

No innocents in Gaza  
by  
Pervez Hoodbhoy

**Pull Quote:** The West's blank cheque for Israel is a renunciation of universalism and endorsement of tribalism.

Ahead of the impending invasion the Jerusalem Post [reports](#) Israeli defence minister Avigdor Liberman: "There are no innocents in Gaza". The Post's comments section mostly shows support for Liberman. The West largely concurs.

Photo: US President Joe Biden hugs Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on arrival at Tel-Aviv airport. In the backdrop stand hulks of Gaza's bombed out buildings, a million terrified Palestinians fleeing their homes, and the rubble of Al-Ahli hospital. But even before 500 bloodied and broken bodies could be picked up, Biden rushed to whitewash Israel by affirming that Hamas, not Israel, had blown up the hospital.

But a New York Times [analysis](#) of October 24 casts doubt on Israel's official claim that an errant Hamas missile was responsible. Even before this hospital's bombing, WHO pointed out that Israel had [targeted](#) and heavily damaged four of Gaza's 35 hospitals.

For decades Israel has been the tail that wags the American dog. Netanyahu has often bragged that whatever he does matters little because he has "the American leadership in his pocket". He is right. When cabinet minister Rafael Eitan once boasted that Palestinians living under Israeli occupation were like "drugged cockroaches in a bottle" none on Washington's Capitol Hill protested.

Stop! Lest we descend into an abyss of hate, let's understand that Israel and America are not alone in committing crimes against humanity. A full gallery of rogues cannot be fitted into any decent sized building. Of course, one must avoid whataboutery else every crime can then be absolved by pointing to yet another crime. But focusing just on one set of crimes while ignoring others is also a whitewash. Most importantly, the underlying pathology of human behavior would then be unexposed.

Consider, for example, the Saudi-UAE led war against impoverished "low-life" Yemenis and a Gaza-like blockade from which 85,000 children starved to death. Or, closer to home, the Pakistan Army's operation in East Pakistan which killed several hundred thousand dark-skinned Bengalis and sent millions fleeing into India. In Gujarat, Narendra Modi's government casually looked on as 2000 innocent Muslims were slaughtered.

Such episodes of war and butchery are no less horrific than the ongoing carnage in Gaza. They force us to recognize that all mortal conflicts come from tribalism – the identification with your own group and a separation of "us" from "them". You mourn the death of your own tribe's member and kill the other with relish – as Hamas does. But Hamas is weak and can kill only a few while Israel is strong and is extracting revenge in proportion to its strength.

In evolutionary terms, tribalism derives from the territorial competition between small tribes during the formative period when our ancestors were hunter-gatherers on the grasslands of Africa some 80,000 years ago. A pessimistic view is that tribal identities are forever fixed by our genes. Ergo: human nature is fixed, unchangeable.

By this logic we cannot stop humans from fighting any more than we can stop cats and dogs from fighting. But this view was challenged with the advent of modernity and industrialization. As societies became more diverse and complex, tribal identities weakened. You could belong to bigger and bigger entities such as large nation states with all behavior being rule based.

The appearance of international law gave a framework for resolving conflicts between states and delivering human rights to all. Signed by most countries, the UN Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) is the finest document ever produced collectively by humans and the strongest negation of tribalism.

But this great hope for peace is diminishing because of increasingly selective adherence to international law. The Russian invasion of Ukraine – with the Russians seeing Ukrainians as deviant members of their own tribe – was justly condemned by much of the world. Europe and the United States loudly denounced an aggression aimed at eliminating Ukrainian history and identity.

These very countries – with scarcely any dissent in their high circles – have handed Israel a blank cheque for genocide. What else to call it? The world’s most densely populated strip of land has all exits controlled by the Israelis who have denied food and fuel to the population while relentlessly bombing it from the air.

Why explains Western support for Israel? This needs some reflection.

Israel has historically served as America’s watchdog in an oil rich region. But oil is no longer so big a factor. The discovery of oil shale and largescale fracking has made the US far less dependent on Middle Eastern oil.

More importantly, Israel is a colonial settler state like the United States, Canada and Australia. In each of these states indigenous populations were first overpowered, whittled down in numbers through systematic dispossession, and reduced to irrelevance. An occasional sop is thrown at the survivors. American Indians get casino licenses, Canada’s original inhabitants are remembered through museums and artifacts, and Australian aborigines get some perks.

At the deepest level the “Western tribe” identifies culturally with Israel. The new tribalism is not ethnically or religiously based. Orthodox Jews may have growing nuisance value in Israel but as yet have no real role in key decision making. Common identification comes from sharing a similar way of life and similar mindset.

It is a big step backward for humanity that major countries which once sought de-tribalization (Pakistan never even tried walking this path) are retribalizing and turning into civilizational states. Europe, the avante garde of modernity and birthplace of humanism, is turning inward in a bid to protect the “European way of life”. Though not all, several civilizational states are very cruel to those they see as the other. Israel to Palestinians is the obvious example but so is India to its Muslims and China to the Uighurs.

In Israel-Palestine there is little prospect of anything except an action-reaction cycle. Israel will work yet harder to eliminate the Palestinians as a people. In turn Hamas will speak ever louder for the Palestinians and seek to kill more Jews. Until the Palestinians find a home the world should not expect differently.

-----

The author is an Islamabad based physicist and writer