

# **The Gaza Ghetto Uprising**

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TO THE HEART OF IT: Gaza has been a free kill zone and a “concentration camp” (to quote Israel’s National Security Director Giora Eiland in 2004), long before October 7.

In light of this, the most radical position comes directly from the simplest question: are Palestinians human beings? If your answer is emphatically yes, unambiguously and without reservations, then you are a lost cause to Zionism. Because if Palestinians are human beings, then their self-defense is legitimate, and the defense of their continued existence is necessary.

Gaza, this black box, this holding pen for refugees from the 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestine—can we think of its people as we think about ourselves, imagining being enclosed, imprisoned, in a small stretch of land forever, for no reason other than being born into a specific ethnicity? A place that has been cut off from the world to varying degrees since 1948. And a place that since at least 2003 has experienced multiple devastating large-scale military operations. Gazans had survived twelve of these since 2003, with a death toll of over 8,000 people, before October 7. Since then, that number has grown by over 34,000. And every minute there’s a new update of more deaths from Gaza from Israeli fire, but now also from starvation. No fuel, no food, no water, no medicine. Whatever is coming in is like “a drop in the sea,” to quote UN officials, in a place that these officials had already, in 2018, predicted would soon be “unlivable,” unfit for human life—a place that was experiencing what Ilan Pappé called “an incremental genocide” already in 2006.

This is the context that we need to have in mind when thinking about the attack on October 7. And then we need to ask ourselves, what would we do in that situation? Do you acquiesce and die? Or do you fight?

And if you fight, then how? George Orwell wrote about Gandhi being asked this question about the Jews in Europe in 1938, before the Holocaust. Gandhi said that the Jews should stage a kind of collective mass suicide to show the world the brutality of the Nazis, and then the world would have to intervene.<sup>1</sup> Orwell thought this was unhinged. But the Palestinians, in fact, kind of did this in 2018–19, during the period of the Great March of Return, the Palestinian equivalent to the Salt March in India. On the first day, about thirty thousand Palestinians marched towards the fence, and this unarmed protest was gunned down by Israeli snipers. Over one thousand people were injured and at least seventeen people were killed, just on the first day. And the world did nothing. Liberal politicians extended some vague condemnations, often against violence on both sides. Imagine looking at that and condemning violence on both sides.

So what *would* you do? Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak—the architect of the 2007 siege, considered a liberal Zionist—answered this question himself in 1998, saying he would have joined armed Palestinian resistance had he been born on the other side.

We think of Gaza, “we Israelis,” think of Gaza as a place that warehouses violence. It contains the refugees who must hate us so badly for what we did to them. This is also how Americans think of prisons, as places that warehouse violence, contain it so that we don’t have to think about it. But actually, the prison produces violence, and it flows out of the prison and into our seemingly removed lives. That’s why moralistic questions on violence are beside the point.

As for what happened on October 7, I’ll try as much as possible to stick to verifiable observations. It is very easy to fall into moralistic analysis, and we obviously can’t avoid it, but we should try to understand what actually occurred. And what happened, as far as we’re able to gather within the sea of misinformation and disinformation and whatever kind of psychological operations are happening? What happened, gathering from GoPros, surveillance footage, first

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<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, “Reflections on Gandhi,” *Partisan Review*, 1949.

person accounts, as well as reading everything I could put my hands on: military analysts, testimonies, media from both sides of the fence? What happened was that armed resistance factions in Gaza—not only *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya* (the Islamic resistance movement, Hamas), most prominently, but also the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which is a Marxist-Leninist organization, and other factions—launched a meticulously executed guerrilla operation, which immediately turned into a popular insurrection, against military bases and settlements surrounding the Gaza Strip on October 7, 2023.

Around 6 a.m. local time, the resistance<sup>2</sup> deployed a wide array of forces—totaling an estimated 3,000 fighters—on sea, land, air, and underground. They started with what Israelis call a “diversion,” by launching an unusually extensive missile strike targeting the so-called Gaza Envelope and the coast, up to Gush Dan (the Tel Aviv metropolitan area). Simultaneously, they attacked Israel’s panoptic surveillance systems and their cameras above and around Gaza, with what appeared to be relatively cheap commercial drones with DIY explosive capacities. And then they approached and breached the fence with multiple guerrilla army units, blowing holes in fences around Gaza at many points with specialized explosives, and laying down metal railings over which armed motorcyclists in groups of two could ride rapidly. Then heavy construction equipment like bulldozers and front-end loaders moved in to expand the breaches so that pickup trucks and sedans could drive through, carrying more armed fighters. Videos show that well-before 8 a.m. other factions (in this video, the Mujahideen Brigades) were in full gear and uniform, ready to participate in the uprising. With these forces the resistance completely overwhelmed Israeli defenses across many locations simultaneously, taking over the Erez Crossing—which is the main checkpoint separating Gaza from the world (alongside Rafah, which separates Gaza from Egypt to the south)—catching soldiers in their underwear in the bases, taking over entire settlements, killing many hundreds of Israeli soldiers and civilians—the death toll currently stands between 1,100 and 1,200<sup>3</sup>—killing and capturing high-ranking army officials; killing one mayor, too, the head of the municipal authority of the Gaza Envelope, and kidnapping over two hundred people into Gaza.

To qualify this: these figures come largely from Israeli government sources. Without a fully independent investigation, we will probably never know what exactly happened in those first few hours. While there is video evidence of a few instances of Palestinians killing unarmed Israelis and foreign nationals who were hiding or fleeing, we do not know the full extent of the phenomenon. Israel claims that all the hundreds of civilians killed on Oct 7 were “murdered by Hamas,” but Israeli publications have confirmed that dozens of them were killed by Israeli fire. With Israel aggressively rejecting an independent investigation, the full extent of its killing of its own civilians remains unclear. It is evident, too, that unaffiliated Gaza residents joined the attack and also kidnapped Israelis. What happened after the fences were breached, after the gates were opened, was that thousands of Gaza residents, or inmates, joined the assault in what became a

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<sup>2</sup> By “the resistance” I mean the plurality of factions and unaffiliated individuals opposing Israeli siege, apartheid, and colonization in Palestine and outside of it.

<sup>3</sup> Due to the complicated process of identifying hundreds of corpses disfigured by indiscriminate IDF fire in the Gaza envelope that day, Israeli officials have slowly revised the number down from 1,400, and Haaretz military journalist Amos Harel now says “almost 1,100.” Amos Harel, “Israel’s Army Makes Headway in Gaza, but Hamas’ Surrender Is Far from Imminent,” *Haaretz*, November 14, 2023, sec. Israel News, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-14/ty-article/.premium/israels-military-is-making-headway-in-gaza-but-hamas-surrender-is-far-from-imminent/0000018b-ca6f-d8c7-a59b-df6f80560000>.

prison break and an uprising. And you can see some of the footage where people from Gaza walk out, kiss the ground, and turn around to go back inside. And then others on bicycles and crutches, or however they could, kept going. They looted military bases and settlements—expropriating military vehicles and even horses—and some participated directly in the attack, with children throwing stones at IDF outposts next to fighters attacking the posts with light arms.

In my binge-reading, I came across one account where an Israeli Haaretz journalist went to one of the hotels to which residents of the Envelope were relocated by the Dead Sea, and spoke to people, asked them what they saw. One person talked about seeing teenagers with stones and machetes next to well-equipped uniformed Hamas fighters. I'm not sure if this is true; I've never seen a machete in Palestine. Another thing we saw was fake news coming in from other places around the world, including Latin America. I specifically remember one terrible 2013 video of a woman burned. So it's possible that this person too was confusing this with a video from Latin America with machetes. But we do know that there was an element as well of a popular insurrection once the gates were opened. This reminds me of other rebellions, slave rebellions, really, where there's an organized vanguard or an organized underground that leads the attack with the intention of opening the gates, taking over an armory, arming the populace, and letting rip the spontaneity of the masses. Fanon talks about this, in the second chapter of *Wretched of the Earth*, about launching the spontaneity of the masses, which is uncontrollable.<sup>4</sup> Once the rage of the dispossessed is unleashed, you don't know what's going to happen, and some of it might be horrendous, right? It might. And it's something we have to grapple with, without falling into a knee-jerk panic reaction that justifies genocide.

By analogy we can think of Nat Turner's rebellion, in which dozens of white Virginians were killed, including women and children. We can think of John Brown, whose idea was to take over the armory at Harpers Ferry and then free slaves, kill slave owners, arm the slaves, and start a rebellion that would bring down slavery in the South. Some people saw this as a kind of general rehearsal for the Civil War. But it failed, and John Brown was executed, and a lot of brutal killing happened. Still, the way we remember it now is certainly not how people talked about it back then. I just want to challenge readers to think about their own knee-jerk reactions to seeing news from October 7, and to put these reactions in a historical context.

Another case that is especially important to me as a Jewish person, having studied our history of persecution and rebellion, is the Sobibor Uprising. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is of course the most famous Jewish revolt of that era, and many people made the analogy, including Refaat Alareer, a Gazan poet who generated controversy for drawing this comparison on BBC, and who was murdered by Israel as a possible consequence. The Sobibor revolt, while much less well known, was more of a success story. Sobibor was a concentration camp where, in 1943, realizing they were all going to get killed, a small group of maybe twenty people, some of them prisoners of war, organized in secrecy, came up with a sophisticated plan to kill high-ranking SS officers, sabotage the electricity and communications infrastructure, take the guards' weapons, loot the armory, arm the other inmates, open the gates, and let people escape and join the partisans. Launched on October 14, 1943, it worked, to an extent. Approximately half of the camp escaped. But only about fifty rebels survived the war. Still, that's a much higher percentage than would've survived otherwise. And of course, there are infinite differences between these cases, but I instantly thought about it when I got the news from my sister, who lived in one of the set-

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<sup>4</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

tlements of the Envelope until October 7, in the family WhatsApp group, saying that their power went out, that there was some kind of sabotage of the electricity infrastructure in the October 7 operation.

There was also an element of short-circuiting Israel's surveillance capacities, creating the mirage that Hamas was deterred from confrontation with Israel, and that it had no plans to attack. According to Israeli and American sources, there were multiple gatherings of forces in the lead-up that were framed by Hamas as harmless training exercises. There were phone call conversations among Hamas officials, supposedly—again, according to Israeli sources—saying that they had no interest in any confrontation with Israeli forces. Apparently, Egyptian and American intel was delivered to the IDF, but they waved it away as something familiar and un concerning. This short-circuiting of surveillance was also long term: in the previous few months, Israel moved entire divisions from Gaza to the West Bank, assuming that Hamas was contained, banking on technological surveillance and enclosure systems, like smart fences and robotic sentries, to keep Gaza pacified.

## **The Israeli Response: A Mass Hannibal**

The Israeli response to all this didn't materialize until later in the morning. It took the IDF a few long hours to understand what was going on. And when they finally responded, they basically implemented the Hannibal Directive, as attested by Israeli Air Force Colonel Nof Erez who said on the Haaretz podcast on November 9, that October 7 "was a mass Hannibal."

The Hannibal Directive is a kind of scorched earth response to kidnapping attempts. Mondoweiss ran an important piece about this early on. Kidnappings have been an extremely effective way for Palestinians to generate leverage against Israel for decades, culminating in the Gilad Shalit deal in 2011, when Israel exchanged 1,027 Palestinian political prisoners, including Hamas head in Gaza Yahya Sinwar, for one soldier. The Hannibal Directive is an army procedure where the idea is to prevent something like that by all means necessary, even at risk of killing the kidnapped soldier or soldiers, which almost always winds up happening, as with Israeli soldier Hadar Goldin and others in 2014.

So, on and since October 7, this was Israel's logic. The Israeli Air Force was utilized to bomb Israeli military bases and settlements, as well as dozens of cars moving in the Envelope (the leading Israeli newspaper Yediot said "70 vehicles" were bombarded without confirming who was inside, in an article by Ronen Bergman, who is a staff writer for the *New York Times*, which apparently decided that this story didn't warrant an anglophone audience). There's a witness account where an Israeli citizen from one of the kibbutzim, locked in his safe room, describes getting a phone call from an IDF helicopter operator who asks, "Are there terrorists in your home? If so, I'm blowing up the house." (I believe this, by the way, is the first time that this particular account appears in print in the English language.)

In Sderot, which is a working-class town, not a gated, fenced-in kibbutz like most of those settlements, Palestinian fighters were able to take over the police station and barricade themselves inside with hostages. The IDF did not negotiate with them; they systematically destroyed the whole reinforced building and killed everyone inside.

Haaretz journalist Amos Harel, who is seen as perhaps the most moderate and collected Israeli military analyst—though he too has been spreading fallacies concocted by the IDF Spokesper-

son's unit about sexual violence—reported honestly that the south district division was “compelled to request an aerial strike against the base itself in order to repulse the terrorists.”

In one interview on Israeli radio, a survivor of the attack describes being treated “humanely” by her Palestinian captors, and recounts how over fifty people were killed in “heavy, heavy cross-fire,” and by tank shells, not by Gaza fighters, all while the Israeli radio host tries to goad her otherwise. In footage published by the biggest Israeli news site Ynet (Yediot) as well as by Israeli Channel 12, you can see Israeli helicopter operators opening fire on what they estimate as “300 targets” that day, including on people fleeing from the dance party, while they admit being unable to differentiate partygoers from Palestinian militants, saying Hamas operatives were instructed “to walk, in order to confuse” the Israeli Air Force, and that they were “in a dilemma, not knowing who to shoot, because there were so many.”

The same logic has been applied in Gaza itself: catastrophic shelling, an unending slew of unapologetic war crimes, and utter disregard for human life, Israeli citizens included. Add to that a “drawer plan”<sup>5</sup> to expel, or, if that is not possible, exterminate the Palestinians, and you get the current situation—Gaza 2024.

Most mainstream media have been complicit with the erasure of this reality, silencing the Israeli hostages themselves, as with Yocheved Lifshitz, an 85-year-old woman who was released from captivity, who insisted on telling people at a press conference in an Israeli hospital, surrounded by journalists and Israeli officials, that she was treated very kindly while in captivity. And still CNN, BBC, *New York Times*, almost every one of these respected, so-called dependable news sources omitted her words and quoted her out of context to imply otherwise.

From the very beginning, Israel has been unable to achieve its military goals, so it responded by attacking and massacring civilians, murdering over 13,000 children and counting. The Palestinian fighters themselves, meanwhile, are underground when the bombing occurs, and emerge as close to the enemy as possible for attack, similar tactically to Chuikov's “hugging of the enemy” in Stalingrad. And Israel knows this very well—when there's bombing, the insurgents go underground, same as in Vietnam and elsewhere in the Middle East, into a very intricate network of tunnels. Israel is aware of this happening, but it still bombs the civilian population to smithereens, in what is, truly, “a textbook case of genocide,”<sup>6</sup> as claimed already early on by Israeli historian Raz Segal. Clear intent to commit genocide, complete with blood libel.

## **Blood Libel and the Myth of the Palestinian Rapist**

Blood libel is a term I'm taking, again, from my own ancestral history. It's a term that specifically hearkens to the genocidal lie that Jews use the blood of Christian children to make their matzah for Passover as a justification for pogroms and worse. So similarly, we're seeing lies about the beheading of children, the tossing of babies into ovens, necrophilia, reiterated made-up stories on sexual violence, the circulation of horrendous older photos of sexually violated Kurdish fighters as if they're Israeli women, and so on and so forth. All of this appeared starting the very

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<sup>5</sup> “Drawer plan” (*tochnit megera*, in Hebrew): an operational plan that has been devised but not yet enacted. Minister and MK Smotrich's “Decisive Plan” is one example.

<sup>6</sup> Raz Segal, “A Textbook Case of Genocide,” *Jewish Currents*, 2023, <https://jewishcurrents.org/a-textbook-case-of-genocide>.

first day and has been gradually debunked,<sup>7</sup> but it keeps resurfacing periodically.<sup>8</sup> The White House walked back on Biden’s outright lie that he’s seen photographic evidence of children being beheaded, the *LA Times* pulled out an unsubstantiated quote on sexual violence, the *New York Times* has had an internal firestorm over its own publication of atrocity propaganda, but mainstream media remains fully complicit, continuing to pump out unsubstantiated claims by Israeli spokespeople. It’s almost like the IDF spokesperson sits with a button that they can press to get another bogus *NY Times* story whenever they need an extra push of legitimacy for their genocide.

This atrocity propaganda has been the narrative engine of the genocide. As shown by Frank Luntz—who wrote the confidential 2009 Hasbara manual—and his comprehensive polling, audiences respond to claims of “ Hamas rape and massacre ” more than anything else. This while Israeli soldiers showcase not only their genocidal intent but also their intent to commit rape—with impunity—in Gaza. Internationally, at least in the anglophone world, I’m getting the sense that the Israeli atrocity narrative is falling apart. The damage it has inflicted, however, both on the struggle against sexual violence writ large, with its overshadowing of actual cases of rape of Palestinian women by the IDF, and by giving the West a reason to greenlight the genocide, cannot be overstated.

At this point, we’re still seeing liberal Zionists, people who think of themselves as progressives, reiterating these stories. For me it’s particularly tragic, because it’s also my family, even Israeli activists or lefty writers who I had looked up to when I started getting disillusioned with Zionism. On social media, asking for evidence became cause for cancellation, academics and rape crisis counselors were losing positions for not adhering to Israel’s propaganda, and the #MeToo hashtag was co-opted to justify genocide.<sup>9</sup> While the weaponization of feminist discourse for genocide in Gaza might seem new, the mobilization of colonial forces to ostensibly protect women from the colonized “ savages ” goes way back. This phenomenon shows up throughout colonial history as one of the prime avenues to legitimize genocide both before and after the fact, as exemplified so succinctly, and in such a clear analogy to the images disseminated after October 7, in the 1892 painting *La Vuelta del Malón*. Translated as “ Return of the Indian Raiders, ” this painting, intended to legitimize the genocidal “ conquest of the desert ” in Argentina,<sup>10</sup> is considered a foundational work of Argentinian art specifically and colonial art at large. It depicts a fictional image of Mapuche warriors kidnapping a naked white woman.<sup>11</sup> Remember this next time an Israeli art exhibit comes to your hometown.

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<sup>7</sup> And here’s a partial list of the debunking: <https://www.yesmagazine.org/social-justice/2024/03/05/israel-hamas-oct7-report-gaza>

<sup>8</sup> “ CNN Report Claiming Sexual Violence on October 7 Relied on Non-Credible Witnesses, Some with Undisclosed Ties to Israeli Govt, ” Mondoweiss, December 12, 2023, <https://mondoweiss.net/2023/12/cnn-report-claiming-sexual-violence-on-october-7-relied-on-non-credible-witnesses-some-with-undisclosed-ties-to-israeli-govt/>.

<sup>9</sup> “ Inside the Campaign to Undermine DEI and Palestine Solidarity at the University of Minnesota: An Interview with Dr. Sima Shakhshari, ” Mondoweiss, January 31, 2024, <https://mondoweiss.net/2024/01/inside-the-campaign-to-undermine-dei-and-palestine-solidarity-at-the-university-of-minnesota-an-interview-with-dr-sima-shakhshari/>.

<sup>10</sup> Lauren Kaplan, “ Topographical Violence and Imagining the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Argentina, ” *Hemisphere: Visual Cultures of the Americas* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 32.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Malosetti Costa, “ The Return of the Indian Raid (La Vuelta Del Malón), ” Equipo de Desarrollo de la Dirección de Sistemas | Secretaría de Gobierno de Cultura, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://www.bellasartes.gov.ar/en/collection/work/6297/>.



Anglophone audiences should be familiar with all this from the history of lynchings in the US. In their doctoral work, Jameson Austin Leopold highlights how Angela Davis's 1981 essay "Rape, Racism, and the Myth of the Black Rapist" frames the "racist ideological fabrication of 'the propagandistic cry of rape'" as "the major political and sociocultural justification of the extrajudicial institution of lynching."<sup>12</sup> This focus on a phantasmatic Black rapist works, in turn, to make invisible the literally countless rapes that go unreported, and, as Leopold argues, the state-sanctioned rape that every single one of the United States' two million plus prison population goes through on a routine basis in strip and cavity searches. Similarly, this obsessive reiteration of fabricated October 7 rape stories erases the real, routine, state-sanctioned sexual abuse of countless Palestinians. The trophy images of masses of Palestinian men and boys stripped to their underwear and held in torture positions for hours and days are images of sexual violence. The erasure of the rape of countless Palestinian women and men subjected to routine strip and cavity searches by Israeli forces, as well as those extralegally violated by marauding Israeli soldiers, is driven by anti-Palestinian racism.

The dehumanization of the entire population of Gaza continues. Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant now-infamously said they're beasts, "human animals." In Hebrew, it's *hayot adam*, which actually is like saying they're beasts, animals, monsters. That would be the idiomatic translation. So they've created this zero-sum game, like it's either us or them, which is genocidal thinking. All the way throughout history, in very different conflicts, we see the creation of this false narrative that people of different identities cannot coexist. It's either us or them, and they need to be annihilated.

## Rival Tendencies: The Different Flavors of Genocide

Haaretz, the liberal Zionist newspaper considered "the Israeli newspaper-of-record," continues spreading blood libel. But it supports a different idea of statesmanship than the majority of the Israeli public. Tareq Baconi talks about this—by the way, everyone should read Tareq Baconi. He wrote an excellent book called *Hamas Contained*, which doesn't romanticize Hamas, doesn't glorify it in any way at all—it's critical of Hamas—but at least sees it for what it is and discusses it openly.<sup>13</sup> Since October 7 he's been courted by mainstream English platforms, including the *New Yorker*, where he says that Netanyahu basically had no strategy. I think it *was* a strategy, but one that was doomed to fail the moment that the status quo got disrupted. And it *has* failed, the moment that Al Aqsa Flood was launched successfully on October 7. Elsewhere I've talked about Sun Tzu's hierarchy of warfare: you attack the enemy on the level of strategy.<sup>14</sup> Hamas did that right away. And that strategy was Netanyahu's "manageable conflict" approach, this idea that every couple of years you could go into Gaza and "mow the lawn" with relatively few losses on the Israeli side. This is a term they used, "mow the grass." Any kind of military capabilities that the Palestinian resistance built up, you just mow it down periodically. Kill a few hundreds, maybe thousands—in 2014, it was thousands—and just sort of continue living like this indefinitely while

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<sup>12</sup> Jameson Austin Leopold, "Critique of 'Sexual' Violence" (Unpublished Manuscript, 2024).

<sup>13</sup> Tareq Baconi, *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance*, Stanford Studies in Middle Eastern and Islamic Societies and Cultures (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Sun Tzu, *Sun Tzu On The Art Of War*, trans. Lionel Giles (London: Routledge, 2013).

building up your technological capacities. This is how Netanyahu sought to create “a durable peace,” which is the title of his book.<sup>15</sup>

This strategy has failed. And who knows what will happen with Netanyahu now? He’s still very popular. But, with his approach failing so spectacularly, there are competing visions for an Israeli future. One of them is just total genocide, full-fledged, not even pretending to only go for Hamas, just eliminate Gaza off the map. It’s also very popular. It’s shared by major military and political leaders currently in office. Bezalel Smotrich, who is the finance minister, is considered one of the key figures of this tendency simply because over the past decade he laid out a more or less comprehensive plan, “the decisive plan,” that is essentially a genocidal transfer idea. And against this genocidal view, there’s a kind of “two states”-ism, which maybe isn’t called “two states” in Israeli society anymore as that has no popular support whatsoever, but it comes out of that tradition. This is more aligned with counterinsurgency, more sophisticated. And this is a view that is much less popular, but is very strongly pushed by the US, which is extremely involved, a lot more than in Ukraine, sending aircraft carriers and top-level military and political leaders almost daily during the early months. The US is pushing for counterinsurgency, learning from its military failures in the Middle East over the past couple of decades. Counterinsurgency is contingent upon dividing populations, isolating insurgents, controlling space, and, perhaps most importantly, appointing a government that would be working for “USG interests,” US government, and here I’m quoting from the US Army’s counterinsurgency field manual, JP 3–24.<sup>16</sup>

The counterinsurgents are not concerned about the well-being of Palestinians, but they’re trying to think in a more sophisticated way about how to achieve the state’s goals effectively, and the brute force approach, they argue, might in the long run generate more resistance than it would crush. Counterinsurgency might be even more genocidal, in terms of the loss of human life and the inability to resolve the conflict and meet people’s needs as if everyone is actually a human being. But the counterinsurgents are thinking of how to be effective. At first, Israel was able to recruit a little over 300,000 soldiers from reserves, shutting down various sectors of its economy to add to its 150,000 conscript army, while Hamas had an estimated 40,000 fighters and PIJ had at least 10,000 (as noted on the Electronic Intifada podcast). Thousands more have been fighting back in the West Bank. Hezbollah, which has been constantly shelling Israel from the north since October 7, has an estimated 100,000. So Israel’s meager manpower has been stretched thin. By now, all reservists have gone back home. The Americans know that Israel does not have nearly enough forces to win in urban warfare in as complex a terrain as Gaza. You need a ratio of one to ten or even one to twenty attackers for defenders, following John Robb and his book *Brave New War*, and John Spencer as well, in a maxim that goes back to Clausewitz with his assertion that defense is the strongest form of warfare.<sup>17</sup> So they’re saying, okay, how can you realistically do this? What are your achievable goals? You can’t just act intuitively and try to wipe out 2.3 million people and think you’re going to win when your adversaries are fighting back and appear to know what they’re doing.

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<sup>15</sup> Binyamin Netanyahu, *A Durable Peace: Israel and Its Place among the Nations* (New York: Warner Books, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> *Joint Publication FM 3–24: Counterinsurgency*, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012); John Robb, *Brave New War: The Next Stage of Terrorism and the End of Globalization* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2008); John Spencer, “Mini-Manual for the Urban Defender,” John Spencer Online, 2022, <https://www.johnspenceronline.com/mini-manual-urbandefender>.

Accordingly, about every other day since the ground invasion started, the Palestinian resistance has put out unbelievable videos of guerrilla footage, targeting the IDF with snipers, mines, IEDs, mortars, thermobaric explosives, and countless RPG strikes, frequently with the Yassin 105, which is a made-in-Gaza double-headed munition that disables the tanks' reactive armor (Jon Elmer's Twitter profile is currently a good archive for this footage).

The Israeli casualty rate has risen accordingly, with the army releasing the names of roughly two to five dead soldiers a day on average over the first couple of months and those of dozens of wounded soldiers every day. And these are their figures, knowing the Israeli army is a pathological liar. Citizens report a constant flow of rescue helicopters from Gaza to the hospitals. According to Israeli hospital registrations, the actual number of wounded soldiers is about ten times higher than what the IDF has been releasing,<sup>18</sup> with thousands of newly disabled soldiers in what an Israeli Defense Ministry official says is "unprecedented, not something we've ever dealt with."<sup>19</sup>

Unable to sustain the mass ground invasion militarily and economically, Israel has by now (at time of writing, late March) released all of its reserve brigades, still refusing a climb-down ceasefire and hostage exchange deal, violating a recent UN Security Council resolution. Within Israel, we've seen the rise of Itzhak Brik, a major general in the reserves, who predicted this collapse of Israeli defenses, having extensively surveyed dozens of Israeli units back in 2018. He met Netanyahu and Gallant, Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, a few times in October, as one of many people who are advising them, but as one who's been vindicated popularly and militarily. He cautioned against a land invasion, calling it "a trap," and recommended aerial bombardment, continued tightened siege, and "surgical raids" from the sea, using elite units like the "Ghost Unit."<sup>20</sup> This unit, the brainchild of Aviv Kohavi, hasn't been used in large-scale combat yet, by the way; its head, Colonel Asaf Hamami, was killed on October 7.

## Hostages as Leverage: A History

As of this writing, hostages remain the Palestinian wild card. Israel has been in what I would call a strategic vacuum, reacting out of genocidal rage and humiliation and continuously shattering to dust its own social contract by bombing, shooting, and even gassing its own citizens held hostage in Gaza. With the collapse of this paradigm, different strategic approaches are vying to fill the void: namely, counterinsurgency, which is pushed by the primary genocidal accomplice, the US, and full-fledged messianic genocide, which is very popular in the extremely fascist and racist Israeli society. The counterinsurgency vision would basically see a revamped Palestinian Authority try to take control of the Gaza Strip in some kind of process towards statehood, but the problem is that any Israeli leader who would agree to roll with this scenario is unlikely to win among Israeli voters, who have been conditioned for years to see Arabs as subhuman terrorists who could never be trusted with a state.

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<sup>18</sup> Yaniv Kubovich and Ido Efrati, "Discrepancies Arise between IDF and Hospital Reports on Numbers of Wounded Soldiers," *Haaretz*, December 10, 2023, sec. Israel News, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-10/ty-article/.premium/1-593-israeli-soldiers-wounded-since-october-7-idf-reveals/0000018c-5416-df2f-adac-fe3fbe6d0000>.

<sup>19</sup> "דומה משהו עברנו 'לא המלחמה: מתחילת חודשים צה"ל נכי מ-2,000 יותר סרור, ארצי' חן *Ynet*, December 7, 2023, <https://www.ynet.co.il/health/article/yokra13707397>.

<sup>20</sup> קודנר, ליאור, הארץ עצמם, "על להגן צריכים האזרחים כרגע כשלה. וחכם קטן צבא של התפיסה בריק: "יצחק" October 10, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/digital/podcast/weekly/2023-10-10/ty-article-podcast/0000018b-18f7-dcc0-a3df-9cf7140e0000>.

Taking soldiers hostage has been a way for the Palestinian resistance to generate leverage against Israel for decades. The first deal that broke the status quo of 1:1 prisoner for prisoner was, according to Israeli negotiator Ariel Merari,<sup>21</sup> a 1978 agreement with the PFLP-General Command (a militant group that splintered from the PFLP) to exchange seventy-six Palestinian political prisoners for one Israeli soldier. Since then the resistance has been able to raise the floor of Israeli negotiations with every deal, with the Jibril Agreement being particularly contentious in the Israeli national memory, where the PFLP-GC was able, in exchange for three Israeli soldiers captured during the First Lebanon War, to bargain for the release of 1,151 Palestinian political prisoners, including the Palestine solidarity militant Kōzō Okamoto of the Japanese Red Army.

Gilad Shalit, kidnapped in 2006, marked another watershed deal. Shalit was captured (and two other soldiers in his tank were killed) during Olmert's government. This Israeli Prime Minister, who in an Al Jazeera documentary expressed disrespect for Shalit himself for not fighting back like the others who were killed, basically revealed that Israeli leaders prefer soldiers dead rather than captured. Shalit's family, with his dad Noam in the forefront, was able to galvanize a social movement for his release through a "no matter the cost" prisoner exchange. This social movement was endorsed by Olmert's rivals across Zionist political lines, from the right wing to liberal Zionists. Olmert was still going to broker a deal—of about 350 Palestinians prisoners for Shalit—but, according to him in the AJ interview, his rival and former PM Ehud Barak visited Shalit's family a night before the deal would have been signed, signaling to Hamas that Israel would bend further yet.

When Netanyahu took power in 2009, with Ehud Barak as Minister of Defense, it was with a promise to his base to bring Gilad Shalit home. And in 2011 an unbelievable deal was brokered (1,027 Palestinians, including Yahya Sinwar, for one soldier). This agreement is largely seen by both sides as a huge failure for Israel and an amazing victory for the resistance.

David Graeber, in the piece he wrote on Palestine after his visit, made one of his quintessentially simple yet profound anthropological observations when he said that hospitality is "the entire point of life" ("hospitality is everything") in Palestinian culture, and that one of the tragic ironies is that Israel is the worst possible guest. And it's true, you know: anyone who has experienced Palestinian hospitality will tell you that: in many ways the meaning, the core of social life in Palestine, is to be generous to guests and strangers. We're seeing it in the treatment of the hostages, as they recount their experience on the rare occasions that they're actually allowed to speak freely, as was the case with Yocheved Lifshitz. We've also seen this with Gilad Shalit. He has never spoken in detail, apparently not even to his family, about his five-year experience in captivity, but Hamas released footage of him basically hanging out with his kidnappers, Hamas's "Shadow Unit," chatting, drinking tea, receiving letters from his family, doing a barbeque, and so on. I'm sure it wasn't a pleasant situation for him, but compare that with the experience of Palestinian prisoners—who since October 7, have been experiencing retributive torture, beatings, stress postures, sleep deprivation by blasting Israel's national anthem in the cell, and murder. And in international media, we see this absolutely racist double standard—no word about more than 7,000 Palestinian political prisoners held without fair trial, many of whom don't even know what the justifications are for their administrative detention; not to mention thousands more, abducted since October 7. Up until now, every deal has set a new floor in Israel's hostage negoti-

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<sup>21</sup> Lior Kodner, "Professor Ariel Merari: Ein Li Safek," *הארץ*, Haaretz Podcast, November 12, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/digital/podcast/weekly/2023-11-12/ty-article-podcast/0000018b-c36d-dc2b-a3fb-e7fd61560000>.

ations with the resistance. The question is whether the Shalit deal and October 7 created enough of a rift in Israel's sense of self that this will now change, and that Israel will be able to withstand the pressure to concede. The cost of not conceding might be too high, paving the way for mass migration.

Though this might be proven wrong, I would say we might want to wait for the five-year mark before drawing any conclusions one way or the other. Historically, Israel has taken five years to concede after a military defeat, and it is only power and violence that forces its hand. Five years after the Yom Kippur War in 1973, it finally made a commitment to return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. Five years after the beginning of the First Intifada, it allowed thousands of former Palestinian fighters and refugees, including Yasser Arafat, to return to Palestine and start the so-called peace process. Five years after the start of the Second Intifada, it withdrew its settlements from Gaza. And five years after Gilad Shalit was captured, his release deal was brokered in 2011.

The true gains from the current leverage that Palestinians hold with their hostages from October 7 will only materialize as Israel's shaky political terrain crumbles internally under the Netanyahu administration. As with Netanyahu against Olmert, the opposition parties—headed by the genocidal Zionist centrist Yair Lapid—are claiming to be the rescuers of the hostages now. Sooner or later they may find themselves brokering Israel's concession.

## **The Palestinian Authority: A Tool of Israeli Counterinsurgency**

The Israeli wildcard is the Palestinian Authority (PA). The Netanyahu administration is politically incapable of recognizing the PA as its most vital military asset, but, again, a successor might be able to do so and try to rebrand, revamp, and reappoint the PA as a governing body in both the West Bank and Gaza. Unless something unexpected happens, which is by no means impossible, Netanyahu will stay at least until elections are held in October 2026. Meanwhile, the PA continues to crumble. By now, the resistance—from the armed factions (including Fatah's armed wing, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade) to the youth rioting in the streets—fully recognizes the PA as an arm of the Israeli state, and true political wizardry would have to be done to recover its legitimacy. However, the success of the Israeli-American counterinsurgency idea depends on this.

Starting in December 1987, the First Intifada was a massive popular uprising against Israeli apartheid. This uprising saw the use of the tools of mass struggle to great effect—strikes, civil disobedience, mass rallies, riots, tax resistance—all working together in confluence. And despite the fact that the uprising was largely unarmed, it was met with unspeakable brutality, the killing of many hundreds of protesters, the arrests of multiple thousands, and injuries to over a hundred thousand Palestinians by Israeli soldiers who were specifically instructed by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to “break their bones.” Still, it's remembered with incredible fondness by that generation of rebels, and the way that this uprising was pacified was not by “breaking their bones,” but by bringing in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which was in exile in Tunis, and appointing it as a legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. As specified in the US Army's Field Manual, successful, long-lasting counterinsurgency “requires development of viable local leaders and institutions.”<sup>22</sup> If there are no leaders, if the resistance is decentralized, counterin-

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<sup>22</sup> *Joint Publication FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency*, 2018, 1–22.

surgency requires the creation of a centralized leadership. The PLO, which had been created by Arab states in 1964 as what Baconi calls “a tool to control the insurgent [Palestinian] factions,”<sup>23</sup> was now appointed by the US and Israel as the leadership of the uprising. This allowed Israel and the US to marginalize and ignore the decentralized popular committees that were, to use Fanon’s terminology, guiding the insurrection away from a recuperable “traditional politics.”<sup>24</sup> Then, through the Oslo Accords between 1993–95, the PLO, Israel, and the US formed the PA as an auxiliary arm of the Israeli occupation, with a limited security apparatus that would be dedicated to policing and repressing insurgents within Palestinian population clusters in select areas of the West Bank and Gaza. I can’t describe how successful this move was.

Well-meaning people still see the Oslo Accords as a genuine peace process rather than a sophisticated counterinsurgency operation that enabled Israel to continue entrenching its settlement project with relative calm. After the so-called peace process collapsed with the conclusion of the five years allotted for its duration, the PA remained. The Second Intifada broke out in October 2000, and for a brief moment PLO Head Yasser Arafat did act up by releasing 350 political prisoners, including Hamas and PIJ members, but then the US and Israel effectively fired him, and a new collaborator-in-chief was appointed, Mahmoud Abbas, aka Abu Mazen. The PA was ousted from Gaza in 2007 when Abu Mazen attempted what Baconi calls a “US-planned coup,”<sup>25</sup> after Hamas won the elections in 2006.<sup>26</sup> But Abu Mazen was able to complete the coup in the West Bank and greatly help in stabilizing Israel’s control there.<sup>27</sup>

The PA creates the appearance of Palestinian autonomy, but in fact, much like the governments of the Bantustans of apartheid South Africa, it is simply an extension of the colonial state, a tool of counterinsurgency that is highly effective for the repression of local rebellions, because it makes the native population police itself. Fatah, which was a revolutionary movement in the early days of the armed struggle, is now mostly contained by the PA. Would-be rebels are now government employees, fighting to keep their collaborationist jobs. Community organizers are now working for NGOs, exemplifying Colin Powell’s infamous categorization of nonprofits as “force multipliers” for Empire.<sup>28</sup> The money funneled by NATO countries into the nonprofit and government sector is the main reason for the relative pacification of the West Bank following the militarization of the Palestinian resistance in the Second Intifada. This echoes General Petraeus’s guideline of employing “money as a weapons system.”<sup>29</sup> These are the winning counterinsurgency principles: move in with overwhelming force to control space, isolate the insurgents from the general population, appoint your own government (but, importantly, make it of the same identity as the general population), and supply the population with services so they don’t become

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<sup>23</sup> Tareq Baconi, *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance*, Stanford Studies in Middle Eastern and Islamic Societies and Cultures (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018), 14.

<sup>24</sup> “Les dirigeants de l’insurrection, qui voient le peuple enthousiaste et ardent porter des coups décisifs à la machine colonialiste, renforcent leur méfiance à l’égard de la politique traditionnelle.” Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (La Découverte / Poche, 2016), 127.

<sup>25</sup> Baconi, *Hamas Contained*, 331.

<sup>26</sup> David Rose, “The Gaza Bombshell,” *Vanity Fair*, March 3, 2008, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/04/gaza200804>.

<sup>27</sup> Baconi, *Hamas Contained*, 123.

<sup>28</sup> Sarah Kenyon Lischer, “Military Intervention and the Humanitarian ‘Force Multiplier,’” *Global Governance* 13, no. 1 (2007): 99–118.

<sup>29</sup> David H. Petraeus, “Multi-National Force-Iraq Commander’s COUNTERINSURGENCY GUIDANCE” (*Military Review*, 2008), 211.

insurgents to meet their basic needs (this ties with General Peter Chiarelli's SWEAT concept,<sup>30</sup> standing for sewage, water, electricity, and trash-collection; I recommend Greg Stoker's short video on SWEAT-MSO on this). In short: "divide-and-conquer" and money—this is how empires win wars.

But somehow, even though the world supplied the Palestinian Authority with the neoliberal institutions that would lead it into the choking counterinsurgent stability of a neocolonial regime, Israel keeps shooting itself in the foot. Interestingly, Israeli army literature generally fails to recognize the effectiveness of the PA in furthering its interests. The term "counterinsurgency" has not been fully translated into Hebrew, and when Israeli strategists do talk about it in English they generally conflate counterinsurgency with "counterterrorism."<sup>31</sup> You can see this scrolling through *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies*, a 2016 Cambridge publication co-edited by an Israeli author: in their timeline of Israel's purported "counterinsurgency experience," they simply skip the important years following the Oslo Accords,<sup>32</sup> revealing to us that they only understand counterinsurgency as the application of force, and not as "stability operations."<sup>33</sup> How can they misunderstand this? It might have something to do with the nature of Israel as a settler-colony, where the foundational idea is to ethnically cleanse and replace the native population rather than simply contain and control it. But I think the true reason is incompetence and, on a broader level, greed. The Israeli army, as argued by Israeli historian Uri Milstein, is a deeply anti-intellectual institution,<sup>34</sup> and increased reliance on the army as a generator of GDP incentivizes a suicidal military strategy. I suppose you could see this as a symptom of capitalism as a whole, where the logic of the market can be self-undermining. The Palestinian resistance, which, by contrast, focuses on *sumud* (perseverance) and on the long-term sustainability of its capacity to fight, might find this encouraging.

## Looking Ahead

"Many of us like to ask ourselves, 'What would I do if I was alive during slavery? Or the Jim Crow South? Or apartheid? What would I do if my country was committing genocide?' The answer is, you're doing it. Right now."

— Aaron Bushnell

Six months in, the question remains: when will the world intervene? The resistance within Gaza continues unabated to inflict casualties on the IDF and impede the machinery of genocide. Resistance continues also, importantly, in Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq. In the US, there has been some targeting of the Israeli shipping company ZIM, of arms manufacturer Elbit, and other logistical operations and weapons manufacturers. However, the impression has been that whatever popular energy had appeared in the first several weeks following October 7 has been mostly

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<sup>30</sup> Fred M. Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War*, 1<sup>st</sup> Simon & Schuster hardcover ed (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 185.

<sup>31</sup> Efraim Inbar and Eitan Shamir, "Israel's Counterinsurgency Experience," in *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies*, ed. Beatrice Heuser and Eitan Shamir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 168–90.

<sup>32</sup> Inbar and Shamir, 178.

<sup>33</sup> *Joint Publication FM 3–24: Counterinsurgency*, 7–3 (89).

<sup>34</sup> Uri Milstein, "התמשך הכשל" [The Continuous Failure Syndrome], *הארץ*, April 3, 2012, sec. דעות, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/2012-04-03/ty-article-opinion/0000017f-ef34-d4cd-af7f-ef7c79660000>.

contained by liberals and identity politicians. Anti-Zionist Arab, Jewish, and student organizations have been able to channel popular rage towards marches and rallies, and are now gearing up to continue this de-facto counterinsurgency operation by platforming electoral campaigns. As soon as someone proposes more decisive action, they defang it by claiming that the action would pose a risk to people of a marginalized identity. Of course, as Idris Robinson says, their ability to hold civil protest is “predicated on genocide in Palestine.” Meanwhile, the insurrectionary tendencies that would be able to call out and circumvent the counterinsurgent modality of the liberal and identity organizations has not yet intervened meaningfully for Palestine. These tendencies participated in the 2020 George Floyd Uprising and have apparently reappeared as a completely decentralized network powering the Stop Cop City movement. They successfully temporarily dismantled the Cop City construction site on March 5, 2023 and pressured multiple construction companies to drop their contracts with the project, including one company that held on tenaciously before finally dropping out after dozens of clandestine sabotage attacks all over the country. A similar campaign could conceivably isolate, drive out, or compel local arms manufacturers to stop supplying Israel. It remains to be seen whether these tendencies will be willing or able to connect themselves materially to the popular forces that have still not been fully co-opted by what Robinson calls “the progressive wing of the counterinsurgency.”

In February, anarchist Aaron Bushnell committed the extraordinary act of killing a US Air Force soldier by orchestrating his live-streamed self-immolation—an act of solidarity felt deeply by various Palestinian resistance groups. While his death is tragic and horrifying, it charged what he had to say with meaning. This seemed to have helped in giving protest in the US another boost, challenging people here and everywhere to have a fraction of his courage and do everything in their power to stop the genocide. His sacrifice calls on us all to step up.

I find some hope in the increasing popularity of the writings of Basil Al-Araj in Palestinian resistance discourse. Himself a martyred resistance fighter killed by Israeli soldiers in a shootout in 2017, Basil was heavily influenced by Fanon and adopted his radically inclusive, anti-identity politics outlook. In his “Eight Rules and Insights on the Nature of War” Basil said, “Every Palestinian (in the broad sense, meaning anyone who sees Palestine as a part of their struggle, regardless of their secondary identities), every Palestinian is on the front lines of the battle for Palestine, so be careful not to fail in your duty.”<sup>35</sup> In a lesser known piece that has yet to fully appear in English, he wrote:

I no longer see this as a conflict between Arabs and Jews, between Israeli and Palestinian. I have abandoned this duality, this naïve oversimplification of the conflict. I have become convinced of Ali Shariati and Frantz Fanon’s divisions of the world [into a colonial camp and a liberation camp]. In each of the two camps, you will find people of all religions, languages, races, ethnicities, colors, and classes. In this conflict, for example, you will find people of our own skin standing rudely in the other camp, and at the same time you will find Jews standing in our camp.<sup>36</sup>

He goes on to criticize Israeli journalist Amira Hass’s editorials as insidious examples of “the progressive wing of the counterinsurgency,” counterposing Israelis such as Yoav Bar and

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<sup>35</sup> Basil Al-A’raj, “Eight Rules and Insights on the Nature of War,” Resistance News Network, 2017–2023, <https://t.me/PalestineResist/25227>.

<sup>36</sup> Basil Al-A’raj, *Wajadtu Ajwibatī: Hākadhā Takallama al-Shahīd Bāsil al-A’raj*, al-Ṭab’ah al-ūlā (Bayrūt: Bisān lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī, 2018), 146. My translation.



Jonathan Pollak as examples of Jews who, as Fanon would say, “change sides, go ‘native,’ and volunteer to undergo suffering, torture, and death” as members of the camp of liberation.<sup>37</sup> If, as per Basil and Fanon, the broad resistance would be able to distinguish friends and enemies based on “the choices they make,”<sup>38</sup> on their actions and commitments, rather than their identity and “race,” then counterinsurgent psychological operations that pit people against each other and diffuse collective action might be halted at the point of implementation, enabling a more formidable movement trajectory in the heart of Empire.

*This essay, based on a transcript of an interview with Silver Lining on WCBN 88.3 FM Ann Arbor on Oct 27, 2023, has been substantially expanded and updated.*

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<sup>37</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 94.

<sup>38</sup> James Yaki Sayles, *Meditations on Frantz Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth: New Afrikan Revolutionary Writings* (Chicago, Ill.: Spear and Shield, 2010), 181.

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