

Israel's War on Palestinians: Language in the Service of the Unspeakable

Thursday 19 October 2023, by [VANAIAK Achin](#) (Date first published: 19 October 2023).

It is extraordinary that Israel, the occupier, calls for a 'war' against the occupied.

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Let us start with acceptance of a fundamental moral-political reality. The relationship between the Palestinians in the occupied territories and Israel is that of the oppressed vis-à-vis the oppressor. Through the use of the most brutal forms of violence, both overt and covert, Israel has maintained the longest running illegal occupation of the 20th and 21st centuries. Another moral-political principle follows from this. While the side that is oppressed has the right, under international law, to use military and other means to resist and fight against the Occupying State (of course, in conformity with international humanitarian law), the Occupier has *no right whatsoever* to use military or any other mean to sustain, let alone deepen, that structure of injustice.

Now let us look at the assault carried out by Hamas through the prism of what Malcolm X said when he declared that the struggle for black liberation will use "any means necessary". Why did he say this and was he justified in making such a blanket call? The wisdom in what he said was his recognition that the oppressor will use any means necessary to maintain its domination so why should the victims forego what their opponent will undoubtedly do time and again? As a characterisation of the various means that Israel has been using all these decades and will continue to use after the Hamas assault, Malcolm X's warning is both prescient and accurate. But this does not mean the side that is oppressed should follow this dictum, especially when it knows the oppressor will continue to do so. Going after a military base and attacking enemy soldiers is justified but never an assault on innocent unarmed civilians. In spite of the absence of any universally accepted definition of terrorism, there is enough of a global consensus to recognise this as a terrorist act that must be condemned no matter which side does it. But then how is it that Israel is able to get away, both before and after the Hamas assault, with its assaults on civilians not being widely recognised at home and abroad as terrorism?

This is where the power of language and the arsenal of words used and not used, by Israel and its supporters, comes in. The current Israeli defence minister, Yoav Gallant, [has called Gazans "human animals"](#) even as the ongoing devastation of Gaza and its public is being carried out. This mental dehumanisation is not an emotional 'overreaction' to what has recently happened in Israel but reveals the basic but necessary mindset of so many of Israel's top leaders. It is necessary because it is the only way for them to rationalise and justify both to themselves and to the public their longstanding involvement in the brutal incarceration and mass killings of Palestinians. During an earlier 2012

Gaza bombardment, [deputy prime minister Eli Yishai said](#), “We must blow Gaza back to the Middle Ages, destroying all the infrastructure including roads and water.” Moshe Feiglin, deputy speaker of the Knesset, laid out a seven-step plan for the destruction of all infrastructure and issued a single ultimatum “[to the enemy population](#)” defined as any who did not move from Gaza to Sinai.

The call for such an evacuation out of Gaza to Egypt has been repeated now by the Benjamin Netanyahu government which gave civilians north of Wadi Gaza 24 hours to leave and go south. In July-August 2014 a [massive 51-day assault](#), codenamed ‘Operation Protective Edge’ (one of a number of such brutal campaigns against Gaza), resulted in over 2,200 dead and over 5000 injured. Shortly before this, the Knesset member Ayelet Shaked, later to serve as justice minister, [posted inflammatory remarks by a Netanyahu associate on Facebook](#): “The Palestinian people have declared war on us, and we must respond with war... Who is the enemy? The Palestinian people...in wars the enemy is usually an entire people, including its elderly and its women, its cities and its villages, its property and its infrastructure.” Women who give birth to “martyrs” should follow their sons (i.e., into their graves). “Otherwise, more little snakes will be raised there.”

It is extraordinary that Israel, the occupier, then and now, calls for a ‘war’ against the occupied!

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Words used

The public discourse around terrorism when used by governments and their media drum-beaters is selective, hypocritical and morally dishonest. Terrorism must not be seen as primarily a reference to a category of persons but as referring to a means, a tactic, a technique, a method. This is precisely why there are three kinds of agents that carry out terrorist acts and campaigns - the individual, the non-state group and the apparatuses of the state. The scale of victims and of general devastation caused by state violence massively dwarfs that caused by a non-state group actor. This is obviously because it has much greater capacity to exercise violence and does so. But the ‘grand’ character of its terrorist actions are much more easily disguised because they are rationalised in the name of grandiose ends - ‘national security’, ‘unity and integrity’ of the nation, ‘protecting democracy’, etc.

The fundamental nature of any political actor, good or bad, is not defined by its means but by its programme, its ideology, its goals. But once the term ‘terrorist’ is taken to define the political nature of the non-state actor, it is taken as justification for identifying all its members or even the civilians they claim to represent as terrorists and targets - and to seek their physical elimination irrespective of whether they have carried out a terrorist act or whether their culpability has been established.

And how are the terrorist actions by the state to be justified? Simply call its unspeakable actions that violate basic humanitarian principles, rights and laws ‘counter-terrorism’. Other words and phrases can now be used to further cover up their culpabilities as is, for example, widely being done in the mainstream India media for Israel. So Israel’s murderous actions in Gaza (and in the West Bank) should be described as ‘retaliation’, as ‘reprisals’.

Insofar as there are those who describe Hamas as motivated not so much by the desire to liberate Palestinians but by an ideologically driven *jihadi* ‘terroristic’ fervour, how many among them or others would be prepared to declare that the Israeli state’s behaviour is motivated by a *Zionist* ‘terroristic’ fervour! Islam or Judaism, like any religion, can be selectively interpreted to justify politically racist and exclusivist purposes but no religion is inherently so. Zionism is not a religion but a political ideology which is inherently exclusivist.

It is a little more difficult for Israel in its pursuit of Hamas to get away with justifying the 'collective punishment' of Gazans. Here the language used to pre-empt any criticism and condemnation of its terrorist killings of civilians, is the accusation that Hamas is 'hiding behind civilians'. Like all colonised people, those willing to carry out armed struggle against the colonial oppressor must do so in an underground fashion. Moreover, there is no possibility of there being a geographically 'remote' area separated from the mass of civilians in what is the world's most densely populated zone. Israel knows this and doesn't care. The definition of terrorist behaviour applies universally. There are never any excuses for intentionally or knowingly or indiscriminately killing civilians. Israel has no right to attack Gaza with or without evacuation warnings which, when occasionally given, are for the purposes of pretending to the global public that it will be justified in carrying out its subsequent brutalities.



Benjamin Netanyahu. Photo: Av Jolanda Flubacher/WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM/swiss-image.ch. CC BY-SA 2.0.

Declaring a 'war on terrorism', as Israel has also done, is fraudulent. How can one declare a war against a method! But deceitfully using the term 'war' dramatically expands the range of activity that can be undertaken by Israel. To win a war, one can take all manner of pre-emptive and proactive large-scale military actions in the name of 'self-defence' against the 'enemy'. Most importantly, the home territory of the presumed foe can then be transformed into a supposedly legitimate theatre of war. This is how Israel and its supporters try to construct their discourse of justification.

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Words not used

There are three terms that are of the utmost truth that Israel will not use. First, the proper description of Israel is that it is a 'settler-colonial' state, indeed now the only one in the world. Second, it is also an apartheid state fitting the 2002 Rome Statute definition of a state whose 'crimes against humanity' are "committed in the context of an institutionalised regime of systematic [oppression](#) and [domination](#) by one [racial group](#) over any other racial group or groups and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime". Third, similar to the South African apartheid regime, here too there is the deliberate 'Bantustanisation' of the West Bank so as to maximise Israeli's military control over the Palestinians there and over its resources, especially water, while its illegal Jewish settlements will continue to expand. But even worse than this, has been the situation and treatment of Gazans which had no parallel under the South African apartheid regime.

What now

The two-state solution has long been dead. Israel was never serious about it, as any honest investigation of its behaviour in the years immediately after the 1993 Oslo Accords will make clear. What talk of the 'need to pursue the two-state solution' does is to enable other governments, most certainly including India, to continue paying diplomatic lip service to the Palestinian cause while pursuing deeper relations with Israel.

So where does the Palestinian struggle for justice go? It must be to fight for the end of apartheid and therefore for full rights and equality with Jews in a genuinely democratic non-Zionist, multi-ethnic, multi-racial society. The tragedy of the Palestinians is that for too long a remarkable and courageous people have not had the kind of leadership they deserve. More and more Palestinians today are coming around to this perspective, one that if officially adopted by a newer leadership, would have much greater democratic appeal worldwide. This would greatly worry the Israeli government and the US seeking to construct a wider regional alliance structure with the neighbouring Middle East dictatorships. The Palestinian cause would link much more strongly to the popular aspirations in the Arab world to rid themselves of their own dictatorships. Here, the 2011 mass uprisings, though currently contained, have rung the warning bell for what can and will happen in the future.

This is one important source of hope for the Palestinian cause. The other is that Israel cannot completely or forever crush the Palestinian resistance. Their struggle for justice will continue.

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P.S.

- The Wire. 19 October 2023:
<https://thewire.in/world/israels-war-on-palestinians-language-in-the-service-of-the-unspeakable>
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