

The New York Times and Gaza: Justifying genocide

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On the fourth day of the Israeli aerial blitz against the population of Gaza, the *New York Times*, the mouthpiece of US establishment liberalism, weighed in on the subject for the first time on its editorial pages.

In a lead editorial, the *Times* made its position clear in short order. "Israel must defend itself," it began. "And Hamas must bear responsibility for ending a six-month cease-fire this month with a barrage of rocket attacks into Israeli territory."

There is little to distinguish the "newspaper of record's" version of events from the mendacious account being peddled by the American media in general: the Palestinians are the aggressors and Israel the victim. Never mind the grim and unequal equation of the conflict: roughly 100 Palestinians killed for every Israeli.

The *Times*' potted explanation of the war, presented as though it were common knowledge and irrefutable fact, conveniently ignores that it was the Israeli military which broke the cease-fire with a provocative cross-border raid into the Gaza Strip in which six members of the Hamas security force were killed. The date of the raid was November 4, not by coincidence Election Day in America. The timing is an indication that the attack was a politically calculated provocation by the Israeli regime, which it held in abeyance until after the electoral contest in the US, its indispensable patron, had been concluded.

Press reports in Israel indicate that the attack on Gaza had been actively prepared for six months, with the Zionist regime agreeing to the cease-fire only to give its military the time it needed. One of the principal aims of the operation was to reestablish the credibility of Israel's military after the humiliating defeat it suffered in Lebanon two-and-a-half years ago and to thereby intimidate all others in the region.

The present military operation has been launched by Israel not as an act of self-defense but in pursuit of definite geopolitical aims and in response to its own internal political and social contradictions.

The *Times* editorial engages in a bit of hand-wringing over whether the slaughter in Gaza is good for Israel—not a word of sympathy for the dead and maimed Palestinian men, women and children—and issues a hypocritical appeal for the Israeli regime to "limit civilian casualties."

Passed over in silence is the brutal Israeli blockade which has left Gaza's population impoverished and hungry, without adequate food, medical supplies, electricity, potable water or other basic necessities of life. The cease-fire was supposed to alleviate these desperate conditions, but Israel merely tightened the noose around Gaza. Nor is there any mention of how 1.5 million people came to be trapped in these desperate conditions and on this narrow strip of land as a result 60 years of Israeli expulsions and occupations.

If the *Times* editorial is merely cynical, the opinion piece which the

newspaper chose to publish on the opposite page of its Tuesday edition is colored by outright criminality.

The author is Benny Morris, a prominent Israeli historian, whose views were formerly identified with the Israeli left, but who in the past several years has swung decisively over to the extreme right.

"Why Israel Feels Threatened" is the title of Morris's piece, which provides a more lengthy and sophisticated justification of the slaughter in Gaza and a sinister warning of greater crimes still to come.

He presents a portrait of Israel surrounded by increasingly dangerous enemies, while confronted with dwindling support from its allies in the West. "To the east, Iran... to the north, the Lebanese fundamentalist organization Hezbollah... To the south, Israel faces the Islamist Hamas movement, which controls the Gaza Strip."

As a result of these "dire threats," Morris insists, "Israelis feel that the walls—and history—are closing in on their 60-year-old state."

Who is threatening whom? Israel is the one state in the world that recognizes no permanent boundaries. In the north, it has repeatedly invaded Lebanon, on the last occasion in July 2006, carrying out massive bombings of the country's south and Beirut's suburbs and killing thousands of civilians. In the east, it has imposed unbearable conditions of life on West Bank Palestinians, sealing them behind an apartheid wall and subjecting them to restrictions, roadblocks and repression. And in the south, it is now pounding Gaza's teeming neighborhoods with high explosives, while preparing for a ground invasion.

As for Iran, Morris spoke for the bullying state that he represents in an op-ed piece that the *Times* published in July, essentially threatening the Iranian people with nuclear annihilation. Urging a conventional bombing attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, Morris wrote then that the operation would result in "thousands of Iranian casualties and international humiliation" for Iran. He added that, if this attack failed to halt Iran's nuclear program, "The alternative is an Iran turned into a nuclear wasteland."

In his latest piece, Morris reserves what he perceives as the darkest threat for last: demography. The very existence of 1.3 million Arab citizens inside Israel's pre-1967 borders, he warns, "offers the recipe" for the "dissolution of the Jewish state."

These Arab-Israelis, he states, have become "radicalized" and are "embracing Palestinian national aims." Moreover, higher birthrates among Arab-Israelis, if the trend continues, mean that they would constitute the majority of Israel's citizens by as early as 2040. Within as little as five years, Arabs could become the majority within the borders of pre-1948 Palestine (including Israel, the West Bank and Gaza).

"Most Jews," Morris asserts, "see the Arab minority as a potential fifth column."

He concludes that the threats facing Israel are "difficult to counter" because of Israel's commitment to "Western democratic and liberal norms." He adds darkly that the sense of danger from these developments "has this past week led to one violent reaction. Given the new realities, it would not be surprising if more powerful explosions were to follow."

For the casual reader of the *Times*, this piece by Morris is clearly meant to inculcate a weary acceptance of still greater atrocities in the name of Israeli "self defense."

The politics of Benny Morris

But, as the *Times* is well aware, Morris is a fervent and public advocate of ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians. For those more familiar with his political record, the genocidal conclusions that flow from his arguments are clear.

Morris first gained a name for himself as one of Israel's so-called "new historians," who in the 1980s exposed the founding myths of the Zionist state and provided documentary evidence that Israel was established only through the violent and forced expulsion of up to three-quarters of a million Palestinians from their land. This population of stateless refugees has now swelled to nearly 4 million.

While he was then considered a man of the left, beginning in 2000, with the onset of the second Intifada and the collapse of the Camp David "final status" talks, he turned sharply to the right. He upheld his earlier findings—and produced new ones showing that Israeli military forces were responsible for a deliberate campaign of massacres and rapes aimed at driving out the Palestinians—but then defended these crimes as necessary and justifiable.

In a January 2004 interview with *Ha'aretz Magazine*, Morris spelled out his position: "Under some circumstances expulsion is not a war crime. I don't think that the expulsions of 1948 were war crimes. You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs. You have to dirty your hands."

Morris went further, declaring that Israel's founder, David Ben-Gurion, "should have done a complete job" and "cleaned the whole country" of Arabs. As historical justification, he added, "Even the great American democracy could not have been created without the annihilation of the Indians."

"There are circumstances in history that justify ethnic cleansing," he continued. "I know that this term is completely negative in the discourse of the 21st century, but when the choice is between ethnic cleansing and genocide—the annihilation of your people—I prefer ethnic cleansing."

Morris was not merely offering his opinions on history. He insisted in his 2004 interview that under "other circumstances... which are likely to be realized in five or ten years," characterized by war and crisis, "acts of expulsion will be entirely reasonable. They may even be essential."

Elsewhere in the *Ha'aretz* interview, he described the Palestinian people as "a wild animal that has to be locked up in one way or another," and he concluded, "When the choice is between destroying or being destroyed, it's better to destroy."

This is the language of fascism. It offers a pseudo-intellectual justification of the policy known in Israel as "transfer"—that is, the forced expulsion of the remaining Arab population from Israeli

territory, and potentially from the West Bank and Gaza as well. Initially championed by such fascistic elements as the late Meir Kahane, it has been increasingly embraced by Israel's main parties and leaders. Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, a leading candidate for prime minister, expressed this policy somewhat delicately recently, declaring that as Israel's leader she would "approach the Palestinian residents of Israel ... and tell them: 'Your national aspirations lie elsewhere.'"

The distinction that Morris makes between ethnic cleansing and genocide is a false one. One practice leads to the other. The Nazis' "final solution" initially called for forced emigration, the expulsion of Jews from Germany. Then came the death camps.

The *Times*' publication of Morris's column only underscores its own opportunistic and cynical attitude towards ethnic cleansing and genocide. Whether it opposes these practices or tacitly accepts them is entirely dependent on who is carrying them out and whose interests are served.

Thus, on Sunday it published a piece by its columnist Nicholas Kristof urging Obama to take military action against Sudan over what he described as genocide in Darfur. Similarly, the newspaper was a major proponent of US intervention in the former Yugoslavia in response to ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and charges of the same in Kosovo.

When opposing ethnic cleansing serves to further US consolidation of its control over oil-rich countries in Africa or to expand eastward the domination of NATO, it becomes a moral imperative. When it is practiced by US allies, it is quietly supported.

The slaughter in Gaza and the more horrific crimes being suggested by the likes of Morris are a telling indication of the political, social and moral blind alley reached by the nationalist project initiated under the banner of Zionism.

In 1938, Leon Trotsky stated that the "attempt to solve the Jewish question through the migration of Jews to Palestine" represented a "tragic mockery of the Jewish people." He issued a prescient warning that "The future development of military events may well transform Palestine into a bloody trap" and insisted that "the salvation of the Jewish people is bound up inseparably with the overthrow of the capitalist system."

Seventy years on, the Zionist project threatens to become a "bloody trap" not only for working people in Israel, but for the entire region. The only alternative remains the struggle to unite the working class, Jewish and Arab alike, in a common fight against capitalism and for the creation of a socialist federation of the Middle East.

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