

MARXIST

Theoretical Quarterly of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)

XXXIX, 3–4
July–December 2023

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CONTRIBUTORS

Ian Pappé is Professor, College of Social Sciences & Director of the University's European Centre for Palestine Studies, and Co-Director, Exeter Centre for Ethno-Political Studies, UK.

John Cherian is a senior journalist who has been covering world affairs for more than four decades with a particular focus on the global south.

Sayantan Mukherjee teaches at Ashoka University.

Shata Ghosh teaches history at the University of New Mexico.

For subscription and other queries, contact

The Manager, Marxist, A.K. Gopalan Bhavan, 27-29 Bhai Veer Singh Marg, New Delhi 110001
Phone: (91-11) 2373 8725. Email: pcpbln@gmail.com

Printed by Sitaram Yechury at

Progressive Printers, A-21, Jhilmil Industrial Area, Shahdara, Delhi 110095,
and published by him on behalf of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) from
A.K. Gopalan Bhavan, 27-29 Bhai Veer Singh Marg, New Delhi 110001

JOHN CHERIAN

Gaza and the Palestine Conflict

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Israel a colonial settler outpost implanted in the heart of West Asia, has now acquired the contours of an ethno-nationalistic state. After failing to subjugate the native Palestinians completely, the state of Israel is now intent on the task of ethnic cleansing on a scale not witnessed after the second world war. The ongoing onslaught on Gaza, in which maximum military power is being used on an unarmed civilian population, is part of the process. Concurrently violent Jewish settler activity and military raids have increased in the occupied West Bank to put pressure on the local populace there. All this is being done under the benign watch of Israel's benefactor and protector ---the United States of America.

From the time of the Crusades, between 1096 and 1492 Europeans have been trying to establish a permanent presence in the West Asian region. The war on the region in the 12th century started after a speech by Pope Urban calling on Christian to take up arms against Muslims and liberate the holy land. The Crusaders, a European Christian movement had established control over historical Palestine and the surrounding region during that period. Jerusalem had fallen to the Crusaders in 1099. It was called the "Latin Empire of Jerusalem". In 1948, the state of Israel was formally established under the leadership of the Zionists, a "European Jewish movement". It was imperial Britain, aided and abetted by other colonial powers which helped lay the foundation for the state of Israel.

The colonial settler project had started in the last fading days

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of the Ottoman empire. Jewish immigration to Palestine had accelerated after the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement that divided the Arab Levant between Britain and France. Palestine became part of the British controlled area. In 1917, the British issued the Balfour Declaration. The Declaration committed the British colonial administration to establish “a national home for the Jewish people” in historic Palestine. After emerging victorious in the first world war, the British viewed the creation of a Jewish state as a strategic goal to maintain hegemony over the region that lies between Egypt and India. Egypt too was under British control in those days.

The Balfour Declaration was the first notable success for political Zionism. For the first time, an extremist ideological movement had received the backing of a leading world power. The Declaration while green lighting the creation of a Jewish state willfully ignored the rights of the sons of the soil—the native Palestinians. There were only a few thousand Jews who were resident in Palestine in 1917 as compared to the native Palestinian population of around 800,000. In 1922, Palestine was formally designated as a “British mandated territory” by the League of Nations. The British mandate administration while encouraging Jewish emigration into Palestine also allowed the Zionists to organize paramilitary groups. The newly arrived Jewish settlers were allowed to buy land, both for commercial purposes and agriculture.

At the same time, the native population was suppressed even as their land was being usurped. The Palestinian demand for self-determination was given short shrift by the colonial administration. Anger against British rule manifested itself in what was called the “The Great Arab Revolt” (1936-39). Following the revolt, the British were forced to make concessions. A “White Paper” issued by the British government in 1939 restricted the purchase of land by Jewish settlers and put more stringent curbs on Jewish immigration. More importantly, the British government promised independence for Palestinians within a ten-year time frame.

Zionist groups reacted violently to the announcement by

resorting to terrorism. Britain, preoccupied by the second world war was not able to reign in the Zionist groups which had gained strength under their patronage. Unwilling to fully crack the whip against the Zionist groups the British handed over the Palestine issue to the newly created United Nations after the end of the second world war. The holocaust against the Jews in Europe had triggered a sympathy wave for the community internationally. So, when the UN proposed a Partition Plan for Palestine, it immediately found acceptance among the international community.

The Soviet Union was the first of the big powers to recognize the newly formed state of Israel, despite the raw deal given the Palestinians. The United States was only the second country to do so. Moscow had misread the true character of the Jewish state during its formative stage. Many of its leaders, including its first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, claimed to be influenced by socialism. They had sworn by the “kibbutz” (collective settlements) usually agriculture and also industrial, in which all wealth was held in common. Many of the Israeli leaders were Russian speaking Jews who had emigrated. The USSR had hoped to wield influence in the region through Israel and all the countries at the time were under pro-western monarchies. Within a few years after its establishment, Israel showed its true colors.

The new state of Israel created by the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 181 on November 1947 was awarded 53 per cent of historical Palestine though the Jews constituted only one-third of the population. The Palestinians had immediately rejected the partition plan for their homeland, arguing that the Palestinian majority was being deprived of their territory and that the Jewish settlers now had exclusive use of land that was historically theirs. The territory allotted to the Zionist state in 1947 had a significant percentage of Palestinians residing on it. There were 498,000 Jews and 438,000 Palestinians living there at the time. This demographic fact was unacceptable to the Zionist leadership which quickly started a campaign of brutal ethnic cleansing. The

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Palestinian resistance armed with rudimentary weapons was no match for the Zionist terror groups like the Irgun.

The ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians in the years 1947-49 was clinically organized and executed. It has gone down in collective Palestinian memory as the “Naqba” (catastrophe). The Zionist terror campaign led to the violent dispersal of over 750,000 Palestinians from their homeland. After the departure of British troops on 14 May, 1948, four Arab countries declared war on Israel on behalf of the Palestinians. Their defeat on the battlefield resulted in the occupation of 77 per cent of historical Palestine by the Zionists. The Palestinians woke up to the sad reality that their homeland was under the control of settler-colonialists. Once in control of most of historical Palestine, the Zionist went about further consolidating the Jewish character of the state of Israel.

The Zionist government quickly passed laws aimed at legally dispossessing Palestinians. They included laws “to seize, retain, expropriate, reallocate and reclassify the Arab lands appropriated by the state”. The hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who were forced to flee from their lands were refused the right of return. Their lands and properties were expropriated. Within a short time, the Jewish state was in possession of more than 90 per cent of Palestinian land. The remaining Palestinians were relegated to the status of second-class citizens through policies such as administrative detentions, curfews, military trial and banning of political activity.

After the first victory over the Arabs, the Israeli army soon established itself as the most powerful in the region. Military conscription was made compulsory for all Jewish citizens from the age of 18. Men had to serve for 36 months and females for 24 months. Till the age of 40, every Israeli citizen has to remain in a reserve unit and spend one month in a year with the unit. Israel from the beginning was a highly militarized and regimented society and boasts of having the strongest army in the region. Most Israeli Prime Ministers have come from within the ranks of the army.

But Arab armies and even armed militias have shown that that the Israeli army is not an invincible force. The first serious setback the Israeli army experienced was during the 1973 “Yom Kippur” war. The Egyptian army in a surprise attack caught the Israelis by surprise in the Sinai Peninsula. A comprehensive Israeli military defeat was averted with help from the United States. However, Israel had to let the Sinai Peninsula revert back to Egyptian sovereignty after the Yom Kippur war. In 2006 after Israel launched yet another invasion of Lebanon, the Hezbollah militia confronted the Israeli forces. After more than 40 days of fighting, Israeli troops had to withdraw after suffering heavy losses of men and material.

Since then, the Hezbollah movement has become an important political and military player in the region. It has been active in the current conflict also. Hezbollah has kept large numbers of Israeli forces confined to its northern border with Lebanon, by targeting Israeli military positions. Israel’s threats to launch another full-scale invasion into Lebanon and destroy it like Gaza, have not deterred Hezbollah. Israel had invaded and occupied Lebanon twice in the 1980’s.

THE WAR ON GAZA

The Hamas movement showed its military capabilities by breaching the allegedly “impenetrable” defenses the Israelis had built around the Gaza Strip. Israeli commentators and military experts have described the October 7, 2023 attack by Hamas as the biggest military reverse suffered by Israel since the 1973 Yom Kippur war. In fact, the attack by Hamas and its military ally the Islamic Jihad, had taken place on the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur war. The Hamas attack on Israel through the land, sea and air took place as the country was celebrating sabbath and a religious holiday. The Hamas attack’s success was also facilitated by the fact the Israeli authorities had diverted many of their soldiers

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to the West Bank to assist the Jewish settlers there to ethnically cleanse the area. Israel initially claimed that the Hamas fighters had killed babies and young children in cold blood. That claim has since been rebutted. The Hamas leadership has stated that main purpose of the October 7 attack was to secure the release of over 9000 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails, many of them children and women. Even as the fighting was raging, Hamas had said that it was ready to release all the Israeli hostages it had taken if Israel freed all the Palestinian political prisoners it has in its custody.

While demonizing Hamas, Israeli propagandists continue to insist that their army is the most “moral” in the world despite all evidence in the last seventy years proving otherwise. The latest damning incident was the shooting of three Israeli citizens who were taken as hostages by Hamas. The three were shot in cold blood by Israeli soldiers though one of them was carrying a white flag and all of them were shouting in Hebrew that they were Israeli citizens. The Israeli army was quick to apologize for the killings. Palestinians say that the news of the killing only came out because Israeli citizens were involved. Palestinian civilians in Gaza are being killed with impunity. A day after the incident, Israeli snipers shot a woman and her child who had sought refuge in the only Catholic church in Gaza.

Israel from the beginning of its existence sought to ensure that it remains the sole pre-eminent power in the region. This goal has the backing of the West. When Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser started stoking Arab nationalism, Israel viewed him as a threat. The “Suez Crisis” of 1956 saw the Israeli army waging a short-lived war in alliance with the British and the French against Egypt. The French and the British, angry with the nationalization of the Suez Canal, prodded the Israeli government to join the military campaign. The campaign failed mainly due to the reluctance of Washington at the time to militarily back its allies. It was the only time that the Americans refused to help Israel. President Dwight

Eisenhower was upset that his French, British and Israeli allies had gone ahead with their military adventure without fully consulting Washington.

Zionist ideologues have never stopped talking about the need to expand the borders of the Jewish state. “Greater Israel”, with its borders ranging from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea was the goal. The 1967 war which Israel initiated with the Arab coalition led by Egypt helped realize the Zionist settler colonialist dream of capturing more Arab land. Besides capturing the West Bank, populated by Palestinians, the Israeli army overran the Sinai Peninsula belonging to Egypt. The Gaza Strip which was administered by Egypt after the British left in 1948, also fell into the hands of Israel in 1967. Another notable conquest was the capture of the Golan Heights from Syria. Israel built a few settlements in the crowded Gaza Strip also but found the radicalized area too tough to control.

In 2005, Israel withdrew from the Strip but sealed its borders converting it to “a large open-air prison”, blockaded from the ground, the air and the sea. The Zionists had hoped that Palestinians living on the captured territories will flee to neighboring countries like it happened in the late 1940’s. Most Palestinians decided to stay and live on their land despite Israel becoming the occupying power. Israel however did not give up its dream of solving the demographic challenge posed by Palestinians living in the occupied territories. The Zionists started implementing their policies aimed at economically, militarily and legally pressuring the Palestinians to either leave their homes or agreeing to become second class citizens.

Settlement activity on Palestinian land was one of the preferred ways for the Israeli government to steadily encroach on Palestinian land. By the time the Oslo accords were signed in 1993, 250,000 Jews had already settled on the West Bank. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) under the leadership of the Fatah leader, Yasser Arafat, had agreed to the deal fully aware that the

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West Bank was already pock marked with Israeli settlements. The Oslo peace accord was hailed by most members of the international community as a landmark agreement that would lead to a two-state solution. But settlement activity only accelerated after the signing of the Oslo accords.

Many influential Palestinian groups, including the left-wing Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Hamas an acronym for Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya (Islamic Resistance Movement), which was formed in 1987, rejected the Oslo accord. The PFLP, under the leadership of the radical George Habash, was the second biggest group within the umbrella Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The PFLP was critical in getting the support of the socialist bloc for the Palestinian cause. The PFLP and Hamas were among the many Palestinian political parties which had refused to recognize the state of Israel after the signing of the Oslo accords.

The PFLP however decided to change course after a few years and accept the “realities created by the Oslo accords”. It reluctantly accepted the “two state solution” envisaged in the Oslo accords with East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state. In recent years it has further modified its position by calling for a “one state” solution in which Jewish and Palestinian citizens have equal rights. The PFLP’s view is that continuing “negotiations” with Israel was only a ploy for Israel to “continue with its occupation”. A “one state” solution will never be accepted by the Zionists because in such a scenario the Jewish population will only be slightly bigger than that of the Palestinians.

Hamas, which is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) took its time to adjust to the reality of the Jewish state on Arab land. As it emerged as a political force, the Americans quickly designated the party as a “terrorist” outfit. The founder of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, a Palestinian cleric was assassinated by the Israelis in 2004. Several other top leaders of the grouping have also been eliminated by the Israelis. Hamas had contested in

the first and so far, the only free and open elections conducted in the occupied territories in 2006. The party won the majority of seats in the Palestinian parliament.

The Palestinian public had become deeply resentful of the Oslo accords and the seeming acquiescence of the Palestinian Authority (PA) to the creeping annexation of the Palestinian lands by the Zionist state. They were also upset by the growing nepotism and corruption in the Fatah dominated PA. But the Israeli government did not allow Hamas to take over the PA on the pretext that it was a “terrorist” organization. Major sections of the PLO led by the Fatah tacitly agree with the move. An attempt was made that year to dislodge the Hamas forcibly from Gaza. A brief internecine war broke out between Hamas and the Fatah fighters in Gaza. Hamas emerged victorious and Gaza has been under their control since 2006.

The American and the Israeli government had wanted the Fatah dominated PA to take over the administration of Gaza, despite the fact that the Palestinian electorate had rejected the Fatah and its allies. Israel took more punitive measures against the enclave hoping that the populace would rise up against the Hamas which has been administering the enclave. Egypt too followed suit imposing tighter restrictions on the movement of people and goods through the Rafah crossing---the only post on the border with Egypt through which Gazans could exit and enter.

The beleaguered people of Gaza did find some respite when the Muslim Brotherhood government led by Mohammed Morsi briefly held power in Egypt from 2013-14. Besides allowing a freer flow of people from Gaza to the outside world, the Egyptian government turned a blind eye to the smuggling of essentials, medicines and weapons through a network of tunnels that Hamas had built along its borders. But after the Morsi government was overthrown, the military backed government of Gen. Muhammad Fatah al Sisi, reimposed the blockade on Gaza and sealed the tunnels used by Hamas to smuggle in essentials and weapons. Hamas

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was viewed with deep suspicion by the military regime in Cairo, given its close links with the Muslim Brotherhood, the biggest and most organized political party in the Arab world.

Not satisfied with the collective punishment it had inflicted on the people of Gaza, Israel started its series of full-scale military assaults on Gaza. The first full scale attack code named “Operation Cast Lead” started on the last week of December, 2008. It lasted for 72 days. 1400 Palestinians were killed. More than 300 were children. This was followed by “Operation Protective Edge” in 2014. The people of Gaza were subjected to butchery on a bigger scale. In fifty days of sustained bombing and artillery attacks, 2,251 Gazans including 551 children lost their lives. Periodically, like clockwork, Israel subjects the people of Gaza to the most horrendous kind of warfare. 15,000 housing units in the enclave were destroyed in the 10-day war of 2019.

The Israeli security establishment has described the regular display of overwhelming military strength in Gaza as akin to “mowing the grass” in its backyard. Mowing the grass at regular intervals also helps the Israeli army test its new weaponry, especially the efficacy of its drone and missile technology, in which it has emerged as a competitor to the bigger arms exporting countries. In the latest war on Gaza, Israel is showing off its prowess in artificial intelligence (AI). Arms export deals represent a substantial portion of the country’s GDP. The international arms bazaar likes nothing better than weapons that have proved their worth in actual combat. There has been extensive use of drones to bomb civilian targets and carry out assassinations of Hamas military and political leaders.

Almost two thirds of the population in Gaza are registered as “refugees”. 600,000 still continue to live in refugee camps. Around half the population of Gaza comprises of children. The unemployment rate in Gaza is over 50 per cent, the highest in the world. Half the population there depends on food aid from outside. Most of the problems ordinary Gazans face is due to the blockade Israel

has imposed turning Gaza into a virtual open-air prison for the people trapped there.

In 2017, Hamas released a political document which accepted the idea of the creation of a Palestinian state in the areas occupied by Israel after the 1967 war. The document states that the Islamist movement is not at war with the Jewish people but only with the ideology of Zionism which propagates the continuing occupation of Palestinian territory. “Hamas advocates the liberation of all of Palestine but is ready to support the state on 1967 borders without recognizing Israel or ceding any rights”, the head of the movement’s political bureau had stated then. At the same time the document had stressed that “armed resistance is considered as the strategic choice for protecting the principles and rights of the Palestinian people”.

That imperialism was critical to the creation of the state of Israel is obvious from the words of the most important leader of the Zionist movement, Theodor Herzl. He had stated that a future state of Israel “should be a portion of the rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism”. As the current genocidal war on Gaza dragged on, only the United States remained fully committed to Israel. Even the United Kingdom and Germany started calling for a “humanitarian cease fire” in Gaza after the Palestinian casualty figures crossed twenty thousand. The United States was the only country which has been vetoing UN Security Council resolutions calling for a “humanitarian ceasefire” in Gaza.

The UN General Assembly overwhelmingly voted for an immediate cease fire in Gaza in early December. Only the Americans stood with Israel along with a handful of small countries. President Joseph Biden, a self-professed “Zionist” said in the third week of December that he wants Israel to “end the indiscriminate killing of civilians” in Gaza. This was after more than 17,000 Gazans were killed. At the same time, the Biden administration has not stopped replenishing the Israeli army with arms. The

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United States has itself not bothered about civilian casualties in all the wars it has conducted. The people of Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries can testify to this fact. Millions of civilians were killed in the wars the Americans waged in Asia in the last seventy years.

Gaza may have been reduced to rubble but the Palestinian cause has been reinvigorated once again. Palestinians have refused to acquiesce to the dictates of Israel and its western backers and be condemned to live the life of second-class citizens in their own homeland. The entire world has been witness to the brutalities inflicted on the hapless people of Gaza and the rest of the occupied territories thanks to the courageous reporting of journalists from ground zero in Gaza. To dissuade the first-hand coverage of the massacre, Israel has been targeting media professionals and their workplaces in the Gaza Strip.

In the 2019 war on Gaza, Israel had indicated that they consider independent reportage as a crime. The building where the offices of the al Jazeera network and the Associated Press were located was among the buildings demolished by Israeli strikes. In the current blitzkrieg on Gaza, more than 90 journalists have been killed. One journalist has been killed almost every day by the occupation forces, making 2023 the most horrific year for reporters. Palestinian journalists accounted for 72 per cent of all the media deaths reported worldwide in 2023.

Israel has also been deliberately targeting Palestinian academics and intellectuals. In the second week of December, the prominent Palestinian academic and writer, Refaat al Ar'eer, was assassinated along with his close family members. His residence in was surgically targeted by the Israeli army. Refaat was a professor at the Islamic University of Gaza. Known among Arabs as the "voice of Gaza, one of Refaat's last messages was a post condemning the role of the Biden administration and the Democratic Party in the ongoing massacre of Palestinians.

Universities along with schools and hospitals were among

the first to be targeted by the American supported Israeli army. The Islamic University was among those institutions of higher learning destroyed by the Israelis. The head of the institution, Professor Sufian Tayeh, a renowned mathematician along with his close family members, were targeted and killed by the occupation forces.

The collective West under American leadership has seen to it that the inhuman bombing of Gaza has gone on without any meaningful respite. Israel has been using the most modern American weapons available in its onslaught on the hapless people of Gaza. These also include satellite assisted bunker busting bombs and laser guided missiles. The Israeli army has had no compunctions on the dropping 2000-pound bombs on heavily populated areas of Gaza. The American army in its assault on the Iraqi city of Mosul had only used 500-pound bombs. More than a hundred thousand houses in Gaza have been flattened.

The damage inflicted on Gaza just in the first month by Israel was equivalent to the dropping of two nuclear bombs, according to human rights groups. By the first week of November, it was estimated that Israeli forces had used approximately 10 kg of explosives per resident. More than two million people live in the Gaza Strip, the majority of them being women and children. Israel has also been using banned cluster and phosphorus bombs on Gaza. Israel's Health Minister, Amihai Eliyahu, had in fact openly called for the dropping of a nuclear bomb on the Gaza Strip. Israel is the only country in the region which possesses nuclear weapons. The minister later claimed that he was only speaking "metamorphically".

All the same, according to many military historians, the scale of bombing in Gaza is comparable to the bombing of cities like Dresden, Hamburg and Cologne during World War II. Gaza has gone down in history as a place that has witnessed the heaviest conventional bombing in history so far. The fascist Israeli government claims that its goal is to eradicate Hamas. In actual practice,

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it is trying to force the people of Gaza from their land and become refugees again. The overwhelming number of Gazans are descendants of refugees uprooted from their homes during the creation of Israel. The Zionists plan to make them refugees again.

The first thing Israel did in response to the Hamas led attack of October 6 was to cut off almost all essential supplies, including electricity and potable water to the Strip. Top Israeli officials had made it clear from the outset that all Palestinians, including civilians were targets. The Israeli President, Isaac Herzog said that all Palestinians, not just Hamas, should be punished. Israel had initially focused its attacks on northern Gaza, forcing the most of the population there to move to the southern part of the Strip. After destroying the North and making it unlivable, the Israeli forces moved their attention to the South. With the north of the Gaza Strip made out of bounds, the unarmed people of Gaza have no other alternative but to face the incessant Israeli bombing.

“What the Israeli state is doing in Gaza to the Palestinian civilian population—with the support of the Biden administration—is a crime against humanity that serves no meaningful military purpose”, according to the University of Chicago Professor John J. Mearsheimer, an expert on the region and the author of the book “The Zionist Lobby”. He said that Israel “is purposely massacring huge numbers of civilians, roughly 70 per cent of whom are women and children”.

With the attention of the international community rivetted to Gaza, the Israeli army in cahoots with the settlers have also been on a rampage on the West Bank. The Jewish settlers have been attacking Palestinian homes and businesses to further their ethnic cleansing efforts. The Israeli security forces have been actively aiding and abetting their activities. Meanwhile, the Israeli armed forces have been raiding cities like Jenin and Nablus, which have become strongholds of the Palestinian resistance.

Since the extreme right-wing government came to power earlier in the year, the number of Palestinians being killed every

day by the Israeli security forces on the occupied West Bank is increasing. It is obvious that the Zionist state's attempts at ethnic cleansing now extends to all of the occupied territories. The Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has once again rejected the idea of a two-state solution despite the international community, including the United States calling for the two-state solution to be implemented to bring about a lasting peace.

Netanyahu continues to be defiant knowing that the powerful Zionist lobby in the United States will prevent any meaningful reaction from the Biden administration. He has said that he would ensure that a two-state solution will never happen. The Trump administration had recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the Golan Heights as part of Israel. The Biden administration has not reversed these decisions. East Jerusalem is the designated capital of a Palestinian state and the Golan is internationally recognized as an integral part of Syria.

The slogan "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be Free" now reverberates from all parts of the world. Huge pro-Palestinian demonstrations were staged in major cities of the world. A recent opinion showed that a majority of Americans want an immediate cease fire in Gaza. A poll published by the Centre for American Political Studies at Harvard University found that American voters aged between 18 to 24 support Hamas than Israel on the subject of Gaza war. But the American political establishment is unmoved and continues to turn a blind eye to the genocide being perpetuated.