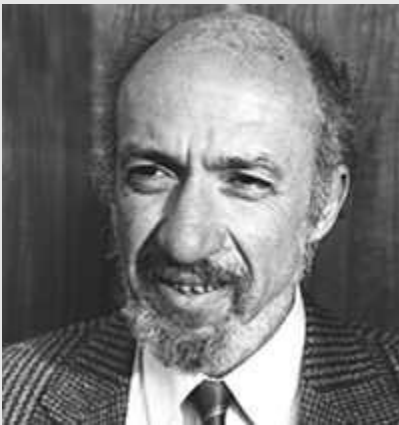


Slouching toward a Palestinian Holocaust



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And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?
William Butler Yeats, *The Second Coming*

There is little doubt that the Nazi Holocaust was as close to unconditional evil as has been revealed throughout the entire bloody history of the human species. Its massiveness, unconcealed genocidal intent, and reliance on the mentality and instruments of modernity give its enactment in the death camps of Europe a special status in our moral imagination. This special status is exhibited in the continuing presentation of its gruesome realities through film, books, and a variety of cultural artifacts more than six decades after the events in question ceased. The permanent memory of the Holocaust is also kept alive by the existence of several notable museums devoted exclusively to the depiction of the horrors that took place during the period of Nazi rule in Germany.

Against this background, it is especially painful for me, as an American Jew, to feel compelled to portray the ongoing and intensifying abuse of the Palestinian people by Israel through a reliance on such an inflammatory metaphor as 'holocaust.' The word is derived from the Greek *holos* (meaning 'completely') and *kaustos* (meaning 'burnt'), and was used in ancient Greece to refer to the complete burning of a sacrificial offering to a divinity. Because such a background implies a religious undertaking, there is some inclination in Jewish literature to prefer the Hebrew word 'Shoah' that can be translated roughly as 'calamity,' and was the name given to the 1985 epic nine-hour narration of the Nazi experience by the French filmmaker, Claude Lanzmann. The Germans themselves were more antiseptic in their designation, officially naming their undertaking as the 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question.' The label is, of course, inaccurate as a variety of non-Jewish identities were also targets of this genocidal assault, including the Roma and Sinti ('gypsies'), Jehovah Witnesses, gays, disabled persons, political opponents.

Is it an irresponsible overstatement to associate the treatment of Palestinians with this criminalized Nazi record of collective atrocity? I think not. The recent developments in Gaza are especially disturbing because they express so vividly a deliberate intention on the part of Israel and its allies to subject an entire human community to life-endangering conditions of utmost cruelty. The suggestion that this pattern of conduct is a holocaust-in-the-making represents a rather desperate appeal to the governments of the world and to international public opinion to act urgently to prevent these current genocidal tendencies from culminating in a collective tragedy. If ever the ethos of 'a responsibility to protect,' recently adopted by the UN Security Council as the basis of 'humanitarian intervention' is applicable, it would be to act now to start protecting the people of Gaza from further pain and suffering. But it would be unrealistic to expect the UN to do anything in the face of this crisis, given the pattern of US support for Israel and taking into account the extent to which European governments have lent their weight to recent illicit efforts to crush Hamas as a Palestinian political force.

Even if the pressures exerted on Gaza were to be acknowledged as having genocidal potential and even if Israel's impunity under America's geopolitical umbrella is put aside, there is little assurance that any sort of protective action in Gaza would be taken. There were strong advance signals in 1994 of a genocide to come in Rwanda, and yet nothing was done to stop it; the UN and the world watched while the 1995 Srebrenica massacre of Bosnians took place, an incident that the World Court described as 'genocide' a few months ago; similarly, there have been repeated allegations of genocidal conduct in Darfur over the course of the last several years, and hardly an international finger has been raised, either to protect those threatened or to resolve the conflict in some manner that shares power and resources among the contending ethnic groups.

But Gaza is morally far worse, although mass death has not yet resulted. It is far worse because the international community is watching the ugly spectacle unfold while some of its most influential members actively encourage and assist Israel in its approach to Gaza.

Not only the United States, but also the European Union, are complicit, as are such neighbors as Egypt and Jordan apparently motivated by their worries that Hamas is somehow connected with their own problems associated with the rising strength of the Muslim Brotherhood within their own borders. It is helpful to recall that the liberal democracies of Europe paid homage to Hitler at the 1936 Olympic Games, and then turned away tens of thousands of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. I am *not* suggesting that the comparison should be viewed as literal, but to insist that a pattern of criminality associated with Israeli policies in Gaza has actually been supported by the leading democracies of the 21st century.

To ground these allegations, it is necessary to consider the background of the current situation. For over four decades, ever since 1967, Gaza has been occupied by Israel in a manner that turned this crowded area into a cauldron of pain and suffering for the entire population on a daily basis, with more than half of Gazans living in miserable refugees camps and even more dependent on humanitarian relief to satisfy basic human needs. With great fanfare, under Sharon's leadership, Israel supposedly ended its military occupation and dismantled its settlements in 2005. The process was largely a sham as Israel maintained full control over borders, air space, offshore seas, as well as asserted its military control of Gaza, engaging in violent incursions, sending missiles to Gaza at will on assassination missions that themselves violate international humanitarian law, and managing to kill more than 300 Gazan civilians since its supposed physical departure.

As unacceptable as is this earlier part of the story, a dramatic turn for the worse occurred when Hamas prevailed in the January 2006 national legislative elections. It is a bitter irony that Hamas was encouraged, especially by Washington, to participate in the elections to show its commitment to a political process (as an alternative to violence) and then was badly punished for having the temerity to succeed. These elections were internationally monitored under the leadership of the former American president, Jimmy Carter, and pronounced as completely fair.

Carter has recently termed this Israeli/American refusal to accept the outcome of such a democratic verdict as itself 'criminal.' It is also deeply discrediting of the campaign of the Bush presidency to promote democracy in the region, an effort already under a dark shadow in view of the policy failure in Iraq.

After winning the Palestinian elections, Hamas was castigated as a terrorist organization that had not renounced violence against Israel and had refused to recognize the Jewish state as a legitimate political entity. In fact, the behavior and outlook of Hamas is quite different. From the outset of its political Hamas was ready to work with other Palestinian groups, especially Fatah and Mahmoud Abbas, to establish a 'unity' government. More than this, their leadership revealed a willingness to move toward an acceptance of Israel's existence if Israel would in turn agree to move back to its 1967 borders, implementing finally unanimous Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.

Even more dramatically, Hamas proposed a ten-year truce with Israel, and went so far as to put in place a unilateral ceasefire that lasted for eighteen months, and was broken only to engage in rather pathetic strikes mainly taking place in response to Israeli violent provocations in Gaza. As Efraim Halevi, former head of Israel's Mossad was reported to have said, 'What Israel needs from Hamas is an end to violence, not diplomatic recognition.' And this is precisely what Hamas offered and what Israel rejected.

The main weapon available to Hamas, and other Palestinian extremist elements, were Qassam missiles that resulted in producing no more than 12 Israeli deaths in six years. While each civilian death is an unacceptable tragedy, the ratio of death and injury for the two sides is so unequal as to call into question the security logic of continuously inflicting excessive force and collective punishment on the entire beleaguered Gazan population, which is accurately regarded as the world's largest 'prison.'

Instead of trying diplomacy and respecting democratic results, Israel and the United States used their leverage to reverse the outcome of the 2006 elections by organizing a variety of international efforts designed to make Hamas fail in its attempts to govern in Gaza. Such efforts were reinforced by the related unwillingness of the defeated Fatah elements to cooperate with Hamas in establishing a government that would be representative of Palestinians as a whole. The main anti-Hamas tactic relied upon was to support Abbas as the sole legitimate leader of the Palestinian people, to impose an economic boycott on the Palestinians generally, to send in weapons for Fatah militias and to enlist neighbors in these efforts, particularly Egypt and Jordan. The United States Government appointed a special envoy, Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton, to work with Abbas forces, and helped channel \$40 million to build up the Presidential Guard, which were the Fatah forces associated with Abbas.

This was a particularly disgraceful policy. Fatah militias, especially in Gaza, had long been wildly corrupt and often used their weapons to terrorize their adversaries and intimidate the population in a variety of thuggish ways. It was this pattern of abuse by Fatah that was significantly responsible for the Hamas victory in the 2006 elections, along with the popular feelings that Fatah, as a political actor, had neither the will nor capacity to achieve results helpful to the Palestinian people, while Hamas had managed resistance and community service efforts that were widely admired by Gazans.

The latest phase of this external/internal dynamic was to induce civil strife in Gaza that led to a complete takeover by Hamas forces. With standard irony, a set of policies adopted by Israel in partnership with the United States once more produced exactly the opposite of their intended effects. The impact of the refusal to honor the election results has after 18 months made Hamas much stronger throughout the Palestinian territories, and put it in control of Gaza. Such an outcome is reminiscent of a similar effect of the 2006 Lebanon War that was undertaken by the Israel/United States strategic partnership to destroy Hezbollah, but had the actual consequence of making Hezbollah a much stronger, more

respected force in Lebanon and throughout the region.

The Israel and the United States seemed trapped in a faulty logic that is incapable of learning from mistakes, and takes every setback as a sign that instead of shifting course, the faulty undertaking should be expanded and intensified, that failure resulted from doing too little of the right thing, rather than is the case, doing the wrong thing. So instead of taking advantage of Hamas' renewed call for a unity government, its clarification that it is not against Fatah, but only that "[w]e have fought against a small clique within Fatah," (Abu Ubaya, Hamas military commander), Israel seems more determined than ever to foment civil war in Palestine, to make the Gazans pay with their wellbeing and lives to the extent necessary to crush their will, and to separate once and for all the destinies of Gaza and the West Bank.

The insidious new turn of Israeli occupation policy is as follows: push Abbas to rely on hard-line no compromise approach toward Hamas, highlighted by the creation of an unelected 'emergency' government to replace the elected leadership. The emergency designated prime minister, Salam Fayyad, appointed to replace the Hamas leader, Ismail Haniya, as head of the Palestinian Authority. It is revealing to recall that when Fayyad's party was on the 2006 election list its candidates won only 2% of the vote. Israel is also reportedly ready to ease some West Bank restrictions on movement in such a way as to convince Palestinians that they can have a better future if they repudiate Hamas and place their bets on Abbas, by now a most discredited political figure who has substantially sold out the Palestinian cause to gain favor and support from Israel/United States, as well as to prevail in the internal Palestinian power struggle.

To promote these goals it is conceivable, although unlikely, that Israel might release Marwan Barghouti, the only credible Fatah leader, from prison provided Barghouti would be willing to accept the Israeli approach of Sharon/Olmert to the establishment of a Palestinian state. This latter step is doubtful, as Barghouti is a far cry from Abbas, and would be highly unlikely to agree to anything less than a full withdrawal of Israel to the 1967 borders, including the elimination of West Bank and East Jerusalem settlements.

This latest turn in policy needs to be understood in the wider context of the Israeli refusal to reach a reasonable compromise with the Palestinian people since 1967. There is widespread recognition that such an outcome would depend on Israeli withdrawal, establishment of a Palestinian state with full sovereignty on the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as capital, and sufficient external financial assistance to give the Palestinians the prospect of economic viability. The truth is that there is no Israeli leadership with the vision or backing to negotiate such a solution, and so the struggle will continue with violence on both sides.

The Israeli approach to the Palestinian challenge is based on isolating Gaza and cantonizing the West Bank, leaving the settlement blocs intact, and appropriating the

whole of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. For years this sidestepping of diplomacy has dominated Israeli behavior, including during the Oslo peace process that was initiated on the White House lawn in 1993 by the famous handshake between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat.

While talking about peace, the number of Israeli settlers doubled, huge sums were invested in settlement roads linked directly to Israel, and the process of Israeli settlement and Palestinian displacement from East Jerusalem was moving ahead at a steady pace. Significantly, also, the 'moderate' Arafat was totally discredited as a Palestinian leader capable of negotiating with Israel, being treated as dangerous precisely because he was willing to accept a reasonable compromise. Interestingly, until recently when he became useful in the effort to reverse the Hamas electoral victory, Abbas was treated by Israel as too weak, too lacking in authority, to act on behalf of the Palestinian people in a negotiating process, one more excuse for persisting with its preferred unilateralist course.

These considerations also make it highly unlikely that Barghouti will be released from prison unless there is some dramatic change of heart on the Israeli side. Instead of working toward some kind of political resolution, Israel has built an elaborate and illegal security wall on Palestinian territory, expanded the settlements, made life intolerable for the 1.4 million people crammed into Gaza, and pretends that such unlawful 'facts on the ground' are a path leading toward security and peace.

On June 25, 2007 leaders from Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority met in Sharm El Sheik on the Red Sea to move ahead with their anti-Hamas diplomacy. Israel proposes to release 250 Fatah prisoners (of 9,000 Palestinians currently held) and to hand over Palestinian revenues to Abbas on an installment basis, provided none of the funds is used in Gaza, where a humanitarian catastrophe unfolds day by day. These leaders agreed to cooperate in this effort to break Hamas and to impose a Fatah-led Palestinian Authority on an unwilling Palestine population. Remember that Hamas prevailed in the 2006 elections, not only in Gaza, but in the West Bank as well. To deny Palestinian their right of self-determination is almost certain to backfire in a manner similar to similar efforts, producing a radicalized version of what is being opposed. As some commentators have expressed, getting rid of Hamas means establishing al Qaeda!

Israel is currently stiffening the boycott on economic relations that has brought the people of Gaza to the brink of collective starvation. This set of policies, carried on for more than four decades, has imposed a sub-human existence on a people that have been repeatedly and systematically made the target of a variety of severe forms of collective punishment. The entire population of Gaza is treated as the 'enemy' of Israel, and little pretext is made in Tel Aviv of acknowledging the innocence of this long victimized civilian society.

To persist with such an approach under present circumstances is indeed genocidal, and risks destroying an entire Palestinian community that is an integral part of an ethnic whole. It is this prospect that makes appropriate the warning of a Palestinian holocaust in the making, and should remind the world of the famous post-Nazi pledge of 'never again.'