

The moral issue behind the Israel-Palestine conflict

Tuesday 14 November 2023, by [PLENEL Edwy](#) (Date first published: 22 October 2023).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict presents a moral issue of universal importance, that of the equality of rights, says Mediapart publishing editor Edwy Plenel in this op-ed article. In parallel to Israel's international legitimacy is a denial of the rights of Palestinians. Alarmed spectators, we discover the horror of the Hamas terrorist attack and the killing of Israeli civilians, and follow the slaughter, under the bombs of the Israeli military, of Palestinian civilians in Gaza. All these human lives have the same value, the same cost, he writes, and we cannot accept this escalation of terror in which the crimes of one camp supposedly justify the crimes of another.

The sleep of reason produces monsters. Before depicting the disasters of war in all their abomination ([Los Desastres de la Guerra](#)), it was thus that the Spanish painter and printmaker Francisco de Goya (1746-1828) entitled one of his etchings in the series [Los caprichos](#), which he produced at the end of the 18th century: *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*. It shows the artist dozing, while above and beside him are winged, dark creatures, a scene that symbolises the folly and ignorance that leads humanity to its downfall.

We are currently living through a similar moment of confusion and loss of direction. Alarmed spectators, we discover the horror of the Hamas terrorist attack and the killing of Israeli civilians, and follow the slaughter, under the bombs of the Israeli military, of Palestinian civilians in Gaza. All these human lives have the same value, the same cost, and we cannot accept this escalation of terror in which the crimes of one camp supposedly justify the crimes of another. But we feel powerless in face of what appears to be an irremediable catastrophe, announced in advance, such as it is that so many occasions to prevent it have been lost, since long ago.

We know that there is an urgent way out, which is an immediate ceasefire under the control of the United Nations (UN) in order to save the hostages of both sides, and which would open up the path to a political solution; the recognition of a Palestinian state which itself recognises the state of Israel. But if, emerging from an imminent peril, there could be an improbable salvation, such a scenario appears like a pious hope given the lack of a strong and united international community capable of imposing it. A lack, above all, of determination among those lending support to Israel, beginning with the United States, to put the brakes on the desire for vengeance that can only accelerate the jump into the abyss.

People in Gaza search for victims amid the debris of a building hit by an Israeli strike on Khan Younis in the Gaza Strip, October 14th 2023. © Photo Yasser Qudih / Xinhua / Sipa

In this context, how can one not feel all the more dumbfounded by the spectacle of the political and media debate in France? So very far from a supposed grandeur, those who govern France display a

debasing racist tack, throwing suspicion upon Muslim and Arab compatriots, and choosing an imperialist alignment in contrast to France's previously balanced diplomatic approach to the Middle East. Indifference to oppression and intolerance of dissidence reign over this mediocrity, with pro-Palestinian demonstrations and expression [paying the price](#), amid a McCarthyist climate that sadly distinguishes our country from other democracies.

What is to be done? It is important firstly to have a clear view of the situation. Here, the responsibility of journalism, associating its professional duty with its social utility, is to pierce this obscurity, distancing blind anger. To find one's bearings, and not get lost. This is vital and all the more imperative at a time swamped by propaganda, and which we must serve with journalism that is as rigorous as it is sensitive. It implies resisting the current monster of rolling news that creates a certain amnesia, losing the thread of the story, forgetting the past that determines it, and erasing the context that conditions it.

But it is not enough to simply recognise the events. One must also escape resignation, "this habituation of catastrophe, of which the vague feeling today dulls any will for action" as French historian Patrick Boucheron puts it in a recent essay, [Le temps qui reste](#) (The time that remains). He echoes Victor Hugo, who in *Les Misérables* wrote: "To advance the human race [...] is to venture, to brave to persist, to be true to ourselves, to grapple with fate, to astound catastrophe by how little it makes us afraid"*. Boucheron's essay is an invitation not to waste this "time that remains", by refusing to fall into the trap of catastrophe like animals frozen by the glare of headlights, paralysed by the peril.

For habituation, woven with conformism and leader-following, is the best ally of the worst that may come. Presented below, like fireflies in the falling curtain of night, are a few truths that might guide us in affronting the disorders of the world and the follies of humankind. Four moral compasses that also identify what it is that we refuse to become used to.

1. Any form of unconditional support is akin to blindness, whatever the camp, and whatever the justice of the cause.

No state, no nation, no people, and consequently no army, political party nor movement that lays claim to represent them, can be the subject of unconditional support. Because above them is a universal human condition from which springs a borderless, international right. In 1948, the year of the creation of the state of Israel, the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) for the very reason that if no limits are placed, states, nations and peoples can become indifferent to humanity and, as a result, dangerous and criminal.

Approved in Paris at a meeting of the 58 states that then made up the UN General Assembly, the 1948 UDHR was born from a lucidity that emerged from the catastrophe in Europe, one which was driven by nationalism and racism, and which led to the genocide of the Jews in Europe. The French drafter of the declaration, René Cassin, a jurist who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1968, fought for the inclusion of the word "universal" in the title of the text instead of the term "international". It was a manner of signifying that a superior right, that of the whole of the human community, should be imposed upon the states and nations over which it prevails. Otherwise put, no state nor nation nor people can be allowed to challenge, on the pretext of its own interests, this requirement for the respect of equal rights.

Israelis take cover during an alert of a rocket attack launched against their country from Rehovert, in the Gaza strip, on October 13th 2023. © Photo Dor Kedmi / AP via Sipa

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and

conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood,” states [Article 1 of the UDHR](#) . Like the French Revolution’s 1789 [Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen](#), the 1948 declaration sketched the horizon of a promise, albeit one that remains unfulfilled and incomplete, a work in progress in face of the renewed egotisms of states and the threat of them giving way to ideologies of inequality. From that point of view, the addition of the word “dignity”, a sensitive notion, along with “rights”, a legal criterion, in the text of the UDHR, and its placing in the opening article of the text, is significant. For the issue is not only about the respect of other human beings, but also the respect of oneself: to remain dignified, to know how to conduct oneself, to restrain oneself so as never to yield to the hate of others.

In the current situation, a declaration of “unconditional support” for the state of Israel in its riposte against Hamas is to give carte blanche to its leaders and military and to turn one’s back on these universal values. It prolongs the contempt shown to international law which, while cited in reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is denied to Palestine in an absolute non-respect of UN resolutions that have, beginning in 1967, condemned the Israeli annexations of, and settlements in, Palestinian territories.

2. The end can never justify the means, and only the means employed will determine the hoped-for end.

For the past 75 years, Palestine has posed a moral question for the world; that of the end and the means employed to reach it. The legitimacy of Israel cannot be founded on the negation of the rights of Palestinians, to the point of repeated acts of war crimes. But opposition to occupation and settlements cannot allow for a negation of the humanity of Israelis.

Crossing that boundary with the massacres and kidnapping of civilians, Hamas has done more than only harm the cause it claims to serve, for it has also dishonoured it. In the Jewish memory of the persecutions in Europe, in reaction to which the Zionist movement was created at the end of the 19th century, the terror unleashed by Hamas against Israeli civilians evokes the anti-Semitic pogroms of the past. The recalling of the massacres committed in 1947-1948 by the most extremist Zionists in their quest to chase away the Palestinians cannot, in any manner whatsoever, serve to excuse Hamas.

The blind violence of the oppressor discredits them, legitimising the violent resistance of the oppressed. Up until the peace process that began in 1991, the Palestinian national movement, then led by Yasser Arafat and the Fatah, which dominated the Palestine Liberation Organisation, illustrated this eternal rule in situations of injustice where one people seek to dominate another. But, through its internal debates, its pluralism, and its evolution to the point of recognising the state of Israel, that movement adopted the conviction that the cause of liberation for the oppressed requires a superior moral stance, by which the riposte is not a reflection of the crimes of the oppressor.

In 1973, the year of the Yom Kippur War, the 50th anniversary of which Hamas chose to launch its attack on Israel this month, [an open letter](#) co-signed by notable French intellectuals (including Edgar Morin, Laurent Schwartz, Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet) in French daily *Le Monde* underlined. “There is not a problem of the end and the means. The means are an integral part of the end. It results from that that any means that is not oriented towards the wanted end must be challenged in the name of the most elementary political morals. If we want to change the world, it is also, and perhaps above all, because of moral concerns. [...] If we condemn certain political procedures, it is not only, or not always, because they are ineffective (they can be effective in the short term), but because they are immoral and degrading, and that they compromise future society.”

Palestinians beside an overrun Israeli tank after they crossed the border fence in the south of the

That warning obviously applies to both camps. To risk the comparison between the October 7th attacks by Hamas and the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York is not only to ignore the Palestinian national issue, on the pretext of a war of civilisation between the (good) West and the (bad) Arab worlds, it is above all to be blind to what comes next.

While terrorism always makes things worse in furtherance of the perpetrator's ends, current world disorders result from the American riposte, both deceitful and criminal, which destroyed Iraq, which had nothing to do with 9/11, and gaining universal discredit by its violation of human rights, for which the West is still paying the price. Far from destroying the designated enemy, it created others. from al-Qaeda to the so-called Islamic State group.

3. At the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the persistent colonial issue has a brutalizing effect.

Driven by the Zionist movement which obtained the creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine, the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 was unanimously approved by the powers that conquered Nazism. The incommensurability of the crimes against humanity committed against the Jews of Europe, to the point of extermination through genocide, legitimised the new state. In amends for an abominable crime, the world's Jewish populations were offered a refuge where they could live in peace and security, sheltered from persecution.

If, today, Israel is one of the places in the world where Jews live with the opposite sentiment, that of anxiety, it is because the amends for the European crime was accompanied by the injustice committed against the Palestinians. In so doing, the West – that political entity over which the United States has taken leadership – has prolonged to our present day the past ill of the European catastrophe that is colonialism. Rebounding against Europe and its peoples after its projection around the world, colonialism was the imperial argument of Nazism, with its ideological vision of civilisations and identities that are superior to those of vanquished, subjugated and excluded peoples.

Colonialism does not civilise, it brutalises. The resentment prompted by the humiliation of dispossessed populations is accompanied by the retreat of the colonists into a conquering and indifferent posture. The spiral is as fearsome as it is infernal, producing enclosed identities whereby the community becomes a tribe, religion an absolute and origin a privilege. From there, to accept colonialism is to stir up a war of civilisations which illustrates the parallel radicalisation of both sides; the racist Jewish supremacism of the Israeli far-right echoes the Islamic ideology of Hamas and its allies, in a negation of the diversity of Palestinian society.

The late and much missed writer, diplomat and concentration camp survivor [Stéphane Hessel](#), who as a diplomat at the UN accompanied the creation of the Jewish state in Palestine, joined with [Elias Sanbar](#), the Palestinian historian, poet and diplomat, in a series of conversations (they discuss their collaboration [here](#), in French) in which they set out their positions on the Israel-Palestine issue. These were published in a 2012 book, *Le Rescapé et l'Exilé* (The Survivor and the Exile). Sanbar underlined the origins of a conflict that can only deepen as long as they are not confronted. "Certainly, one cannot re-write history, but it is important to say that this conflict began by a terrible injustice committed in Palestine in order to repair another, born in the horror of Nazi concentration camps," he said. Sanbar, who took part in the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, concluded that the only solution lies in an equality of rights, in reciprocity and recognition. Which is the opposite of the competition about numbers of victims, and this misery that is the condescension of the victor.

“One must say that the competition in the register of ordeals is indecent, that the races for the record in the number of deaths are literally obscene,” he said then. “Each suffering is unique. The fact that the Jews were exterminated takes nothing away from the suffering of the Palestinians, just as the fact that the Palestinians have suffered, and continue to suffer, takes nothing away from the horror lived through by the Jews. Also, and above all, the recognition of the suffering of others never de-legitimises your own suffering. On the contrary.”

4. The search for a solution to the disaster cannot be handed to those in Israel who are responsible.

On October 8th 2023, the day after the Hamas attack against Israel, the daily *Haaretz*, which saves the honour of Israel’s democracy, published an [editorial](#) in which it stated that this umpteenth war “is the clear responsibility of one person: Benjamin Netanyahu” who, it wrote, established “a government of annexation and dispossession”, and who embraced a foreign policy that openly ignored the existence and rights of Palestinians”.

Benjamin Netanyahu pictured during a visit to Israeli troops deployed close to Be’eri and Kfar Aza in southern Israel, close to the border with Gaza, October 14th 2023. © Photo distribuée par le gouvernement israélien via Anadolu et AFP<

The Right and far-right in Israel have poured fuel on the fire that they now pretend they will put out with the military extermination of Hamas and the expulsion of the Palestinians of Gaza. It was not a Palestinian but an Israeli ultra-nationalist terrorist who, in 1995, assassinated Yitzhak Rabin, prompting the fatal end of the peace process. It was Israel which, under the manoeuvring of Benjamin Netanyahu, has never ceased to play a cynical game with the Hamas Islamists in order to divide the Palestinian camp and weaken its secular and pluralist elements.

Set against these widely documented facts, notably by French journalist Charles Enderlin, there is something surreal about the controversy in France over the prerequisite of defining Hamas as a terrorist organisation, and not only for its actions whose criminal character has been underlined. In the period 2008-2009, and in echo to Israeli strategy, the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy had no hesitation in [arguing](#) for the necessity “to talk” to Hamas, whose then leader Khaled Mechal was interviewed by French daily [Le Figaro](#) in which he invited Sarkozy to “give a vital impulsion for peace”.

The height of hypocrisy is that Qatar, known to finance Hamas with the tolerance of Israel, is an economic, financial, military, diplomatic, sports and cultural partner of France, and one which is so very at home within the French establishment. Just as is also Qatar’s rival, the United Arab Emirates. It is in Qatar that Hamas has based its foreign representation, with a status resembling a diplomatic post, worthy of a state in the making.

If the actions of Hamas can indeed be called terrorist, it is to be voluntarily blind not to take into consideration another reality of the organisation – that of a political movement which has a social base. While its ideological line and its authoritarian practices make it the enemy of a potential Palestinian democracy, a democracy which respects the pluralism of its communities and a diversity of opinions, that does not remove the fact that it is one of the constituent parts, today a dominant one, of Palestinian nationalism.

Peace tomorrow can only be made by those who were enemies yesterday. And, above all, between peoples who are not assimilable to their leaders. The lie, and hypocrisy, about the reality of Hamas, and its instrumentalization by the Israeli state, underlines the illusion that has been shattered since October 7th. Israel and the United States believed they had downgraded the Palestinian issue by

gambling on the Arab states, their short-term interests and outright opportunism. In doing so they forgot that peoples are not fooled, rather they inform themselves and help each other; while they are absent from these diplomatic manoeuvres, where their future is supposed to be decided in their place, they always end up, one day or another, in undoing such plans.

Amid the scenes of demonstrations held around the world in solidarity with Palestine, including in Arab countries which have normalised relations with Israel, one is drawn to the words of French journalist Christophe Ayad cited in an ongoing exhibition entitled [*Ce que la Palestine apporte au monde*](#) (What Palestine brings to the world) at the Institut du monde arabe (Institute of the Arab World) in Paris. "It is about the world which is unwell that Palestine speaks to us," he says. "We observe it, we scrutinize it, we encourage it or we sermonize it, but it is [*Palestine*] which looks at us from the future of our humanity. Palestine already lives in the age of a world that is alienated, watched over, caged up, made savage, neo-liberalised. Palestinians know what it is to be an exile in one's own land. Let's learn from them!"

In face of the darkness spreading today, these reflections may appear optimistic. Yet the lesson is already before us, the only one that can avoid the worst with this war of which Benjamin Netanyahu and Hamas are the protagonists. Peace will never be achieved through power and force. In face of the challenges that know no borders, the credo of power is a dead end, while the consciousness of fragility is, on the opposite, a strength.

Edwy Plenel

* From Christine Donougher's 2013 translation of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, published by Penguin.

P.S.

- MEDIAPART. 25 October 2023 à 16h10:
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/international/251023/moral-issue-behind-israel-palestine-conflict>

- The original French version of this op-ed piece can, be found [here](#).
- English version by Graham Tearse.