

Israel-Palestine: What Could Be a Nonviolent Path Forward for Ending Oppression?

What if a “peace process” wasn’t another futile attempt at finding compromise between two corrupt political systems but rather a bottom-up process working with the needs of everyone involved?

Martin Winiecki, January 30 2024



Witnessing the unprecedented carnage in Israel-Palestine unfold over the last months has been crazy-making. As someone who's worked for peace for many years, including with Israeli and Palestinian peace activists, it's been overwhelming to face the extent of pain and suffering, the seemingly limitless cruelty both against Israelis on Oct 7 and against the entire population of Gaza since then, the explosion of dehumanizing genocidal language — and worst of all, to feel that there's little one can do to change the situation.

As a German who grew up with the collective post-WW2 identity of “never again” towards fascism and antisemitism, it's been harrowing to watch the mass slaughter of Jews on Oct 7 and hear the details of a horror which most people thought could no longer happen to Jews. Ironically, Hamas also killed quite a few among the small minority of Israelis working for a just peace and an end to occupation. It's ironic as well that the Israeli government has since used their deaths to justify an atrocious campaign of collective punishment that many of the victims would have done everything to stop.

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After weeks of unreserved brutality, the hope that was radiated by the images of families embracing their liberated relatives seemed almost surreal — and made the return to bombing combined with the Israeli vow to “absolute victory” even more unbearable.

The Palestinian journalist and human rights activist Yara Eid, originally from Gaza, [wrote](#) on Dec 1:

I keep writing and deleting cause I can't find the words to describe the level of loss we Gazans are feeling right now. Can you imagine your whole world being wiped out? Everything. The level of destruction we're seeing is beyond any words. Our homes, our landmarks, our schools, our universities, our restaurants, literally everything. Israel's intent was to always remove Gaza from the map. They destroyed our city intentionally. They bombed our ancient landmarks to remove any proof of Palestinian history... I just can't explain what I feel when I'm seeing all of my favourite places flattened. My whole city flattened. Everything I grew up with flattened.

As of now, more than three months into the war, the IDF has killed 20 Palestinians for each person murdered by Hamas on Oct 7. Those include more than 10,000 children. More than two 85% of the population is displaced, half of the buildings are destroyed, with hundreds of thousands acutely threatened by famine and literally no safe place to hide. A few days ago, the UN undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs said, “Gaza has simply become uninhabitable.”

Whether or not you agree with Eid about the Israeli government's intention, it's clear that militarily destroying Hamas would [practically result in the same](#): killing tens of thousands of more civilians, leveling and dismantling this entire society of 2.3 million people. Which is why, for many Palestinians, "eliminating Hamas" is simply code for "wiping Gaza off the map." When we see the atrocities that are taking place everyday, there can only be one humane response: "Stop! An immediate and permanent ceasefire as soon as possible." This stance is, as [Greta Thunberg](#) said, a "question of basic humanity."

What's happening in Gaza isn't just the matter of Palestinians and Israelis. The idea and practice of solidarity rests on the recognition that we're bound up in each other's liberation. None of us are free until all of us are free. Whatever the outcome of this escalation, it will affect all of us in one way or the other. Every day that the assault on Gaza continues is a further debasement and loss of our shared humanity. If we fail to stand up for Palestinians, we shouldn't be surprised if we'll be haunted by fascism and war ourselves. This has become even more urgent by the ever growing danger of growing regional escalation.

But this stance isn't, as the warmongers want us to believe, anti-Israeli. If we have learned anything from the horrendous "war on terror," we know that the Israeli strategy is very likely to [backfire](#) and create less security for Israelis, at least in the medium- and long-term. Because the horror which the IDF is imposing on Gaza creates the very conditions for the attacks that Israelis say they want to prevent in the future. There's no true or lasting peace and security for anyone without peace and security for all.

What could be a path forward to achieve this? The situation presents those of us committed to nonviolence with a paradox that can be hard to bear: while we shudder at the calls for and justifications of violence, it would be ironic and deeply ignorant to suggest Palestinians resist nonviolently. The last of many times that Gazans tried that, the "Great Return March" in 2018-19, Israeli snipers shot hundreds of unarmed people—including children, women, journalists, and aid workers—in cold blood. The systematic crackdown that has made nonviolent resistance unviable for Palestinians is based on broad public support in Israel, the military and political aid by Western countries and—crucially—the silence and complacency of those in the more privileged parts of the world who are horrified but fail to raise their voice.

The Palestinian nonviolent resistance leader Sami Awad admitted on a recent call with the Buddhist Peace Fellowship that he doesn't have an action plan to propose under these depressing circumstances. Yet, he was very clear about one thing that Palestinians now

needed: “A worldwide nonviolent resistance movement in every place to dismantle systems of oppression.”

A nonviolent shift on the horizon?

As unlikely as it may seem, however, the Palestinian liberation and solidarity movements might be at the cusp of a major breakthrough. The dimensions of brutality in Gaza have provoked an unprecedented worldwide awareness of and solidarity with the Palestinian cause. A fundamental narrative shift about the conflict is underway, despite enormous [censorship and criminalization](#) of Palestinian and pro-Palestinian voices. South Africa’s filing to the International Court of Justice marks an unprecedented milestone. Notably, a growing number of (mainly young) American Jews are turning their backs on Zionism as they begin to stand up for Palestinians. The pro-Palestinian movement is gaining so much momentum that it’s causing serious concerns for Biden’s reelection campaign.

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As we’ve seen in India and many other places, decolonization movements can actually bring empires to their knees. A key, I believe, lies in what Gandhi referred to as “moral authority,” an incorruptible humane ethics that will unmask the brutality of the oppressor and ultimately make its violence unsustainable. This is the power we need to be tapping into now. Yet, given that Palestinians have almost no pathway to act nonviolently under the current circumstance, it's up to all those who care for justice and collective liberation to stand up.

How might this work? A few possible starting points:

1. Continue the worldwide mobilizations. We must continue to put Palestine on the agenda, even as the war begins to disappear from frontpages, and continue to put pressure especially on President Biden, Chancellor Scholz, Prime Minister Sunak and all other allies of Israel to demand a permanent ceasefire, an end to the occupation and accountability for all perpetrators. Biden, Scholz, Sunak and others must be called out for their complicity in genocide. The more public opinion shifts in the favor of Palestinians, the more the movement can escalate pressure through nonviolent civil disobedience, including [boycott, divestment and sanctions](#). If the movement keeps growing in the United States, a point might soon be reached at which Democrats can no longer electorally afford their unconditional support for Israeli war crimes, apartheid and occupation. (The same might happen for the Labour Party in the UK or SPD and Greens in Germany.)

2. Build a broad international alliance. We need to strengthen and build ties of solidarity and cooperation between the international solidarity movements with Palestinian nonviolent activists on the ground *and crucially also* Israelis who stand up for peace and an end to the occupation. Such relationships and efforts already exist (such as “[Standing Together](#)” and “[Combatants for Peace](#)”) – the international solidarity movements must support these groups, follow their leadership and amplify their messages.

3. Commit to the liberation of all and act with love. Instead of featuring narratives that justify violence, let us spread frames, stories, and visions invoking nonviolent alternatives. On one logical plane, we can always find reasons that justify violence, especially now, but wisdom knows the consequences of such logic. Instead let us ask: How can nonviolence become effective now and show a path forward?

We need to clearly reject hatred against anyone, highlight the humanity of all people involved, even the perpetrators; and acknowledge the needs of all involved.

Part of this is a clear, unequivocal stance against hate speech and violence against anyone, regardless of their religion or nationality. As much as we must rise against the criminalization of pro-Palestinian voices and the rise of Islamophobia, the pro-Palestinian movement must also clearly and loudly reject the (actually happening sad explosion of) anti-Jewish hate speech and hate crimes. Otherwise, the pro-Palestinian solidarity will just deepen the psychological dynamics that prompts Jewish Israelis and Jews in other places to support or justify the brutal oppression of Palestinians.

We must succeed in communicating to Jews everywhere that to be pro-Palestine isn't to be anti-Jewish but to oppose apartheid, occupation, and oppression. We must also express that to be pro-Palestine is a stance for life. Only then can we credibly unmask the false antisemitism accusations used to silence the criticism of Israel.

Understanding violence isn't the same as condoning it; to the contrary, it's a condition for overcoming it.

The distinction between the structural and the personal is crucial here. As Sami Awad says, “I chose. I chose to stand against your hate and not hate you, to resist your persecution and not demean you, to overcome your oppression and not suppress you, to respond to your violence with nonviolence. I chose to speak loud and clear for freedom and life and not insult you. I chose love to be my motivation.”

4. Make our politics trauma-informed. In the power-over paradigm, understanding the other means condoning or justifying their actions. That's why compassion is often deemed taboo in politics. In peace work, however, we compassionately inquire and ask “Why do

people act in these ways?” to actually begin to see possibilities for ending violence. Understanding violence isn’t the same as condoning it; to the contrary, it’s a condition for overcoming it. Without this understanding, our attempts to create peace will be based on coercion and therefore be impractical.

There’s an awakening in the Western world and beyond about how trauma functions and shapes our experience of life. In [The Body Keeps the Score](#), one of the bestsellers that’s populated this awareness, Bessel van der Kolk defines trauma “not [as] the story of something that happened back then, but the current imprint of that pain, horror, and fear living inside [the individual].” Trauma is the impact of (real or felt) existential threat that the organism couldn’t discharge and so gets stuck in our nervous systems.

The impacts of trauma can be deep and far-reaching. So long as trauma lives in you unprocessed, you will, as Van der Kolk writes, “[continue] to organize your life as if the trauma were still going on—unchanged and immutable—as every new encounter or event is contaminated by the past.” Trauma often distorts our judgment and prompts us to react disproportionately and to perpetuate harm, even if we don’t intend to. If we run into situations that remind us of the trauma, consciously or not, we usually feel existentially unsafe, at which point our thinking brain hands control over to our reptilian brain with its basic survival reflexes: fight, flight, freeze, and sometimes, exterminate. So long as your body believes it’s unsafe, it will do whatever it feels necessary to get safe.

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It’s understandable then why those who’ve experienced brutality and oppression often end up brutalizing and oppressing others.

But so far, the growing trauma awareness movement has mostly been confined to the psychological and interpersonal spheres and remained apolitical (with a few exceptions, like the outstanding work of [Resmaa Menakem](#)). To me, it seems that an often missing link lies in how social, political, and economic systems channel the energy of trauma into oppressing entire groups of people and how they perpetuate trauma at a massive scale through systemic violence. For example, they implant beliefs into people's minds that make the oppression of or violence against other groups seem rational — by portraying the oppression of “them” as a condition of safety for “us.”

As Menakem [writes](#), “Trauma decontextualized in a person looks like personality. Trauma decontextualized in a family looks like family traits. Trauma decontextualized in people looks like culture.”

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Hamas' atrocities on Oct 7 were Israelis' worst nightmare come true and re-activated a centuries-old collective trauma that screams, "We aren't safe anywhere in the world. At the end of the day, we're on our own and unless we exterminate our enemy, they'll exterminate us." Netanyahu and his far-right allies have channeled this existential angst to achieve their core mission: creating a contiguous Israel "between the river and the sea" (as it reads in Likud's manifesto) by irreversibly sabotaging a two-state solution and accelerating the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. This is nothing new; for decades, Jewish trauma has been channeled into the oppression and occupation of Palestinians.

This isn't to say that Jewish Israelis are the only ones who turn trauma into violence. Undoubtedly, Islamist ideologies funnel Palestinian trauma into Jihadist mentalities of revenge. Hamas' political ideology is based on hatred towards Jews and the desire to violently finish with the Jewish state — an inversion of what Palestinians have experienced since 1948. We can easily observe how both of these collective traumas and violent ideologies of religious nationalism keep feeding and activating each other. I have no doubt that Hamas would actually throw Jews into the sea and violently overthrow Israel if they could. But that's the point, they can't. They're facing one of the world's best-equipped and most efficient armies, backed by the most powerful nations of the planet. However atrocious a massacre, Oct 7 didn't actually pose an existential danger to the state of Israel. But Israel's reaction is doing to Gazans exactly what they fear Hamas was doing to them. Such are the workings of trauma. And an exaggerated interpretation of external threats also results in blindness toward one's own power and the impact of that power.

The lens of trauma needs to be integrated with a structural analysis of power and privilege, otherwise it runs the risk of being instrumentalized to uphold existing structures of power and privilege. Because even infinite empathy for the trauma of oppressors, as indispensable as it, will hardly stop their actions and the systems in which they function on its own. To overcome systems of oppression, we need to acknowledge and address people's experiences and patterns of trauma (both individual and collective), absolutely, but we also need to call out inequities, seed doubt about the beliefs that turn trauma into systemic violence and introduce concrete structural changes towards equity.

Yet being trauma-informed changes *how* we go about equity. And this makes a world of a difference.

5. Raise a field through embodied peace research. Imagine a network of experimental research centers (e.g. "[Healing Biotopes](#)") or even just small "study action groups," as Joanna Macy calls them, researching how to make peace — not just through their words and actions but also the quality of their thoughts, interactions and presence. Such groups would be made up of people who understand that we can only create as much peace around us as we've achieved within and among us. The love-based and trauma-informed activism I'm proposing here requires a deep commitment to self-knowledge and transformative spiritual practice — which isn't easy, to say the least, in a surrounding of such intense escalation and hatred. We need communities of practice to cultivate compassion, mutual support, embodied trauma awareness and lived nonviolence, and at the same time, build social, economic, political and ecological structures for a post-domination society. If such groups existed, they could function as catalysts to shift existing fields of violence into a different direction. The actual embodiment of love and compassion is crucial to open up possibilities of different paths forward.

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A key for such a movement, I believe, lies on the spiritual plane. At Standing Rock in 2016, we saw the unifying power of a nonviolent movement that gathers around a shared spiritual center. No matter how much this word has been abused, the experience of the sacred—or whatever we might call the power of Life itself—transforms people, dissolves hostility, creates perseverance, and makes things happen that otherwise seem impossible. The more groups root themselves in the sacred dimension of existence the more grows the probability for a nonviolent shift.

6. Develop a credible peace vision. There won't be a return to how things were prior to Oct 7. Such moments of crisis that break with continuities can make scenarios previously unthinkable possible, for the better or the worse. Whether Netanyahu's cruel vision of an ethnically cleansed Palestine will come true or whether it might actually result in a process of healing and peacemaking really depends on what image the collective imagination can see and embrace. We must develop a realistic event horizon for collective liberation in Israel-Palestine.

The slogans "Free Palestine," "decolonization," and "right to return" reflect a burning need for justice but they need to be filled with practical nonviolent ideas for what exactly they entail and how we could get there. While it's obvious that Israelis will have to give up privilege if the oppression and apartheid against Palestinians is to end, this vision also

needs to include their needs, if it's to be a nonviolent transformation. If Israelis can see that Palestinian dignity, safety, and autonomy will make their lives safer too, an essential mythological pillar of the apartheid regime will crumble. Yet given the dimensions of suffering and trauma, these ideas will only be convincing if they're practical and down-to-Earth, not if they stay as vague, ideological aspirations.

What if a "peace process" wasn't another futile attempt at finding compromise between two corrupt political systems but rather a bottom-up process working with the needs of everyone involved?

To be fair, such a vision will be radical. I believe that as long as our political "solutions" operate within the framework of ethnocentric nation-states that necessarily impose a brutal "either-or" logic, violent competition will continue to seem inevitable. Instead of a one-state or two-state solution, could we imagine a no-state solution? A plurinational confederation for the peoples of Israel-Palestine?

You might think this is simply too far out. But Hannah Arendt, widely considered the most important political philosopher of the 20th century, floated this idea already in the 1940s. You might be even more surprised to learn that what I'm describing is a lived reality already in one of the region's most difficult corners: in north-east Syria. In an area known as *Rojava*, making up roughly a quarter of Syria, several million people are experimenting to build a society beyond the system of nation-state, capitalism, and patriarchy and are operating on the principles of grassroots democracy, feminism, multi-ethnic peaceful coexistence, restorative justice, and regenerative agriculture. If this works in Syria, why shouldn't it also work in Israel-Palestine?

What if a "peace process" wasn't another futile attempt at finding compromise between two corrupt political systems but rather a bottom-up process working with the needs of everyone involved? Well-facilitated citizens' assemblies, like the ones that have solved complex issues in other countries, could hear people of all identity groups and integrate their needs into a proposal for the future of this land.

You might insist that it's impossible but the strategists of war and oppression wouldn't think that way; they never let a crisis go to waste. As the chief theorist of neoliberalism, Milton Friedman, famously said, "When [a] crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable." What if we applied the same thinking to collective liberation?