

The Palestine Example:

The Problem of Gaza Genocide Exceptionalism

by Azeezah Kanji

WHY DO WE continue to speak of the Gaza genocide as an exception, rather than a manifestation of the annihilatory premises upon which the current world order has been constructed?

As Israel's campaign of obliteration persists in the open-air concentration camp known as Gaza – the daily killings, emergency kitchen bombings, home bulldozings, and aid blockings now conducted under the name of “ceasefire” – so does the logic of elimination continue to unfold across the atlas of the colonial present.

In Palestine's West Bank and East Jerusalem – partitioned from Gaza only by a colonial politics of fragmentation – the unending Nakba rolls on with mass expulsions, legalized land appropriations, record settlement approvals, settler rampages and campaigns of terror — including against schoolchildren – and a new death penalty law formalizing the de facto policy of extrajudicial assassinations. As the refugees are driven out even from their refugee camps — dispossession upon dispossession – Israel is converting the seized premises of the UN Palestinian refugee agency UNRWA into a military compound, and forces Palestinians to demolish their own homes to make way for a biblical theme park.

In Myanmar, the military regime — enriched by a vast web of global economic interests — proceeds with its forty-year “slow-burning” incineration of the Rohingya by means of collective starvation, live immolation, rape, beheadings, breast-severings, and massacres of those attempting to flee by the hundreds. The disfigured and

decapitated bodies of the dead bear mute testimony to the horrors inflicted on them. As whole families and elders choose suicide rather than slow death by hunger, thousands die in the sea trying to escape their conditions — another 200+, including children, just earlier this April.

In Sudan — the site of the world's largest human-manufactured famine — those who have survived the bombings of refugee camps, markets, and villages are eating leaves and soil, while Canadian-, French-, UK-, Chinese-, and Turkish-made weapons funnelled through the United Arab Emirates (UAE) continue to fuel the carnage. As the Gulf states siphon off Sudan's livestock, the Sudanese army bombs starving refugee camps to destroy the evidence of famine, just days after the UN's official declaration. Yet US lawmakers refuse to block arms sales to the UAE, for the sake of equipping its war of “pre-emptive self-defensive” aggression on Iran, and Canadian bureaucrats block the refugees with absurd paper obstacles: for example, rejecting children because they crossed the age threshold into “adulthood” during the delay in processing their applications.

In Kashmir, the mass graves and interrogation centres of India's eight-decades-long occupation – the world's most concentrated military-to-civilian ratio – continue to be filled with the casualties of extrajudicial “encounter” killings and torture, such as the insertion of chilli paste-coated rods into anuses, executed under the aegis of an “Armed Forces Special Powers Act,” which grants Indian forces the “special power” of impunity. In March, Kashmiri grandmother Aasiya Andrabi was given a triple life sentence for the “crime” of “infusing the minds of Kashmiris [...] with the idea that Kashmir is not part of India and India has occupied Kashmir illegally and in a hostile manner,” while fellow settler genocidal

states like Canada, the US, and Israel assiduously court India's business.

In Indonesia, the central government's forcible incorporation of West Papua — an afterlife of Dutch colonialism — continues to be enforced by mass killings (as many as a quarter of the Indigenous population slaughtered), live skinnings, genital burnings, and other tortures. As occupation soldiers take trophy videos of their atrocities. In one scene, “a naked elderly man [...] is shown having a plastic bag forced over his head and screaming in pain as a burning stick is held to his genitals.” Global North governments dispose of the evidence as per “routine review and destruction” procedures, and Global North corporations reap the profits of the precious metal and palm oil extraction they enable. For instance, the world's largest gold and second-largest copper mine, West Papua's Grasberg, is co-owned and operated by the US-based company Freeport-McMoRan. In 2017, a petition signed by 1.8 million West Papuans requesting consideration of their independence claim was rejected by the UN's Decolonization Committee, vice-chaired by Indonesia.

In Western Sahara — officially categorized by the UN as a “non-self-governing territory,” the international legal euphemism for “colony” — Morocco's self-arrogated sovereignty has been given the imprimatur of US, Israeli, and now Canadian recognition, in exchange for Morocco's normalization of relations with Israel: a Trumpian bargain. As Israeli “Gaza-tested” surveillance and assassination drones police Morocco's “vertical occupation,” and Israeli apartheid wall technology bars the Indigenous Sahrawi “rats” from “infiltration” — in the terminology of Israeli political advisor/Netanyahu associate Edy Cohen — Moroccan and Israeli corporations collaborate in exploiting the territory's offshore oil and gas resources.

In Lebanon, Israel has been applying the “Gaza model” — killing journalists, medics, rescuers, children; blowing up homes, schools, churches, mosques, hospitals, entire villages; ordering serial mass forcible displacements; unceasing during the “ceasefire” — itself built on the prior “Lebanon model” of Israel's Dahiya Doctrine, which explicitly prescribes the infliction of deliberately disproportionate civilian destruction, named for the area of Beirut where it was first officially implemented.

We speak often of the “Palestine exception”: the extreme repression of Palestinian and Palestine solidarity speech and activism. We ought also to speak of the *Palestine example*: understanding Palestine not simply as an exception, but as an emblem of the colonial modern condition.

The Politics of Exceptionalization

And yet, Gaza is perpetually portrayed as a breach or an aberration: a rent in the fabric of the status quo, rather than an extension of its pattern.

Genocide scholars like Martin Shaw anoint the post-October 2023 devastation of Gaza as the inauguration of a “new age of genocide” — as if colonial genocidal modernity had ever ceased its operations.

Palestine is identified as the world's “last” or “longest” occupation — erasing the shadow geography of occupation and colonization that continues to exist behind the fiction of the “equal” nation-state system, itself predicated on the erasure of Indigenous nations evicted from sovereign status.

According to socialist magazine Jacobin, “what we are seeing in Gaza” is “something unprecedentedly cruel and inhuman in the entirety of recorded history” — deleting the entire genealogy of colonial atrocity within which Gaza is situated: the Spanish Inquisition's tortures, executions, and expulsions of the Jews and Muslims from Al-Andalus, a precedent for the permitted brutalization of those deemed “infra”-human; the “American holocaust” of 100 million Indigenous people across Turtle Island/Abya Yala — so extensive it registered changes in the climate — whose extermination as a forced labour source was compensated by the kidnapping and enslavement of 12 million Africans; the colonial famines which killed 12 – 29 million in India, 3 million in the Congo, 1 – 3 million in Vietnam, 1 million in the Sahel of West Africa, 1 million in Ireland, 500,000 in Algeria.

The records of sadism belie representations of famine as a crime of indifference rather than intention.

In Vietnam, French colonizers dismantled the pre-colonial emergency granaries as a “sign of infancy or weakness in a people,” then mocked the wasted corpses piled in the streets as “more ugly than the ugliest of animals.” In India, Britain’s colonial viceroy hosted the most expensive feast in world history – to proclaim Queen Victoria Empress of India – as 100,000 Indians starved to death in Madras and Mysore; the famine relief fund was used instead to finance the British invasion of Afghanistan. During the “clearing of the plains,” one Canadian Indian Agent’s idea of an April Fools’ joke was to lure emaciated Indigenous people to the ration house with promises of food, which were revealed to be fictitious. In Algeria, Europeans made a sport of throwing coins into thickets of cacti, forcing the famished natives to tear their skin retrieving them, and Israeli soldiers have played games shooting blockade-starved Palestinians queuing for food aid.

As historian Mike Davis noted, “Millions died, not outside the ‘modern world system,’ but in the very process of being forcibly incorporated into its economic and political structures”; the lamentation, on the part of senior British government economic advisors, that famines like the Irish Great Hunger “would not kill more than a million people, and that would scarcely be enough to do any good.”

The depictions of Gaza as “unprecedented” indicate how successfully coloniality has wiped its bloodstains from the slate of history. European legal doctrines authorizing land theft, slaughter, and enslavement, rooted in the Crusades’ depredations against Jews and Muslims, gestated in the genocidal “columbusing” of “the Americas,” and seeded the colonial dispensation of Palestine. As the representative of the settler state of Guatemala, born of Spanish conquistadors’ extirpation of 80 percent of the land’s Indigenous population, opined on the UN Committee that decided to create a Jewish state in Palestine: “Palestine was no more Arab than certain Spanish countries of Latin America were Indian [sic].”

Precedents of “total warfare” and torture against the “barbarians” were carried over from the “Indian Wars” to the imperial killing fields — as in the Philippines, where US soldiers, veterans of anti-Indigenous massacres, were “congratulated” by President Theodore Roosevelt for butchering entire mountains–full of refugee settlements — to Israel, to the “War on Terror,” back to Israel. American policies of eugenics, racial segregation, and

settler colonization served as an inspiration and validation for Nazism; whose finest scientists devised innovations such as “fuel-efficient” gas chamber furnaces powered by the burning of corpses; hundreds of whom were patriated to the US post-Holocaust by a special “operation” to populate the American military-industrial-research complex; which now equips Israel’s genocide in Gaza with cutting-edge bombs, fighter jets, and targeting systems. This is not, as some argue, the “Israelisation of America” — as if “America” were ever innocent; or a one-way “boomerang” of oppression back home from the colonies — as if “home” is not also stolen Indigenous territory, but a continuous colonial circuit.

Far more damning than Gaza being “unprecedentedly cruel and inhuman” is that it is not.

The erasure of the colonial past is essential for maintaining the colonial present: recasting its structural violences as a perpetual “glitch” or “outlier.” The prevalence of this erasure, even on “the left,” shows that colonial modernity is not a particular political position, but the entire epistemic framework within which positions are generated.

How profoundly telling that in all the books written by non-Palestinians professing to put the Gaza genocide in world historical, sociological, and political context, the concurrent violence against the Rohingya, the Kashmiris, the West Papuans, the Sahrawis of Western Sahara, and in Sudan is rendered almost completely invisible: if appearing at all, mentioned only to be marginalized or explained as irrelevant.

In Omar El Akkad’s *One Day, Everyone Will Always Have Been Against This*, Kashmir is name-dropped only as a source of “radicalization” for Muslims. In Pankaj Mishra’s *The World After Gaza* and in Didier Fassin’s tract on Gaza for Verso, Sudan, Kashmir, and the Rohingya are brought up only to state they are not of global importance; Mishra refers to the settler colonial Indian and Israeli states both as “post-colonial.” In Franco “Bifo” Berardi’s Gaza book for Semiotext(e), the Rohingya genocide is referred to diminutively as a “pogrom” – put on the same plane not as the Gaza genocide but with Hamas’ attack of October 7.

Perpetuating the Eurocentrism wherein events in the colonized world acquire significance only in relation to the colonial centre, the Holocaust and Russia's invasion of Ukraine are exalted as the ultimate reference points. Martin Shaw's new book on "the new age of genocide" is organized around the two central case studies of Ukraine and Gaza – though Ukraine is not in fact being argued as a case of genocide committed by Russia at the International Court of Justice; while the situation of the Rohingya — the other major ICJ genocide case, alongside Gaza, and a crucial source of legal precedents – receives a mere two paragraphs. In Ibram Kendi's exposition of "our authoritarian age," the discussion of Gaza is nestled in a section dedicated to Ukraine and Putin.

Writer Naomi Klein warned that with Gaza, "atrocities is once again becoming ambient." As for the atrocities relegated to ambience long before October 2023 – they continue to be treated as the background to the background, the meta-ambient wallpaper of the world against which the "true" outrages are registered.

These are not simply errors of omission but of distortion – obscuring the web for a strand, excising the Gaza genocide as an "event" from the context necessary to analyze its import. The *politics of exceptionalization* is the corollary to the politics of "appeal" and "recognition": preserving the conceit that the same system responsible for the abuse can be the source of its rectification.

Though Aimé Césaire's observation is ubiquitously quoted – "what [the European] cannot forgive Hitler for is not crime in itself [...] but] the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa" – the colonial geography of concern he identified remains unattenuated. How different would our picture of the world be, if not constantly triangulated to "the West" but instead reoriented to center the linkages across colonial modernity's "zone of non-being"?

State(s) of Annihilation

Now, Trump and co plan to convert Gaza into "the Riviera of the Middle East" — luxury beachfronts erected atop the bones of the slaughtered, the surviving Palestinians consigned to "alternative safe communities," i.e. concentration camps. Kashmir is being transformed into a premier golf tourism destination — a

Mar-a-Lago of the Indian subcontinent. Indonesia is developing a gold mine in West Papua the size of the city of Jakarta — an El Dorado of the Indo-Pacific. Myanmar is "beautifying" the scenic beaches of Rakhine State, the Rohingya genocide epicentre — an Ibiza of Southeast Asia. and Morocco is turning Western Sahara into the home of a new "green-powered" data mega-centre — a Silicon Valley of the Maghreb.

Complementing the explosive terror of 5,000-lb bombs and white phosphorus, the "silent violence" of blockades and economic sanctions is wielded to bring resistant populations to their collective knees by mass deprivation. "[Sanctions] may have contributed to more deaths during the post-Cold War era than all weapons of mass destruction throughout history," calculated political scientists John Mueller and Karl Mueller — a total of 38 million due to unilateral US and EU measures since 1970, more than half of them children and elders, according to a 2025 study published in The Lancet. As Israel strangles Gaza by blockade, 60 percent of "low-income" Global South countries remain crushed under the boot of US sanctions: the butcher's bill of which has included 1-2 million dead in Iraq, 40,000 in one year alone (2017-2018) in Venezuela – receiving a total of one mention in US media – and a 148 percent increase in infant mortality in Cuba.

Inextricably intertwined with the liquidation of human beings is the wholesale targeted unravelling of the tapestry of ecological relations within which humans are imbricated.

The poisoning of waterways and the intricate universes of life that constitute them; the mass razing of beloved trees, some hundreds or thousands of years old, from Palestine to Lebanon to Sudan to Kashmir to "Canada" by military powers and occupiers; Indonesia's depopulation-by-corporate-deforestation of the orangutans, whose name translates literally from the Malay as "people of the forest," as the buffalo and gray whales before them were driven to eradication by European settlers — with all we know of other-than-humans' intelligence and social structures, should these not also be considered genocides? Only not under a colonial paradigm, in which personhood and peoplehood are reserved for humans.

Presiding over the wreckage are the very international institutions upheld as the bulwarks against humanity's descent into "barbarism." The United Nations that mandated Palestine's partition and admitted Israel as a "peace-loving" state in the wake of the Nakba, is the same UN that rubber-stamped West Papua's "voluntary" accession to Indonesia by a unanimous "vote of free choice" in which the Indonesian military selected all the participants, and betrayed the promises of referendums to decide the fates of Kashmir and Western Sahara. The only remaining trace of Western Sahara's barmecide referendum is in the name of the UN "peacekeeping mission," the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, overseeing Morocco's ravages.

The International Criminal Court that charged Palestinian but not Israeli leaders with the war crime of "extermination," is the same ICC that has delayed issuing arrest warrants against the Rohingya genocide perpetrators for a year and a half (and counting) — a new record — and refused to pursue investigations into the crimes of British soldiers in Iraq, "including murder, torture, and other forms of ill-treatment," and of US soldiers in Afghanistan, originally holding that "an investigation into the situation in Afghanistan [...] would not serve the interests of justice." Now the ICC has opened an investigation into Afghanistan, but the actions of US personnel are "deprioritized," i.e. excluded.

The acceptability of mass death and dispossession has been built into the very instruments meant to protect their victims. The UN Genocide Convention segregates the condemned violence of "genocide" from the condoned violences involved in forcibly ushering the "primitive" and "backwards" into civilization, as put by apartheid South Africa during the Convention's drafting. Enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is the inviolability of colonial states' "territorial integrity" — achieved through the vapourization of not only "Indigenous rights," but Indigenous existence. The UN's Integrated Food Security Phase Classification famine-detection system requires the equivalent of four million excess deaths per year in a population the size of the UK — 67 times the toll of COVID — to trigger a humanitarian emergency declaration. "[T]hese figures give some impression of the appalling levels of excess death that neocolonialism has normalized in the majority world," writes political economist Mark Duffield.

So sacrosanct is the state's sovereign right to massacre, that the greenhouse gas emissions generated by military activities — 33 million tons from the Gaza genocide and five million tons from just the first two weeks of the assaults on Iran and Lebanon alone, more than the combined total of entire Global South countries — are exempted from emissions reporting requirements and restrictions; as pointed out by Palestine in its submission to the 2025 ICJ climate change case, utterly unheeded in the judges' final opinion. The same ICJ that previously refused to ban nuclear weapons in case of a possible hypothetical future threat to nuclear states' existence, declined to prescribe any concrete action or reparations now that Global South states are being desiccated into dead zones or subsumed by the rising oceans.

As for genocides past, the execution of genocide in the present continues to be made possible by the highest institutions of scientific, legal, and philosophical learning: furnishers of the necessary technological and ideological apparatus.

While commentators fixate on the buffoonery of evil — a la Donald Trump and Pete Hegseth — the banality and virtuosity of evil churn on in research labs, global summits, and ivory towers. Oxford and Cambridge academics laud fallacy-riddled books¹ trafficking in colonial genocide denialism; legal "luminaries" lend a façade of legitimacy to the edifice of fascism and occupation; "global thought leaders" endorse removing all the Palestinians from Gaza into concentration camp-esque "safe havens"; eminent philosophers defend Israel's annihilation of Gaza as "justified in principle" — and still are panegyricized, even in "progressive" publications.

Though dismissively stereotyped as "irrational," the genocidal impulse is impelled by the rationality par excellence of the profit motive. As speculators rake in millions on the war predictions market, military technology manufacturers post record earnings — from 2021 to 2025, "Israel's arms exports grew by 56 percent over the previous five-year period" — and schemes like the GREAT (Gaza Reconstitution, Economic Acceleration and Transformation) plan to reconstruct Gaza, "cleansed" of its Palestinians, promise a 385 percent return on investment to corporations such as IKEA, Amazon,

the Bin Laden Group, and Iraq torture contractor CACI. Kill and rebuild: a viciously endless necro-capitalist circle.

How similar is economist Joseph Schumpeter's famous colonially-inspired laudatory epithet for capitalism — “creative destruction” — to the eminent Polish-Jewish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's description of modern genocide: “Modern genocide, like modern culture in general, is a gardener's job [...] If garden design defines its weeds, there are weeds wherever there is a garden. And weeds are to be exterminated. Weeding out is a creative, not a destructive activity.”

The Creative Destruction of Creative Destruction

What is perpetually represented as the “exception” has, in truth, long been the standard operating procedure against the colonial *damnés de la terre*: those upon whose terrorization, immiseration, and destruction the security, wealth, and “creation” of the colonially privileged have been constructed.

Genocide is often framed as a refusal to recognize the peoplehood of the targets. Yet from Gaza to “the Americas,” Indigenous peoples’ bonds of love and sociality have not simply been denied or erased, but weaponized into the arteries of their ruination.

As European conquistadors exploited Indigenous systems of roads, hospitality towards travellers, and food-sharing to advance their colonial penetration, so now in Gaza the emotional and physical infrastructure of communal Palestinian life has been mutated into the architecture of their collective extermination: schools transmogrified into field execution sites, hospitals and cemeteries into Israeli military installments, homes into death chambers for the Palestinian families buried in the rubble.

Double- and now quadruple-tap drone strikes target medics, rescuers, and mourners; quadcopters lure Palestinians to snipers with recordings of crying babies and screaming women, turning care and the impulse to help the distressed into a death warrant. This is an assault not only on what makes us “human” — for other-than-human peoples too, such as the sperm

whales and the buffalo, were slaughtered en masse by colonial hunters while gathering to grieve their fallen community members — but on what makes us beings in relation with one another. The destruction of a people is not only genocidal, but sociopathic, poisoning the foundations for shared life on this planet.

And yet — and yet! — Palestinians have continued to share food through starvation, to risk death to retrieve survivors and bodies from the wreckage. We are living in a world built by colonialism. But amidst the detritus of the centuries-long epistemicide we inhabit, the seeds of other possible worlds exist — despite the efforts of genocide to destroy them.

As I learned recently from a friend, the great West African anti-colonial liberation intellectual Amílcar Cabral also used the phrase “creative destruction” to refer not to the destruction inflicted for colonialism but the destruction of colonialism and the construction of something new out of its ashes. What we are working towards, then, is the Cabralian creative destruction of Schumpeterian creative destruction: the annihilation of colonial annihilation. Not freedom through the racial capitalist extractivist sovereign nation-state system, but freedom from its strangulating constrictions; not a “Riviera of the Middle East,” but Free Palestine — a Palestine example for a world made free, from every river to every sea. The end of this colonial world is not the end of the world — but may be its liberation.

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Endnotes

1. For instance, Jeff Flynn-Paul's Not Stolen – which purports to deliver “the truth about European colonialism in the New World” – cites “Wikipedia” and “Google searches” as authorities; alludes repeatedly to “countless” and “credible” sources corroborating his assertions – but then fails to provide any; claims simultaneously that it is absurd to blame capitalism for settler colonialism because “there is no such thing as not-capitalism [...] [a]ll economies are fundamentally the same” and contradictorily that “it’s difficult to find serious evidence of what we would call ‘capitalism’ anywhere in the New World [before the nineteenth century]”; and uses Spanish race classification *casta* (“caste”) diagrams as evidence of Spanish colonizers’ “loving” “celebration of difference,” and settler sport fishermen’s campaign calling to “Save a Walleye, Spear an Indian” as proof – not of genocidal ideology – but that “Indigenous groups were among the biggest obstacles to the preservation of natural resources.”