

The Explosion Point of Israeli Contradictions

Ten theses on the ongoing upheavals in the Middle East

Il Lato Cattivo

October 2023

Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------------------|---|
| A minor editorial note | 3 |
| I. | 4 |
| II. | 4 |
| III. | 4 |
| IV. | 4 |
| V. | 5 |
| VI. | 5 |
| VII. | 5 |
| VIII. | 6 |
| IX. | 6 |
| X. | 6 |

A minor editorial note

The following is a rough translation of *Il Lato Cattivo*'s "The explosion point of Israeli contradictions." We offer it as a supplementary, if imperfect, analysis of the unfolding crisis in Gaza.

Il Lato Cattivo ("The Bad Side") is a communist magazine, published in Italian, associated with the "communization" current. From their website:

"Il Lato Cattivo is a magazine that is edited by a small group of individuals, formed between 2010 and 2011, in the wake of the Greek crisis and revolt of December 2008, and on the basic idea that these two events (in particular) would have given new meaning to the word "revolution", reactivating the actually complex and non-automatic, but nevertheless existing, link between crisis and communism."

On the consideration of Palestine, *Il Lato Cattivo* has been... uneven. In the wake of the 2014 "Gaza War" (what the IDF referred to as "Operation Protective Edge"), *Il Lato Cattivo* published "Letter on anti-Zionism," in which they purport to offer a critique of anti-Zionism. The real content of the analysis is equivocation, which they present in the face of the massive assault on Gaza. Anti-zionism is reduced to a caricature, at best, and equated with anti-semitism at worst. Their overall point is rather banal: to truly achieve liberation in Palestine would require a communist revolution. What they smuggle in, perhaps inadvertently, is the tacit but often explicit notion of "No War but Class War," which suggests that Palestinian struggle, or even solidarity, is a form of false consciousness, or mystification of the real social relations at play. This is rather typical of the European "ultra-left," which often mistakes concrete processes of racialization and racialized revolt for the pitfalls of "petite bourgeois" mediation. This is the tenor with which they tend to deploy the critique of the "nation" and "nationalism." To hear it, we must not be seduced by the ephemera of "the working class." What matters is the real composition of struggle, always concrete, always fragmented, and fraught with the historical inheritances of capital, colony, race, nation, war, displacement, and, in the case of Palestine, dispossession and settler colonialism.

"The Explosion Point of Israeli Contradictions" better achieves these latter types of considerations. *Il Lato Cattivo* provide a much more astute analysis here than in their more parochial writing following the 2014 "Gaza War." The real meaning of the *deluge* (the Al-Aqsa Flood) is revealed for what it is: a rupture with the daily life of Israeli occupation, which presents itself to the world as invincible, impenetrable.

We do not agree with every position or characterization here, but we find these theses to be a useful analytical supplement to inevitable chaos and noise of insurgence and militarization, and an antidote to the insipid condemnations, the moral platitudes, and jockeying for position on display among the 'left,' especially the 'activist' milieu. We think this piece helps to provide clarity, at least, if not a course of action. For that, it might do better to follow the example of Palestinians, the actions that compose the *deluge*: the torched IDF tanks, shredded border walls, and burning embassies.

decompositions

October 2023

I.

The offensive launched by Hamas on Israeli territory on October 7, 2023 and its immediate consequences represent, in our view, as of now, a major turning point in the economic, political and military developments in the Middle East. We do not write these words lightly, with indifference to the suffering of the victims and their loved ones or, worse, with sympathy for the indiscriminate use of violence against civilians. We simply believe that the analysis of events must necessarily make abstraction from these aspects in order to properly appreciate their significance. It is not possible to favor a strictly local interpretation of events at the expense of an international one, or vice versa. It is necessary to pursue both. This handful of theses are but a first attempt.

II.

The multifaceted attack launched by Hamas must first be contextualized in the current geo-economic conjuncture. In very general terms, it must be placed in the crisis phase of globalization, at a juncture when opposing capitalist projects for a post-globalized (de-globalized?) world are beginning to emerge more clearly. In more specific terms, it must be situated in the broader repositioning of the major Middle Eastern players in relation to the global confrontation between the United States and China.

III.

One must first consider the regional integration processes promoted by the United States (most recently with the Abraham Accords), which place on the agenda the ultimate normalization of economic and diplomatic relations between Israel and a number of Arab countries in North Africa and the Near and Middle East, with the United Arab Emirates in the lead. With last week's attacks, Hamas has made it clear that such normalization is either achieved by including the Palestinian issue and accepting its representation at the negotiating table, or it will have to pass over the bodies of 5 million Palestinians.

The dynamics of the Abraham Accords are countered by Chinese efforts toward a thaw – for obvious reasons indigestible to Israel – between the bloc vulgarly identified as “Shiite” (Iran-Lebanon-Syria-Iraq) and the so-called “Sunni” bloc. Hamas offers here the perfect alibi for Saudi Arabia not to sign the Abraham Accords and confirm its (momentary?) misalignment from Washington. Chinese diplomacy gives thanks.

IV.

Once the gravity of the historical moment is grasped from the Palestinian point of view, it is futile to linger excessively in the distinctions between Hamas and the Palestinians in general. That the attack was “imposed” on the Palestinian population as a whole, first and foremost the population of Gaza, that they are “hostages” of Hamas, means nothing except the following banality: that men make history under conditions they do not have the luxury of choosing. The key political fact is that in the immediate term, in Gaza as in the West Bank, Hamas is the only major

political actor, even in spite of its international nonrecognition, while the Palestinian Authority, however much it is still in office, is now doomed to irrelevance.

V.

By unleashing violence against Israeli civilians to an unprecedented degree, and drawing Israel into the terrain of full-scale war, Hamas actually reveals the limits (the impossibility) of the purely repressive/military approach to the Palestinian question. “Eradicating Hamas,” for Israel, does not just mean entering Gaza boots on the ground, with a technically arduous military operation with uncertain outcomes. It means exposing itself to the likelihood of mass unrest in the West Bank and the opening of an additional military front on the border with Lebanon (Hezbollah). The magnitude of such a confrontation would pose to each of the components of Israel’s varied social structure the existential dilemma: “to die for Israel?” Those who know the real country know that the answer today is by no means a foregone conclusion. It was perhaps so in 1967, or in 1973, but it is no longer. Is the bourgeois-bohemian Ashkenazi youth with dual passports, for whom Tel Aviv is just one entertainment capital among many, really ready to die for the homeland? Are the Russian-speaking Jews who barely speak Hebrew, the Haredim sucking up benefits but exempt from compulsory military service, the Israeli Arabs still and always treated as second-class citizens, ready to die for Israel? This is the vexed question that the prospect of full-scale military conflict presents.

VI.

Israel’s policy following the Oslo Accords (1993) is indeed incomprehensible if one does not take into account the multiplicity of the “tribes of Israel” (“Limes”) and the unfinished, evolving character of Israeli nation-building. This policy is not the result of a Likud political whim, nor of crude accounting reasons that a vulgar materialism would suffice to reveal. The expulsion of the Palestinian workforce of the Territories from the Israeli economy, the tacit or explicit support for new settler colonies, the administrative fragmentation of the West Bank etc., promised to ensure internal cohesion by fueling the factor of external conflict. But this presupposed that the latter would be kept within the limits of a conflict of low intensity and controllable proportions. On this point, as on others, the Hamas attack radically changes the cards on the table. Debates and conspiracy theories are of little or no use in determining to what extent the Hamas attack was truly unexpected, how great were the intelligence faults or the deafness to warnings addressed to the top echelons of political power etc. In fact, even a week ago the Palestinian question appeared evanescent because Israel seemed to have taken the upper hand. If today the image of Israeli power appears seriously compromised, this does not depend on the event itself or on some particular aspect of it (number of casualties, army reaction time etc.), but on the cracks it may deepen within Israeli society.

VII.

Tariq Ali (see the *New Left Review* blog, Oct. 13, 2023) is therefore wrong, and with him the majority of the left-wing intelligentsia, in believing that the existence of Israel, simply because it

is “a nuclear state, armed to the teeth by the U.S.,” is not at all in question. Behind the phantasmatic and ideologized threat of encirclement by the “Axis of Resistance,” there is for Israel the very real threat of no longer being able to produce the internal cohesion necessary to project itself externally. That is, the threat of finding itself, despite the remarkable economic and technological development it has achieved, reduced to the status of a banal failed state in the Middle East, an amorphous patchwork of ethnic groups and clans periodically on the brink of civil war.

VIII.

Compared to such a patchwork, the situation of the Palestinians is as desperate as one likes, but it has on its side an extraordinary national homogeneity, produced precisely by more than seven decades of conflict with Israel. The Palestinian nation, from a pale invention of British colonialism, such as it was at the time of Mandatory Palestine and again in the aftermath of the Nakba, is perhaps only now coming to the status of a historical nation in the proper sense. In any case, it is much more so than it was in the 1970s, in the golden age of the Third Worldism of yesteryear. The very success of the Hamas attack demonstrates this. The point is not to apologize for it, but to measure its scope beyond its most spectacular and truculent aspects, that is, to grasp its level of organization, complexity, and determination – which have little in common with the Al-Qaeda and Islamic State attacks to which it has been compared in the mainstream media.

IX.

As in the rest of the Arab world, the rise of political Islam in Palestine has also been a petit bourgeois declension of the crisis of secular and socialist nationalism, if not of the Arab nation tout court – a declension often encouraged and fomented by its fiercest local and international adversaries. Nevertheless, the trajectory of Islamist forces has each time been shaped by the specific context in which they have taken root – i.e., in the Palestinian context, by the plebeian “resistance” movement against Israel. For Hamas, riding on this movement, giving a political outlet to the uprisings (First and Second Intifada), and achieving at least a provisional solution to the Palestinian question, are the obligatory steps to realize the medium-term class interests that underlie it as a political force: the promotion of the “ragged” petty-bourgeoisie of Gaza to the status of the Palestinian bourgeoisie in the proper sense, potential agents of a new impetus of capitalist relations within a relatively small perimeter, but densely populated by a young and educated workforce. Indeed, the political trajectory of Hamas is counterbalanced by the social trajectory of the Palestinian proletariat, for whom “Israel” is less and less an employer of capital (and thus, of labor) and more and more a mere repressive and military force.

X.

This brings us once again to the impossible dilemma facing Israel: to enter Gaza, but to do what? In other times and circumstances, Israel might have made the Palestinians one of its “tribes.” Today, this option is no longer on the agenda: “two peoples for one state” is not a viable solution when one of the two peoples, the supposedly dominant one, tends to fragment. The prospect of a full-scale war requires a clear strategic horizon. Under current conditions, “eradicating Hamas” is

at best utopian, at worst a euphemism for genocide. The kind of asymmetrical warfare that would have to be waged (and won) to “cleanse Gaza” would require a number of conditions that are not given, chief among them the neutrality or connivance of a not insignificant segment of the local population. Of course, the unrealistic nature of the operation does not preclude either that it be undertaken or that its real or stated objectives change during its course, right up to the bloodiest *De profundis*. But beware: for the past few years, the variables at play have not been the same. The global confrontation between the United States and China overdetermines everything. We are not counting on Xi Jinping’s good feelings to save the Palestinians, but we are betting on the “expendability” of the Palestinian issue politically within the framework of the new bipolarism in formation. It would not be the proletarian revolution, but perhaps good news for the future of the Palestinians, which today appears so uncertain and bleak.

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Retrieved on January 17th, 2024 from
<decompositions.noblogs.org/post/2023/10/18/the-explosion-point-of-israeli-contradictions>.
Originally published in Italian on October 17th, 2023:
<illatocattivo.blogspot.com/2023/10/il-punto-desplisione-delle.html> Translated into English
by decompositions

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