

Patrick Lawrence

Is global justice any longer possible?

It is now approaching two years since Israel began a campaign of terror against the Palestinians for whom the Gaza Strip has been home for many generations. The Netanyahu regime, controlled by far-right Zionist fanatics, spreads this genocidal violence against unarmed populations to the West Bank as we speak. Those purporting to lead our post-democracies, beholden to corrupting Jewish lobbies, have authorized attacks on civil liberties, free speech, freedom of association, academic freedom—all manner of constitutional rights—to protect Israel by labeling all well-deserved opprobrium “anti-Semitic.”

So has “the Jewish state” dragged the watching world into a state of moral depravity, lawlessness, and irrationality.

“This struggle has transcended the Palestinian people and the Arab world. It is now a battle for humanity’s soul,” Richard Medhurst, the English journalist, wrote on “X” last week. “Zionism has dragged the entire planet into the moral abyss, making a mockery of international law and our sovereignty. It is a scourge on human civilization.”

It would be hard to assail the truth of these assertions, or to fault Medhurst, who was charged last year under Britain’s Terrorism Act for his work on Palestine and related questions, for his timing. British authorities are currently investigating scores of attorneys—again, under the Terrorism Act—simply for defending the

legal rights of those who support the Palestinian cause. This is lawlessness in the name of law: There is no other way to interpret such aggressions.

But it is time to take Medhurst's cue and consider the consequences of Israel's daily crimes against humanity in their broader context. The Trump regime, fully bought off by the Israel lobby in Washington, now celebrates wanton strikes against villages in Yemen and the U.S. military's flagrantly illegal attack last week on a civilian vessel in international waters—an act of piracy on the open seas, as Chas Freeman, the distinguished ambassador emeritus, terms it. These are not unrelated to the Zionist state's terror. The Jewish state has effectively licensed open contempt for law—international and domestic—across the West, wherein we now find the same presumption of total impunity, the same givenness to state-sponsored violence.

So are questions imposed upon us. Must we now consider the eight decades since the signing of the U.N. Charter as an era that passes into the past? Is global justice, to put the point most saliently, any longer possible?

I see no flinching from this line of inquiry. As each of us looks out front, there appear to be but two versions of our future: We either anticipate a return to humanity's incomplete attempt to construct a global order worthy of the name and a system of justice that will stand as its highest expression, or we must conclude Medhurst's "battle for humanity's soul" has been lost and Israel has tipped us into an age of barbarity future historians will render with capitals: Ours will enter the record as the Age of Barbarity.

There are plenty of reasons to look forward pessimistically. As others have remarked, humanity has effectively "normalized" genocide these past two years.

The coarse abridgement of civil liberties in the Western post-democracies proceeds unapologetically.

There is considerable controversy as to the casualty count among the Palestinians of Gaza, some of this apparently reflecting the usual spread of disinformation in defense of the Zionists' murder spree, but by the soundest estimates the number of dead and wounded—leaving aside the untold thousands of missing—approaches 200,000. And still we hear the voices of only a principled minority.

Most striking of all, at least to me, among the political elites in the West there is no political will to act decisively against the Zionist regime. No will and no political leadership—only a kind of craven pragmatism in the service of prolonging corrupt power structures. Try to imagine those purporting to govern the Western post-democracies gathering to produce a document that measures up to the world-historical significance of the U.N. Charter. It is impossible.

O.K., one could go on in this line. But short-sightedly, in my view. To take the view that the soul of humanity has been... what is my word?... defeated is to accept that we live in precisely that eternal present to which the West in the declining decades of its hegemony proposes to confine us. No, in my read of our moment we are called upon to imagine the unimaginable.

The U.N. General Assembly is to convene for the 80th time this coming week. Fifteen nations, notably several members of the Atlantic alliance, have pledged to announce they will formally recognize a Palestinian state. It is possible the most powerful of these 15—France and Britain; Canada, Australia, and New Zealand as a considerable part of the Anglosphere, will determine to take effective action in defense of the state they will acknowledge. But [as I have written elsewhere](#), there is a strong likelihood they will stop short of any such course. The British, as noted

above, are busily harassing lawyers who act for the Palestinian cause because they stand for the law. We can take this as a measure of the mood shared by many of these signatories, if not most of them. Britain's pledge, in any case, is conditional on whether or not the Israelis meet several (very modest) demands.

But there are other places to look for indications of things to come. As I was writing this essay the Scottish Parliament voted—61 to 31, with 21 abstentions—immediately to impose (here I quote the parliamentary motion) “a package of “boycotts, divestments, and sanctions targeted at the state of Israel and at companies complicit in its military operations and its occupation of Palestine.” Note the phrasing: The motion was an implicit endorsement of the B.D.S. movement, which spreads as we speak.

Here is a brief part of [the statement John Swinney, Scotland's chief minister](#), delivered to the Scottish Parliament as the chamber voted on 3 September:

[indent.]

We must confront this crisis with urgency, compassion, and an unwavering commitment to accountability.... While I welcome the intent behind the decision of the U.K. Government to recognise a Palestinian State at the U.N. General Assembly this month, recognition must not be conditional and should be irreversible. It is the right of Palestinians, not the gift of international powers and must be backed by sanctions against the Israeli government.

[end indent.]

Such language is rare among officials of Swinney's stature at the moment. But one is sure the Starmer government is listening. A month ago the London police arrested 532 demonstrators for supporting Palestine Action, a group dedicated to

nonviolent action against the genocide in Gaza. When I remarked upon this in a commentary, a reader named Jason Patrick Quinn wrote in the comment thread to say more than a thousand had responded with a pledge to demonstrate this past weekend. And so it went. “We plan to continue multiplying the number of people participating with each protest,” Quinn wrote with confidence and a touch of glee.

As my reader suggests, public outrage at Israel’s barbarism and Western support of it appears to be reaching a sort of inflection point beyond which the suppression of protest prompts more protest. My suggestion here is that the dynamism of the Western responses to the Israel–Palestine crisis—moral, political—lies not with ruling elites but with the populations these elites no longer represent.

In so many words, and I may as well say this plainly, I am invoking the human spirit as I make the case for a future that departs from the present. If the Zionist state has brought us to the brink of a barbarous age, popular outrage, as it mounts throughout the West, suggests what Marcuse called, in a very different context, a “great refusal” lies somewhere in the middle distance. I do not see that people of ordinary conscience will passively and indefinitely accept the complicity in crimes their purported leaders impose upon them, or the ruination of their institutions of government and learning, or the anti-democratic intrusions of unprincipled Zionist lobbies in what remains of their democracies. To do so would be to acquiesce as we are condemned to darkness.

History supports this case amply enough. The sclerotic bureaucracies atop the Soviet Union and the East bloc satellites were presumed to be unbudgeable. For a long time the apartheid regime in South Africa seemed impregnable. What prevailed in the end if not the human spirit?

My reference in this connection concerns the Cold war's chronology. Its origin in the first post-1945 years coincided with an extraordinary swell of humanist aspiration, most clearly expressed by the scores of nations that achieved their independence in the decades that followed. The Cold War's perverse binaries, vigorously imposed by the policy cliques in Washington, all but extinguished the ideals of what we call "the independence era"—high among them the dignity of all peoples, parity between the West and non-West, and nonalignment.

All but, I say: The Cold War suppressed and corrupted the aspirations that mark that period as exceptional in modern history, but it never extinguished them. And what happened when the Cold War drew to a close with the fall of the Wall in 1989? My answer is simple: The spirit of the first postwar years came instantly back to life. It now lives in the new world order that takes shape more swiftly than one would not have anticipated even a few years ago.

The Israelis appear to be mindful that the world will eventually cease tolerating what amounts to a biblically authorized genocide against the rightful residents of what is rightfully called Palestine. So does the Zionist state now rush to advance its unspeakable project. And there is no saying now when these grotesque inhumanities will end. There is only this: The extent to which Israel finishes its clinically psychotic work is the extent to which it will eventually face decisive justice.

6 September 2025.