

Gaza, Nakba: Zionism's Hubrisⁱ

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on attempts to make sense of the vast atrocity of Israeli violence against the Palestinians since October 7, 2023, arguing that this violence is not only comprehensible but an inevitable outcome of the colonial world order that birthed Zionism and which its violent onslaught exemplifies. Urging a reconsideration of both 'Gaza' and 'Nakba', the article contends that both violation and resistance are constitutive of the Palestinian condition. Recognizing this interconnection reveals that Israel's vicious campaign of eliminatory violence in Palestine will not conclude in heroic triumph, and that this 'war' is better read as the symptom of a decadent power tragically/inevitably failing to accomplish its impossible, inhuman dream of a world without others.

Keywords

Gaza, Nakba, Arendt, violence, genocide, Zionism

What kind of people talk like this, with a godlike sense of their power over literally millions of people? What mindset produces such genocidal proclamations on the disposition of entire populations?
Saree Makdisi (2023)

After a missile strike, everyone searches in the debris to put their loved ones back together. Mothers search for their children's heads to match with their bodies. To be a good mother in the rest of the world is to feed your children good food and keep them warm, but to be a good mother in Gaza is to bury your children whole.
Mariam Mohammed Al Khateeb (2024)

What can be said? You see everything.
Gaza Poets Society (2024)

The violence being unleashed in Gaza today is tearing the world at the seams.
Tareq Baconi (2024)

I

Considered the signature flaw of Greek tragedy's protagonists and a hallmark of declining empires, *hubris* names not simply Oedipal blindness but also, it seems, the entitled arrogance of the dogged, vicious, voracious cruelty of Israel's unprecedented campaign of violence against the Palestinians since Oct. 7, 2023.

II

Indeed, what we are witnessing in Gaza – the worst violence committed against the Palestinian people in the history of their existence, the first mass genocide livestreamed to the world in real-time – appears to defy comprehension. We are given numbers to make sense of it – nearly 40,000 murdered, more than twice that injured – and statistical analysis to clarify the meaning of these numbers: 1 in every 75 people in Gaza has been killed; nearly 2% of the population of Gaza has been killed; six children are killed every hour (Al Jazeera, 2003b).

² Saree Makdisi offers comparative political analysis in an attempt to understand:

The true, horrific scale of these numbers – of the calamity being methodically inflicted on an entire population as the world watches – becomes even clearer when considered in relative terms. In three weeks, Israel has killed more civilians than the Russians have killed in almost two years of total war in Ukraine, a country with nearly twenty times Gaza's population and a landmass over a thousand times its size. Save the Children reported that Israel has killed more children in the first three weeks of bombing Gaza than were killed annually in all conflict zones across the entire world since 2019 [...]. On an average day in Gaza, Israel kills 136 kids. (Makdisi 2023, 69)

We also have visual evidence, videos and pictures and photographs. Images of the most gruesome fatalities: bodies strewn in pieces by the side of the road, or piled up in mass graves, or hanging headless from buildings, or still living, but missing limbs or jaws or the tops of their heads, or still living and physically intact but on the verge of starving, quite literally, to death. The living look at the camera or away from the camera, or simply oblivious to it, covered in ashes and soot, clawing through rubble, carrying the bodies or limbs of the dead, shaking, listless, weeping or screaming or tearing their clothing, silent, raging with grief and devastation, begging, entreating the viewer to do something, that someone, *anyone*, please just *do something*. There are endless videos of frightened, orphaned children, dazed, walking in confused circles, going nowhere, belonging nowhere. Agonized parents wail and heave and grasp the still, small bodies of their dead children. We have seen doctors amputate limbs without anesthesia for their patients and get shot to death by Israeli snipers while performing surgery. We have seen babies left to die in NICUs and now, in the face of the collapse of Gaza's medical system, watch newborns slowly starve to death in the ruins of former hospitals.

We have seen the unnerving TikToks of Israeli soldiers showing off their trophies from this assault, flaunting the toys, food, art, money, furniture they have looted from the destroyed homes of Palestinians they have murdered or expelled. We see these soldiers' bizarre selfies, modeling or posing with lingerie they've pilfered from Palestinian bedrooms, in photographs they post on social media or use as their dating app profile pics. We see Israeli civilians partying at the Erez and Rafah crossings, attempting to block aid trucks from entering Gaza, while Israeli settlers, in the West Bank, destroy or set fire to food aid bound for Gaza. And, of course, we have seen the Israeli military bomb not just hospitals, schools, universities,

bakeries, cafes, and water treatment plants, but *also starving people themselves* as they approached the paltry few aid trucks Israel once allowed in.³ At first, people in Gaza coped with Israel's deliberate starvation strategy by eating grass and leaves. Others began eating the equally malnourished stray animals that remained alive in Gaza, animals who have themselves survived by feeding on the remains of human corpses that litter the streets of former villages. This apocalyptic nightmare, this hellscape of annihilation, has turned what remains of Gaza into a cesspool of sewage, rot, and decomposition. Indeed, Israel has begun immunizing its soldiers in Gaza (but not the Palestinians there) against polio, which now lives in the toxic waters running through Gaza's streets and destroyed towns and refugee camps. The "safe zones" to which the Israeli military has directed Palestinians to flee have been bombed repeatedly, as have the UN schools they shelter in, ostensibly non-military targets. And of course this is not nearly all. There seems to be neither limit nor end to the creativity, intensity, and depravity of the Israeli killing machine in Gaza.

Some of us bearing witness to this bitter campaign of violence have responded by engaging in discourse, becoming analysts and interpreters of Israel's violence. The point of this "holocaust," as Susan Abulhawa has explained, is "erasure" and the "intentional dismantling of another's humanity" (Abulhawa 2024).⁴ Sherene Seikaly has called it "the unhinged destruction of our peoplehood" Abu (2024). Samera Esmeir names it the latest of Israel's reiterative colonial attempts at "hollowing out Palestinian resistance, turning Palestinians into empty vessels, evacuating their souls, eradicating their existence as a collective, and muting the liberation struggle" (2023, 122).⁵ Attempting not simply to name this violence but also to resist it, we have engaged in imperative and exhortatory discourses. We have written letters and articles, tirades and poems, emails and social media posts. We have held teach-ins and attended protests; we yell and chant and carry signs and hold banners and pass out leaflets and flyers and stickers and make t-shirts and wear our keffiyehs everywhere we go. We write to our elected officials. We vote uncommitted. We hold ourselves and one another – in conversation, in community, in networks of care. We refuse to stop talking about Palestine. All eyes on Rafah, we say. Free Gaza, we demand. Free Palestine, from the river to the sea.

None of it is enough. We know this. We know it is not enough because none of this discourse stops the violence. We also feel it is not enough because our words seem unequal to this violence, incapable of not only stopping it but even just explaining it. How to understand the vastness of Israel's "stunning disregard for life," not to mention the accompanying affects of "perverse, almost gleeful nihilism" (Editors of *n + 1* 2024, 8) that accompany it like a loving companion? Mary Turfah (2024) writes,

The cruelty itself, on display in videos like the one taken from the vantage point of Israeli soldiers driving their tank over the “I Love Gaza” sign (that greets visitors entering Gaza through the Rafah crossing), is somehow less disturbing than that it is presented with naked glee – no trace of the sober air that marks a person “doing what needs to be done” or an awareness that the rest of the world might not welcome overt, genocidal sadism as enthusiastically as the average Israeli. It’s like they can’t see us seeing them.

Or, rather, it is as if they relish our seeing them – Palestinians seeing them most of all. These pictures and videos are trophies, after all, and so are meant to be shown off. Another editorial observes,

The smiles are the scariest part. They call to mind the grins of Charles Graner, Lynndie England, and Sabrina Harman posing with their thumbs up next to the tortured prisoners in Abu Ghraib. The only thing scarier than the cheerful expressions of latent aggression are the plain demonstrations of malice: a soldier shooting at the interior wall of an apartment whose walls have been spray-painted with the words LET YOUR VILLAGE BURN. Soldiers lighting food aid on fire. Soldiers destroying a warehouse where aid was stored. A soldier standing beside the exterior wall of a house that is spray-painted with red graffiti: INSTEAD OF ERASING GRAFFITI, LET’S ERASE GAZA. (Editors of *n + 1*, 11)

Turfah (2024) adds to this description that “Beneath the show of unifying genocidal intent, he has added the Star of David, also in red.” Equally agog at such behavior, Turfah offers a survey of the now-notorious Israeli soldier social media posts bragging about the violence they’ve committed in Gaza, categorizing these posts into genres ranging from the “carefree” to the “feminist.” In response to Israel’s violence and Israeli soldiers’ proud pictorial replications of it, Turfah asks, in all seriousness and completely non-rhetorically, “What is wrong with the Israelis?” (“With,” as she says, “emphasis on the word *wrong*”) (Turfah 2024). Puzzling over what is and is not legible in the context of Israel’s onslaught, the editorial continues:

One soldier even made a wedding invitation video with a bomb. “Thursday, the twenty-ninth of February, there will be an explosion!” he says to the camera, standing inside what appears to be a partly demolished apartment. Someone off-screen counts down from ten while the soldier beside him with an iPhone mounted to his helmet holds a reel of cord. The soldier pulls a pin, something in his hand sparks, and outside there is a blast, blowing the curtain behind him aside. The men around him cheer, raise drinks in the air, put their arms around one another and jump, smile, wave, clap, sing: “Tonight, tonight, tonight, a big celebration! Tonight, tonight, tonight, a big celebration!” Hebrew text over the video says SAVE THE DATE 29.02.2024. (Editors of *n + 1* 2024, 11)

How can such banal juxtapositions of unification and destruction, the building of a new life together with its complete eradication, be understood or made sense of? Referencing the genocidal rhetoric of Israeli politicians and military officials, from which he takes the title of his essay,⁶ Saree Makdisi (2023) asks, in the epigraph above, who talks like this? Indeed, who *does* talk like this? *How is any of this happening?* Just over a week into Israel’s campaign of violence, Samera Esmeir (2023) asked: “What explains this indifference to the suffering of the

indigenous colonized and the horror at the pain of the colonizer? [...] Could it really be that so many outside Israel secretly wish for Palestinian resistance to disappear so that so-called tragedies can be avoided, the ‘mess’ can be fixed, and the colonial international order can be restored?”

III

Such astonishment and felt incapacity recall Hannah Arendt’s assertion that violence and discourse are mutually exclusive, just as the geopolitical location of this violence suggests Arendt as a relevant interlocutor to help make sense of the (de)formations of state and statecraft which might explain it. For Arendt, only language is properly political, meaning that language is both the medium and domain of collective action amongst formally recognized equals. Violence is simply coercion by another name and is neither synonymous with nor substitutable for political action (Arendt 1958); Arendt 1970). As she says, “sheer violence is mute” (Arendt 1958, 26): it is anathema to discourse, not only in the sense that it is the antithesis of the properly political, but also because it is an experience that those who are violated cannot capably or adequately convey in words.⁷

As appealing as this hypothesis at first seems, it is transparently false. Not only is language itself violent, an enabler of violence, and a medium via which violence travels,⁸ but both those who violate and those who are violated are quite capable of capturing their intentions, feelings, and experiences in words. Indeed, nowhere is this more apparent than in the current Gaza Nakba,⁹ wherein there is an almost radical proliferation of discourse and representation conveying not simply the horrific violations of Palestinian lives and land, as captured and disseminated by Palestinians themselves,¹⁰ but also – as already discussed – a remarkable transparency of the oppressor’s intentions – genocide,¹¹ “human animals,” (Al Jazeera 2023), “no human being can exist,” “Amalek” (Middle East Monitor 2023), “the battle of civilization” (Netanyahu 2023), “Nakba 2023” (Tov 2023), and the oppressors’ experiences realizing those intentions in real-time (e.g., “the glee, the mockery, the rancor, the cruelty, the need to humiliate” (Abourahme 2024).

Of course, with this assertion, Arendt did not mean to offer an empirical description of politics so much as a normative one; specifically, her preferred version of politics in the form of the Aristotelian *polis*. Thus, she might be more fairly construed as saying that politics *as it should be* does not properly involve violence but, rather, the domain of speech, which she argues is the only, necessarily social medium for the forging of collectivity and collective action (itself the only proper understanding of politics). Indeed, for Arendt, it is only when politics has so deteriorated or been destroyed that the public realm becomes saturated with violence and is transformed into a domain of pure coercion, command, or tyranny (Arendt 1970). Yet even

this aspirational version of Arendt’s political theory is false, insofar as it is founded on a profound Eurocentric superiority (or, more plainly, racism). That is, Arendt’s proprietous bifurcation of the human condition into *violence*, on the one pre- (or anti-)political hand, and *language*, on the suitably political other, reliably correlates with clear distinctions in her work between the Orient and the Continent, East and West, the savage and the civilized. To take only one example: Arendt notes a premier mark of the East is its “despotism,” (Arendt 1958, 26-27) proof that it is incapable of proper political or state formation and fundamentally misunderstands the nature of politics. Or, in the words of every Orientalist architect of empire ever, the only language the Arabs understand is force (Said 1979; Patai 1973; Hersh 2004).¹²

When we lament the seeming impossibility of capturing the Gaza Nakba in discourse, what we are gesturing toward, I think, is less the alleged incompatibility of language and violence than our felt inability to make sense of this violence within the parameters of meaning-making afforded us by so-called logic, reason, and morality, much less the versions of government, state, and citizen enshrined in the “international rules-based order.” One prominent attempt to defeat this incapacity, to make sense of Israel’s violence in Gaza or restore some legal-moral-discursive order has been to identify what is happening there as a genocide. Activists have insisted on *genocide* to clarify that Israel’s campaign of violence is not a war between two powers, but rather an act of extermination of a racial/ethnic/national group. By contrast, of course, Zionists have claimed that the violence committed by Hamas on October 7th was a massive pogrom or even itself a Holocaust, an act committed by Nazis, a genocidal attack aimed at eradicating the Jewish state (and thus, by consequence, the Jewish people).¹³ Meanwhile, the Republic of South Africa mounted a stunning case for naming the Gaza Nakba a genocide and demanded the International Court of Justice enact provisional measures to stop it, among them ordering Israel to cease military operations (Republic of South Africa 2023).¹⁴ In the academic arena, scholars were engaged; journal special issues commissioned; open letters issued; debates and forums held. According to some, the arguments over genocide’s applicability to Israel’s violence campaign in Gaza have resulted in the implosion of the field of Genocide Studies (Segal and Daniele 2024).

Without disputing the enormous significance of the broad-scale, Global South-led, international effort to identify the Gaza Nakba as a genocide, a designation that is neither inaccurate nor misplaced and marks “the beginning of the end of the impunity that Israel has always enjoyed in the international legal system” (Segal and Daniele 2024, 9). I also want to acknowledge that, as with so much of the discourse we have all already produced about this violence, this term, too, is not enough. It is not enough because, despite the unwritten rule that genocide “is an evil greater than any other category of atrocity under international law, such as war crimes and crimes against humanity – and therefore nearly any violence is justified in

preventing or stopping it” (Li 2024), this discourse too has proven insufficient to stop the violence. This is perhaps because what is happening to Palestinians at the hands of Zionist forces right now far exceeds the limits of the term *genocide* itself, a term indebted to a postwar liberal global order that deliberately sidelines not simply colonialism and empire, but the fundamentally eliminatory violence of the modern nation-state itself.¹⁵

Zoé Samudzi (2021) deftly explains the limitations and double standards embedded in the term genocide. Noting the distinction between the *crime* of genocide (in international law) and an *act* of genocide (as committed by states all the time), Samudzi (2021) notes that it is only because the *act* of genocide – fundamental to colonialism and a necessity of modern state formation – was excluded from international law that it came to constitute a *crime* there. In other words, the colonial massacres and empire-building expulsions and ethnic cleansings that have conjured the modern nation-state into being are side-stepped entirely in international law, not only as genocides but also, indeed, as crimes (Samudzi 2021). According to A. Dirk Moses (2023), this side-stepping was intentional, so as to preserve ruling powers’ ability to wage wars of extermination. By making *intent* key to distinguishing genocide from other crimes in international law, the 1948 Nations Convention on the Punishment and Prevention of Genocide (UNGC) insisted on the “requirement that people are killed ‘as such,’ meaning solely on the grounds of their identity – the genocidal intent of destroying the enemy – rather than by the military logic of defeating them” (Moses 2023). The Nazi Holocaust was, of course, the paradigm case of genocide in this sense and the definition’s animating example: precisely, this event was genocide because Jewish people were killed as *Jews* and for no other reason.

This version of genocidal intent – the aim of killing of X population for killing’s sake – as the definitional essence of genocide in international law is, Moses argues, a handy carve-out provision by which states evade accountability for behavior that is otherwise normative to their daily functioning and survival. In other words, by defining exterminatory state violence against civilians as “a glitch in the international system” rather than “baked into statehood itself” (Moses 2023), the ordinary examples of mass violence (both internal and external) required to create those civilized Western states as “civilized Western states” can be rationalized as order, security, peacekeeping, and lawfulness. In this framework, the violence of the colonizer/empire/state is righteousness, self-defense, and protection of the innocent, while the violence of the colonized/subject(ed)/civilian is criminal, savage, barbaric, backward, perverse, and evil. What enables and perpetuates this double standard of violence, of course, is the racialization work of white supremacy. Thus, just as genocide becomes marked as “aberrational violence beyond the laws of war observed by civilized Western states” (Samudzi 2021), so too do racism and white supremacy become exceptional to the order of states and nations – rather than, as we know, intrinsic to it (Mamdani 2004). Refusing to exceptionalize

genocide as somehow outside or beyond nation-state logic, Samudzi entreats us to recognize “the workaday necropolitical functioning of the Westphalian structure: someone *must* die so *life* can be preserved” (Samudzi 2021; Schotten 2018).

When it comes to understanding Israel’s horrific campaign of violence against Palestine since Oct. 7, 2023, then, the problem is not that we lack the ability to articulate Israel’s violence – either its quantity or its depravity – in language. It is rather that the language we do have is saturated with the violence it is ostensibly intended to document, advancing that violence in our reuse of it and rendering us complicit with the regimes of racial colonialism that we are attempting, through discourse, to identify and resist. What cannot be understood or made sense of in the Gaza Nakba is not its vastness, malevolence, lustfulness, or shamelessness so much as its emergence within a sociopolitical and economic world order that has, for so long, masqueraded as the emancipation of Man or the fulfillment of the Idea in history (Wynter 2003, 257-337; Fukuyama 1992; Mills 1997; Thobani 2021). Our anguish at the hyperbolic, reactionary culmination of that world order in the Gaza Nakba is the horrible heartbreak of confronting the necropolitical, racial annihilationism of that global order exposed in all its gruesome, disgusting, racist nakedness. The constitution of the World of Man is exclusive of Palestinians, the colonized, and all those populations marked by the state for death so that it may live.

IV

To return to Arendt for a moment, then, we might note that not only are language and violence co-constitutive, but also that denial of this fact amounts to a denial of Palestinian existence, suffering, and death. Indeed, although Arendt herself did not live to participate in this discourse, it is worth noting that the unspeakability of violence is a recurrent theme in Zionist ideological discourse. It is key, for example, to claims that the Nazi Holocaust was an exceptional event in human history, the full magnitude and brutality of which cannot be articulated – whether because the violence was too vast and incomprehensible to be captured in language or because to articulate its totality and vastness would somehow shame or dishonor its victims (Mandel 2001, 203-228).¹⁶ More recently, in a similar vein, Zionists have declared it is acceptable to dehumanize Arabs, Muslims, and Palestinians via the language of “terror” and “terrorism” because the heinousness of the violence committed against Israel on October 7th is itself unspeakable, beggaring belief or rational human comprehension.¹⁷

It is perhaps worth noting, then, that despite Arendt’s vocal criticisms [1945] 2007) of not only the modern nation-state but also Zionism, she nevertheless believed firmly in the exceptionality and historical unprecedentedness of the Nazi holocaust, an insistence that shows up repeatedly in her work and particularly in her dispatches from the Adolf Eichmann

trial.¹⁸ This historical uniqueness, she argues, is due in part to its *difference* from colonialism and empire-building, which she acknowledges involved massacres of all sorts. Agreeing with the UNGC definition of genocide, Arendt argues that what is unique about the Nazi holocaust is that it sought to kill Jews for no other reason than that they were Jews. In this sense, “genocide” is a term introduced “to cover a crime unknown before,” and Arendt agrees that intent to exterminate a group as a group is key to demarcating genocide as an international crime.

Despite writing about and sometimes explicitly theorizing colonialism and empire, however, Arendt nevertheless routinely downplayed the existence, extent, and brutality of colonial genocides to the point of seemingly willful ignorance. Referencing the notorious extermination of millions of Congolese by Belgium, for example, she laments that the “perhaps worst” aspect of this colonial project was “the triumphant introduction of such means of pacification into ordinary, respectable foreign policies” (Arendt 1951, 185). Similarly, the greatest travesty of the Dutch colonization of Southern Africa was the degeneration of the Dutch themselves in their rule over the native African peoples there (Arendt 1951, 207). Moreover, these Europeans cannot rightfully be held accountable for genocide in southern Africa because of the outrageous foreignness of “those African savages” who, Arendt contends, “frightened Europeans literally out of their wits” to the point that “when European men massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder” (Arendt 1951, 206).¹⁹ With specific regard to settler colonialism, Arendt asserts that Canada and Australia “were almost empty” (Arendt 1951, 182) at the time of European contact and, in her paean to the American founding, ignores the existence of indigenous people entirely, busy as she is exonerating the Founders of the crime of slavery (Arendt 1973; Mamdani 2004, 5-6). In all cases, even when she does acknowledge colonial eliminationism, she dismisses it as less damaging or politically problematic than the decadence of Europe, Europeans, or European civilization that such behavior indexes.

Indeed, if there is any continuity between the crimes of colonial and imperial expansion and the Nazi holocaust for Arendt, it would not be confirmation for her of the defining logic of an entire political tradition but, rather, the mark of that tradition’s devolution and decay, a continuity that nevertheless does not continue with Nazism insofar as the Nazi holocaust was an unprecedented historical event that killed Jews only because they were Jews (and not, by contrast, for the sake of conquest, expansion, or resource exploitation). But as Aimé Césaire pointedly reminds us, the only thing unprecedented about the Nazi Holocaust was Europe’s turning its wars of annihilation inward and killing its own internal populations Césaire ([1955] 2000).²⁰ Seemingly unwittingly and thus utterly unironically, Arendt warns of the “boomerang effect” of colonial violence, but again with more concern for the colonizer than the colonized,

noting that the decay of colonial or imperial legitimacy will result in an increase in violence, albeit this time among the subjects of the metropole (Arendt 1970, 53-54). Yet, as Samudzi puts it,

No one is killed *simply* for possessing an identity: this is the depoliticized formulation of genocide in its liberal deployment. The real cruelty and terror of collectivized human punishment is the fact that, at any given time, it is possible to observe one or more of the five legally defined acts of genocide in many many parts of the world – including within U.S. borders – being performed against some group in a way, and it is legal (or maybe not) and perfectly normal. (Samudzi 2021)

In other words, the singling out of genocide as uniquely determined by intent is both a by-product and a driver of Holocaust exceptionalism, the notion that the Nazi holocaust is an unprecedented and unique horror in human history. For all her consideration of the history of empire and colonial conquest, then, in her attempt to understand the bloody 20th century, Arendt remains bound to an unjustifiable Holocaust exceptionalism that manages to simultaneously preserve the sanctity of European civilization even as it faults it for failing to live up to its own promises.²¹

Despite, then, or perhaps even because of these failings, Arendt unwittingly supplies the answer to Turfah's question as to just what, exactly, is *wrong* with the Israelis. Near the end of her commentary on the Eichmann trial, Arendt criticizes the court for failing to grapple fully with the adequacy or correctness of the charges against Eichmann:

At no point, however, either in the proceedings or in the judgment, did the Jerusalem trial ever mention even the possibility that extermination of whole ethnic groups – the Jews, or the Poles, or the Gypsies – might be more than a crime against the Jewish or the Polish or the Gypsy people, that the international order, and mankind [*sic*] in its entirety, might have been grievously hurt and endangered. (Arendt 1963, 275-276)

In other words, despite agreeing with the UNGC definition of what constitutes genocide, Arendt finds fault with limiting Eichmann's crime solely to participating in one. She concludes her commentary on the trial by offering her own verdict on Eichmann's guilt, powerfully naming the crime she takes him to have committed on the last page:

[J]ust as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations – as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world – we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you. This is the reason and the only reason, you must hang. (Arendt 1963, 279)

In Arendt's view, the Nazi holocaust was a crime against the Jews as Jews. But it was also more than that. It was a crime against all of humanity, "an attack upon human diversity as such, that is, upon a characteristic of the 'human status' without which the very words

‘mankind’ [*sic*] or ‘humanity’ would be devoid of meaning” (Arendt 1963, 269). Recognizing that Jewish people had been relegated to the subhuman, Arendt identifies the crime of Nazism as determining who can and who cannot inhabit the earth via assertions about who is and is not legitimately part of humanity. In these determinations, the Nazis exhibited a hubris that exceeds properly political acts and crimes, affirming not simply an antipolitically violent character but rather (or also?) the god-like role of determining who is fit to live and who to die: “aspiration toward omnipotence always implies – apart from its utopian *hubris* – the destruction of plurality” (Arendt 1958, 202).

Ironically, then, and despite her own philosophical and political commitments, Arendt’s statement of Eichmann’s crime actually articulates both the animating hubris of Zionism and the aspiration of modern sovereignty, each of which is innately colonial (not to mention theological). Indeed, it would be difficult to distill the essence of colonization to something other than Arendt’s formulation – “the right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world” – a right that is neither reliant upon nor reducible to the specific intent fetishized in the UNGC definition of genocide, but *is* reliant upon who is or is not deemed credibly part of humanity. Arendt’s inability to see the meaning and consequences of her own formulation, to grasp the continuities between the eliminatory violences of European colonization and Nazism, is better understood as her Eurocentric inability to grasp the existence and humanity of non-European peoples and extend her philosophical vision to those beyond her own victimized community. She is, in other words, fully ensconced in the coloniality of the World of Man that is exclusive of *les damnés de la terre*.

V

In the context of Israel’s campaign of violence against Palestine since October 7th, then, it is essential to acknowledge not simply Arendt’s colonial sympathies (a not uncommon revelation at this point, albeit one that does not seem to prevent her consistent rehabilitation for various aspirational and progressive political theories), but also and specifically her Nakba denial. Despite acknowledging, for example, that establishing the state of Israel in Palestine would produce an injustice and corresponding refugee population, illustrating exactly her criticism of the failures of the modern nation-state, (Arendt 1951, 290) in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she willfully ignores her own critique, making excuses for Israeli expulsion and dispossession. In the Postscript to this text, Arendt references the 1956 Kafr Qasim massacre, which is narrated by Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal as follows:

On October 29, [1956] at the outset of the fighting [in the Suez Crisis], military authorities clamped a curfew on Arab villages, starting at 5 p.m. In Kafr Qasim, workers had been toiling in the fields; not having heard about the curfew, they drifted home after five. The village chief, having learned of the curfew at 4:30, had cautioned the local military unit’s NCO that the returning laborers would

have no way of knowing about it. Similar situations occurred in other villages, but in Kafr Qasim the military unit lined up the returning workers and shot them. Forty-seven were killed. (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993, 164)

Arendt acknowledges this massacre as a massacre, even as she exonerates the Zionist forces who carried it out (and the Zionist government that dealt lenient sentences to only some of the soldiers it tried for murder) by calling it a one-off, “an isolated act,” (Arendt 1963, 294) rather than part of a systematic and purposeful campaign of domination, displacement, and transfer of Palestinians who remained within the 1949 armistice lines. Unlike Eichmann’s actions, which “extend[ed] over years, in which crime followed crime,” the actions of these soldiers were apparently definitive of neither their culpability for genocide nor that of the Zionist state whose orders they were following, since Israel’s regime did not essentially differ from “the penal and military lawbooks of civilized countries” (Arendt 1963, 292).

Nakba is Arabic for “catastrophe” and is the word Palestinians use to name their expulsion, massacre, and dispossession in 1947–1949. It is the beating heart of Palestine, “the question of Palestine,” or the so-called “Israeli-Palestinian conflict”. Unsurprisingly, even until today, the Nakba remains both unknown and willfully denied. Despite mountains of evidence and historical scholarship by both Palestinians and Israelis attesting to its occurrence, not to mention its intentionally sadistic and systematically murderous character, it somehow remains unacknowledged. Its violence is consistently dismissed, ignored, downplayed, or outright denied; it seems unqualified to take its place among the world’s greatest atrocities of the 20th century. While Holocaust denial remains the sin of sins and the crowning apex of expressions of antisemitism, Nakba denial remains core to the smooth functioning of the imperial world order, to the extent that even to claim that the Nakba occurred is itself characterized as antisemitism.²²

Revisiting the details of the Nakba – the intentional massacres, the deliberate destruction of whole families and villages, the use of psychological torture (e.g., broadcasting audio of prior expulsions and killings on loudspeakers so as to terrify people into leaving “voluntarily”), the murder of children in front of their parents and parents in front of their children (Khalidi 1992; Masalha 2007) – what comes to mind is not simply the historically adjacent events of the Nazi holocaust (much less the irony of its victims imposing such measures on another people, even herding them into “ghettos” before massacring them) but now, today, Israel’s fabricated, lurid accounts of the violence supposedly committed by Hamas fighters on Oct. 7, 2023. I am both uninterested in and unwilling to rehash the details of the Oct. 7th atrocity propaganda generated by Israel and reproduced *ad nauseam* by corporate media, US politicians, and the pundit class; suffice it to say that much of it has been repeatedly, credibly debunked. What I am instead interested in is reading this proliferation of fake news as a

version of Nakba denial. Of course, that the Nakba should continue to be denied while lies about Hamas violence continue to be repeated as truth is unsurprising, given the racial colonial world order already discussed. What is striking to me is less the asymmetry of their truth status than the similarity in the stories told about the crimes *actually* committed during the Nakba, on the one hand, with those only *fantasized* to have been committed on Oct. 7th. It is almost as if the foundational crime upon which Israel's edifice of "civilization" has been built – the Nakba, with its massacres, rapes, killing of children, and psychological warfare – is manifesting in an inverted fashion, via a warped fantasy that is producing *Israelis* as victims of the Nakba rather than its perpetrators.

This delusion goes well beyond the routine Zionist representation of Israelis as the innocent victims of Nazified Palestinians (Zertal 2005; Schotten 2012). More than simply a false reversal of hierarchy, this rhetoric fantasizes Israelis as actively *changing places* with Palestinians, as themselves subject to annihilatory violence that threatens to destroy not simply "the Jewish people" but, it seems, Jewish civilization as a whole: the presence and political and cultural existence of *the Jews in Palestine*. What I am speculating here is that there is a kind of *envy* manifesting in Israeli discourse about Oct. 7th via a wildly fanciful juxtaposition of just who, exactly, has been and is currently the object of the Nakba. This covetous fantasy suggests that Israelis (or Zionism as an ideological project writ large) actually imagine themselves or long to *be Palestinian*, even as they are simultaneously and explicitly determined, in both word and deed, to *exterminate* the Palestinians.²³

If this speculation has any merit, one consequence is that in order for colonial hubris to succeed, for it not to result in tragic failure, it must accomplish the impossible: *it must transform itself into the colonized even as it must eradicate the colonized*. The futility of this project gives the lie to sovereignty's promised ideals of security, equality, and freedom for all and forces a reckoning with all that it renders taboo, savage, evil, or immoral: in this case, the continued existence and resistance of the Palestinian people. As it turns out, this resistance is ineradicable from the Palestinian people as hubris is from Zionist colonialism. As Samera Esmeir explains, the Nakba defines not simply Zionism and Palestine but, also, the Palestinian subject:

It [the *Nakba*] indexes a double loss: of the land of Palestine and, consequently, of Palestinians. This is why the *Nakba*, or the severing from the land, was never accepted. Acquiescing to it would have been equivalent to consenting to world-destruction. Hence, the dual position of the Palestinian subject: she is at once marked by the catastrophe and cannot but struggle against it. (Esmeir 2023)

In other words, to be Palestinian is to be unable to separate from or "get over" the Nakba. Its violence constitutes Palestinian subjectivity, which is itself coterminous with resistance to that

subjectification. *Contra* Arendt once again, the Nakba is world-making violence that has resulted in the creation of the very people it seeks to eliminate from the face of the earth.²⁴

In an example of just such Palestinian existence/resistance, Rabea Eghbaria (2024) has argued that *Nakba* be codified as a distinct crime within international law. As he notes, *Nakba* is essential to Zionism insofar as its definition is not merely theoretical but also material: Zionism is what Zionism does. And what Zionism does is *Nakba*.²⁵ Eghbaria's contribution is an unanticipated application of Arendtian politics, to be sure: an anticolonial forging of discourse to constitute the new and bring it into being (Arendt has no account of oppression and thus cannot countenance discourse "from above" or "from below"). But Eghbaria's proposal is even more transformative than that, insofar as its articulation offers the possibility of Palestinians entering the world of Man. Indeed, for *Nakba* to become a crime, Palestinians would have to become human, and Zionism recognized as an annihilatory, colonial enterprise.

What Eghbaria has attempted in discourse, Hamas has undertaken in deed. The Al-Aqsa Flood operation of October 7th, 2023 was an undeniable act of anticolonial resistance and an epic jailbreak potentially more world-transformative than the storming of the Bastille. While the global colonial order of things insists that the violence of the colonizer is necessary, rational, and justified while the violence of the colonized is savage, barbaric, evil, and terrorism, the real virtue of armed anticolonial resistance is neither that it necessarily breaks through these layers of ideological sediment nor that it poses the realistic possibility of defeating the colonizer. Rather, as Bikrum Gill puts it, armed resistance changes the colonial calculus of power:

The logic of the war of national liberation is centred upon overturning the material equation of force that underpins colonialism and the broader imperialist world order. Here, colonialism and imperialism are premised, in the first and last instance, on a 'greater violence' that enables the coloniser to usurp sovereignty from the colonized. This material equation of force generates a secondary ideological projection of power wherein the coloniser appears as invincible in any encounter with the colonised, capable of enacting any degree of violence with impunity. The ideological legitimization of this impunity consists of a supposed higher rational purpose (e.g. anti-terror, civilisational, democracy promoting, humanitarian, etc.) that is ascribed to the coloniser's violence. The colonised, by contrast, are rendered as inherently killable in any contestation with the coloniser due to an irrational savagery that is attached to their violence. Insofar as the colonised remain within such a balance of material and ideological force, they will by necessity be compelled to seek, or perhaps put more properly, beg for, recognition of their rights under the sovereign power of the colonizer. (Gill 2024)

The point, then, of anticolonial warfare is not to overwhelm the colonizer militarily, usually impossible anyway. Rather, the goal is to disrupt the colonial balance of material and ideological forces, wherein the colonizer is materially more powerful and ideologically invincible and the colonized is simply irrational and savage. Indeed, as Nasser Abourahme (2024) argues, "The power of anticolonial war is not in any final decisive confrontation"; rather,

“It’s always about the opening of *political* possibility through changing relations of force” (original emphasis). Gill argues that this is what Al-Aqsa Flood did. Both materially and ideologically, it shattered the myth of invincibility necessary to sustain an already unstable and unfinished colonial project: Zionism, or the elimination of the Palestinians. This radical disruption of the logics of global colonial warfare explains, for both Gill and Abourahme, the wildly disproportionate, abominable, and wanton campaign of violence Israel has unleashed against Palestine since October 7th.

For both Gill and Abourahme, it is the ongoing and historical existence and resistance of the Palestinian people that has prevented Zionism’s successful closure. This resistance has now brought Zionism to a breaking point because it has fundamentally challenged not simply the material realities of colonial domination, but also its affective/psychological/ideological character, specifically in the domain of *the human*. Abourahme (2024) argues that “the bedrock of any war of national liberation is ordinary people’s capacity to keep rejecting the terms of defeat and insisting on life at all costs.” For Gill (2024), Al-Aqsa Flood has “commanded a recognition of its political rationality and thus brought the racialized framework of ‘irrational savagery’ to crisis point. In so doing, it has opened a road beyond the inhumanity of genocidal colonialism that is the foundation of the Western world order.” Both in word and deed, then, Palestinian existence and resistance, forged in and through Nakba, continue to give the lie to Zionist mythology and, in Tareq Baconi’s words (2024), pose “one of the greatest threats to Western hegemony in modern times.”

For Baconi, it comes as no surprise to acknowledge Palestine’s constitutive dependency on Zionism and Israel. If anything, this relationship is exemplified by Gaza, which Baconi argues symbolizes and bears the historic weight of Palestine in its entirety – its loss and its steadfastness, its conquest and its resistance, its deformation and its beauty. He characterizes this status as an abjection, per Julia Kristeva. Simultaneously ineliminable, expelled, repudiated, and horrific, Gaza is abject. Itself abject as well as the geographical site of abjection, Gaza is iconic of Palestine – both its unbearable oppression and its intolerable, extraordinary, inevitable resistance.

The thing about the abject is that its inevitable irruption poses an *existential* danger to whatever seeks to deny, repress, expel, or destroy it. This threat is simultaneously the effect of Al-Aqsa Flood and the meaning of Gaza’s enduring existence:

This is the lesson that Gaza has taught us, that the revolution of the abject is inevitable, and this is a lesson that is frightening to those committed to dominance. Countries that proclaim Western civilizational values at home elide the unwanted populations they have brutalized in pursuit of their superiority. There is a Gaza – an unwanted and dominated population, a site of abjection – undergirding most sites of democratic rule, built as they are on the legacies of slavery, racialized capital, and colonialism, which is why the truth that Gaza embodies has the potential to dismantle our world order. (Baconi 2024)

This is both the unique burden and special privilege of abjection: simultaneously subject to annihilatory hatred and expulsion, the abject's inability to be forever silenced necessarily erupts with an equally annihilatory, if also self-liberatory force. In this sense, it is not simply Gaza that is abject but the Nakba itself. Indeed, the simultaneities of violence and language, occupation and resistance, deformation and stabilization of Palestinian subjectivity, are what crucially define the Nakba. Zionism is Nakba, as Eghbaria entreats, but the Nakba also defines Palestine. Nakba is both the hubris of Zionism and the resistance of the Palestinians. It is the destruction of Palestine even as it is the source of Palestinian *sumud* (steadfastness) and the key to Palestinians' continuing survival. Nakba, in other words, defines Zionism, is inextricable from Zionism. But it defines and is inextricable from Palestine and Palestinians as well: "scholarship might as well acknowledge the Nakba for what it is: an organic articulation of the Palestinian condition" (Eghbaria 2024, 955).

We might say, then, that "Gaza" is another word for Nakba. There is no Palestine without either, without the agony of their destruction and the terrible beauty of their resistance and refusal to be eliminated. Neither Gaza nor Nakba can be successfully or finally denied, refused, contained, or destroyed without annihilating the very force(s) that have abjected them to begin with.

If we are left with nothing else, then, in our inadequate attempts to comprehend the incomparable violence of this latest Gaza, Nakba, at the very least we know that the atrocities of Zionism's hubris are animated not simply by envy or fantastic projection but, more primarily, by its own failures, which fundamentally include and are caused by the continued existence and resistance of the Palestinian people. Indeed, it is sometimes lamented: if only the early Zionists had "finished the job," "completed" the Nakba and eliminated the Palestinians entirely, we would not find ourselves in the dire situation we are today (Morris 2004).²⁶ And yet, such hubris is indeed only a fantasy, for it presumes not simply to dictate who may inhabit the earth, as Arendt claims, but also to deny that those it would eliminate are human, as she herself also did. Whole peoples cannot be wiped from the earth, just as nothing can transform the colonizer into the colonized: "The abject is persistent, ever-present, unerasable" (Baconi 2024). The attempt to do either, however, and the exuberant, often erotic experience of those Israelis participating in it, are evidence of neither an omnipotent nor immortal regime but, rather, horrifying glimpses into its pathological decay and material signs of its imminent demise. In this case, the violence of the Gaza Nakba, no less than Gaza, Nakba, will be the undoing of Zionism and the end of the World of Man (Abourahme 2024; Baconi 2024; Gill 2024).

Notes

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² *The Lancet* estimates the projected death toll of this violence campaign at upwards of 186,000 people, or roughly 8% of Gaza's population ((Khatib, McKee, and Yusuf 2024). Of course, any declaration of the death toll remains provisional given how many cannot be counted because they have been buried under the rubble of destroyed buildings or, even, under the ground itself, in the gargantuan craters made by US-manufactured 2000 pound bombs (Al Jazeera 2024). An atrocity that promises to keep on killing even after the "official" killing ends, this campaign of violence renders any specific number obsolete the very moment it is entered into writing.

³ This is in reference to one of the more notorious of the series of massacres that have come to constitute this Nakba, the Flour Massacre, in which the Israeli army massacred 118 starving Palestinians as they attempted to access flour from a UN aid truck (Cordall, Mhawish, and Nashed 2024).

⁴ Keeping in mind that "holocaust" literally means burning, it seems relevant that Israel has repeatedly bombed people as they sleep in their tents in ad hoc encampments set up in Israeli-designated safe zones. The tents catch fire and burn people alive; see, e.g., Barakat (2024), Hajjaj (2024), and Al Jazeera (2024).

⁵ On the colonial evacuation of Palestinians' souls as a tactic and vehicle of colonial dispossession, see Lara Sheehi and Stephen Sheehi (2023).

⁶ Makdisi (2023) is quoting Israeli reservist Major General Giora Eiland saying that Gaza will become a place where "no human being can exist" (Khalidi 2023).

⁷ "Indeed, the most intense feeling we know of, intense to the point of blotting out all other experiences, namely, the experience of great bodily pain, is at the same time the most private and least communicable of all" (Arendt 1958, 50-51).

⁸ For a relevant recent citation, see Erekat (2023).

⁹ This is how I will refer to Israel's campaign of violence in Gaza since October 7, 2023. More on *Nakba* below.

¹⁰ "There is no handwringing [here, in the Gaza Nakba] about the politics of representation. The victims are representing themselves" (Editors of *n + 1* 2024, 6)

¹¹ For a compendium of Israeli incitations to genocide during the Gaza Nakba, see Law for Palestine. (2024). For an exhaustive summary of the genocidal acts and strategies undertaken by Israel during the Gaza Nakba, as well as a detailed assemblage of "Expressions of Genocidal Intent against the Palestinian People by Israeli State Officials and Others," see Republic of South Africa (2023).

¹² For more on the foundational fictions and racialized problems of Arendt's political philosophy, on which this essay draws, see Chapter 1 of Schotten (2018).

¹³ See Samudzi (2024) and Segal and Daniele (2024).

¹⁴ More recently, UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese (2024) has faced intense criticism and threats for declaring the Gaza Nakba a genocide in service to the ultimate elimination of the Palestinian people (Al Jazeera 2024c).

¹⁵ Li (2024) notes the double-sided character of the successful campaign to characterize Israel's violence in Gaza as a genocide, noting that advocates for the term "are democratizing its power, extricating genocide from a desiccated legalism that serves the status quo and injecting it with an explicitly anticolonial politics instead," but also that while "nothing can be more urgent than stopping genocide [...] nothing could be more inadequate."

¹⁶ While Mandel (2001) does not discuss the Zionist uptake of this discourse of unspeakability, she does note that its falseness signals "unspeakability" as a vehicle for a political agenda rather than a truth claim simply: "it is not merely an ironic paradox that the most thoroughly documented atrocity in human history is figured as the emblem of this history's incomprehensibility" (205).

¹⁷ Five Holocaust scholars have defended the dehumanizing language of "some Israeli leaders" as "not evidence of genocidal intent but a reflection of the limits of language to describe behavior that truly seems inhuman" (Segal and Daniele 2024, 7); meanwhile, Michael Walzer (2023) has recently written

that “the terrorist attack of October 7th was an atrocity beyond my capacity to describe.” On this tactic of dehumanization, see Schotten (2024).

¹⁸ E.g., “unprecedented” (Arendt 1963, 233), “hitherto unprecedented” (Arendt 1963,273), “which all agree is unprecedented” (Arendt 1963, 288).

¹⁹ On Arendt’s constitutive anti-Blackness, see, among others Gines (2014), Norton (1995) and Schotten (2018).

²⁰ cf. Mandani (2004, 7)

²¹ On the astonishing ways that this sort of discourse manages to salvage “the West” and “civilization” at the expense of “Asian despotism” even as it purports to pose as a critique Western civilization, see Pietz (1988).

²² To take only a single example, U.S. Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib has been roundly censured and censored by most of her colleagues as antisemitic for introducing a resolution to commemorate the Nakba (see Thakker 2023). By contrast, the Arab Canadian Lawyers Association (2022) has proposed Nakba denial as an essential component of anti-Palestinian racism, which it distinguishes from anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism.

²³ This is a rather psychodynamic rendering of Lorenzo Veracini’s assertion (2012) that settler colonists seek to indigenize themselves after the fact of conquest and as another version or chapter of conquest. On settler colonialism as a form of psychic invasion and co-optation, see Sheehi and Sheehi (2023) and Schotten (2018).

²⁴ In explicit response to Fanon, Arendt argues that violence is incapable of creating the new, an activity she assigns exclusively to politics (properly construed). What seems clear, however, is not simply that Arendt’s celebrated *natality* is an experience of violence (whether via the act of birthing a child or a new political order), but also exactly what Fanon argues; namely, that colonial violence creates one kind of world – a segregated, bifurcated world – while anticolonial violence creates precisely the world that comes *after* the colonial world, after its violent destruction (Arendt 1970; Fanon [1961] 2004).

²⁵ Eghbaria (2024) acknowledges the presence of genocide during the Nakba and the overlap of events and processes identified by both terms, identifying them as “tangent concepts” and claiming that the “ongoing Nakba is the continuation of genocide *by other means*” (956, original emphasis). Additionally, however, he also argues that Nakba exceeds genocide, naming as it does the multiple and overlapping violences of the Palestinian condition. In support of his proposal to render Nakba a legal concept, Eghbaria notes its “three elements – foundation, structure, and purpose” (964). Foundationally, Nakba is the violence of 1948; structurally, Nakba is fragmentation of Palestinians “into distinctive legal statuses that correspond with different forms of violence and divergent degrees of legal privilege” (964-965); purposively, Nakba is the denial of self-determination to Palestinians.

²⁶ cf. Abourahme (2024).

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