutionary activism in French-occupied Algeria. This fundamental dynamic of colonial power, so carefully identified and analyzed by Fanon over half a century ago, is clearly witnessed in the present siege of Palestinians and their demonization in Israeli—as in the larger western—political culture.

Enter the army of the enforcers of the injunction that recognition of this fundamental dynamic of Israeli settler colonialism cannot be publicly spoken. The mainstream western media, as eager as ever to restabilize the status quo ante by upholding the Israeli state narrative, wages its own racial

logic dehumanizing Palestinians by rendering illegible their suffering and condemning their resistance. Even social justice activists are sucked into this logic when they demand the demonization of Hamas as the price for their solidarity, such as it is, with Palestinians and their cause.

Racist denunciations of Palestinians from the right are entirely predictable; they are to be expected. Silence from the liberals about the violation of the ‘rule of international law’ that they hold so sacred by the enraged Israeli war-machine is also to be expected. The intellectual contortions of the pronouncers and enforcers of the injunction to silence from the western left, however, are revealing. Their support of the ban rests on shaky grounds: this is not the time to speak out, Israelis are hurting, theirs is a society in mourning, speaking out will only further inflame the Israeli ultra-right, and so on. The torment and mourning of Palestinians that has resulted from the actions of the most powerful military machine in the region does not, apparently, amount to anything much.

The demand from those on the left who are more familiar with anti-colonial struggles and their intellectual traditions—if not their spirit—is unconditional recognition of the exceptionalism of Israeli settler-colonialism. Many on the left are in a moral quandary, they explain. Yet this does not stop them from rebuking Palestinians and pro-Palestinian activists who they chide with the following types of questions: surely there are forces among Palestinians other than Hamas that can be found and supported? Surely Palestinians could commit themselves to non-violent forms of resistance? Surely there are other moral horizons that can guide the Palestinian resistance? Don’t Palestinians understand that their methods of resistance are futile against the might of the Israeli military? Can Palestinians not comprehend that their struggle is at a different stage than that of the Algerians when they turned to the armed struggle? Are Palestinians not aware that Fanon’s theorization of the colonizer’s violence as ‘violence in its natural state’ does not apply to the Israeli war on Gaza? Do Palestinians not see that independence is a meaningless objective given present global conditions? What of the corruptions of the Arab regimes; is that the future Palestinians desire for themselves?

From these perspectives the Palestinian cause may be worthy of support, but only if Palestinians choose the path of resistance (capitulation?) that these enforcers of the injunction believe Palestinians *should*. The commandment from these quarters is that if Palestinians want to be heard, they should speak the language of an abstract universal humanism, of their love for humanity, of their commitment to stand with ‘the’ children (but apparently not their own), of rethinking their paradigm of resistance. In other words, Palestinians should put their hope in the above approaches, as these are more ‘sane’ and ‘humane’ positions that can be defended by everybody.

In short, Palestinians loving Israelis, even if not the Israeli state, is the answer. Palestinians elevating the security of Israel above their own, Palestinians clearing the conscience of these left advocates, Palestinians fighting for a common humanity and not their own survival would be the right, moral choice. Israel's right to self defense, however, is to remain absolute.

What the enforcement of the injunction by those on the left—including the feminists—demonstrates is that although the Israeli state has failed to secure the physical security of its nation, it has succeeded in securing the consciousness of its nation as exalted, as the only people worthy of such security in Palestine/Israel. And it has succeeded in convincing its western (standing in for international) supporters of its exceptionalism.

Through its policies, the Israeli state has defined its nationals as the only legitimate citizenry with the unquestionable right to have rights. Thus exalted—politically and structurally empowered by the state to claim this position of belonging to a higher order of humanity, of being the only civilized community in the territories controlled by the state—the overwhelming majority of Israelis and their international supporters appear willing to continue the abdication of their own humanity to support the war on Gaza. Even under the leadership of the very Prime Minister who has led Israelis, and dragged Palestinians, to this moment of political catastrophe.

In the face of the horrific violence being waged by the Israeli state, with its 'civilian' settlers and army reservists, against the people of Gaza and the West Bank, Israelis of all political stripes—with some exceptions—are standing behind their wartime unity government.⁶ This has remained the case even with the accusation of Human Rights Watch that the Israeli military is using white phosphorous munitions in Gaza and Lebanon,⁷ the assessment of the World Health Organization that the evacuation orders of Gaza amount to a death sentence for the sick and injured,⁸ and the call of the United Nations Secretary General for Israel to allow desperately needed aid into the occupied territory for the terrorized and traumatized population.⁹ That the Israeli nation still considers itself exalted, as the only people whose needs, interests, and suffering matter, is abundantly clear. While Israelis may eventually rid themselves of a Prime Minister they hate and consider unworthy of their support, they will then bring in another to wage more effectively the genocide of Palestinians, restore hope in an Israeli 'peace' by fixing in place the cover of 'democracy' with which the nation prefers to see itself, and protect more carefully their conscience by concealing the violence from full view of the entire world.

Meanwhile, the supporters of Israeli exceptionalism in the international left and feminist movements will police the injunction so they can have their cake and eat it too. Turning to the ban to help reconcile their support for the Israeli project (albeit in its 'soft' version) while simultaneously claiming the position of the benevolent western subject willing to provide tutelage to Palestinian anti-colonial movements, their 'soft' governmentality sustains the 'hard' governmentality of the Israeli settler state by managing the growing supporters of the Palestinian

struggle. Trying to straddle the impossible position between and betwixt Israeli settler colonialism and Palestinian anti-colonialism, they fail to see how they too are reinscribing what Du Bois famously called the color line.

The global political landscape has changed in profound ways with the war on terror. The terrible killing, torture, and targeted assassinations of ‘terrorists’—as racialized a category as has ever been produced by Euro-American societies—incited global public revulsion. The imposition of collective punishment, the destruction of entire families and communities turned public opinion around the world against the Euro-American states, including the Israeli settler state and their allies in the Global South. During this period anti-colonial, anti-war, and anti-racist movements continued to not only expose the life-destroying violence that sustains the liberal-democratic projects of the West; they also made common cause with Palestinian resistance. As we now see, public opposition against the US-backed Israeli siege of Gaza grows stronger by the day; this is evident well beyond the Arab street. The heat is increasingly felt by politicians and policy makers nationally and internationally; no doubt the pro-Israeli western left feels this too. Yet again, this left proves itself to be more ‘western’ than ‘left.’

The Israeli state has proved utterly ineffectual in colonizing the collective consciousness of the Palestinian people, of erasing their historical memory, of destroying their spirit to resist by militarily convincing them that resistance is futile. That spirit of resistance, that historical memory, has only gained in intensity and strength during these past three weeks. Israel is now further away from securing the defeat of the Palestinians—politically, as well as morally and intellectually—than it has ever been before. The left and feminist supporters of the Israeli project in the western world are scrambling to contain the growing international support for this resistance as best they can.

If Israel is ever to become a ‘democracy,’ even in the most truncated and impoverished meaning of the term, this will be a gift of the Palestinian resistance committed to shattering the narrative of Israeli exceptionalism and ending the rule of this settler-colonial violence.

Sunera Thobani is the author of *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2007) and *Contesting Islam, Constructing Race and Sexuality: The Inordinate Desire of the West* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

¹ “Israeli Defense Minister Orders ‘Complete Siege’ of Gaza,” *Al Jazeera*, October 9, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/newsfeed/2023/10/9/israeli-defence-minister-orders-complete-siege-on-gaza>

² The New Arab Staff, “Netanyahu Deletes ‘Racist’ Tweet on Palestinian ‘Children of Darkness’ after Hospital Massacre”, *The New Arab*, October 18, 2023,

<https://www.newarab.com/news/netanyahu-deletes-palestinian-children-darkness-tweet>

³ Adam Rasgon and David D. Kirkpatrick, “What Was Hamas Thinking?” *The New Yorker*, October 13, 2023,

https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/what-was-hamas-thinking?utm_source=nl&utm_brand=tny&utm_mailing=TNY_Daily_101423&utm_campaign=aud-dev&utm_medium=email&utm_term=tny_daily_digest&bxid=6142d2981cd3416e0f4b4314&cndid=66470414&hasha=f81e0f1899389178311f7ddc10901279&hashb=d70dc6804b02968bae6898c61fd60c008616d081&hashc=1e649fb0a8ad04b6b340be7aae687ee59f82e53ff4273bdd1c1b1161c672bd2c&esrc=growl2-regGate-0521&mbid=CRMNYR012019

⁴ David Hearst, “The Nakba that Israel has Started will Backfire,” *Middle East Eye*, October, 13, 2023,

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/israel-palestine-war-netanyahu-second-nakba-started>

⁵ See Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove Press, 1961) and *Black Skin White Masks* (Grove Press, 1967).

⁶ Ruth Michaelson and Harriet Sherwood, “Netanyahu Sets up Emergency Israeli Unity Government and War Cabinet,” *The Guardian*, October 11, 2023,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/11/netanyahu-sets-up-emergency-israeli-unity-government-and-war-cabinet>

⁷ Emily Rose and Rami Ayyub, “Human Rights Watch Says Israel Used White Phosphorous in Gaza, Lebanon,” *Reuters*, October 12, 2023,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/human-rights-watch-says-israel-used-white-phosphorous-gaza-lebanon-2023-10-12/>

⁸ World Health Organization, “Evacuation Orders by Israel to Northern Gaza are a Death Sentence for the Sick and Injured,” *World Health Organization*, October 14, 2023,

<https://www.who.int/news/item/14-10-2023-evacuation-orders-by-israel-to-hospitals-in-northern-gaza-are-a-death-sentence-for-the-sick-and-injured>

⁹ António Guterres, “Why Israel Must Reconsider Its Gaza Evacuation Order,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/13/opinion/israel-gaza-united-nations.html>