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Middle East

Al-Aqsa Flood, the West and the Holocaust: A Conversation with Gilbert Achcar

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1. Al-Aqsa Flood brought “the question of Palestine” back to the centre of world’s attention and exposed the bias inherent in the official and institutional “Western” position, which not only supported Israel, but also sacrificed values, such as journalistic objectivity, freedom of opinion, and others, in order to protect the Israeli government’s narrative, even when the latter was crumbling. By “Western” position here, we do not mean all Western countries, nor do we mean that there is one position without internal objection or different iterations. Rather, we mean a position that defined itself as “Western” and justified its limitations in this light. How can media and cultural attitudes towards the current genocide be assessed and explained? Were there any shifts in these attitudes from last year until now?

Let me first clarify what Operation Al-Aqsa Flood is supposed to have achieved. If what is meant by returning Palestine to the “centre of world’s attention” is the rising wave of condemnation of Israel’s genocidal war and solidarity with the Palestinian people, it would be more accurate to say that it occurred despite Al-Aqsa Flood rather than thanks to it. Indeed, the operation’s first impact was that global sympathy for the Israelis reached a peak, with intense media exploitation of what happened on the 7th of October – not without exaggeration and even fabrication of myths. However, it is the brutality of the onslaught on Gaza, which exceeded what had been witnessed in all Zionist wars against the people of Palestine, including the 1948 Nakba, that provoked the indignation of a significant part of public opinion in Western countries. As for the Global South, most of its populations support the Palestinian cause, with the great exception of India, dominated by a neofascist and anti-Muslim government that shares the mindset of Israel’s neofascist government.

The crux of the matter is the exceptionality of the genocidal war that the Zionist state has been waging in Gaza. It has exacerbated the divide in Western media between those who brood over the myth of the State of Israel as redemption for the Nazi Holocaust, so that anyone who opposes it is referred to a genealogy that puts them in the same category as the Nazis, and those who denounce what is being done by a state now ruled by a coalition of neofascists and neo-Nazis, whose behaviour towards the Palestinian people is reminiscent of the behaviour of German Nazis. The Palestine solidarity movement is noticeably quite stronger in Britain than in countries like France or Germany. One of the key reasons for this is the obvious difference between the guilt complex of the Germans and the French, whose ancestors were involved in the extermination of the Jews, and the absence of such a complex among the British, who see their ancestors, quite the contrary, as saviours of the Jews.

2. The Holocaust is the cultural and historical lever for this position, especially in countries such as Germany, leading them to withdraw “the question of Palestine” from foreign policy and insert it in a psychological and historical narrative of guilt and responsibility. How was this historical narrative constructed and turned into a lever for Western support for Israel?

This is a very old propaganda endeavour, which began immediately after World War II when the Zionist movement escalated its campaign towards the Western governments, and the United States in particular, as well as the Soviet government, in order to get them to support the project of a Jewish state – first, by exerting pressure on the British government, and later at the United Nations when the issue was referred to it. The propaganda focused initially on [Palestinian religious leader] Amin al-Husseini’s disastrous role in turning into a Nazi propaganda mouthpiece during the war, so that Palestinians could be portrayed as Nazi followers – contrary to the historical record, as I showed in my book *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives* (2010).

This legend continued to be weaved over the decades, with Gamal Abdel Nasser and Yasser Arafat portrayed in turn as if they were impersonators of Adolf Hitler. The latest to be Nazified are Hamas and Hezbollah. Al-Aqsa Flood provided a unique opportunity to bring this mythical narrative to a climax. From the outset, Netanyahu and his co-thinkers, but also various Western governments, described the operation as “the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust”. This way of putting things is intended to portray Al-Aqsa Flood as a continuation of the series of racist crimes to which European Jews have been subjected throughout history, thus detaching it from the historical sequence to which it truly belongs, which is the history of popular struggles against colonialism in general, and the history of resistance to Zionist colonialism in Palestine in particular.

3. Narratives change and adapt to social and political transformations. This applies to the Holocaust narrative, whose features changed in recent years. Whereas this narrative was initially about the West’s relationship with its Jewish components, it began to change, in a push to redefine it, into a narrative about the danger of Islam to Jews, especially after the events of September 11. How was this narrative reoriented to align with political change?

The issue is more complex than that, I believe. The Zionist focus on Islam has been in line with the rise of Islamophobia in the West in recent decades, especially after the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. It happened amid a global rise of the far right, pioneered by the Zionist state where the neofascist Likud party came to power in 1977; its then most radical figure, Ariel Sharon, became prime minister in 2001 a few months before 9/11; and most notably, Netanyahu has been occupying the same position for the long haul starting in 2009. They all engaged in manufacturing the ideology of the contemporary far right, in which Jews have been replaced by Muslims so that the state claiming to represent the legacy of the anti-Nazi struggle turned into a central cog in the opposite tradition, that of present-day Islamophobic far right.

However, the issue is complicated when the Israeli goal of “normalization” with reactionary Arab states, and most notably with the Saudi kingdom, is taken into account. That is why there is a parallel discourse that distinguishes between “good Muslims” and “bad Muslims”, with a focus on depicting Hamas and Hezbollah as antisemitic, that is, anti-Jewish racist groups, and calling them terrorists, of course, so as to differentiate between them, with Iran behind them, and the “normalization” countries, namely Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and the Gulf monarchies. The same distinction was at the heart of the George W. Bush administration’s rhetoric after September 11.

4. The debate over the Arab position on the Holocaust was one way to transform this narrative, by devising an Arab culpability or an Arab antisemitism that could replace the former enemy. How would you evaluate these attempts, based on your book on the subject?

These attempts do not stand the test of reality and examination of the historical facts. I have devoted a thick book to refute them, which was commended even by some prominent Holocaust historians and which no pro-Zionist historian was able to counter except with the usual epithets and insults, especially the veiled accusation of antisemitism. They hence preferred to confront it with a conspiracy of silence, to the extent that no prominent US newspaper or magazine did review the book, to the great disappointment of my US publisher, one of the largest US publishing houses. As for the Hebrew translation, it wasn’t reviewed, commented on or even mentioned in any Israeli newspaper. Published in 2017 after years of pressure by anti-Zionist Israelis, it was contracted by the US publisher, which owns the translation rights, with the Van Leer Institute, where several Israeli Jewish and Palestinian intellectuals have worked, the most prominent of the latter being Azmi Bishara when he was still in the country. In fact, you can notice that the historical debate on these matters has faded in recent years to be replaced by general charges without scholarly pretence.

5. The return of “the question of Palestine” to the centre of politics was accompanied by the ongoing “genocide” in Gaza, which became the headline of this year, and a quasi-criminal charge against the Israeli

government. Do you expect the “genocide” to transform the “Western” approaches of Israel and the Holocaust narrative?

There is no unified “Western” position on the matter. There are Western European governments, in Ireland, Spain and Belgium, that adopted early positions condemning the Zionist aggression on Gaza and calling for solidarity with the Palestinian people by recognizing the State of Palestine, a way for them to register their condemnation of the Netanyahu government’s deeds and their support for a peaceful solution to the ongoing conflict within the framework established by international law. The judicial response to the Zionist genocidal war, which is being handled by the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, is of course based on international law, whose violation by the Zionist State has reached a higher level than any time before.

All of this affected other Western governments, to the extent that Germany itself, which has been the most ardent of Israel’s supporters for obvious historical reasons, started showing some timid reservation and suggesting that its military exports to Israel have been frozen. As for Britain, even its current prime minister, a pro-Zionist par excellence, was forced to announce a suspension of some military exports to Israel. The latest event in this regard is the French President’s call for an end to arms exports to Israel while it is engaged in a deadly war on Gaza and Lebanon.

More importantly, opposition to the genocidal war waged by the Zionist state reached the US House of Representatives, where a few lawmakers submitted bills to attach to military exports to Israel strict conditions regarding their usage. Even Joe Biden, whom Netanyahu described as a “proud Irish-American Zionist”, had to freeze for a while its supply to Israel of the most lethal bombs weighing about a ton each, which Zionist forces have used extensively to destroy Gaza and annihilate its people. All this points to the stark contradiction between international law, most of which was drafted in the wake of the victory over Nazism and its allies, and the behaviour of the Zionist state. Western governments face a difficult choice in their stance on this international law which they enthusiastically upheld against the Russian invasion of Ukraine and overlooked regarding the genocidal war in Gaza, but with a trouble that is increasing with time.

6. The second development that accompanied the return of “the question of Palestine” was the wave of solidarity with Gaza, which surprised many, especially after decades of keeping the Palestinian issue away from the centre of Western public attention. Do you see in this solidarity the possibility of a political shift in the ways of approaching “the question of Palestine” in the West?

If we are to find a glimmer of hope in the midst of this tragic fog that has haunted our region since the beginning of the genocidal war in Gaza, it is undoubtedly in the popular solidarity movement that has developed in Western countries – contrary to the lackluster picture reflected by Arab countries in this regard – especially in the United States, where this movement is most important because of the centrality of the US role in supporting the Zionist state, and indeed US complicity with it and full participation in its ongoing genocidal war. We have reached the point where the position on this war has become a factor to be reckoned with in the US elections. This is an important development, and it is to be hoped that it will continue and reach the point where it could change the international equation regarding Palestine.

[Gilbert Achcar's blog](#)

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