

There Is a Jewish Hope for Palestinian Liberation. It Must Survive.

Oct. 14, 2023

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In 1988, bombs exploded at restaurants, sporting events and arcades in South Africa. In response, the African National Congress, then in its 77th year of a struggle to overthrow white domination, did something remarkable: It accepted responsibility and [pledged](#) to prevent its fighters from conducting such operations in the future. Its logic was straightforward: Targeting civilians is wrong. “Our morality as revolutionaries,” the A.N.C. declared, “dictates that we respect the values underpinning the humane conduct of war.”

Historically, geographically and morally, the A.N.C. of 1988 is a universe away from the Hamas of 2023, so remote that its behavior may seem irrelevant to the horror that Hamas unleashed last weekend in southern Israel. But South Africa offers a counter-history, a glimpse into how ethical resistance works and how it can succeed. It offers not an instruction manual, but a place — in this season of agony and rage — to look for hope.

There was nothing inevitable about the A.N.C.’s policy, which, as Jeff Goodwin, a New York University sociologist, has [documented](#), helped ensure that there was “so little terrorism in the anti-apartheid struggle.” So why didn’t the A.N.C. carry out the kind of gruesome massacres for which Hamas has become notorious? There’s no simple answer. But two factors are clear. First, the A.N.C.’s strategy for fighting apartheid was intimately linked to its vision of what should follow apartheid. It refused to terrify and traumatize white South Africans because it wasn’t trying to force them out. It was trying to win them over to a vision of a multiracial democracy.

Second, the A.N.C. found it easier to maintain moral discipline — which required it to focus on popular, nonviolent resistance and use force only against military installations and industrial sites — because its strategy was showing signs of success. By 1988, when the A.N.C. expressed regret for killing civilians, [more than 150 American universities](#) had at least partially divested from companies doing business in South Africa, and the United States Congress had [imposed sanctions](#) on the apartheid regime. The result was a virtuous cycle: Ethical resistance elicited international support, and international support made ethical resistance easier to sustain.

In Israel today, the dynamic is almost exactly the opposite. Hamas, whose authoritarian, theocratic ideology could not be farther from the A.N.C.’s, has committed an unspeakable horror that may damage the Palestinian cause for decades to come. Yet when Palestinians resist their oppression in ethical ways — by calling for boycotts, sanctions and the application of international law — the United States and its allies work to ensure that those efforts fail, which convinces many Palestinians that ethical resistance doesn’t work, which empowers Hamas.

The savagery Hamas committed on Oct. 7 has made reversing this monstrous cycle much harder. It could take a generation. It will require a shared commitment to ending Palestinian oppression in

ways that respect the infinite value of every human life. It will require Palestinians to forcefully oppose attacks on Jewish civilians, and Jews to support Palestinians when they resist oppression in humane ways — even though Palestinians and Jews who take such steps will risk making themselves pariahs among their own people. It will require new forms of political community, in Israel-Palestine and around the world, built around a democratic vision powerful enough to transcend tribal divides. The effort may fail. It has failed before. The alternative is to descend, flags waving, into hell.

As Jewish Israelis bury their dead and recite psalms for their captured, few want to hear at this moment that millions of Palestinians lack basic human rights. Neither do many Jews abroad. I understand; this attack has awakened the deepest traumas of our badly scarred people. But the truth remains: The denial of Palestinian freedom sits at the heart of this conflict, which began long before Hamas's creation in the late 1980s.

Most of Gaza's residents aren't from Gaza. They're the [descendants of refugees](#) who were expelled, or fled in fear, during Israel's war of independence in 1948. They live in what Human Rights Watch has [called](#) an "open-air prison," penned in by an Israeli state that — with help from Egypt — rations everything that goes in and out, from [tomatoes](#) to the travel [documents children need to get lifesaving medical care](#). From this overcrowded cage, which the United Nations in 2017 [declared](#) "unlivable" for many residents in part because it lacks electricity and clean water, many Palestinians in Gaza can see the land that their parents and grandparents called home, though most may never set foot in it.

Palestinians in the West Bank are only slightly better off. For more than half a century, they have lived without due process, free movement, citizenship or the ability to vote for the government that controls their lives. Defenseless against an Israeli government that includes ministers [openly committed](#) to ethnic cleansing, many are being [driven from](#) their homes in what Palestinians compare to the mass expulsions of 1948. Americans and Israeli Jews have the luxury of ignoring these harsh realities. Palestinians do not. Indeed, the commander of Hamas's military wing [cited](#) attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank in justifying its barbarism last weekend.

Just as Black South Africans resisted apartheid, Palestinians resist a system that has earned the same designation from the world's [leading human rights organizations](#) and [Israel's own](#). After last weekend, some critics may claim Palestinians are incapable of resisting in ethical ways. But that's not true. In 1936, during the British mandate, Palestinians began what some consider the longest anticolonial general strike in history. In 1976, on what became known as Land Day, thousands of Palestinian citizens [demonstrated](#) against the Israeli government's seizure of Palestinian property in Israel's north. The first intifada against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which lasted from roughly 1987 to 1993, [consisted primarily](#) of nonviolent boycotts of Israeli goods and a refusal to pay Israeli taxes. While some Palestinians threw stones and Molotov cocktails, armed attacks were rare, even in the face of an Israeli crackdown that [took more than 1,000 Palestinian lives](#). In 2005, 173 Palestinian civil society organizations [asked](#) "people of conscience all over the world to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel similar to those applied to South Africa in the apartheid era."

But in the United States, Palestinians received little credit for trying to follow Black South Africans' largely nonviolent path. Instead, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement's call for full equality, including the right of Palestinian refugees to return home, was widely deemed antisemitic because it conflicts with the idea of a state that favors Jews.

It is true that these nonviolent efforts sit uncomfortably alongside an ugly history of civilian massacres: the murder of 67 Jews in Hebron in 1929 by local Palestinians after Haj Amin al-

Husseini, the grand mufti of Jerusalem, claimed Jews were about to seize Al Aqsa Mosque; the airplane hijackings of the late 1960s and 1970s carried out primarily by the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Yasir Arafat's nationalist Fatah faction; the 1972 assassination of Israeli athletes in Munich carried out by the Palestinian organization Black September; and the suicide bombings of the 1990s and 2000s conducted by Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Fatah's Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, whose victims included a friend of mine in rabbinical school who I dreamed might one day officiate my wedding.

And yet it is essential to remember that some Palestinians courageously condemned this inhuman violence. In 1979, Edward Said, the famed literary critic, [declared himself](#) "horrified at the hijacking of planes, the suicidal missions, the assassinations, the bombing of schools and hotels." Rashid Khalidi, a Palestinian American historian, [called](#) the suicide bombings of the second intifada "a war crime." After Hamas's attack last weekend, a member of the Israeli parliament, Ayman Odeh, among the most prominent leaders of Israel's Palestinian citizens, [declared](#), "It is absolutely forbidden to accept any attacks on the innocent."

Tragically, this vision of ethical resistance is being repudiated by some pro-Palestinian activists in the United States. In a statement last week, National Students for Justice in Palestine, which is affiliated with more than 250 Palestinian solidarity groups in North America, called Hamas's attack "a historic win for the Palestinian resistance" that proves that "total return and liberation to Palestine is near" and added, "from Rhodesia to South Africa to Algeria, no settler colony can hold out forever." One of its posters featured a paraglider that some Hamas fighters used to enter Israel.

The reference to Algeria reveals the delusion underlying this celebration of abduction and murder. After eight years of hideous war, Algeria's settlers returned to France. But there will be no Algerian solution in Israel-Palestine. Israel is too militarily powerful to be conquered. More fundamentally, Israeli Jews have no home country to which to return. They are already home.

Mr. Said understood this. "The Israeli Jew is there in the Middle East," he [advised](#) Palestinians in 1974, "and we cannot, I might even say that we must not, pretend that he will not be there tomorrow, after the struggle is over." The Jewish "attachment to the land," he added, "is something we must face." Because Mr. Said saw Israeli Jews as something other than mere colonizers, he understood the futility — as well as the immorality — of trying to terrorize them into flight.

The failure of Hamas and its American defenders to recognize that will make it much harder for Jews and Palestinians to resist together in ethical ways. Before last Saturday, it was possible, with some imagination, to envision a joint Palestinian-Jewish struggle for the mutual liberation of both peoples. There were glimmers in the protest movement against Benjamin Netanyahu's judicial overhaul, through which more and more Israeli Jews grasped a connection between the denial of rights to Palestinians and the assault on their own. And there were signs in the United States, where almost 40 percent of American Jews under the age of 40 [told](#) the Jewish Electoral Institute in 2021 that they considered Israel an apartheid state. More Jews in the United States, and even Israel, were beginning to see Palestinian liberation as a form of Jewish liberation as well.

That potential alliance has now been gravely damaged. There are many Jews willing to join Palestinians in a movement to end apartheid, even if doing so alienates us from our communities, and in some cases, our families. But we will not lock arms with people who cheer the kidnapping or murder of a Jewish child.

The struggle to persuade Palestinian activists to repudiate Hamas's crimes, affirm a vision of mutual coexistence and continue the spirit of Mr. Said and the A.N.C. will be waged inside the Palestinian camp. The role of non-Palestinians is different: to help create the conditions that allow ethical resistance to succeed.

Palestinians are not fundamentally different from other people facing oppression: When moral resistance doesn't work, they try something else. In 1972, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, which was modeled on the civil rights movement in the United States, organized a march to oppose imprisonment without trial. Although some organizations, most notably the Provisional Irish Republican Army, had already embraced armed resistance, they grew stronger after British soldiers shot 26 unarmed civilians in what became known as Bloody Sunday. By the early 1980s, the Irish Republican Army had even [detonated a bomb](#) outside Harrods, the department store in London. As Kirssa Cline Ryckman, a political scientist, observed in a 2019 paper on why certain movements turn violent, a lack of progress in peaceful protest "can encourage the use of violence by convincing demonstrators that nonviolence will fail to achieve meaningful concessions."

Israel, with America's help, has done exactly that. It has repeatedly undermined Palestinians who sought to end Israel's occupation through negotiations or nonviolent pressure. As part of the 1993 Oslo Accords, the Palestine Liberation Organization renounced violence and began working with Israel — albeit imperfectly — to prevent attacks on Israelis, something that revolutionary groups like the A.N.C. and the Irish Republican Army never did while their people remained under oppression. At first, as Khalil Shikaki, a Palestinian political scientist, has [detailed](#), Palestinians supported cooperation with Israel because they thought it would deliver them a state. In early 1996, Palestinian support for the Oslo process reached 80 percent while support for violence against Israelis dropped to 20 percent.

The 1996 election of Benjamin Netanyahu, and the failure of Israel and its American patron to stop settlement growth, however, curdled Palestinian sentiment. Many Jewish Israelis believe that Ehud Barak, who succeeded Mr. Netanyahu, offered Palestinians a generous deal in 2000. Most Palestinians, however, [saw](#) Mr. Barak's offer as falling far short of a fully sovereign state along the 1967 lines. And their disillusionment with a peace process that allowed Israel to entrench its hold over the territory on which they hoped to build their new country ushered in the violence of the second intifada. In Mr. Shikaki's [words](#), "The loss of confidence in the ability of the peace process to deliver a permanent agreement on acceptable terms had a dramatic impact on the level of Palestinian support for violence against Israelis." As Palestinians abandoned hope, Hamas gained power.

After the brutal years of the second intifada, in which Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups repeatedly targeted Israeli civilians, President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority and Salam Fayyad, his prime minister from 2007 to 2013, worked to restore security cooperation and prevent anti-Israeli violence once again. Yet again, the strategy failed. The same Israeli leaders who [applauded](#) Mr. Fayyad undermined him in back rooms by funding the settlement growth that convinced Palestinians that security cooperation was bringing them only deepening occupation. Mr. Fayyad, in an interview with The Times's Roger Cohen before he left office in 2013, [admitted](#) that because the "occupation regime is more entrenched," Palestinians "question whether the P.A. can deliver. Meanwhile, Hamas gains recognition and is strengthened."

As Palestinians lost faith that cooperation with Israel could end the occupation, many appealed to the world to hold Israel accountable for its violation of their rights. In response, both Democratic and Republican presidents have worked diligently to ensure that these nonviolent efforts fail. Since 1997, the United States has [vetoed](#) more than a dozen United Nations Security Council resolutions criticizing Israel for its actions in the West Bank and Gaza. This February, even as

Israel's far-right government was beginning a huge [settlement expansion](#), the Biden administration reportedly [wielded a veto threat](#) to drastically dilute a Security Council resolution that would have condemned settlement growth.

Washington's response to the International Criminal Court's efforts to investigate potential Israeli war crimes is equally hostile. Despite lifting [sanctions](#) that the Trump administration imposed on I.C.C. officials investigating the United States's conduct in Afghanistan, the Biden team [remains adamantly opposed](#) to any I.C.C. investigation into Israel's actions.

The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, or B.D.S., which was founded in 2005 as a nonviolent alternative to the murderous second intifada and which [speaks](#) in the language of human rights and international law, has been similarly stymied, including by many of the same American politicians who celebrated the movement to boycott, divest from and sanction South Africa. Joe Biden, who is [proud](#) of his role in passing sanctions against South Africa, has [condemned](#) the B.D.S. movement, saying it "too often veers into antisemitism." About 35 states — some of which once divested state funds from companies doing business in apartheid South Africa — have passed laws or issued executive orders punishing companies that boycott Israel. In [many cases](#), those punishments apply even to businesses that boycott only Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Image

Palestinians have noticed. In the [words](#) of Dana El Kurd, a Palestinian American political scientist, "Palestinians have lost faith in the efficacy of nonviolent protest as well as the possible role of the international community." Mohammed Deif, the commander of Hamas's military wing, [cited](#) this disillusionment during last Saturday's attack. "In light of the orgy of occupation and its denial of international laws and resolutions, and in light of American and Western support and international silence," he declared, "we've decided to put an end to all this."

Hamas — and no one else — bears the blame for its sadistic violence. But it can carry out such violence more easily, and with less backlash from ordinary Palestinians, because even many Palestinians who loathe the organization have lost hope that moral strategies can succeed. By treating Israel radically differently from how the United States treated South Africa in the 1980s, American politicians have made it harder for Palestinians to follow the A.N.C.'s ethical path. The Americans who claim to hate Hamas the most have empowered it again and again.

Israelis have just witnessed the greatest one-day loss of Jewish life since the Holocaust. For Palestinians, especially in Gaza, where Israel has now ordered more than one million people in the north to leave their homes, the days to come are likely to bring dislocation and death on a scale that should haunt the conscience of the world. Never in my lifetime have the prospects for justice and peace looked more remote. Yet the work of moral rebuilding must begin. In Israel-Palestine and around the world, pockets of Palestinians and Jews, aided by people of conscience of all backgrounds, must slowly construct networks of trust based on the simple principle that the lives of both Palestinians and Jews are precious and inextricably intertwined.

Israel desperately needs a genuinely Jewish and Palestinian political party, not because it can win power but because it can model a politics based on common liberal democratic values, not tribe. American Jews who rightly hate Hamas but know, in their bones, that Israel's treatment of Palestinians is profoundly wrong must ask themselves a painful question: What nonviolent forms of Palestinian resistance to oppression will I support? More Palestinians and their supporters must express revulsion at the murder of innocent Israeli Jews and affirm that Palestinian liberation means living equally alongside them in safety and freedom.

From those reckonings, small, beloved communities can be born, and grow. And perhaps one day, when it finally becomes hideously clear that Hamas cannot free Palestinians by murdering children and Israel cannot subdue Gaza, even by razing it to the ground, those communities may become the germ of a mass movement for freedom that astonishes the world, as Black and white South Africans did decades ago. I'm confident I won't live to see it. No gambler would stake a bet on it happening at all. But what's the alternative, for those of us whose lives and histories are bound up with that small, ghastly, sacred place?

Like many others who care about the lives of both Palestinians and Jews, I have felt in recent days the greatest despair I have ever known. On Wednesday, a Palestinian friend sent me a note of consolation. She ended it with the words "only together." Maybe that can be our motto.

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A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 15, 2023, Section SR, Page 4 of the New York edition with the headline: The Work of Moral Rebuilding Must Begin Now.