On Hamas’s October Counter-Offensive

Gilbert Achcar

The counter-offensive launched by Hamas against Israel on 7 October 2023, a day after the 50th anniversary of another Arab surprise attack on Israel—the October 1973 War, is a much more spectacular feat than the latter. Whereas fifty years ago, the two Arab states of Egypt and Syria launched a conventional war to attempt to recover the territories that Israel had seized from them six years earlier in the June 1967 War, the new counter-offensive launched by Hamas evokes the boldness of the biblical David in his fight against the giant Goliath. Combining rudimentary air, sea, and land means—the equivalent of David’s sling—Hamas’s fighters executed an amazing and highly daring offensive all along the border zone between the Gaza strip and the Israeli state.

In the same way as Israel’s arrogant self-confidence in the face of its Arab neighbours was shattered in 1973, the security and impunity that it has been taking for granted in dealing with the Palestinian people and combatting Palestinian guerrillas have been severely and irreversibly impaired. From that angle, Hamas’s October counter-offensive is to the Israeli population and state a powerful reminder of their vulnerability and of the fact that there can be no security without peace and no peace without justice.

Whatever one may think of Hamas’s decision to launch such a massive operation against the Israeli state, thus inevitably unleashing the Israeli government’s massive murderous retaliation and inciting it to attempt to wipe off Hamas and its allies from the Gaza Strip at a huge cost for civilians, the fact remains that this counter-offensive has already and undoubtedly dealt a heavy blow to the unbearable haughtiness

of the Israeli racist far-right government and their belief that Israel could ever reach a “normal” state of coexistence with its regional environment while persecuting the Palestinian people and inflicting upon them a protracted Nakba of territorial dispossession, ethnic cleansing and apartheid.

No less unbearable is the precipitation with which Western governments (and a Ukrainian government that ought to know better about the legitimate fight against foreign occupation) have expressed their solidarity with Israel, very much in contrast with their muted reactions to Israel’s brutal onslaughts on the Palestinian population. The Israeli flag was projected on Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate on the evening of 7 October in a contemptible display of fawning over the state of Israel, the usual hallmark of German misoriented redemption-seeking for Nazi crimes against European Jews by endorsing Israel’s crimes against the Palestinians. This becomes even worse at a time when Israel’s government is composed of the whole gamut of Jewish far-right forces, including people whom a prominent Israeli Holocaust historian did not hesitate to aptly describe in Haaretz as neo-Nazis!

No less contemptible are the attempts at “analysing” Hamas’s offensive as an Iranian plot to derail the ongoing US-fostered rapprochement between the Saudi kingdom and the Israeli state. Even if it were true that Tehran wishes to derail that rapprochement instead of using it to enhance its own claim of monopoly over anti-Zionism, a very disputable hypothesis indeed, this denial of Palestinian agency by way of conspiracy theory is the exact equivalent of every oppressive government’s reaction to popular revolt. It postulates that there are no sufficient grounds for the oppressed people to revolt against their oppression and that any such move is necessarily inspired by the invisible hand of some foreign government.

Anyone familiar with what the Palestinian people has been enduring for decades, and aware of the kind of open air prison

that the Gaza Strip has become, ever since it was occupied in 1967 and then evacuated by Israeli troops in 2005—an open air prison that is periodically the target of a murderous Israeli "turkey shoot"—can easily understand that the only reason why such quasi-desperate act of bravery as Hamas's latest operation does not actually happen more frequently is the huge military disproportion between the Palestinian David and the Israeli Goliath. Gaza's latest counter-offensive brings indeed to mind the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

There can be no doubt that this new chapter will end with a terrible cost for the Palestinians in general, the Gazans in particular, and Hamas specifically—much higher than the cost endured by the Israelis, as has unfailingly been the case in every round of fighting between Israel and the Palestinians. And whereas it is not difficult to understand the "enough-is-enough" logic behind Hamas's counter-offensive, it is much more doubtful that it will help advance the Palestinian cause beyond the blow to Israel's self-confidence mentioned above. This would have been achieved at a hugely disproportionate cost for the Palestinians.

The very idea that such an operation, however spectacular it was, could achieve "victory" can only stem from the religious type of magical thinking that is characteristic of a fundamentalist movement like Hamas. The distribution by its information service of a video showing the movement's leadership praying to thank God on the morning of 7 October is a good illustration of this thinking. Unfortunately, no magic can alter the fact of Israel's massive military superiority: the result of Israel's new ongoing war against Gaza is certainly going to be devastating.

The 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington dealt the United States' arrogance a spectacular blow. Eventually, they tremendously enhanced George W. Bush's popularity and enabled him to launch 18 months later the occupation of Iraq that he ambitioned. Likewise, Hamas's October counter-offensive has

already succeeded in reunifying a previously deeply divided Israeli society and polity, and it will allow Benjamin Netanyahu to implement his wildest plans to inflict massive terror on the Palestinians to precipitate their forced displacement.

On the other hand, if Hamas's leadership had been betting on Lebanon's Hezbollah—and Iran behind it—to join the war at a level that would really put Israel in jeopardy, this bet would be very risky indeed. For not only it is far from certain that Hezbollah would take the high risk of massively entering a new war with Israel, but such a situation, if it were to happen, would inevitably bring Israel to resort unrestrainedly to its massive destructive power (which includes nuclear weapons), thus bringing about a catastrophe of historic magnitude.

Against an oppressor that is far superior in military means, the only truly efficient way of struggle for the Palestinian people is by choosing the terrain on which they can circumvent that superiority. The peak in Palestinian's struggle effectiveness was reached in the year 1988 during the First Intifada, in which the Palestinians deliberately avoided the use of violent means. This led to a deep moral crisis in Israel's society and polity, including its armed forces, and was a key factor in leading the Israeli Rabin-Peres leadership to negotiate the 1993 Oslo Accords with Yasir Arafat—however flawed these accords were, due to the Palestinian leader's indulging in wishful thinking.

The Palestinian struggle must rely primarily on mass political action against Israel's oppression, occupation, and settler-colonial expansion. The new underground armed resistance organised by young Palestinians in Jenin or Nablus can be an efficient adjuvant to the people's mass movement, provided it is predicated on the latter's priority and conceived in such a way as to incentivise it. The regional support that the Palestinian people should rely upon is not that of tyrannical governments like that of Iran, but that of the peoples

fighting against these oppressive regimes. Herein lies the true potential prospect for Palestinian liberation, which needs to be combined with the emancipation of Israeli society itself from the logic of Zionism that has inexorably produced its polity's ever-expanding drift to the far right.

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About Gilbert Achcar

Gilbert Achcar grew up in Lebanon. He is currently Professor of Development Studies and International Relations at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. His most recent books are T*he New Cold War: The US, Russia and China – From Kosovo to Ukraine (2023), Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising* (2016) and *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (2013). Other books include *The Clash of Barbarisms* (2nd expanded edition 2006); dialogues with Noam Chomsky on the Middle East in *Perilous Power: The Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy* (2nd edition 2008); and *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives* (2010). He is a member of Anti*Capitalist Resistance in England & Wales.