

Gaza: On Zionism, Judaism, Racism and Barbarism

Ariel Feldman

I was born in Israel 44 years ago. I am Jewish, and I have been living in Argentina for more than three decades. Since then, I have visited the State of Israel several times, walked through Arab towns and villages, talked with the so-called Israeli Arabs (Palestinians who remained within the Israeli borders after the war that followed the self-proclamation of the State of Israel in 1948), crossed checkpoints and toured the occupied territories. In particular, I walked through Hebron more than once - one of the Palestinian cities with a strong Israeli military and settler presence - and talked to Palestinian families and young people living there. I was not fortunate enough to see Gaza. For someone with Israeli nationality, it has been practically impossible to do so for 16 years.



Photo: Ariel Feldman

This biographical information does not pretend that my words are worth more than others, thanks to an authority that I do not feel, but they do try to inhibit ad hominem fallacies that are often used against those who criticise the State of Israel. Whether in this particular context of the horrific attack on civilians by Hamas followed by the inhumane retaliation against the Gazan population or in any other historical moment of the debate, it is argued that an anti-Zionist position is based on a lack of sensitivity and empathy for the suffering of the Jewish people, either by pointing to an alleged anti-Semitism or ideologised position in the interlocutor or by arguing a lack of knowledge of the territory and its complexity. These are a set of statements that avoid answering arguments and instead seek to cancel the discussion by annulling the interlocutor.

In order to make a reading of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the current situation, it is first necessary to dismantle two fundamental fallacies that I will illustrate on the basis of an argument that is circulating among those who demand a defence of the State of Israel. The argument would propose this false syllogism: being a humanist, progressive or leftist, implies being against racism; anti-Semitism is certainly a form of racism; ergo, blaming Israelis for their own murder is anti-Semitic. This or similar arguments appealing to sensitivity and empathy with the victims of the Hamas attack have been used without exception to demand empathy with the state of Israel and sensitivity towards its position in the conflict. We must unveil this ruse and not allow what is nothing more than argumentative extortion.



Photo: Ariel Feldman

Zionism and Judaism are simply two different things, and thus, so are anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. Zionism is a nationalist political ideology less than two hundred years old, while Judaism is a religion, a culture for some, a nation, a community for others, dating back centuries before the Christian era. The link between the two, however, is undeniable. Zionism is an ideological-political current that emerged and was intended as a solution and safeguard for the persecuted Jewish people, who succeeded in establishing a self-proclaimed Jewish state in Palestine in 1948. In spite of this, Zionism is still a current, a partiality, just as theocratic Islamic fundamentalism is to Islam or a Christian sect to Christianity. It is true that Zionism is hegemonic among Jews, and explaining why this is the case is beyond the scope of this text. However, the fact that it is hegemonic is central: hegemony implies that that which exercises hegemony (Zionist ideology) is distinct from that over which it exercises its ideological or political domination (Judaism, in this case). It also implies that all domination is circumstantial, historical, and not essential. The false identification and consequent confusion of the one and the other is an ideological ploy of Zionism so that the symbolic capital and atrocities committed over millennia against the Jewish people are transferred as prerogatives to the state of Israel and, every time Israel's Zionist policies are criticised, it can be said that we are dealing with an anti-Semitic position. Thus, in the guilt-ridden West for the atrocities suffered by Jews in those longitudes and latitudes, a kind of intangibility to criticism is generated by the fact that Israel would embody the spirit and safeguard of all Jews, those persecuted and exterminated in the Nazi concentration camps, as well as represent their survivors and descendants, outside and inside Israel.



Photo: Ariel Feldman

In Germany these days, people are rightly horrified by the appearance of houses where Jews live that are marked with Stars of David. It is true the appearance of anti-Semitic acts in different parts of the world following Israel's attacks on Palestinian civilians is a constant. Anti-Semitism certainly did not disappear with the fall of the Nazi regime, and it certainly predates the founding of the State of Israel. Undoubtedly, the atrocities committed by the Israeli army and settlers are exploited by individuals and groups with no sensitivity to the Palestinian people. However, the aforementioned intentional confusion between Zionism and Judaism carried out by Israel and its supporters is an essential component in understanding the anti-Semitic phenomenon today.



Photo: Ariel Feldman

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by a state against a virtually defenceless people are attributed to Judaism, it will lead to the development of a sui generis anti-Semitism. What is scandalous is to see time and again that the organisations of the Jewish community in the diaspora, funded by and aligned with Israeli Zionism, and many of their intellectuals, are not at all concerned about the potential growth of anti-Semitism, but about defending indefensible acts and policies pursued by the State of Israel.

It is scandalous that we are only concerned about marked Jewish houses and not about laws prohibiting the flying of the Palestinian flag (not the Hamas flag, but the Palestinian national flag) and the repression of peaceful demonstrations denouncing the collective punishment of the Gazan people.

To combat the seeds of prejudice and hatred of the Jewish people - which do exist - the way forward is not to cover up criminal acts on the grounds that to criticise them is anti-Semitic. On the contrary, we must repeat again and again that the State of Israel does what it does as a Zionist, not as a Jew. And insist on the humanist values, on the very experience of suffering, of resistance in the face of cruelty, of love of words and reflection that sharply distinguishes Judaism from Zionism.

The supposed syllogism was left very high, but let us remember that, in addition to the confusion of Zionism and Judaism, it operated on the notion of victimhood. We can reinstate and expand it as follows: if we condemn the killing of Israeli civilian victims (of course we do) and believe that a person at a party near the Gaza Strip is an innocent victim, one should simply derive that the state of Israel is being victimised in the conflict and that, therefore, pointing to its primary responsibility for the Hamas attack would be analogous to trying to hold a victim responsible for what its victimiser does to it.

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Despite the argumentative effect derived from the grief over the deaths of Israeli civilians, the reasoning contains a rather transparent logical sleight of hand. It serves to sensitively neutralise a debate extortionately but does nothing to really

try to unravel what is going on in the conflict. The argument in question takes the part for the whole (citizens for state). The dead and kidnapped civilians are innocent victims, no doubt, but that does not make the state of Israel innocent. This move, which takes the part of the whole, produces the isolation of an atrocious and condemnable event from its historical, material and political conditions of existence. It is necessary to be able to condemn the Hamas attack while explaining how Israeli policies are necessary conditions for the Palestinian people's acts of resistance to become desperate and bloody.

The targeting of civilians by the Palestinian resistance began in the early 1970s, more than twenty years after the founding of the state of Israel. Palestinian dispossession and ethnic cleansing by Zionist



Photo: Ariel Feldman

The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza consolidated Israeli colonialism and gave it a particularly bloody reality in those territories: an occupying minority that claimed the right to rule over a native and majority population, judge them, administer them, imprison them, bomb them, progressively invade them with settlers, dispossess them of their land, humiliate them, destroy any possibility of economic development, of infrastructure, of a future.

organisations, and later by the state of Israel, began decades before the colonial expansion of the 1967 Six-Day War. But attacks on Israeli civilians only became a practice of the Palestinian resistance after the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, which consolidated Israeli colonialism and gave it a particularly bloody reality in those territories: an occupying minority that claimed the right to rule over a native and majority population, judge them, administer them, imprison them, bomb them, progressively invade them with settlers, dispossess them of their land, humiliate them, destroy any possibility of economic development, of infrastructure, of a

future.

Israel dominates the West Bank through a colonial apartheid system condemned by the United Nations that results in fragmentation of the territory and obstruction of free mobility, encourages settler encroachment, militarily administers the territory, kills and validates pogroms by settlers guarded by the regular army, produces continuous deaths of young people in repressive actions. Gaza has been blockaded at every level for 16 years, and this blockade is radicalised by siege and bombardment, with essential supplies cut off periodically as its military occupier deems necessary.

Collective punishment of the civilian population, condemned as a war crime by the international community, is an essential and frequent practice in Israeli colonial procedure. A Hebrew philosopher, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, days after the

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occupation of these territories in 1967, asserted that Israel should withdraw from them because nations that exercise colonial power, gradually rot their souls. Justifying colonisation can only be achieved by reinforcing a supremacist ideology and thus dehumanising the colonised people. In 2007, I was in Israel on the 40th anniversary of the occupation. I took part in a demonstration in the Israeli capital, Tel Aviv, against Israel's

colonial policy on this significant anniversary of four decades. We were less than 200 people. The soul of Israeli society has not stopped rotting. I was able to register, trip after trip, the increasing and cross-cutting racism of Israelis when referring to Palestinians. They did not call them human animals after the Hamas attack. They have been calling them that in the streets for decades and treating them as such.

Those who have visited Israel over the years can agree on what might be called a dialectic of security and sensitivity, whatever their position on the conflict. The greater the Israeli society's sense of security, thanks to an almost complete

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neutralisation of the Palestinians' capacity for harm through its defence infrastructure (separation wall, intelligence apparatus, the iron dome that stops feeble Palestinian rockets, "targeted" assassinations, diplomacy and colonial collaboration of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, etc.), the less attention

Israeli society pays to the situation of the Palestinians, the less empathy, the less pressure Israeli society puts on its government to find a solution to the conflict.

Nor, it must be said, is there any sensitivity towards the Palestinian people on the part of the other Arab governments, which have been normalising relations between their states and Israel despite the fact that the situation of the Palestinian people has only worsened over the years. It does not seem unreasonable that in this dialectic, the Palestinians think that harming the Israelis is the only way to avoid being made invisible in their desperate situation.

And here, I think it is necessary to state something, however obvious it may be. There is nothing essential, ontological, intrinsically cruel or supremacist in the genes of any people. But there are ideological movements and forms of political organisation that end up being so. Human formations are historical realities, which means that historical processes carve, ennoble or debase the social groups that embody them. Hamas is a political-military organisation that would not exist were it not for the inhuman and increasingly cruel Zionist colonisation of Palestine. This is an indisputable truth.

One need not even go into the veracity of the historical research that the Israeli government actively encouraged the rise

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of Hamas to confront the PLO and divide the enemy into opposing camps. What is certain is that it enabled the organisation's growth centrally by systematically undermining the Palestinian Authority and frustrating any

political way out of the conflict. The central aim was arguably to bring about a particularly violent Palestinian resistance that would overshadow the increasingly evident colonial violence and the consequent strengthening of the Palestinian cause in international fora and public opinion.

No Palestinian organisation has ever done such an act as the one on Saturday, 7 October. It can only be understood in the context of the absolute desperation of the Palestinians and their cause of national liberation. In recent times, and well

before the Hamas attack, the already devastating policies of the Israeli state have been significantly intensified: Continued pogroms on Palestinian villages by fanatical settlers in the occupied territories, accelerated settlement growth and land expropriation, militarised visits and Jewish prayers at Islamic holy sites as provocation, supremacist laws and official statements by Israel's ultra-right government, siege of Gaza, and no intention to negotiate an end to the occupation and a self-determined way out for the Palestinian people. It is not on the agenda.

Add to all this the chilling objectivity of the numbers. The newspapers may carry the stories of the lives and families of

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the dead Israelis and virtually no stories that humanise the suffering and personalise the death of the Palestinians. But the only truth is reality. The death toll in the conflict over the last ten years, as counted by the Israeli human rights organisation B'Tslalem, shows that what is happening between Palestinians and Israelis is not a war but simply a

massacre. Ninety-five per cent of the dead are Palestinians, and a high percentage are children. Perhaps the reader has a different feeling because, in the Western press, some deaths are worth more than others..., but numbers are numbers.

When I finished school in Argentina, still with the memories of my childhood in a Kibbutz quite fresh, I considered attending university in Israel. I still loved my country, but I was already critical of the policies of the State of Israel. So I started asking Israeli acquaintances how I could go to study but not do Tzavah (compulsory 3-year military service for men and women). There were options, like starting to study and then becoming a conscientious objector and refusing to do military service. But an Israeli friend told me there was no point in doing that because then I would never really belong to Israel because the army was the emotional and cultural backbone of the country.

That's when I understood something. Indeed, military service is Israelis' rite of passage to adulthood and citizenship. It is the

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moment when they leave the family home and

meet their lifelong friends, whom they will see again whenever the army reserve regularly calls them up. This conversation helped me to understand that, unlike what happens between the Palestinians and Hamas, the identification of Israelis with the colonial policy of their state in arms has a rather structural aspect. With the obvious exception of Israeli Arabs, Israeli citizens with health exemptions, rabbis and conscientious objectors, virtually the whole of Israeli society has a strong military education and training in armed violence. Hamas is said to have 20,000 fighters—less than 1% of Gaza's population.

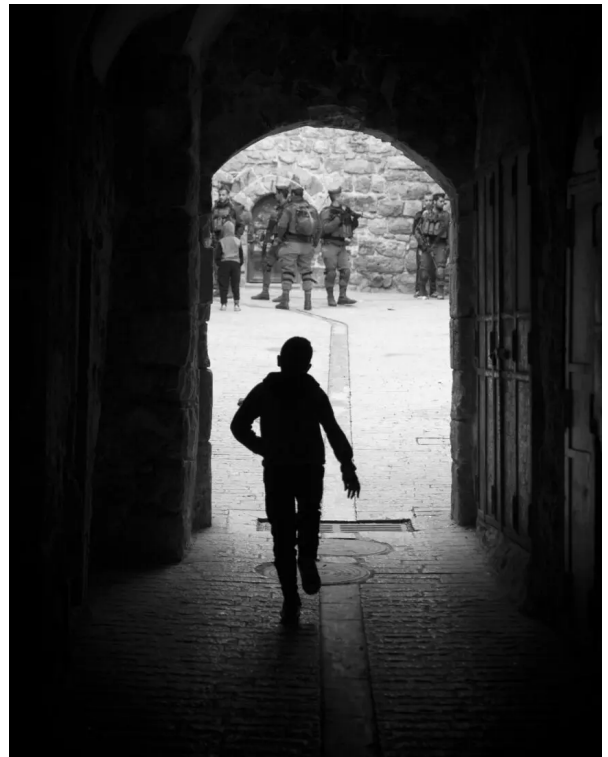


Photo: Ariel Feldman

I am a militant for a just peace between Palestinians and Israelis. However, it is imperative for me to disarm and

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denounce pseudo-pacifist discourses that are nothing more than an incarnation of the theory of the two demons, well known to Argentines. To speak of the pendulum of terror, as Jorge Drexler did, is one example among others of the reprehensible and unjust equalisation of two different forms of violence. Palestinian violence, even in its most condemnable form, is an act of resistance. To say that is not to romanticise it: it is to be descriptive; it is violence resisting something else, a first and original violence that initiated and is the daily and

continuous source of the violence of the conflict. That original terrifying violence, which is not a pendulum, is that of colonisation.

I last visited the occupied territories in 2016. The photos accompanying this article are from my visit to Hebron. Knowing I was Jewish (my name is Ariel, like the infamous Ariel Sharon), they opened their homes to me, told their stories, and let me take pictures. The girl in the portrait on the stone wall suffered an assassination attempt by settlers, and the teenagers on the terrace told me about their impossible futures. Hebron is a highly contested city because it is home to the Abraham Mosque, where the tombs of the patriarchs who share a Jewish and Muslim religion are said to be located (in 1994, Goldstein, a fundamentalist Zionist, entered the mosque and murdered 29 people at prayer and wounded more than 100 others). The city is home to fewer than a thousand settlers and more than 200,000 Palestinians. The photos of soldiers and children are from when I witnessed the Israeli army guarding, as it does every Friday, a provocative parade of settlers through the streets of the Palestinian market in Hebron to show them that they not only dominate the Jewish quarter in the heart of their city but that the whole city belongs to them.

In Gaza, the reality is radically worse. Palestinians in the West Bank often excuse themselves from commenting on Hamas's methods in the Strip because they say they cannot know what they would do under that level of oppression. When one considers the systematic attempt at dehumanisation that Israeli colonialism entails, which seeks to drive the Palestinians to their bare minimum, the perseverance of the Palestinian people is simply admirable. Gaza has been under a 16-year blockade by land, air, and sea, with constant bombardment of the civilian population, with cuts in the supply of water, electricity, fuel and essential goods. It is now customary to call Gaza an open-air prison. But it should be added that it is a prison where the most basic human rights are not respected. Gaza is a ghetto, and we are witnessing in real-time and on television the process of annihilation of that ghetto and its population. The Jewish ancestors, whom the Nazis tried to dehumanise in the concentration camps, the victims of the pogroms in Eastern Europe, and the very worthy uprisings in the Warsaw ghetto, today would rise in indignation at the racist colonialism of the State of Israel and its ongoing genocide. Again, not in our name.

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❖ **About the author: Ariel Feldman** holds a degree in philosophy, is a photographer and filmmaker.

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