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When the Dead Speak and the Living Refuse to Listen



A Palestinian mother mourns her child. Photo: Gaza Notifications.

The problem with writing about Gaza is that words can't explain what's happening in Gaza. Neither can images, even the most gut-wrenching and heartbreaking. Because what needs to be explained is the inexplicable. What needs to be explicated is the silence in the face of horror.

Israel has been brazenly upfront about its plans to subdue Gaza, depopulate it of Palestinians, and seize the Strip for itself. Israel will not change. It hasn't deviated from this genocidal course since October 8, 2023. For 19 months, every Palestinian has been a target because

Israel wants Gaza cleansed of Palestinians. Therefore, everyone can be bombed. Everyone can be starved. Everyone can be denied medical care and the mere essentials of life.

Those who make distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate targets, between Hamas and civilians, between adults and children, themselves become targets. Humanitarians are targets because they insist on seeing Palestinians as humans. And even their deaths, their systematic slaughter, evokes silence from the countries they came to Gaza from, many killed by weapons made and sold by their home nations. Anyone who associates with a Palestinian is treated as a Palestinian, as someone to be silenced, one way or another: Banned, gagged, exiled, deported, jailed, killed.

Silence over one atrocity serves to legitimize all those that came before and those that follow. After Israel got away with bombing its first hospital in Gaza, it knew it could get away unscathed with bombing all hospitals and clinics in Gaza. And it did.

It's clear, Israel will not yield to public opinion; it can only be constrained by those more powerful than it. By its funders and weapons suppliers. Yet nothing changes. No one intervenes. Not the US, certainly, not the UK, not Germany, not China, not Russia or Saudi Arabia, not Turkey, India, or France. Only silence, a silence that amplifies and isolates the screams of burning children. This collective silence invalidates the West's exalted concept of itself, exposing the monstrous hypocrisy beneath the shimmering veneer of human rights laws and fatuous rhetoric about the sanctity of civilian lives.

I'm not convinced there are any "just wars," but there are unjust ones. There are wars that traduce every cherished notion of civilized conduct, every rule combatants have been meant to abide by since 1919. And this war, if you can call it a war, has violated all of them: not only killing, but targeting, civilians; blowing up non-military infrastructure; bombing schools, universities, churches and mosques; burning agricultural fields, slashing down orchards, cementing wells, poisoning and gunning down livestock; killing doctors, nurses and rescue workers; murdering aid workers; using chemical weapons; detaining 1000s with without warrants; inflicting torture and sexual abuse on prisoners; using human shields; practicing perfidy during raids; assassinating diplomats and journalists; shooting children in the head.

The rules of war are set by the winner. What will the new rules look like after Gaza, where what was once forbidden became standard operating procedure?

Biden wanted credit for working toward a ceasefire he never pressed the Israelis to enact. Rafah was flattened on Biden's watch, after he publicly said (but didn't mean) that an Israeli invasion of the city would cross a red line. Cross one red line, cross them all. Trump wants

credit for a temporary ceasefire and the swift resumption of a total war designed to empty Gaza of Palestinians. But the end result for both Biden and Trump was always going to be the same: mass slaughter of civilians, destruction of Gaza's liveable spaces, displacement of two million people and eventual Israeli annexation of large swaths of the Strip. In a word: genocide.

Members of the Israeli war cabinet vowed this week that its military will pulverize every building with more than two stories if Hamas, whatever is left of Hamas, doesn't surrender. Who are they saying this to? The people who don't know that Israel has already pulverized more than 80 percent of the buildings in Gaza? What is the purpose of saying this other than as a kind of unabashed triumphalism, a declaration of impunity to commit the worst of crimes and not only get away with it but have those institutions that outlawed genocide and land theft say nothing about it.

Silence breeds silence.

Israel no longer fears any international institutions: not the UN, not the International Criminal Court, not the International Court of Justice, not NATO, not the Arab League, not BRICS, not Interpol. As Israel itself breaches international laws, knowing there will be no consequences. Netanyahu travels freely, knowing the charges and warrants against him will never be enforced. Israel has humiliated the Western powers and has been embraced by many it humiliated for doing so.

In this time of silence, many of the words that are spoken have lost all meaning. In fact, their meaning has been inverted, twisted inside out. Humanitarian zones are tent cities, whose populations of refugees are deprived of water, food, clothing, sanitation, and heating. Humanitarian zones are where you are forced to flee in order to get starved, sickened, become hypothermic or get firebombed as you sleep with your kids in a tent made of garbage bags and rotted cloth. A humanitarian zone is where humanitarians aren't allowed to go. A humanitarian zone is where inhuman acts take place in plain view.

Gaza's population of two million people, most of them women and children, isn't "starving." They're being starved. We're conditioned to think of famines as natural events, caused by prolonged drought, floods, earthquakes. That's not what is happening in Gaza. What's happening in Gaza is an unimaginable thing. Except we don't have to imagine it, because it's taking place before our eyes. The famine in Gaza is completely engineered. This is famine as a weapon, designed quite literally to "starve out" the entire population of Gaza.

Palestinian mothers are so malnourished that they can't breastfeed their newborns. This is appalling enough, but Israel has also blocked the entry of infant formula into Gaza. But there

is no shortage of food. Food is within sight of Gaza, inside trucks backed up for miles at the entry points Israel has blocked. If one can't draw the line at the intentional starvation of newborns, where will one draw the line?

How many Palestinians has Israel killed in Gaza? 100,000? 200,000? Could Ralph Nader be right in saying the total will grow to 500,000 or more? We won't for years.

The death toll in Gaza defies human comprehension. Viewed through a statistical lens, each new death becomes less and less significant. The first image of a Palestinian baby decapitated by an Israeli quadcopter provoked disgust, anger, and sorrow. Now, eight or 10 babies similarly slaughtered in a day barely rate a notice in the media. Our voices are silent, our revulsion has been numbed, our capacity for human empathy muted. We are dehumanizing ourselves.

The first deaths hit the hardest. The most recent deaths slip by us. We can't think of them without condemning ourselves for doing nothing to slow the killing since seeing those first shocking images more than a year and a half ago.

According to Unicef, more than 50,000 Palestinian children have been killed or seriously wounded by Israeli military attacks in Gaza. They've been burned, eviscerated, decapitated, had their limbs blown off, their eyes seared shut, their skin flayed to the bone and their lungs charred.

The murdered children of Gaza weren't collateral damage. They were targets to be eliminated, just as much as their parents, their mass slaughter justified by the likes of Avigdor Lieberman and Galit Distel Atbaryan, of Netanyahu's own Likud party: "There is no such thing as innocent people in Gaza... They (Palestinians) raise an entire population of Nazis." Knesset member Meirav Ben-Ari declared, "The *children* of Gaza have brought this upon themselves." And the Prime Minister of Israel, Isaac Herzog, denounced the Pope for trafficking in blood libels for condemning Israel's slaughter of Palestinian kids. But one sure way to prove that Israel's committing genocide in Gaza is that it's intent on eliminating not just this generation but the future generation, as well.

This week Dr. Feroze Sidhwa described to the UN Security Council his experiences treating victims of Israeli air and drone strikes in Gaza:

In Gaza, I operated in hospitals without sterility, electricity or anesthetics. Surgeries took place on crowded and filthy floors. Children died not because their injuries were unsurvivable, but because we lacked blood, antibiotics and the most basic supplies that are readily available in any large hospital anywhere else in the world. I did not see or treat a single combatant during my 5 weeks in Gaza. My patients were 6-year-olds with shrapnel in

their heart and bullets in their brains, and pregnant women whose pelvises had been obliterated and their fetuses cut into while still in the womb. Mothers sheltering in the hospital cooked bread on hot plates in the emergency department during mass casualty events as we dealt with the reign of fire and death falling around us everywhere.

Who can hear this and not be driven to action? Who can hear this and say the children and mothers deserved it?

Many have been silenced. Many, many more have silenced themselves.

Let me submit one recent case for your consideration, that of Joseph Borrell, former head of the EU's Human Rights office, who had a front row seat for what was going down in Gaza, where he witnessed refugee camps being strafed, ambulance drivers ambushed, poets and engineers assassinated, desalination plants destroyed and sewage pipelines ruptured, fishing boats torpedoed, bakeries detonated, Rafah, Gaza City, and Khan Younis bombed into ruins, two million people displaced, and 12,000 children killed. Yet he remained silent about what was really happening, what he knew was happening, until after he retired. Only then, at the moment when it would have the least political impact and mainly to salve his own conscience, did he feel free to call it what it was and is: genocide.

When Palestinians have attempted to break through the wall of silence that encloses the Gaza Strip and describe the crimes Israel has committed, they have been systematically killed: while reporting, while videotaping and photographing, while driving, while interviewing, while sleeping at home with their families. More than 210 have been killed, with more being targeted each week. All to keep the word from getting out. There's never been this kind of "censorship" by drone in any other war. Yet, here we must confront a confounding double silence. Not just the terrible silence of the murdered journalists, but the deadly silence of their colleagues in the Western media about their killings and those who killed them. This is a silence that kills and buries the story along with the journalists who risked their lives to report it.

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In Gaza, even the dead speak, but we refuse to hear them.

This is an expanded version of an essay that originally ran in CP +.

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