

Where Are Palestinian Children's Human Rights?

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I last visited the Gaza Strip in November 2014, where I stayed at the Al Deira Hotel. That lovely hotel—demolished by Israel in the current war—was briefly made famous on July 16, 2014. On that day an Israeli gunboat fired at a group of Palestinian boys playing soccer on the beach just outside the hotel. The attack, witnessed by numerous journalists staying at the hotel, killed a 9-year-old, two 10-year-olds, and an 11-year-old. The Israeli response following its own investigation? The deaths were a tragedy but “the attack process in question accorded with Israeli domestic law and international law requirements.”

During my visit I saw first-hand the aftermath of the July-August 2014 Israeli war on Gaza, which Israel dubbed “Operation Protective Edge.” I thought I was prepared, having followed the war closely in real time from afar, but coming face to face with entire neighborhoods reduced to ruins, with people still living among the rubble, was crushing. Yet, that was nothing compared to meeting the people of Gaza. They welcomed me (and yes, they knew I was Jewish and working at that time for a liberal Zionist organization). They introduced me to their children with pride and talked to me with almost unbearable calm and dignity of their losses and pain. And they conveyed, frankly, their bafflement, anger, and sense of total abandonment following a 50-day Israeli military offensive that killed at least 1,391 civilians, of which, according to B’Tselem, “180 were babies, toddlers, and children under the age of six. Another 346 were children from age six through seventeen.”

The children of Gaza whom I met on that visit have never left my mind. Most of all I recall my visit to a UN girls' school, where the teachers and students showed me around and invited me to sit in on a class with students aged around 11 or 12. The students explained proudly that they were studying human rights, conflict resolution, and tolerance. As the class progressed, one of the students stood up to ask me a question. With the preternatural poise and maturity common in children who have had their childhood stolen by catastrophe or trauma, she asked me (in careful, perfect English that I remember so well, this is close to a direct quote): “I am a child. I’ve lived most of my life under Israeli blockade. I’ve lived through three Israeli wars on Gaza. I’ve seen friends and family die, their homes destroyed. I’ve studied human rights and I want to know: what about us? Where are our human rights?” She clearly knew, even as she posed the question, that I had no response.

Returning to the U.S., I told friends and colleagues—and anyone else who would listen—about what I had seen and heard in Gaza. I talked about the terrible toll on children imposed by Israel's years-long blockade and by Israeli military assaults. I talked about the hopelessness and anger among Palestinians that comes from knowing, from a very young age, that the world has turned its back on them and that their lives don't count. I talked about the moral imperative to demand that the U.S. government use its leverage to compel Israel to end the blockade, to pressure Israel to cease violations of Palestinian rights everywhere, and to restore a credible horizon for ending Israeli occupation and achieving Palestinian freedom and self-determination.

Many of my interlocutors agreed. Many more seemed conflicted—sympathetic to Palestinian suffering but overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenge of changing the status quo. But too many, including on Capitol Hill and in the U.S. government, took refuge in the all-too-familiar approach of blaming the victims: Yes, what is happening to children in Gaza is terrible, but so long as Hamas exists, and until Palestinians embrace Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, there is nothing we or anyone can do to help them.

How is this possible? How can people have so little care for the lives and welfare of human beings, and in particular children? How is it that support for Israel translates to utter indifference to, if not outright contempt for, human life when that life is Palestinian? How is it that long before the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks that were the catalyst for Israel's current military assault on Gaza, it had already become accepted in the public debate to view human lives in Gaza, including children's, as presumptively legitimate military targets or collateral-damage-waiting-to-happen? How is it that the world has normalized Israeli military doctrine that boils down to a never-ending fight to compel Palestinians in Gaza—most of whom are refugees from land that is today Israel—to acquiesce to their own oppression, dispossession, erasure, and dehumanization? How has the world come to accept the Israeli worldview described by my friend Danny Seidemann (speaking about Israeli policy in Jerusalem), which holds that “the birth of an Israeli child is a simcha [Hebrew for “joy”] and the birth of a Palestinian child is a demographic threat”---or translated to the Gaza context, that the birth of a Palestinian child is a terrorist threat?

Since October 7, 2023, this blame-the-victim framing is back with a vengeance. As soon as someone starts talking about Israel injuring or killing thousands of Palestinian civilians in Gaza, including children, the We-Stand-With-Israel hallelujah choir sings, “Hamas started it! So whoever Israel kills, Hamas bears all responsibility for those deaths!!”

Do they hear themselves? This logic is a moral obscenity, absolving

Israel of both agency and responsibility for literally anything it does in Gaza. If normalized, this logic will validate a new doctrine of war-making for the entire world according to which there are no limits to the harms that may be inflicted on civilians. Indeed, this logic renders the status of "civilian" irrelevant; so long as the party waging war claims the other side "started it," they are allowed to disclaim responsibility for every man, woman, and child they injure or kill. Do supporters of Israel believe a world that embraces this doctrine of war will be safer for themselves and their children? For Jews anywhere? Or even for Israel?

And as Israel is recorded (indeed, as its own soldiers serially record themselves, and post the videos on TikTok) committing war crimes against Palestinian civilians, the same hallelujah choir sings: "they voted for Hamas!" Or as Israel's own president, Isaac Herzog said, "It is an entire nation out there that is responsible...It is not true this rhetoric about civilians not being aware, not involved. It's absolutely not true. They could have risen up. They could have fought against that evil regime which took over Gaza in a coup d'etat."

Do they hear themselves? This argument is morally depraved. Even if they had voted for Hamas, and even if they failed to overthrow Hamas, that doesn't make them responsible for its actions. To suggest otherwise is to mirror the rationale employed by terrorists everywhere to justify attacking civilians, including the 9/11 terrorists who in effect held all Americans responsible for what they saw as the crimes of our government, and saw every American as, therefore, a legitimate target. It is also disconnected from reality. Do facts matter? The majority of Palestinians in Gaza were either not born yet or were not old enough to vote the last time there were elections in Palestine (in January 2006). Of the people in Gaza who were old enough to vote, most did not vote for Hamas. Rather, Hamas (or as they were called in that election, the Party of Change and Reform) won a plurality of the vote across all of Palestine; in Gaza they won less than 50% of the vote in all but one district.

When I was a child, I often heard adults—whose worldview was shaped both by the Holocaust and by anti-Semitism they had faced in the U.S. —gravely state, "the test of any country is how it treats its Jews." Later I came to understand that this was a Jewish-centered take on a quote that is attributed (though there is much debate on this) to both Hubert Humphrey and Mahatma Gandhi. That quote, in its various formulations, boils down to this: The measure of a society (or a civilization) is how it treats its weakest (or most vulnerable) members. In the minds of my parents and grandparents and others of their generations, it was an

indisputable fact that the Jews are and forever will be the most vulnerable people in any society, anywhere in the world.

Yet today, we—the Jewish people—are by no intellectually honest measure the most vulnerable population anywhere in the world. And while Israel faces threats, its Jewish citizens, living in a state that prioritizes their interests, backed by one of the world's most powerful armies, enjoying strong support from the U.S. and most of the world, are certainly not the most vulnerable population living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

In contrast, the Palestinians, by an accident of geography and history, are arguably the world's most politically and historically inconvenient people—crushed between the millstones of the end of the colonial era and the world's post-Holocaust embrace of Zionism. As such, they are, by any intellectually honest measure, among the most vulnerable people in the world. This is especially true of those living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, where Palestinians face relentless, almost unimaginable adversity, day after day, year after year, at the hands of successive Israeli governments who view their very existence as anathema to Israeli interests and objectives in this land. They persist, no matter that they were dispossessed of their lands and homes in 1948. Yet, Palestinians persist, generation after generation, refusing to disappear or give up on their rights and humanity. They persist, disenfranchised and deprived of basic rights under Israeli military occupation since 1967. They persist as second-class citizens in Israel, their status a testament to the racism inherent in Israel's democracy, even towards its own citizens. They persist, as conditional "residents" in Jerusalem, notwithstanding the fact that the city has been home to their families for generations dating back before 1948.

In almost any other context, the world would honor and celebrate a people that holds on to their collective humanity and preserves their collective history and identity in the face of such adversity. In almost any other context, the world would stand with and seek to defend these extraordinarily vulnerable people. But thanks to the aforementioned accident of geography and history, Palestinians instead face even more adversity.

Israel and its supporters around the globe, including in the US government and Congress, never cease to attack and delegitimize any effort to secure for Palestinians the same rights and protections granted under international law to people everywhere, or to hold Israel accountable for its actions against them. Protest via boycotts is decried as "economic terrorism." Efforts to obtain support at the UN are slammed

as "diplomatic terrorism." Media coverage documenting violations of Palestinian rights is dismissed as "journalistic terrorism." Scholarly work critical of Israel is condemned as "academic terrorism." Efforts to find recourse in the justice system of various countries is slammed as "lawfare." Aid for Palestinian refugees is attacked as "support for terrorism." And a common through line connecting all these attacks: defaming Palestinians and Palestine rights activists as anti-Semites and supporters of terrorism for the sin of giving voice to Palestinian grievances, or the Palestinian lived historical narrative vis-a-vis Israel and Zionism, or Palestinian aspirations for justice.

As I write this essay at the end of January 2024, Israel has (so far) killed more than 26,000 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip since October 6, 2023. The vast majority of these are civilians, and over half of them are children, with the numbers rising every day, sometimes by the hundreds. There are thousands more dead or dying Palestinians trapped under collapsed buildings, and thousands more injured, crippled, and dying for lack of medical treatment. Hundreds if not thousands of children have lost one or both parents, and a horrific new humanitarian category has been coined in this Gaza war: WCNSF—"wounded child, no surviving family"—wounded children with no living relatives left to care for them or in some cases to even identify them. More than 2 million people are at this time being deliberately starved and deprived of health care. More than 1 million human beings have been displaced, most multiple times, and are today without adequate shelter in the dead of winter.

This reality—which aligns closely with intent expressed in statements by Israel officials from the earliest days of this war to the present—lays bare a central truth about this war: Israel's response to Hamas's brutal October 7 attack is not and never was merely about freeing hostages taken by Hamas, who absolutely must be freed. And it is not and never was merely about restoring deterrence or ensuring that Hamas would never again be able to repeat its October 7 attack on Israel. Rather, a key objective of Israel's war on Gaza, or arguably the key objective of this war, is to fundamentally change not just the rules of the game with respect to Israel's Gaza policy, but to substitute a whole new game board. On this new game board, Gaza's Palestinians—their civilization and their lives, including their children's lives—are to the greatest possible extent diminished, if not entirely eradicated.

All of this today is clear, even if those with the power to restrain Israel prefer—for reasons of self-interest, or anti-Palestinian racism, or political cowardice—to close their eyes and only look up when the genocide and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in Gaza is in the rearview mirror. And the day after Israel deems its objectives achieved, they can

look forward to celebrating their benevolence as white saviors, ready to provide subsistence aid to desperate Palestinians who survive the war—almost all of whom will be destitute refugees (like their parents and grandparents were in 1948), whether allowed to remain inside Gaza or forced out.

It has become trendy these days, when learning something new, for people to quip, “I was today years old when I found out X.” Assuming the remarkable girl I met at that UN school in Gaza back in 2014 is still alive, she would now be in her early 20s. In the twisted time-counting forced on her generation, that makes her 6-wars-old—having lived through Israeli assaults in December 2008-January 2009, November 2012, July-August 2014, May 2021, August 2022, and the current genocide underway since October 2023. And she would have lived almost her entire life under Israeli blockade.

“What about us? Where are our human rights?” she asked me back in 2014. I didn’t have an answer for her then. And I don’t have one now.