

The “Civilized World” and its Genocides: Gaza’s Colonial Precedents



by Azeezah Kanji

WHAT HAS THE WORLD been witnessing in Israel-occupied Gaza? Not a “humanitarian catastrophe,” but a human-engineered atrocity: an entire population being bombed, starved, dehydrated, “voluntarily emigrated,” and blockaded into collective death and submission – a continuation of the decades-long ethnic cleansing of Palestine – while Canada and other “liberal” democracies refuse to call for a ceasefire and the US continues to supply the “precision” bombs. Even in the hours preceding a promised temporary four-day “truce” set to begin Friday morning, Israel has persisted in unrelentingly “bombing 300 targets” in Gaza, attacking hospitals, journalists, and refugee camps, and arresting the director of Gaza’s largest hospital, Al-Shifa.

The presumed legitimacy of mass Palestinian death is so pervasive that for some of its more recent school-bombings, Israel hasn’t even bothered to put out an excuse.

Yet still, political leaders like Canadian Defence Minister Bill Blair have maintained the obscenely transparent fiction that Israel is abiding by international law and exercising “maximum restraint.”

The international community was shocked when one far-right Israeli politician suggested simply dropping a nuclear bomb on the Palestinians. Instead, their

liquidation – “Nakba 2023,” as promised by Israeli Minister Avi Dichter – is being permitted to proceed one thousand, ten thousand deaths at a time.

How to characterize the carnage? For weeks, UN Experts and hundreds of international law and genocide scholars have been warning the situation is approaching the legal definition of genocide. To Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, it is “the battle of the entire civilized world” against “the modern barbarians.” Meanwhile, this “civilized world’s” self-anointed European and North American spokespeople have shielded Israel with the same rationalizations and evasions used to immunize their own states’ rapes, tortures, enslavements, and massacres for centuries.

Eliminating “Barbarians” and Other “Civilized” Pursuits
The same essential formula is reiterated once again:

Demonize and “sub-humanize” the targets. ex. “I would encourage the other side to not so lightly throw around the idea of innocent Palestinian civilians ... I don’t think we would so lightly throw around the term ‘innocent Nazi civilians,’” US Congressperson Brian Mast. For their part, Israeli officials have overtly reverted to the old colonial terminology of branding Palestinians as “savages,” “human animals” and, in the case of Palestinian children, “little snakes.” This signals that they are operating according to the same genocidal and ecocidal hierarchy of existence under

which, for example, the US Chemical Warfare Service equated the Japanese with “insects, rats, bacteria, and cancer” in advance of their nuclear obliteration, the French denigrated colonized Algerians as “rats” and “vermin” subject to “annihilation” (unless they “crawl at our feet like dogs”), and Anglo-American settlers marked Indigenous children for elimination because – in the words of the settler slogan – “nits make lice.”

Fetishize the inherent superior humanity of the “civilizers” – regardless of the far greater volume of their violence. ex. “I know that [Israel] is taking every precaution to harming civilians in direct contrast to the terrorists of Hamas,” UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak; “[Israel is] a country that is bound to human rights and international law and acts accordingly. Therefore, the accusations against Israel are absurd,” German chancellor Olaf Scholz. At one time, the claimed marker of colonizers’ innate supremacy was their Christianity; now, it’s their professed allegiance to “human rights” and “democracy”: the updated mantras for genocidal “benevolence” by another name.

Authorize unfettered force against the colonized as “self-defence” and “necessary” – erasing the pre-existing context of occupation and colonization. ex. “Is there any limit what Israel should do to the people who are trying to slaughter the Jews? The answer is no. There is no limit,” US Senator Lindsey Graham, when asked about Palestinian civilian deaths; “[A] model resolution expressing ‘support for Israel’s right to pursue without interference or condemnation the elimination of Hamas’ [...] has been accepted by legislatures in at least eight [US] states,” the Guardian. In fact, Israel’s long-standing “self-defensive” targeting of even paradigmatically non-violent acts by Palestinians corroborates that to present a threat, “all the native has to do is stay at home.”

The transmutation of Palestinians into invaders, aggressors, and occupiers on their own lands is comparable to the feats of reality inversion involved in previous centuries’ colonial luminaries impugning Indigenous people’s “thick” heads for damaging the Spaniards’ swords attempting to decapitate them, or decrying “savage” non-Europeans’ bodies for

continuing to assault the British bullets fired at them, “even [after having been] pierced two or three times.”

Against Palestinians, again, the favourite canard that it is the colonized who are incapable of respecting “civilized” limits – physical, legal, or moral – functions to greenlight virtually unlimited violence against them.

Disguise, minimize, and rationalize the resulting brutality. ex. “I have no notion that the Palestinians are telling the truth about how many people are killed,” US President Joe Biden – although other US officials have subsequently acknowledged that Palestinian casualties are likely even higher than reported, especially now that Israel’s destruction of Gaza’s hospitals impedes the count. The repeatedly debunked allegations about Palestinians faking, inflating, and manipulating their own deaths and suffering participate in the long tradition of colonial genocidaires lying about the colonized being “natural liars,” to sustain the lie of their own beneficence.

Blame the “barbarians” for their own deaths. ex. “[Hamas] shouldered the responsibility for exposing Palestinians to terrible consequences,” French President Emmanuel Macron; “[T]his started with horrific murders on October 7, and if Hamas are hiding in these hospitals then Israel has to do something about it,” UK Chancellor Jeremy Hunt. Perversely, Palestinians’ humanity is acknowledged only to accuse them of acting as “human shields” – supposedly forcing Israel to kill Palestinian children and elders by building their schools, refugee camps, homes, and hospitals in the way of Israel’s bombs. (Evidence to the contrary, as well as Israel’s own long-documented history of using Palestinians – including children – as human shields, are ignored.)

Likewise, for instance, American soldiers attributed their massacres in US-occupied Philippines to the Filipinos’ “Mohammedan religion and custom [which] made it necessary to fire in the direction of women and children,” while European philosophers like Georg

Hegel **asserted** that when Africans were “shot down in the thousands in their wars with the Europeans,” this was due to the Africans’ own “lack of respect for life” and “contempt for humanity.” When “they” kill “us,” it is proof of their barbarism; and when “we” kill “them,” this is also proof of their barbarism: enshrined as a rationality-resistant “unfalsifiable” hypothesis.

Repeat as desired, until the “**extermination of the brutes**” is complete. ex. “How many [dead Palestinians] will be enough?” “All of them,” **US lawmaker Michelle Salzman**.

Who can be surprised, then, at the forms of “total warfare” that ensue? In reality, such “total wars” are not actually “wars” at all – since **war implies** a situation in which both sides may legally kill and be killed – but a claimed unilateral license to brutalize and control. Or as the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt preferred to call it, “**social pest control**,” in which those on the receiving end are treated not as enemies to be defeated but “parasites” that must be eradicated.

Practices of “Social Pest Control”

To that end, Israel’s serial slaughters of the Palestinians under its military occupation have included **Operation “Summer Rains”** in 2006 (416 Palestinians killed, 11 Israelis), **Operation “Cast Lead”** in 2009 (1,390+ Palestinians killed, 13 Israelis, including 4 in “friendly fire”), Operation “Pillar of Defense” in 2012 (167 Palestinians killed, 6 Israelis), Operation “Protective Edge” in 2014 (2,200+ Palestinians killed, 68 Israelis), Operation “Guardian of the Walls” in 2021 (233 Palestinians killed, 7 Israelis), **Operation “Breaking Dawn”** in 2022 (49 Palestinians killed, 0 Israelis), and now Operation “Swords of Iron” (**at least 13,000 Palestinians killed** as of writing, **1,200 Israelis**).

They join the many other shining moments of similarly asymmetrical bloodshed in the “civilized world’s battle against the barbarians” – such as the **US’s recurrent anti-Indigenous massacres**, **Germany’s “pacification”** of the Maji Maji anti-colonial uprising in Tanzania (1905-07: 250,000 Africans killed, 15 Europeans), **Britain’s mass shootings of peaceful Indian protesters** as at Amritsar (1919: 379-1,500 Indians killed, 0 British soldiers), **France’s strafing of Algerians**

at Setif and Guelma (1945: 45,000 Algerians killed, 102 French settlers) ...

Although the Algerians were gunned down just months before the Nazis were to be tried at Nuremberg, “this was such a common occurrence that no one then thought of judging the French government as the Nazis had been judged,” Jean-Paul Sartre **remarked**.

Under this colonial paradigm, the gross “disproportionality” of Israel’s transformation of Gaza into an open-air execution chamber is not an accident or aberration, but **officially declared** Israeli military doctrine since at least 2008. The collective starvation, strangulation, and annihilation of Palestinians in Gaza recalls previous such “civilizing” initiatives as the **French** and **British** creation of special open-kill “death zones” for Algerians and Kenyans, the Canadian government’s mass starvation policies to “clear the plains” of “the Indians,” and **Germany’s infamous extermination order** against the Namibians, under which the Indigenous Hereros were given the choice of being shot on sight or driven into desert concentration camps to starve to death.

Somehow, in a remarkable feat of guilt transfusion, even the culpability for Europe’s own foundational internal genocide – the Nazi Holocaust, primed by **centuries of European** antisemitic pogroms, persecutions, and **portrayals** of Jews as “devils,” “plagues,” “snakes,” and other “pestilences” – has been transferred to the Palestinians to justify the genocidal violence against them. Lest we forget, Canadian officials had also managed to **dismiss** Jewish refugees attempting to flee Nazi Germany as akin to “hogs [at] feeding time when they are all trying to get their feet into the trough.” The same states that executed and enabled the Holocaust now add yet more blood-prints to their butcher’s bill by condoning another genocide in the name of expiating the sin of the first.

How to Hide a “Humane” Massacre

While the term “holocaust” originally **referred** to a religious animal sacrifice, these “civilized” genocides are not sacrifices – which entail a certain valourization of the victims – but massacres, as historian Tzvetan Todorov **explained**. “Unlike

sacrifices, massacres are generally not acknowledged or proclaimed, their very existence is kept secret and denied.”

Even when the evidence is undeniable and overwhelming, as with Gaza, the official willful “ignorance” finds a way to be maintained. International legal norms regarding war, genocide, etc. were in the first place formulated by colonial powers to protect their own lynchings, ethnic cleansings, civilian bombings, and other “civilizing” practices from consequence. And when even these permissive rules are violated – as Israel has done flagrantly against the Palestinians for decades – it is not the violators who are punished by states like the US and Canada, but those who dare to call their crimes by their designated legal names: illegal occupation, apartheid, genocide.

Even mainstream human rights criticisms of Israel are being quietly silenced or explicitly banned. Emblematic of this institutionalized reality-curation, for instance, on Tuesday a McGill University students’ motion supporting Palestinians’ rights was blocked by the Quebec Superior Court via injunction – also the legal instrument of choice wielded against Indigenous land and water defenders in order to enforce the settler status quo.

The colonized are damned as “barbarians” when they don’t uphold international law, and damned as “haters,” “racists,” and “extremists” when they do: a colonial catch-22.

Instead of rights and justice, therefore, the most that Palestinians are accorded is a perhaps slightly mitigated oppression wrapped in the label of “humanitarianism.” No freedom and safety for the Palestinians, but “humanitarian corridors”: the “safe” passageways for their forced march into death or exile. No peace, only “humanitarian pauses”: so that they may obtain some bread and medicine, before their slaughter is authorized to resume. No reparations, just “humanitarian aid”: through which the international community assumes the bill of repeatedly rebuilding

Gaza (largely to the profit of Israel’s economy), only so that Israel may destroy it again.

Grotesquely, even the invasion of Gaza’s hospitals – “soldiers are everywhere, shooting in all directions,” as an eyewitness reported to the BBC from Al-Shifa Hospital on November 16 – is being advertised as a humanitarian intervention. To quote Joe Biden, “They [the Israeli soldiers] are also bringing in incubators or bringing in other means to help people in the hospital.” If only Israel hadn’t also cut off the power to the entire territory, so the incubators might have been of some use to the dying babies.

Gaza reminds us that when it comes to the “sub-humanized,” there is almost no obscenity that cannot be packaged as an act of “humanity” – continuing in the venerable genealogy of the Spanish conquistadors’ “charitable” and “loving” genocides of Indigenous nations, Britain’s “merciful massacres” of enslaved Jamaicans, France’s “humane torture” of the Algerians, and the Belgian King Leopold’s “philanthropic” mass enslavement and mutilation of the Congolese. Indeed, “when ‘civilized’ troops make war on ‘uncivilized’ peoples,” as US Army Captain Elbridge Colby opined in a 1927 article for the American Journal of International Law, “the inhuman act thus becomes actually humane.”

Forging the Future from the “Zone of Non-Being”

Illuminated in the Gaza hellfire once again is coloniality’s basic but (now) unspoken organizing principle: to those relegated to its “zone of non-being,” the realm of the colonized and “uncivilized,” entirely different rules, logics, and languages apply, under a façade of universalism. “The colonial world is a world cut in two,” as Frantz Fanon observed.

Thus, Palestinians killing Israelis, whether civilians or soldiers, is “terrorism”; Israel killing many times more Palestinian civilians is merely “the price of waging war” (Joe Biden). Hamas forcing Israelis to hide inside their own homes is “terrorism”; Israel wiping out Palestinians’ homes, not to mention the families inside them, is Israel’s “right” (former Israeli chief justice Aharon Barak).

Palestinians are castigated and condemned to death en masse for using violence, or even non-violence; while for Israel and its companions in “civilization,” their own greater violence only serves to somehow justify yet more violence on their part.

To defend its current operations in Gaza, for instance, Israel invokes the massive civilian death tolls of the US’s “war on terror,” which itself invoked Israeli court decisions legitimizing extrajudicial killings and torture, alongside precedents from apartheid South Africa, French and British colonialism in Algeria, Ireland, and Kenya, and the US’s own genocidal “Indian Wars” and occupations of Cuba and the Philippines.

As former head of the Israeli military’s International Law Department Daniel Reisner explicated, “The whole of international law is now based on the notion that an act that is forbidden today becomes permissible if executed by enough countries [...] If you do something for long enough, the world will accept it.” What nightmares will be made “permissible” and “acceptable” tomorrow, by what is being “executed” in Gaza today?

It is not only new legal weapons of domination being forged in the colonial conflagration, but physical weapons too. Since October 7, Palestinian doctors have been reporting treating patients with horrific injuries unlike any they have ever seen before, “injuries in which the skin is described as having been melted straight through to the bone.” This indicates Israel’s use yet again of Palestine as a necro-laboratory for experimentalizing new instruments of debilitation and death; as previous innovations in areas such as aerial bombing and chemical gassing were born on the colonial killing-fields of decades past.

Far from being consigned to the “waiting rooms of history,” the colonies have in reality been the testing rooms, where the next technologies of subjugation are devised.

What is the world witnessing in Gaza, then? Not an exception to the “civilized” world order, but an expression of its eliminatory foundations, as well as a preview of possible colonial futures to come: no peace, only “pacification”; no freedom for the dominated, except to consent to their own domination; and the perpetual depopulation of the “pests” from the earth, to make way for “civilization’s” reign.

And yet, despite the extreme violence applied to subjugate and erase them, Palestinians and colonial modernity’s other designated “sub-humans” not only continue to exist, but resist the genocidal premises of their inferiority and disposability, and illuminate the paths to a future organized on fundamentally different terms.

Even in the face of powerful apparatuses of state repression, Palestine solidarity marchers continue to gather in streets around the world in the thousands and millions, Palestinian poetry persists in “teaching life” in the midst of so much death and devastation, and people mourn the precious Palestinian lives wrongfully taken with a Qur’anic verse – inna lilahi wa inna ilaihi raji’un, “from God we all come and to God we will return” – that reminds us of the contingency and temporality of all human-created systems of oppression. In these protests, poems, and prayers – all acts of profound decolonial love – what we are seeing is the collective prefiguring of a world less “civilized” and therefore more liveable for all who inhabit it, inshallah.

CITATION

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