

UNPACKING THE OCTOBER 2023 EVENTS

A persistent Leftist Position - Your Queries, Our Insights

As these words are penned, the fresh graves of hundreds of Israeli citizens serve as a painful reminder of the recent brutal attack by Hamas. Hundreds more remain in captivity in Gaza, homes are reduced to ruins and families displaced. At the same time, the Gaza Strip bears the brunt of relentless bombings by the Israeli army, with thousands of civilians killed, injured, and driven to flee for their lives. The scale of devastation is unparalleled, with basic necessities such as water becoming scarce.

In these trying times, we empathize with the shared feelings of shock, loss, and grief among the Israeli public and Gaza residents alike. We firmly believe that addressing the ongoing crisis necessitates a process of reconciliation grounded in the acknowledgment of past and present injustices, as well as the essential right of refugees to return to their homes.

The tumultuous events of October 7, 2023, have ignited profound questions within the Israeli leftist community. It seems fitting to provide responses to some of these pressing inquiries. This is an offer to engage with the questions in order to find our way forward.



**HOW IS IT THAT YOU HAVE NOT BEEN SOBERED BY THE
EVENTS OF OCTOBER 7? AFTER ALL, YOU'VE SEEN WHAT
HAMAS IS CAPABLE OF...**

Unfortunately, both Hamas and the Israeli military, and in fact many other military and paramilitary forces worldwide, are capable of war crimes. At the same time, however, they are also capable of negotiating and signing agreements. World history is full of stories of violence, just as it is full of stories about reconciliation, even where the conflicts seemed intractable. By extension, there are movements in both Palestinian and Israeli society that are not militant and that do not believe in strong arm tactics. Israel has consistently weakened and even eliminated such Palestinian voices. Like any other society and nation, we are capable of both unimaginable atrocities and shared living on an equal basis. The main thing that determines whether we experience more violence or more diplomacy is the realistic likelihood of achieving freedom and equality through diplomatic means. Making this happen is within our reach. The violence we have witnessed is the tragic result of the exhaustion of all other options, and the consistent cultivation of the violent military option.

It is precisely out of fearing the cruelties and monstrosities all human societies are capable of, in both the past and present, that we have been active for over two decades to promote a political culture of justice, compassion, and equality. Precisely out of a commitment to prevent the terrible cost of all types of violence — whether raw, direct and bloody, mediated through advanced technologies, or applied through systematic mechanisms of dispossession and humiliation — we learn and teach about the contexts that produce violence, and about ways to correct wrongs and achieve reconciliation.

Understanding the context is not equivalent to justification, and responsibility does not necessarily mean guilt. The attack on October 7, including the horrific massacre of civilians, is not only the result of Hamas's fundamentalist ideology. It is planted deep in a broad context of a violent, militarist and racist reality of holding millions of men and women in Gaza prisoner in a fenced compound of neglect and despair, and of a deliberate Israeli choice to eliminate any social–democrat and leftist alternative in the Palestinian leadership, and to prevent all forms of nonviolent resistance to the occupation, such as strikes, demonstrations, boycott, divestment and sanctions.

The violence of the past weeks cannot be understood without acknowledging its broader historico–political context, primarily the ongoing Nakba.



WHAT DOES THE NAKBA HAVE TO DO WITH IT? WHY DOES THE PAST MATTER NOW?

It is impossible to understand the relations between Israel and Gaza, the events of the past few weeks, without understanding how the so–called “Gaza Strip” was created, who its inhabitants are, and why for many Israelis, “the past” is now a tangible, terrible present.

In the narrow strip between Beit Hanoun and Rafah, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians sought refuge during the 1948 war, having been forcibly displaced from cities such as Jaffa and al–Lydd and from hundreds of villages far and near, including Huj (on whose lands the Israeli town of Sderot now stands) and Hiribya (now Kibbutz Karmia). The emergence of a huge refugee camp in this part of Palestine was

not planned, but was mainly due to its frontier location and access to the sea. Nobody intended this resource-poor area to sustain an autonomous metropolis that will exist for decades, and indeed, soon enough, it experienced a terrible humanitarian crisis.

During the war and its aftermath, Israel acted to isolate the newly emergent “strip” and surround it with a belt of Israeli settlements. It did so by means of additional deportations (by the end of 1950, thousands of Palestinians were deported from Majdal — today, Ashkelon) and the establishment of Israeli rural settlements, towns and cities on their lands.

This is how the largest refugee camp in the world was created. More than 70% of the people of Gaza, or about a million and a half, are still considered refugees according to international law. Most of them lack any citizenship, having been born and lived their entire lives without any rights, prevented from returning to their former lands and homes.

The violence against the people of Gaza did not end there. In November 1956, Israel occupied the strip and declared martial law, which was active policy until its evacuation in March 1957. These months saw the killing of many civilians, including in the events remembered in Palestinian society to this day as the Massacre of Khan Younes and the Massacre of Rafah. In 1967, Israel occupied the Gaza Strip yet again, and focused its policy on deepening its geographic isolation and preventing the feasibility of the return of its refugees. In July 1971, the Israeli military invaded the Shati and Jabaliyya refugee camps, destroyed thousands of residential buildings, and forcibly moved some 10,000 people to other areas within the Gaza Strip. In 1972, in a clandestine operation, Israel deported thousands from the “Rafah Salient” area (the northeastern corner of the Sinai Peninsula)

to make room for Israeli settlements designed to serve as a buffer zone between Gaza and Egypt. This came to be known as the “Yamit Region”, after its main settlement. During the 1970s, and to a greater extent after the evacuation of Sinai in 1982, Jewish settlements were also established in the very heart of the Gaza Strip, and remained there until their evacuation as part of the 2005 Disengagement Plan.

Thus, as opposed to the collective Israeli memory, refugeehood, violence and dispossession were part of life in Gaza also between 1948 and the First Intifada (1987-1993). It is no coincidence, in fact, that the First Intifada — the first large-scale popular Palestinian revolt after the Nakba — broke out in Gaza of all places. Refugeehood, violence and dispossession also persisted after the so-called “disengagement.” The evacuation of the Israeli settlements in 2005 did not mean the end of Israeli control over nearly all areas of life in Gaza. Given this reality, the UN predicted that by 2020, the Gaza Strip would be unlivable.

The mass demonstrations held near the Gaza fence in 2018-2019, entitled the “Great Marches of Return” served as a reminder that the younger generation born to horrendous conditions in Gaza, with filthy water, high mortality and unemployment, have not forgotten their history. They demand to realize their right to return to the lands from which their mothers and fathers were uprooted. The Return Marches were mostly nonviolent, essentially an outdoor festival attended by entire families, women and men of all ages, who commemorated the villages from which they had been displaced and their stories that ended in 1948. In one encampment, the protestors held up a bilingual sign that read: “مش جايين بحرب . جايين نرجع لبلادنا - לא באנו לרצוח” (We aren’t here to fight — we’re here to return to our land”). As you may recall, these marches

were met by murderous violence directed at unarmed civilians, journalists and medical teams.

The refugee question is not a thing of the past — it is the ongoing tragedy of the entire Palestinian nation, and the people of Gaza in particular.

As we speak, Israel is adding hundreds of thousands to Gaza's refugee population with the forced evacuation of the northern strip, the ongoing bombing and the destruction of tens of thousands of homes. For many, this is not their first refugeehood experience. Reviewing the history of the violent relations between the State of Israel and the Gaza Strip positions the uprooting, destruction and death in both a broader context and direct relationship with the policy of population transfer implemented by Israel from its very establishment, long before October 7, 2023, and before Hamas was ever conceived.

To understand the problem and think collectively about its solution, we must take these historical facts into account. Concealing and denying the layers of violence and loss are part of a comprehensive and deliberate strategy of erasing Palestinian existence and its history. In the process, the memory, decency and compassion of millions of Israeli Jews are also erased, so that they fail to acknowledge their own (albeit unwilling) complicity in enabling this silenced reality, and thus pay a heavy price for it.



**WHEN YOU SAY THAT YOU CAN'T EXPECT AN
OPPRESSED NATION NOT TO RESIST, AREN'T YOU
CONDONING VIOLENCE?**

Violence against innocent civilians is never justified. Murdering and kidnapping civilians, particularly children, are crimes against humanity. At the same time, learning and acknowledging the historical facts in which these horrible acts occurred is not equivalent to condonement. It is precisely because we are opposed to violence that we act to promote alternatives that will not involve further injustices. Those who have spent so many decades ignoring or condoning violence against the Palestinians – their killing, uprooting, dispossession, kidnapping, rape, humiliation and persecution – should ask themselves what criteria enable them to determine which violence to condemn.



DOESN'T ISRAEL HAVE THE RIGHT TO DEFEND ITSELF?

Everyone is entitled to self-defense — this is self-evident. We should ask, however, whether Israel really defends “itself”? Does it protect the civilians living in the south? In the north? Are its Palestinian “citizens” protected?

Living by the “villa in the jungle” metaphor instead of doing our utmost to create a peaceful home in the Middle East, insisting to live by the sword and falling victim to the myth that military deterrence is better than political negotiation — all those have never defended anyone nor contributed to the safety and security of anyone between the Jordan and the Mediterranean.

The events of October 7 prove, more than anything else, that advanced military and technological deterrence cannot suppress the anger and aspirations of millions living under oppression, nor can they prevent the rise of ever more dangerous militant movements.

What is the endgame of the trigger–happy approach to defending Israel against Hamas? Erasing Gaza with all its millions? At what cost? What about their relatives in the West Bank and within Israel proper? Are they to be destroyed as well? And what about Hezbollah? Do we need to wipe out southern Lebanon as well? The genocidal fantasies constantly circulated by military pundits and irresponsible politicians are as reckless as they are divorced from reality. In practice, and as demonstrated in countless other contexts, the only defense against hostile neighbors is to address the causes of that hostility through dialogue. Yes, it will take time, it will involve concessions, but the alternative is much worse — it is staring us in the face.

More killing and destruction in Gaza will not bring security and will not compensate for Israel's failure to defend its civilians.



**YOU ARE CALLING FOR DECOLONIZATION.
DOES THIS MEAN YOU SUPPORT HAMAS'S ACTIONS?**

Decolonization means liberation from a foreign rule. In the unique case of settler colonialism, where the logic guiding the foreign rule is not only material exploitation, but the taking over of a populated space and changing the demographic balance through mechanisms of dispossession and deportation, decolonization becomes a broader term, which includes the demand for the restitution of lands, assets, rights and sovereignty, together with transforming the political culture from one of suprematism, racism and erasure to one of dignity and equality.

Decolonization, therefore, is a process that comprises a variety of mechanisms. On the part of the population under colonial control, it

includes primarily recognition of its very existence, the insistence to remain, to be heard, to cling to one's land and to one's identity (in Palestinian culture, the equivalent term is صمود, sumud, which means "holding on" or "clinging fast"). Together with continued existence, the desire to be free of colonial control is also expressed through violent or nonviolent resistance (مقاومة, muqawama).

The colonizing society that controls the territory also has a role to play in decolonization processes. In many cases, the settlers' response to the decolonization process has been to leave the disputed territory. This phenomenon is explained by the fact that often, having lost their privileged status, settlers have no interest in staying and prefer to return to their countries of origin (as happened, for example, in Algeria). The emigration of settlers is not necessarily a demand or wish of the community freed from their control, nor is it necessarily possible or desirable. In the Israeli context, for example, the Jewish people's historical, religious, and cultural attachment to the land is not disputed, nor is the fact that Jews have lived here before the Zionist regime.

Emigration is not the only option available to the settler society. Decolonization may include a profound political transformation within the settler society — a painful and long-term but also emancipatory change, that involves acknowledgement and accountability, commitment to reversing processes of erasure and dehumanization, the giving up of lands and privileges, as well as a set of values and beliefs grounded in assumed superiority.

Decolonization may involve, and has unfortunately often involved extreme violence, atrocities and crimes committed by both colonizer and colonized. But it can also proceed mostly peacefully, as in South Africa. This is precisely the vision of Zochrot, as well as of

large sections of Palestinian society. We do not believe in doing the right thing by way of wrongdoing. Rather, we believe that despite the difficulty of renouncing the privileges of Israeli society, only the complete dismantling of the colonial regime has a real chance of healing the deep wound and enabling security and wellbeing and sustainable integration of Jews in the Middle East, as equals rather than colonizers. The alternative is to continue paying the price of living in an occupier state — a militarist, nationalist and racist state, which allocates a huge part of its budgets to funding armed forces, weapons, surveillance systems and propaganda efforts, at the expense of welfare and education, a state that educates for ignorance and anxiety and engages repeatedly in deadly wars.

We are adamantly opposed to the killing of civilians, including Hamas's attack on October 7. However, there is little point in denouncing violence while failing to acknowledge that the absence of a horizon of peaceful reconciliation increases the likelihood of an armed resistance that is very difficult to contain.

No historical development is inevitable. The role of the humane left is to reject the dogmatism of "no choice" or "no partner", and to insist alternatives of reconciliation and wellbeing, compassion and shared living. If you are truly opposed to violence, you must always keep the door open for change.



SO WHAT DO YOU SUGGEST WE DO NOW?

After decades of oppression and violence, the way forward is not simple. Nevertheless, we have to understand that it is the recurring choice of dispossession and violence, of ignoring the right of return and the right to freedom and equality that has brought us to this

juncture. That choice is at the root of the pain experienced by nearly everyone between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, and the terrible bloodshed of the past few weeks. We can also bear in mind that colonial regimes elsewhere in the world have been replaced, and that conflicts no less bitter, violent and conflict than ours have ended. Immediate ceasefire, the exchange of prisoners of war and abductees, and the initiation of reconciliation and recognition processes will enable us to look forward to a more just and less violent future. We must all show courage, but the effort must begin now. Every day we keep accepting the existing order is another day of death, danger and suffering for us all. Every day we maintain our moral compass, oppose harm to innocent civilians, have faith in the humanity of every person, and insist on a politics of reconciliation is a day of life and hope.

