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Moral Matters in Hard Times

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Table of Content

Introduction	1
I. The Right to Self-Defence	2
II. Absolute Evil	3
III. The Killing of Palestinian Civilians Is Not Incidental to the War	5
IV: The Morality of the Right to Resistance and of Actions to Avail this Right	7
V. The Shelling of Hospitals and Schools	10
VI: Weaponising the Holocaust	11
VII: Double Standards and the Fate of Universal Values	12
VIII: Morals and Identity in the Present Context	14
Finally... ..	16



Introduction

Besides political and ideological conflicts, the savagery of war and mass killing inspires several existential reflections. There seems to be little space for moral discussion, trapped as it is between the ruthlessness of an aggression that sets achievement of the war goals beyond good and evil, to a point where anything goes, and the survivors clinging to bare life among their dead amidst total, unthinkable loss. The blurring of moral boundaries makes it difficult to discern any morality in the thick of political and even identitarian polarisation in wartime. Nevertheless, the aim of this article – which is addressed neither to the war criminals nor their victims, who have enough to deal with – is to discern and address the moral issues raised by the Israeli war on the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip. I mean those moral dilemmas that confront humanity as a result of the atrocities committed during the aggression and the mechanisms that allow the suspension of any moral judgment of the crimes committed.

It is crucial to remember that morals are not the driver of human action, in wartime or otherwise, unless it touches a person's emotional, affective constitution such that doing good, refusing to lie, or relieving oppression and achieving justice, for example, spur a moral agent to action. But human motives more typically involve the avoidance of physical or psychological harm, the incapacity to endure, lust and possessiveness, the rejection of humiliation and defence of dignity, the desire for recognition and appreciation from others, the love of control, or the desire to be free from constraints. Individual and/or socially prevalent moral values often constrain, regulate, or *prevent* an act, or justify it after it has occurred.

Values often intersect with core human emotions. Take dignity, for example. For those who hold this value or not, it intersects with a powerful aversion to humiliation that may spur them to rise up against those who seek to humiliate them. It may also inspire feelings of guilt by those for whom it is indeed a moral value and not merely a subjective feeling of pride when humiliating others, and feelings of solidarity with victims of humiliation. .

Nevertheless, human actions are subject to moral judgment even if their motives are not moral, whether the criteria for judgment are individual morals or socially dominant moral values. These moral judgments, whatever their standards, are a prerequisite for the formation and existence of a society. The widespread assumption that the actions of states – meaning their governing authorities and institutions – are typically not driven by morality, but by interests, domination, and other factors, is rarely called into question. Even so, people judge the policies and actions of states not only by the degree to which their interests, however defined, are achieved and harm deterred, but also by moral standards. Without that a civilisation doesn't deserve to be considered a human civilisation..

Truth is not, as often claimed, the first casualty of war; it is morality. When the campaigns of propaganda and lies commence, morals have already been thrust aside. They are asked to fall mute, and the voices that speak on behalf of them are silenced. The thin line between life and death cannot tolerate the urgency of their appeal, but there is no excuse for us.



I. The Right to Self-Defence

The United States, in the person of its president and a great many journalists and intellectuals – including Israeli intellectuals and journalists who have been mobilised into media battalions and brigades – have tried to encapsulate, and then negate, all the moral issues arising from waging war on the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip with one phrase: Israel’s right to self-defence. After what it was subjected to it at dawn on 7 October 2023 and the crimes committed against Israeli civilians that day, the war is considered legitimate, even necessary, because it is waged in self-defence.

In fact, there is no unconditional right, moral or legal, to self-defence. There are conditions of proportionality between action and reaction and other conditions related to means, not all of which are legitimate. After it has become clear how Israel exercises this “right,” some states continue to invoke it even in the second month of the war, which, after the killing of thousands of innocent civilians, including staggering numbers of children, goes beyond hypocrisy to sheer moral depravity of the kind that justifies killing thousands of children. Even if the phrase was followed by remarks urging Israel to respect international law, support for Israel was not conditional on such respect, and so they remained a meaningless addendum with no impact whatsoever on reality.

Israel has rarely cited self-defence to justify this war internally, but its allies have. For its part, Israel moved immediately to justify the all-out assault on the Gaza Strip by asserting the elimination of terrorism as an objective, which requires the elimination of Hamas, or at least its military apparatus and its administration in the Gaza Strip. As soon as this goal was articulated and then accepted by the US, followed by European states and the European Union, absent thought or scrutiny, everything became permissible.

The Israeli prime minister and his ministers laid the groundwork for unleashing the Israeli army by insisting that Hamas is the ISIS of Gaza, knowing that everything becomes permissible once ISIS is invoked. Very few people cared about the crimes committed during the bombardment of Mosul and Raqqa after an international consensus formed on the need to eliminate ISIS, and a blind eye was turned to what was happening in these cities during the bombing campaign by the US-led international coalition. International attention at the time was focused solely on the coalition’s successful occupation of these cities and its efforts to cleanse them of ISIS forces regardless of the cost to their inhabitants and with no regard for the plight of civilians – who suffered first under the ISIS occupation and again during their liberation from ISIS – and the number of those killed by US bombing. As the coalition’s campaign made clear, ISIS crimes against native civilians were of no interest to the coalition states; what concerned them was the actions against foreign nationals. Similarly, aside from human rights organisations, democratic countries in the West do not care what the Taliban are currently doing in Afghanistan.

I have already refuted the tendentious identification of Hamas with ISIS in different contexts. Hamas is not an international organisation that fights in others’ territory. It is a Palestinian movement that

operates on occupied land against the occupation. And unlike many other Palestinian and non-Palestinian armed organisations, it has not carried out military operations outside occupied Palestine and has not harmed civilians in other countries. Even if you disagree with it, it is a political movement that does not engage in nihilistic violence, but rather uses violence in resisting the occupation, even if you disagree with that too. There are other differences as well that lie beyond the scope of this article.

In addition to the attempt to popularise this association between Hamas and ISIS and therefore groom the public to accept anything in the name of eliminating the organisation, Palestinian movements have repeatedly been compared to Nazis and Nazism, a recurrent Israeli trope since the eve of the 1967 war. Gamal Abdel Nasser was likened to Hitler, as was Yasser Arafat, and the Israeli government has repeatedly invoked the Holocaust. The purpose is not only to elicit international sympathy while helping to assuage Europe's guilt by projecting it onto Arabs and Palestinians, but also to assume the mantle of the victim, and this in a context in which Israel is the executioner, not the victim.

All these issues, though important, are not the subject of the present article. I refer to them here insofar as they are mechanisms used to neutralise moral issues and dull any moral sense.

II. Absolute Evil

From the beginning, the justification for the aggression on Gaza and the genocidal war against the Palestinian people was conspicuous for the refusal of Israel, its media, and the Western media supporting it to discuss any precursor to the events of 7 October. The claim was thus propagated that the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades carried out the operation simply because they are evil incarnate. In the past, there was Benjamin Netanyahu's mantra that "the cause of terrorism is terrorists" and experts who busied themselves (and still do) with finding the roots of terrorism in Islam or the personal background of its perpetrators; now it is absolute evil. Absolute evil is a self-contained, discrete evil without beginning or end and, more importantly, without reason. An inscrutable evil that can only be fought and eliminated. From this perspective, any attempt to explain the reasons for or background to the operation carried out by the Qassam Brigades is read as a justification of it. When the General Secretary of the UN said that these actions did not take place in vacuum, he became the object of incitement by the Israeli propaganda machine and was asked to resign by the Israeli delegate to the UN.¹ Any explication of background and context is justification, and those who attempt it are accused of complicity with terrorism. In turn, since the terrorism is directed against Jews, anyone who justifies it is also an antisemite. Terms like "absolute evil" are contrary to rationality, which entails interpretation and comprehension, and they are contrary to ordinary human moral judgment. Absolute evil and absolute good are not features of human morality.

¹ António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, on 24 October 2023: "It is important to also recognize the attacks by Hamas did not happen in a vacuum." United Nations, "Secretary-General's remarks to the Security Council - on the Middle East," 24 October 2023, accessed 14 November 2023, at: <https://shorturl.at/cvwV6>



Such claims are more than mere incitement or emotional outburst. They are a system of political propaganda with its own, predetermined logic, which includes premises and consequences. They are claims based on false assumptions and fallacies. The assertion that Palestinian violence is directed against Jews, for example, is a baseless accusation; even civilian victims, if targeted, are not targeted because they are Jews, but rather in the context of a conflict with an occupying state and the reality of its occupation and associated practices. This is not a justification for targeting civilians, but rather a refutation of the assertion that Jews are targeted qua Jews (ignoring for argument's sake that some of them are settlers bearing weapons or reservists, anyone could be the victim. People are repelled by such operations because they can imagine themselves in the place of victims). The occupation state is not resisted because it is Jewish, but because it is an occupation state. Levelling the charge of antisemitism against people living under occupation effaces the specificity of religious, ideological, and social antisemitism that Jews have historically faced as religious minorities in Europe.

In any case, this is not the first operation carried out by Hamas in which Israeli civilians are among the victims. Hamas and other resistance movements have carried out several suicide operations (known as martyrdom operations) in Israeli cities, which were most frequent during the Second Intifada. This has always provoked a violent Israeli response that included collective punishment and entailed the killing of more Palestinian civilians. But that response does not resemble the current Israeli response, neither in its emotional tenor nor its surrender to vindictiveness. What so provoked the fury of the military state, which conceives of itself as Sparta, is not the number of civilians killed or injured, but its shock and surprise at three things: first, an Arab (Palestinian) party bringing the war inside the 1967 borders, which has not happened since 1948; second, the shock of the audacity and capabilities of Palestinian fighters. In this respect, entering military bases and killing soldiers is more enduring and traumatic than killing civilians in their homes; third, the fear that weaknesses will be exposed, and Israeli deterrence will be ineffective. The shock that sent the state reeling mingled with this calculated fear.

Accordingly, the response had to be decisive, unequivocal, and destructive, and it needed to exploit the anger and popular consensus to carry out the demands of the generals, who, refusing to live in a deterrent balance with resistance movements in the Gaza Strip, called for the total elimination of the resistance in it. In this context, any inquiry into the background of the 7 October attack – the nearly two-decade siege suffocating the Gaza Strip, the seasonal Israeli airstrikes, the unprecedented expansion of colonisation in the occupied West Bank in the past two years, the increasing frequency of incursions in al-Aqsa and attempts to impose a division of the site on Muslims, the harassment of Palestinian detainees in Israeli prisons, and political regression under a far-right government – becomes completely unacceptable, even suspect as sympathetic to terrorism, as if history began on what has become known as “Black Saturday” in Israel. This is because a discussion of the background introduces a measure of rationality in the treatment of the events of 7 October, relativism as opposed to absolutes. In turn, this could temper the overwhelming desire to restore deterrence by means of



all-out tribalistic vengeance against the Palestinian people, with the difference that the Israeli tribe is armed with the latest military technology for aerial, naval, and terrestrial warfare, some of which the US supplies to no other country.

Hence the emphasis on absolute evil, although we are talking about human beings who have lived most of their lives under a siege like no other, and those who are older than the siege will have still lived the first part of their lives under direct occupation in conditions of oppression and deprivation. The overwhelming majority of Gazans are refugees from the environs of the Israeli towns and villages entered or bombed by the Qassam Brigades. There is no absolute evil or absolute good here, and even the right to resist occupation that some imagine to be absolute is not an absolute good, as I will demonstrate below.

III. The Killing of Palestinian Civilians Is Not Incidental to the War

Typically, the killing of civilians is cause for regret, even if some justification for it – it was an error, collateral damage from shelling or fighting – is offered. Israel, however, does not apologise or offer similar justifications that could neutralise a moral judgment of the killing of civilians. On the contrary, it announces that it bombs buildings, residential neighbourhoods, and even hospitals, regardless of the civilians within. It gives no consideration to their presence; indeed, it is not satisfied with what it has already done and promises more to come.

Like all settler colonialism, the history of Israeli settler colonialism is replete with the deliberate targeting of civilians with the purpose of taking their place in the labour market and on the land. The indigenous population was harassed to compel them to sell or abandon their land. Zionist movements also planted bombs in markets and places where civilians gathered, thus introducing this kind of action for the first time to the Arab world, and they used wholesale violence against the residents of entire villages from which gunmen launched resistance operations against Zionist settlements. This pattern of quasi-tribal reprisals and revenge continued until the Haganah and terrorist Zionist organisations embarked on the crime of mass expulsion in 1948, committing organised massacres against entire villages to frighten people into leaving.² After the establishment of Israel, the state pursued the same method, retaliating against the residents of Palestinian villages in response to the actions of fedayeen infiltrators across the border. Finally, there came the direct occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967. Occupation is a still-ongoing series of acts of violence against an entire people.

Contrary to its claims, Israel does not kill civilians because the Palestinian resistance uses the population as human shields simply by residing among them. Even if it were true, it does not justify aerial bombardment in order to postpone direct confrontation on the ground, which would require sacrifices that the Israeli army is not prepared to make. But it is not true. Israel targets civilians directly and deliberately for various reasons, including: 1) to teach civilians a lesson so that they

² Azmi Bishara, *Palestine: Matters of Truth and Justice* (London: Hurst, 2022), pp. 33, 37–39.



do not repeat such acts, as if they bear individual and collective responsibility for them; this is the logic of colonial arrogance, which treats indigenous people as either children or adults who only understand the language of force; 2) to cause non-stop suffering to encourage the population to direct their resentment at resistance movements and even to turn against the very idea of resistance as too costly. This is the logic of the merciless shelling and its cutting off of water, electricity, food, and fuel (the same logic underlying the siege on the Gaza Strip since 2007); and 3) racism. Racism should not be underestimated as a factor given the racist culture and hatred of Arabs prevalent in Israeli society and the army, whose soldiers are indoctrinated with hatred of Arabs. Racism is both a moral position and a “theory.” The former is morally reprehensible, while the latter leads those espouse it to foolish mistakes due to their misdiagnosis, misjudgement, and underestimation of victims of racial discrimination.

The public statements by Israeli leaders have laid the groundwork for mass civilian casualties, although the “civilised world” permits no one else to say it openly without being treated as a heretic. The Israeli president, for example, told the media that there are no innocents in Gaza and that the people themselves are guilty because they did not rise up against Hamas.³ The Israeli minister of defence told his officers that there would be no electricity, no water, no medicine. “We are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly.”⁴ Ministers in Israel called to “kill them all”,⁵ and above 60 percent of the Jewish Israelis support banning water food and energy from entering Gaza⁶. None of Israel’s allies in the US and Europe issued an official denunciation of these statements, to say nothing of its relatively new allies like the current Indian government, which is just as racist as Israel’s rulers.

Anyone who follows the Israeli media, especially the visual media, will be struck at the way intellectuals, media professionals, former officials, and regular studio guests seem to be in a permanent state of alert, as if they were in a war room, on the lookout for even the most timid criticism of Israel’s indiscriminate bombing of the Gaza Strip and the killing of civilians. In addition to accusing the world of hypocrisy and antisemitism, they criticise their own government for its failure to launch media campaigns that deny the charge of killing civilians or demand that Western governments and public opinion focus on Israeli propaganda. Refraining from killing civilians doesn’t occur to them.

³ Israel’s president, Isaac Herzog stated that “It’s an entire nation out there that is responsible. This rhetoric about civilians not aware, not involved, it’s absolutely not true. They could’ve risen up, they could have fought against that evil regime”, Chris McGreal, “The language being used to describe Palestinians is genocidal,” *The Guardian*, 16 October 2023, accessed 14 November 2023, at: <https://shorturl.at/aMOX8>.

⁴ The New Arab, “Israel defence minister Yoav Gallant calls Palestinians in Gaza “human animals”, orders total siege,” 10 October 2023, accessed 14 November 2023, at: <https://shorturl.at/dlX36>

⁵ During an interview with the Israeli Channel 12, Israel’s far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir said “To be clear, when they say that Hamas needs to be eliminated, it also means those who sing, those who support and those who distribute candy, all of these are terrorists.” The minister added “They should all be eliminated”. See: Enes Canli, “Anyone who supports Hamas should be eliminated: Israeli minister,” *Anadolu Agency*, 12 November 2023, accessed 14 November 2023, at: <https://shorturl.at/clqCZ>.

⁶ According to a poll conducted by the Institute for Liberty and Responsibility at Reichman University (IDC Herzliya) in cooperation with iPanel, results show that “the majority of Jews in Israel support implementing measures against Gaza that have received international criticism, such as preventing food and medicine supplies to the Strip; Survey participants also showed a willingness to accept harm to democratic values by adopting emergency regulations during a period of war.” See: “Israeli Poll: An Israeli majority supports holding elections when the war ends... and cutting off food and medicine from Gaza,” *Al Quds*, 13 November 2023, accessed 14 November 2023, at: <https://shorturl.at/nBCKM>.



IV: The Morality of the Right to Resistance and of Actions to Avail this Right

The United Nations recognises the right of peoples to resist occupation using “any means at their disposal” in accordance with the principles and charter of the United Nations.⁷ Of course, “any means” is a qualified expression and one bound up with the Charter, while further treaties restrict it to the laws and customs of war. However, this recognition is not what makes resistance to occupation moral. Rather, resistance is moral by virtue of the right to resist injustice and seek freedom from illegitimate restrictions. This discussion is about a collective right since, under occupation, an entire people is being subjected to injustice. The difference between this kind of injustice and that to which state authorities subject their own people is not a moral difference, but rather one that is distinguished by international laws and norms that recognise peoples’ right to self-determination. This is what resolutions and treaties provide.⁸ From their perspective, the struggle against occupation is distinguished from the struggle against injustice within a state, because it is seeking the right to self-determination, which is an inalienable right. For this reason, peoples themselves have begun to distinguish between this right and those of people embroiled in conflicts within the nation-state for the sake of social justice, democracy, and so on, and whose struggle is no less morally justified.

Whatever justifications are offered by the occupier, occupation is imposed by force. Because the population being occupied have no citizenship rights of any kind, they are often subjected to the tyranny of the ruling occupation authorities. Failure to submit to the occupation also leads to the use of targeted violence to subjugate them. Violence is an inseparable part of tyranny and exists necessarily in imposing the occupation on those who oppose it.

⁷ General Assembly Resolution 2649 of 1970 “affirms the legitimacy of the struggle of peoples under colonial and alien domination recognised as being entitled to the right of self-determination to restore to themselves that right by any means at their disposal.” See: United Nations, United Nations General Assembly, Resolution No. 2649 (25th session), 30 November 1970, Condemning the Denial of the Right to Self-Determination to Peoples of South Africa and Palestine (New York: 1970), accessed on 12/11/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/40GLTDS>. General Assembly Resolution 3236 of 1974 stated that the United Nations “recognizes the right of the Palestinian people to regain its rights by all means in accordance with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.” See: United Nations, United Nations General Assembly, Resolution No. 3236 (29th session), 22 November 1974, Recognizing Palestinian Inalienable Rights and Palestinian People as Principal Party for Establishing Peace (New York: 1974), accessed on 12/11/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3QuI6pw>.

On 4 December 1986, the General Assembly affirmed the legitimacy of the Palestinian armed resistance, linking it to Namibia and South Africa. The resolution stipulated “the legitimacy of the struggle of peoples for their independence, territorial integrity, national unity and liberation from colonial domination, apartheid and foreign occupation by all available means, including armed struggle.” See: UN General Assembly, *Importance of the universal realization of the right of peoples to self-determination and of the speedy granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples for the effective guarantee and observance of human rights: resolution adopted by the General Assembly*, 29 November 1985, A/RES/40/25, accessed on 12/11/2023 at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f21f1.html>.

The Hague Convention and the Third Geneva Convention for the Protection of Prisoners of War give legitimacy to carrying arms to resist the occupier. The Geneva Convention granted the status of “prisoners of war” to members of resistance movements “operating inside or outside their territory, even if this territory is under occupation,” on conditions that include that of being commanded by a person responsible for his subordinates, having a fixed distinctive sign recognizable at a distance, and conducting their operations in accordance with the laws and customs of war. See: International Committee of the Red Cross, *The Convention Respecting the Customs and Laws of War on Land* (The Hague, 18/10/1907). Accessed on 12/11/2023 at: <https://bit.ly/3MAhP76>; the United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, *Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War* (1949), accessed on 12/11/2023, at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/geneva-convention-relative-treatment-prisoners-war>; Duha Wadah Al-Shafi’i, “The Legitimacy of the Palestinian Armed Resistance and its International Legality,” SITA Centre, 15/9/2018, accessed on 12/11/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3QVlr51> [Arabic].

⁸ The right to self-determination is a fundamental principle of the Charter of the United Nations; General Assembly Resolution 1514 states that “All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.” See: United Nations, United Nations General Assembly, *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples*, 14 December 1960 (New York: 1960), accessed on 12/11/2023, at: <https://shorturl.at/euXZ8>.



A people under occupation have the right to engage in violence in resisting the occupation. This is a form of self-defence (resistance) and an attempt to exercise the right to self-determination (liberation). There are both moral and rational considerations, where “rational” is taken in its instrumental sense (as in the discussion of whether it is necessity or beneficial), that are taken into account when deciding whether or not to use violence. Generally speaking, however, this violence does not result from a study of whether or not the conditions for the necessity of violence are met. Rather, it may begin as spontaneous, violent resistance, and evolve and become organised thereafter. Therefore, the distinction between the eruption of violence in resistance to occupation, and rational planning for armed violence is crucial.

However, in response to organised violence against the occupation, the occupying power often perpetrates much greater violence, the effects of which are suffered by civilians who did not take part in the violent resistance. This is because the occupation is inclined to punish the entire society in the hopes of “teaching it a lesson.” It may impose collective punishment in order to deter resistance itself, or in a premeditated fashion for a political purpose, that is, in order to rob the resistance of its popular base of support, believing that by inflicting suffering beyond what people can endure, it can force them to turn against the resistance whose actions, according to Israeli propaganda, led to these punishments. And in fact, the occupying state has engaged in all three practices in the course of its history with the Palestinian people, as I have demonstrated above.

Having recognised a people’s right to resist occupation, can it be concluded that we are not permitted to judge the morality of acts of resistance to occupation? My answer is that, on the contrary, it is not only permissible, but perhaps necessary. The permissibility of resisting occupation by force, regardless of rational strategic disagreements over it (agreements which are always legitimate, as they do not address the matter of rights, but rather of effectiveness) does not mean that we cannot distinguish between good and evil in acts of resistance themselves, especially when it comes to causing physical harm to innocent people. We might sometimes view these as details not worth going into, especially if a political achievement has been scored as a result of the acts in question, such as deterring the occupying state, forcing it to negotiate, or obliging it to reconsider the occupation in its entirety.

This does not always happen, and the harm done is often greater than the political benefit, especially when such operations unite public opinion in favour of tightening the occupation’s grip on the occupied and the occupied population pays a greater price (which is at once a political and a moral issue). However, we are also talking here about the ethics of liberation struggle.

For example, committing a seemingly minor act, such as theft, not for the benefit of the national resistance movement itself, but for the purpose of personal possession, is illegitimate, even if it is theft from the occupying state itself. The same goes for the targeted killing or mistreatment of citizens. All of these are immoral acts which, if they occur, cannot be justified by the right to resist. Moreover, in addition to being immoral, such actions might cast doubt on the justness of the cause



of the people under occupation. Thus, anyone who commits such immoral acts has committed two crimes. These are ethical rules with respect to which there is no room for multiple viewpoints. Some might add something like, “especially in an era when violations are easily documented, and when they are certain to be quickly disseminated and shared on social media,” as if to say that there is nothing wrong with committing violations as long as they take place out of people’s sight.

Condemning this type of action within the framework of a political discourse that does not recognise the right to resistance is meaningless, because it also opposes the targeting of occupation military forces, meaning that such actions have no moral distinctiveness in this view. From the perspective of the right to resist occupation, if a successful armed operation occurs, the operation itself may deserve praise. However, if immoral acts are committed, they should be condemned regardless of the background that led up to them. After all, any crime can be contextualised, and even in the case of a thief, there is a “back story” to his becoming a thief. But this back story does not morally justify his immoral actions. If such actions occur, they are not acts of resistance, but rather acts that harm the resistance. And in fact, such acts were committed on 7 October; there are clear visual recordings of some of these acts, and it is likely that the resistance leadership was not aware of them when they occurred, especially given that some of them were committed by a mob who infiltrated the Israeli towns and villages after the fences were brought down.

Here it becomes the duty of the resistance movement to clarify and explain what happened. To do so would not diminish the heroic military achievements and impressive planning; on the contrary, it would bolster its credibility. However, we hear some people justifying these actions on grounds of revenge. More importantly, there is a fear on the part of the peoples who have languished under occupation or experienced repeated defeats, that condemnation or the admission of mistakes would taint the purity of the struggle and the resistance, undermine the justice of the cause, and other such unfounded illusions. In reality, however, the true harm results from mingling the just with the unjust, the heroic with the criminal, and truth with lies. These are the things that bring real harm to a just cause. It takes moral courage to speak out on this matter among a people living under siege and collective punishment, and now suffering genocide. But there is no moral justification for silence on the part of those who stand in solidarity with this people and their resistance against the injustice of the occupation.

Apart from disseminating and educating society on the values of liberation, one of the differences between a national liberation movement and a resistance movement that does not represent a liberation project in the social and political sense is that a liberation movement is held publicly accountable for such matters. It is a disciplined political movement capable of adhering to standards similar to those of governance.



V. The Shelling of Hospitals and Schools

After the bombing of al-Ahli (Baptist) Hospital on 17 October 2023, Israel rushed to deny it and claimed that the cause of the “blast” (as it was subsequently called by the Western mainstream media) was a failed or faulty rocket launch by the Islamic Jihad movement, without making any actual effort to prove it, taking advantage of the fact that the US administration, represented by the president himself, was prepared to echo any official Israeli lie. But the Israeli government no longer uses this kind of lie. Instead, it acknowledges the bombing of hospitals and justifies it by pointing to alleged tunnels under hospitals that are used as headquarters or refuge for the Qassam Brigades. It cannot be bothered to convince anyone of its claims and instead simply spreads rumours or extracts confessions from prisoners under torture and broadcasts them in the Israeli media. This in itself is a crime, and the Israeli media has never once hesitated to go along with it.

The same lies were applied to schools affiliated with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). These lies have been repeated since 2014. If Hamas leaders are hiding there, then Hamas would have realised that Israel had discovered their “secret” and abandoned these tunnels. A month into the war, Israel no longer bothers to lie and is bombing hospitals and schools with no stated rationale, as it is a routine part of war. The official silence of the so-called civilised world on this crime has set a dangerous precedent. While the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria committed such crimes before Israel, its offences were met with well-known condemnation and sanctions. Israel, however, remains immune to international condemnation and any talk of sanctions. If Israel’s allies stopped at their failure to condemn it or impose sanctions on it, that would be pitiful enough. But they do not stop there; they lavish it with support and privileges granted to no other entity.

The bombardment of hospitals and schools has become a routine part of this barbaric war, one that is subject to criticism only from some segments of the public and international humanitarian organisations. Israel’s allies, however, especially the US, European countries, and most recently India, do not condemn such acts; they merely parrot Israel’s justifications without scrutiny. In a press conference held in Beirut on 6 November 2023, Hamas appealed to the UN secretary-general to send teams to verify the existence of tunnels under hospitals. Oddly enough, no one accepted the invitation. If they had and Israel rejected their request, its lie would immediately be laid bare.

Bombing hospitals – places where the wounded and the sick of all kinds are treated – is a war crime. In addition, in the case of Gaza, thousands of civilians are sheltering in hospitals because they were thought to be safe from bombardment. Hospitals are not bombed in wars, after all. It is so axiomatic that it feels awkward to even debate it – it is difficult to make arguments for truisms. But what I see as a self-evident truth, Israel has turned into a point of contention with its claims about tunnels: a hospital may not be bombed even if there are fighters sheltering within. That is, on whatever



pretexts, it is impermissible to bomb thousands of defenceless civilians, including patients in their sickbeds and others hooked up to life-saving equipment (to which Israel has unscrupulously cut electricity). It is out of this same fear of killing civilians that states do not attack hijackers and their captives. Indeed, this is the very logic driving hijacking, or even ordinary criminal abduction, much less a hospital where there is no kidnapper or abductee. Even more astonishing was a petition signed by 100 Israeli doctors who, citing the same pretext, called for the bombing of al-Shifa Hospital – an act inimical to the compassion and respect for life the word “doctor” implies.

The silence of the “world” before this heinous breach of moral values and norms poses a genuine moral dilemma. The silence represents a setback for internationally accepted norms and a break with lessons learned from long, bitter human experience, and it raises an alarming question: Where is this world heading?

VI: Weaponising the Holocaust

It was on the eve of the 1967 war that the intensive use of the Holocaust emerged as a tool with which to transform Israel from the aggressor into the victim. I will not delve here into the reasons it was not used with such intensity between 1948 and 1967, or for the fact that the founders of Israel disavowed the image of exiled Jews who were “led to slaughter like sheep,” as they put it. But Israel attempted from the beginning, that is, from 1948, to act as a spokesperson for the victims of the Holocaust in negotiating with Germany to obtain financial compensation to be paid to Israel and its resident survivors of the Holocaust. But its extensive use in the media to describe Arab politicians, or the leaders of the Palestinian national liberation movement, was a type of propaganda or media charade aimed at making it difficult for Western European and American politicians to understand or support the Arab position, as this called their position on Nazism into question. There is a consensus in the West on anti-Nazism and a revulsion at the attempt to exterminate the Jewish people based on theories of racial superiority, and literary and cultural production on this subject has continued to this day. The issue is settled as far as Western culture is concerned. Meanwhile, Israel attempts to take advantage of this fact to garner support of its position as a settler-colonial state in a region that has never played host to a systematic persecution of Jews, and whose treatment of Jews has been the furthest cry from European Antisemitism, not to mention the Nazi Holocaust.

The instrumental use of the Holocaust is, of course, an insult to the victims of Nazism, and belittles the Holocaust itself.

The Jews who were led away to concentration camps or the gas chambers in Nazi Germany and who were gathered from various parts of Europe were not Zionists. At that time, the Zionist movement did not enjoy the sympathy of European Jews as a whole; indeed, it was supported only by a tiny minority among them. The majority of Holocaust survivors did not go to Israel, but rather left for the United States when they had the opportunity to emigrate. Israel has no right to speak on their



behalf, let alone use them politically in its relations with other states. And it certainly has no right to use them to justify the persecution of another people while at the same time playing the victim.

Palestinians have no moral dilemma in this connection, and Israel's exploitation of the Holocaust is immoral. Rather, the moral problem for Palestinians begins with belittling the importance of the Holocaust, which reveals an unjustified disregard for the lives of human beings who were persecuted because of their religion (or their race, in Nazi terms). Palestinians have no need to downplay the Holocaust. It is Europe alone that should bear responsibility for it. In fact, we must remind Europe of this, and of the immoral act Israel is committing by exploiting the European guilt complex, and then helping it to assuage its guilt by casting blame on the Arabs and Palestinians. There is an immoral Israeli-European collusion that benefits both parties, the former by playing the victim, and the latter by escaping its guilt complex. By sympathising with those outside Europe who play the victim and placing the blame on the Palestinians or the Arabs, Europe avoids its responsibility to deal with its guilt complex by combating racism in Europe itself. The true continuation of the Nazi Holocaust is the ongoing racism towards others in Europe. Neither Germany, nor France, nor any other Western country has any right to lecture the Arabs on anti-Semitism, which has never been an Arab problem.

VII: Double Standards and the Fate of Universal Values

The attitude of the US and European countries towards Israeli crimes and the adoption of Israel's position lock, stock and barrel even into the second month of the war, coupled with apathy towards the Palestinian victims, has led some young people who are rightly shocked by the horrors of war in the Gaza Strip to question the fate of the so-called "universal values" of justice, equality and freedom that are extolled by some Western countries, whose responses have ranged from complete and unconditional support for Israel to making some non-binding comments, or offering tepid advice on the lips of US officials.

The disappointment is understandable. However, the chorus is sometimes led by those who have been known to instigate against universal human values in general, who did not believe in such values prior to the ongoing aggression, who only see the war as proving their "theories" of the existence of a religious or civilisational clash with the West, and who do not believe in the values of freedom, justice, and equality among human beings. Therefore, this topic deserves to be addressed.

Where have the values of equality, freedom and justice gone? Well, they haven't gone anywhere. They are the tools with which we continue to defend the cause of Palestine and Gaza and condemn Israel, and on the basis of which we engage in other just issues in our region. We don't base our position in support of resistance to the Israeli occupation simply on patriotism, love of Palestine and its people, and our sense of belonging to the Arab nation. These motives are there, and we mustn't deny them. However, we formulate our position in moral terms. Those who are prompted by their religious creed to stand in solidarity with Palestine formulate their position based on the moral elements of their



belief, one of which is justice, or based on a combination of religious belief and universal human values. Otherwise, there will be no shared language between them and others. One's position on the aggression and crimes committed by the occupation certainly can't be justified based on absolute hatred for "Western civilisation" (concerning which we have to ask: What is "Western civilisation"? How is it defined exactly?), nor one's rejection of the "killers of the prophets," or the principle of *al-walā' wa-l-barā'* (that is, loyalty to all that pleases God and disavowal of all that displeases God), or the struggle against "infidels," or the right of invasion or conquest. Those who do so are of no benefit to the cause of Palestine, just as they have been of no benefit to the cause of the Syrian people, the Iraqi people, or anyone else; on the contrary, they have been harmful to them.

Those coming out to demonstrate all over the world in solidarity with the Palestinian people, and particularly, the victims of the aggression against Gaza and the occupied West Bank, do so not because the Palestinians are Arabs or Muslims, but rather because they believe in equality and justice and reject occupation. Even those who stand in solidarity with the victims because they are Arabs and Muslims often cite moral justifications in accessible language that shames those who claim to believe in the same principles and values.

Regarding those who pay lip service ad nauseum to universal values, yet fail to apply them at the level of relations among peoples, is this new or surprising? Didn't colonialism proceed apace even after the Age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution's issuance of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen? Some of the countries that practiced colonialism and treated other peoples as if they were subhuman were ostensibly democratic states whose authorities preached freedom and equality while denying them to large sectors of their own populations. It wasn't long before these values were imposed in domestic politics, universalising voting rights, social rights, and freedoms. And the struggle in these countries continues on numerous fronts. African and Native Americans have fought for justice, equality, and freedom because they have been denied to them in a country that enshrined these values in its constitution. This struggle arose out of the gap that separates values from reality and has exploited this moral tension to call for the actual application of these values. The application remains relative and selective to this day, which is grounds for criticism.

In the arena of international relations, the law has never imposed itself, nor have universal values, although demands for justice and equality have remained the focus of struggles within the framework of the nation state. At the global level, certain international conventions and treaties embodying these values, particularly the United Nations Charter after World War II, have been ratified, enabling oppressed and weak peoples to demand their implementation. However, this has only happened in two types of cases: the first being those cases in which their application has happened to coincide with the interests of one or more powerful states (the metropole in the case of colonialism), and the second being those situations in which public opinion within a powerful state (particularly the metropole) has adopted these demands for various reasons, including moral reasons, and organised protests to the point of influencing state policy. The two types of situation will vary depending on

numerous factors, including struggle itself. Generally speaking, the formulation of demands in the language of the universal values expressed in signed charters and treaties establishes a common basis for conversation and dialogue, including discussions of interests.

What about the expression “double standards,” which has been used frequently of late in comparisons between Ukraine and Palestine, and Russia and Israel? This expression gives voice to the frustration and disappointment that arise over the failure to hold influential countries to account for taking different, even opposite, positions on similar situations, especially when talking about occupying others’ lands by force. Take, for example, Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait and Russia’s occupation of lands in Ukraine on one hand, and Israel’s occupation of Palestine on the other, and the glaring contradiction between the positions taken by the United States on the former and the latter. (By “Palestine,” in this context, I am referring to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, territories that Western countries generally acknowledge as having been occupied by force and to which Security Council Resolution 242 applies.)

This moral critique is necessary. If we go beyond the moral discourse addressed to public opinion to the decisions made by the governments of influential countries regarding situations of occupation and the like, we find that what actually drives them is a single measure, that is, strategic and economic interests and considerations. There is no double standard, but rather, a single standard here. However, critiquing the situation based on moral judgments, which is what must be done, reveals a double standard.

There is no lack of Arab countries that apply double standards, for example, by criticising interference in their internal affairs or the internal affairs of their allies, while they themselves interfere directly in other countries’ affairs to the point of supporting armed militias there, or by calling for the lifting of the siege on Gaza while they themselves besiege it, or by applauding demonstrations of solidarity with Gaza in the West while banning them on their own soil. There are numerous other examples⁹ of Arab double standards which we will spare the reader, trusting that we’ve gotten our point across, namely, that “the West” holds no monopoly on the practice of double standards.

VIII: Morals and Identity in the Present Context

Morals are formed and expressed in daily life in the context of belonging to a reference group that imposes its customs and traditions, and in which the individual’s position and status within the group are inseparable from the expectations of them and their expectations of themselves. In this situation, private morals correspond to public morals to such an extent that it is difficult to distinguish between them within the framework of closely knit groups, such as the extended family, the tribe, and the traditional small neighbourhood, where the moral rules and binding norms that apply outside the group differ from those that apply within it.

⁹ We cite another example, although the use of the term “double standard” hardly describes its horror. In the speech he delivered at the recent Arab Islamic Summit (November 11, 2023), Syrian President Bashar al-Assad decried what Israel is doing in Gaza, despite the fact that he preceded Israel in bombing hospitals in his own country.



As a group expands, individual morality grows increasingly distinct from public morality. We are not speaking here of the expansion of a state or even an empire, which can happen despite an individual's continuing to belong to his or her small, closely knit group. Rather, we are speaking of the expansion of the group of belonging, as in the case of a national group, citizenship in a state, or identity groups (where belonging is reflective) which, in modernity, constitute an alternative to the traditional closely knit group.

However, the growing distinction between private, individual morality and public morality, and the increased possibility of making moral decisions individually, do not diminish the importance of the reference group, even if it becomes an imagined identity based community such as the nation. In the event of the outbreak of hostility and rivalry, especially war, the "close-knitness" of the imagined collective increases, that is, its tribalism or sectarian character. As a result, the gap between morals that apply inside and outside the group widens, reaching the point of total contradiction in the event of war. Ethical treatment of individuals within the imagined community does not apply to individuals and groups belonging to the enemy. Here the importance of two things emerges: the first is the existence of those individuals and organisations who preserve the human values that are termed universal. While their rulers merely pay lip service to such values, these people actually see these values as universal, not only because their content is humane, but in addition, because they view them as "transgroup" values that apply to humans generally. The second is the existence of norms that regulate relations between peoples and states even in times of war, and institutions that call for their implementation and document violations in the absence of major powers capable of enforcing them.

Here the question arises: Do the motives of those who protest the war with moral passion and agony arise out of a humane moral structure that is intolerably pained by the crimes being committed against the Palestinian people and refuses to be silent about them, or do they arise out of the national or religious identity that unites them with the victims? Both motives are legitimate, and can be formulated in the language of justice, because the Palestinian people are being subjected to injustice and oppression, and their cause is just. Similarly, some of those demonstrating in Europe, the United States and elsewhere, demanding a ceasefire, may be motivated by universal morals resulting from a sense of common belonging to a single identity – not a national or religious identity, but rather a human identity, which enables them to imagine themselves in the place of the victims. This is the highest level of shared belonging: Humanity as a larger reference group ought to be governed by universal values.

Young American Jews have offered a great service through their solidarity with the people in Gaza and their rejection of Israeli practices, either from the standpoint of universal values, from the standpoint of their understanding of Jewish values together with human values, or even from the standpoint of a shared Jewish identity with Israeli Jews. In this case, shared identity is a motive for rejecting Israel's monopolisation of the conversation, its claim to speak in the name of this shared identity, and its distortion of that identity with its criminal practices against the Palestinian

people. It is an identity-based starting point; however, it is diametrically opposed to identity-based fanaticism, since it makes mention of its identity not to boast about it, but rather in a refusal to support anyone who claims to represent that identity on illegitimate grounds. It behoves us to lend close attention to this phenomenon as compared with the fanaticism of sectarians in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, and to the major political and social significance of the role being played by those who have broken with it from a starting point that is identity-based, but profoundly moral.

Finally...

The Palestinian cause is a just cause, as is the right to resist occupation, which can, and should be, defended on moral grounds. The spread of youth support for the cause and solidarity with the residents of Gaza against the barbarism of the Israeli aggression is clear evidence of this. We are talking here about an ethical generation that is alienated from totalitarian ideologies and fanaticism of all kinds and is motivated by aversion to injustice and sympathy for its victims, just as it is motivated by issues of the environment, racial discrimination, and other issues that it considers just. It is a grave mistake for anyone, entrenched in their own narrow ideologies, to cling illogically to the belief that this is a manifestation of weakness or that human values have been defeated, and to exploit this solidarity to flaunt immoral positions that have nothing to do with justice.