

## BOOK REVIEW

# Gaza Catastrophe: The Genocide in World-Historical Perspective

By Gilbert Achcar. University of California Press, 2025.

256 pages. \$22.95, paper.

## Road to October 7: A Brief History of Palestinian Islamism

By Erik Skare. Verso, 2025. 240 pages. \$24.95, paper.

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Your eye falls immediately not to the title of Gilbert Achcar's new book but to the subtitle. Even as we approach the third year of post-October 7 conflicts, the G-word still provokes a shudder among all but the hardest of hearts. The charge, leveled initially on campuses and in social media, quickly reached the International Court of Justice in 2023. It has taken far longer for mainstream and academic publications to adopt genocide as a descriptor; indeed, given the legalistic etymology of the term, most may never use it unless it is in scare quotes and attributed to activists. But it is possible that, just a few years from now, the subtitle of Achcar's examination of the Gaza war, its prosecution, and its causes will not be an outlier and will fit comfortably with the growing literature of the new regional order.

Readers looking for a sustained, prosecutorial indictment charging Israel with genocide will not be fully satisfied, as this is not the primary value of Achcar's compelling account of the conflict. This particular war crime is notoriously difficult to prove. The author notes, as scholars must, that it has a strict definition involving killing, mental and physical harm, or creating "conditions of life" that could destroy all or part of a group. Achcar quotes the holocaust scholar Omer Bartov's 2024 declaration that Israel was "engaged in... genocidal actions." But this is not enough to satisfy the legal case, as it must be proved that the perpetrator *intended* to destroy the group. Indeed, after Achcar published his book, Bartov asserted that the intent of Israeli officials was clear and "that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinian people."<sup>1</sup> But while Achcar does provide some evidence of intent—especially Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant's assertion that "we are fighting human animals"—his project is broader and deeper.

<sup>1</sup> Omer Bartov, "I'm a Genocide Scholar. I Know It When I See It." *The New York Times*, July 15, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/15/opinion/israel-gaza-holocaust-genocide-palestinians.html>.

The next part of the title your eye is inevitably drawn to is the echo of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and the resulting expulsion of Palestinians known as the Nakba: Catastrophe. This parallel is deliberate, fitting Achcar's method of tracing patterns established over long periods that allows us to identify causes and the likely next directions of events. But the author is also attentive to new elements, and he sees the Gaza war as both understandable as part of the arc of history but also fundamentally different. The conflict "that has unfolded since 7 October 2023 is indisputably the worst episode in the Palestinian people's long ordeal—worse even than the 1948 Nakba," he argues, adding that it "deserves the stronger Arabic name for catastrophe: *Karitha*." This does not relate only to Israeli actions, as the cleareyed examination also delves into Hamas's "catastrophic miscalculation."

The greatest value in this new volume, a collection of Achcar's writing from 1994 to the present, bookended by new chapters on the war and the potential effects of the new Trump administration, is found elsewhere in the title: "world-historical perspective." While many of the essays have been available previously, bringing them together is essential. The analysis is trenchant, the arguments clearly stated, the anticipation of future events eerily prescient. The structure of the collection complements Achcar's strengths, laying bare the history and logic of the Israeli occupation, as well as enduring patterns of state violence perpetrated not just in Gaza but around the globe and over time. He demonstrates the similarities of today's conflict with the French colonial period and the American unilateralism leading up to 9/11 and the war on terrorism. And he shows how two decades of Israeli policies on Gaza elevated violence over diplomacy, ensured that Hamas and Islamism remained ascendant in the enclave, and furthered the central cause of the Israeli right: realizing Greater Israel.

After examining the case for genocide and analyzing both Israel's and Hamas's motivations, the book shifts to Achcar's older examinations of the conflict. It provides compelling evidence for Israel's long-standing determination to allow nothing more than a "rump Palestinian state" and for Israeli and American complicity in the rise of Hamas. Crucially, Achcar also examines the miscalculation at the heart of Hamas's strategy, which he associates, at least in part, with the group's Islamism.

## ISRAEL'S EXPANSION AND TILT TOWARD WAR ON CIVILIANS

Achcar's approach gives him leverage to evaluate Israel's path toward maximalist aims, alleged war crimes, and perpetual conflict if not expansion into Greater Israel. As far back as 1993, he argued that the political, nationalist Zionism that had taken hold as Israel sought independence naturally converged on "armed expansionism." The author sees this as operative throughout the country's history, clearly eliminating the possibility of a two-state solution or even Palestinian autonomy inside Israel or anywhere between the river and the sea: "The politics of power, the *Machtspolitik*, was built into the very logic of the 'Jewish State' project as soon as it was decided to establish it in Palestine: it could only be achieved by force."

Indeed, teasing out another long-running pattern, Achcar sees Israel's turn to the right—which many consider a quirk of contemporary domestic politics or caused by a deteriorating sense of security—as an essential component of the state's founding logic. Given the increasing openness of the state to obstructing Palestinian self-determination, left-leaning elements could not remain viable forces at home or in foreign capitals. They could not persuade the outside world of the legitimacy of its occupation through a language of liberalism and human rights. Only the right wing could take on this project, especially as the promise of the Oslo accords proved illusory and the state cracked down on the second intifada.

Most tragically, Achcar's method of identifying historical patterns allowed him early on to foresee where Israel's attacks on Gaza were leading. Consider this chilling passage:

A lot of people now sense that the population of Gaza is really under threat of massive extermination. This is not the usual kind of exaggeration, it is a sober assessment when you face such a level of accidents in which concentrations of civilians are targeted with mass-murder as a result. The only alternative to a fiasco for Israel is to push forward its ground offensive in the populated areas. The worst-case scenario becomes therefore quite possible, and that would mean thousands and thousands of people killed, not to mention the maimed and wounded, and that is absolutely frightening.

A reader will be forgiven if this passage is assumed to relate to the post-October 7 wars. But Achcar recorded this observation in 2009, as Israel waged what it called Operation Cast Lead.

At that point, in the late 2000s, Israel was on a political and military trajectory compelling it to ramp up its violence in a way that would cost the lives of, if not directly target, thousands of civilians. Just a year earlier, Achcar explains, the Israel Defense Forces had promulgated the Dahiya doctrine. The aim is the application of "disproportionate force" against "economic interests and the centers of civilian power" that will require "long and expensive reconstruction processes." In addition, according to a *Financial Times* report cited in the book, by 2020 Israel had adopted a military doctrine designed to "achieve maximum goals before the international community puts political pressure to slow down."<sup>2</sup>

Even if Tel Aviv is trying to secure a pathway toward an Oslo-like "Palestinian rump state" and not the maximal expulsion of Palestinians necessary to create an Israel stretching from the river to the sea, Achcar contends, these military strategies necessarily result in unfathomable civilian tolls:

Ultimately, the two scenarios—Greater Israel or Oslo—are predicated on Israel's ability to destroy Hamas to a degree sufficient to prevent it from controlling Gaza. This entails the conquest of most of the strip, if not all of it, by Israel's armed forces—a goal they could only achieve by destroying most of Gaza, which would come at an enormous human cost.

## HAMAS'S ISLAMISM AND 'CATASTROPHIC MISCALCULATION'

Achcar castigates Hamas not just for the unconscionable October 7 attacks, which predictably have set back the Palestinian cause, but also its entire approach to resistance and governance. But the author blames the United States and Israel for complicity in the group's rise. Foremost in this was Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who aimed to drive a wedge between Islamists and the Palestinian Authority (PA), crippling its potential for governance and a final settlement with Israel.

Every time there was some kind of truce, negotiated by the PA with the Islamic organizations, Sharon's government would resort to an 'extrajudicial execution'... in order to provoke these organizations into retaliation by the means they specialized in:

<sup>2</sup> Mehul Sreivastava and John Paul Rathbone, "Military Briefing: 'Everything You Can Imagine and Worse' Awaits Israeli Army in Gaza," *Financial Times*, October 12, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/55d70ab0-f18f-4de7-a4c9-0e14a717ea2a>; quoted in Achcar, *Gaza Catastrophe*.

suicide attacks...This had the double advantage of stressing the PA's inability to control the Palestinian population and enhancing Sharon's own popularity in Israel.

The prime minister, like Benjamin Netanyahu a decade or so later, wanted Hamas to be the face of Palestinian self-governance. President George W. Bush was a willing and misguided supporter of the 2006 elections that allowed the organization to take formal control of Gaza.

Achcar is unyielding in his criticism of Hamas. He has some sympathy for the overall Palestinian resistance, arguing that once Arab nationalism and socialism had been defeated, Islamism was the only revolutionary force remaining. However, the messianism of Hamas led it to divide Palestinians and their officials instead of to unify them. This had devastating effects at home, sparking protests against its administration of Gaza. As well, in a conflict where the Palestinian side is necessarily the weaker, kicking the PA completely out of Gaza did nothing to further the cause of resistance and liberation. Hamas also made the indefensible choice of aligning with states like Syria and Iran; instead, Achcar asserts, the movement should have sought the backing of the people living under those repressive regimes.

Ultimately, Achcar contends, Hamas "genuinely adhered to a messianic vision of its struggle against Israel," and this drove it to launch Operation al-Aqsa Flood. The author allows that some commentators have explained the October 7 attacks as opportunistic, unleashed as Netanyahu's right-wing government was distracted and dividing Israeli society. Others see the cross-border massacre as intended to gain global attention for the cause after the Abraham Accords and the first Trump administration's "deal of the century" had virtually ignored the rights of Palestinians. Even if there is some truth to these rationales, Achcar states bluntly, "there is no possible vindication for what has been the most catastrophic miscalculation ever in the history of anticolonial struggle."

Although the author does allow that Israel has been disabused of its belief that it can normalize relations with Arab neighbors "while persecuting the Palestinian people," this does not make up for the catastrophe Hamas has wrought:

Instead of serving Palestinian emancipation and winning over to its cause an increasing number of Israelis, Hamas's strategy facilitates the nationalist unity of Jewish Israelis and provides the Zionist state with pretexts for increased suppression of Palestinian rights and existence. The idea that the Palestinian people could achieve its national emancipation by way of armed confrontation with an Israeli state that is far superior militarily is irrational. The most effective episode in Palestinian struggle to this day was unarmed: the 1988 Intifada provoked a deep crisis in Israel's society, polity and armed forces, and won for the Palestinian cause massive sympathy in the world, Western countries included.

## **WAS THIS FUNDAMENTALLY IRRATIONAL?**

Erik Skare's new book serves as a worthy companion to Achcar. Impressive in historical sweep, this examination of Palestinian Islamist movements is as deep as Achcar's is broad, examining their development and fault lines and, most crucially, Israel's violent rejection of their moves toward pragmatism. The author analyzes not just the moves by Palestinian religious factions, against Israel and against each other, but also the ideas animating their leaders and adherents. The focus on Islamism is essential to understanding Hamas's origins and the messianism that, as Achcar sees it, undergirded the al-Aqsa Flood. It does, however, risk under-examining a major

component of the road to October 7: the culpability of Israel and the West. While Skare may not convince readers that Hamas acted rationally, he makes a compelling case for the logic behind many of its activities and presents several factors that contributed to the Gaza war.

Skare illuminates patterns behind the history, especially “that Palestinian Islamism has been continually shaped and determined by fierce discussions and competition between moderates and hardliners.” The study details how Islamism arose with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1920s, in reaction to European social and political influence, and eventually to the conflict over the fate of Palestine in the mid-1930s. As the Brotherhood’s influence crossed borders, its leaders called for struggles against imperialism and the nascent Israeli state.

The analysis yields insights into the different trajectories of religiosity and governance in the West Bank and Gaza. Jordanian rule over the West Bank led that territory’s Islamists to align with an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood that was recognized by the Hashemite kingdom as a legitimate opposition. Residents in that part of Palestine who were part of the Brotherhood did not concentrate on Islamizing governance but on education. By contrast, the Gaza Strip fell under the control of Egypt, and Cairo had outlawed the Brotherhood. “The isolation of Gaza afforded the Brothers there with a greater degree of independence,” Skare observes, “which allowed the movement to engage in political work, social initiatives, and the provision of medical and educational services to displaced Palestinians.”

Skare’s survey indicates some Islamist paths not taken in the Palestinian territories over the course of the first few decades, especially the more puritanical anti-statism focused on reviving the caliphate across the region instead of on countering Israel. This is represented today by the remnants of ISIS. Ultimately, the far more political factions aiming at resistance won out. “It was... not an option for Palestinians to postpone their liberation in wait for the establishment of an Islamic state in some distant and uncertain future,” Skare writes.

One of the key patterns of development, which has persisted to today, is the competition between Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas. Islamic Jihad emerged and gained power in the crucible of Israel’s defeat of Arab states in 1967, the revolutionary fervor represented by Iran in the 1970s, and the Palestine Liberation Organization’s fleeing to Tunisia. “If you were a Palestinian in Gaza who wanted to join the armed struggle in the 1980s,” Skare notes, “there was no viable organizational alternative for you to join.” Palestinian Islamic Jihad did not proselytize or act as religious police but focused on armed resistance. By contrast, Hamas emerged out of the Muslim Brotherhood as a grassroots organization that had a broader conception of serving the people.

This basic pattern held up as the Palestinian Authority, created through the Oslo process, demonstrated its corruption and lack of interest in democracy by working with Israel to crack down on militants. Hamas capitalized on popular discontent and tried to push out the Israelis. While the struggle was violent, however, moderates did not share Islamic Jihad’s “maximalist aspirations”:

Hamas was...not *a priori* opposed to negotiations with Israel, but the movement reasoned that such a process had to occur between equal parties. Hamas was similarly not opposed to the Israelis because of their Jewish faith...but because of the occupation. Suicide bombings were, then, an instrument forcing Israel towards equal grounds.

Once Hamas had to formally govern the enclave after prevailing in the 2006 elections and taking over Gaza’s administration, it faced pressures inside and out. Internally, moderates were losing to the armed militant wing, which immediately stoked a civil conflict against the Palestinian

Authority by kicking it out of the enclave. Externally, Hamas now had to satisfy public demands and, just as important, not provoke Israel. This meant the organization had to crack down against the violence of groups like Islamic Jihad, whose rocket attacks risked destabilizing attacks from the Israel Defense Forces. This was sadly ironic, as some of the animus against the PA had stemmed from its cooperation with Israel to tamp down on violence. Indeed, Skare notes, Hamas's "militants perceived themselves as glorified janitors of the Gazan blockade" imposed by Israel after the group took power. Many hardliners thus turned against Hamas and toward Salafi-jihadism, dedicated to a more rigid form of Islamism and extreme violence against Israel.

Key to Hamas's gaining the upper hand against rival groups and hardening its resolve against Israel was the rise of Yahya Sinwar after his release from prison in 2011. While he had a reputation for ruthlessness, Skare depicts the reported mastermind of October 7 as strategically flexible, accepting a revision of the Hamas charter to allow for a two-state solution and declaring "that he embraced a peaceful popular resistance against the Israeli occupation, that he sought a long-term trust with Israel and pushed for negotiations," and that he would aim for a reconciliation with the Palestinian Authority.

However, Skare reminds us, Israel soon demonstrated the futility of this. Between 2018 and 2019, Gazans engaged in the Great March of Return, setting up encampments near the border wall and rallying for an end to the blockade. Hamas patrolled the demonstrations to maintain a buffer between the civilians and the Israeli military. But the protests sparked attacks. "Israeli soldiers were ordered to shoot anyone within several hundred metres of the fence and used considerable force to suppress the protests," Skare writes. "Israeli forces, most of whom were snipers, shot and killed 223 Palestinians during the march." Amnesty International reported that of the 10,000 people injured, 2,000 were children.

Skare contends that this led to a recalculation. With no end to the blockade and regional governments cutting normalization deals with Tel Aviv, Hamas focused on expanding its tunnel system, ramping up military training, and not just building up but also manufacturing weapons. As Hamas fighters swarmed over the border to begin the al-Aqsa Flood, a senior commander declared that this was intended to "resume the march of return."

This investigation into Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad posits far more pragmatism and strategic rationality than Achcar will countenance. Among the reasons Skare provides for the October 7 attacks:

- The Western boycott of Hamas after the 2006 elections undermined moderates.
- Moderates had won the organization few victories, so hardliners chose a different path.
- Israelis saw Gaza as pacified despite "the occasional flareup," creating an opportunity.
- The Palestinian cause had fallen off the agenda of Arab capitals and global leaders.
- Hamas was increasingly unpopular due to the crackdowns on armed groups that were required to maintain relative peace with Israel.

"There were numerous warnings that the unsustainable situation in the occupied territories would come at a cost," Skare laments. "Deprived of the most basic human rights, livelihood, and protection, decades of occupation facilitated the dehumanization enabling October 7." Achcar would likely concur, as this does not attribute rationality to the perpetrators.



## WHAT IF GENOCIDE IS NOT PROVED?

It is not clear that charging Israel with genocide or proving it in any court is necessary or sufficient to end the suffering and forge a path toward justice. The events of the last two years—the brutality of the Gaza war, the continued dispossession of Palestinians in the West Bank, and the right-wing government's expansion of settlements that render impossible any potential for two states to coexist side by side—have not only continued to spark revulsion across the Global South, as Achcar says, they are shocking the conscience of the Global North, as well. But the recent announcements in some European capitals that they will recognize a Palestinian state if Netanyahu continues to foment unnecessary violence are not likely to change the prime minister's behavior. Only cutting off weapons or other material assistance will do this. A determination of "genocide" is no more likely to have any effect.

Despite his exasperation, Achcar holds out hope that Tel Aviv will not choose the maximalist course of driving out all Palestinians and creating a Greater Israel. But for an analyst with such command of history and a gift for seeing the future, he is not sure how the return of Trump will affect the short- or medium-term conflict. Achcar notes that, based on Trump's first four years, he did predict that the American president would not be able to push Netanyahu around. The reverse is more often the case, he argues. And after the book's publication, the June 2025 war against Iran has only supplied more evidence that Trump is likelier to follow than lead. However, the author suggests that Arab capitals could be interested in a "deal of the century" where Israel gets far more land than Oslo would have allowed, in exchange for an end to the slaughter.

Unfortunately, while Achcar suggests that there could still be an Oslo-style outcome with a functioning Palestinian state at the end, he hints at but does not directly acknowledge that there could be a third path: perpetual war. Netanyahu's efforts since October 7 have kept him firmly in power, and while at the time of this writing he faces domestic protests, previous assumptions about his imminent demise have been premature. Without a strong boycott movement against Israel, and with the blind support of Washington, there may be no rush in Tel Aviv to reach a full resolution. At the time of this writing, the Israelis are preparing to fight for Gaza City and potentially to occupy the entire territory. Estimates attributed to IDF sources indicate that this could require several more years of combat.

Instead of strategy and statecraft, we get military tactics and operations. If the killing doesn't stop, long after its strategic utility, Achcar's words will haunt:

The intentionality of the human carnage that went along with this destruction can be denied only by those who wish to keep their eyes wide shut. For, if anything, the intentionality is made even more obvious by the multiplicity of means of mass murder, a combination of extremely intensive bombing and other uses of lethal firepower against densely populated urban zones, with the starvation of a whole population by deprivation of food and the finishing off of its sick and wounded by deprivation of healthcare necessities—all three means plainly documented by international organizations. The same combination of killing, starvation and deprivation of healthcare was at work in the Nazi extermination camps, albeit to an even more atrocious and murderous degree.

We can expect, therefore, the publication of many more studies with the G-word in the title.