

On ‘Moral Panic’ and the Courage to Speak: The West’s Silence on Gaza

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Ilan Pappé on the West's silence on Gaza. (Design: Palestine Chronicle)

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**By Ilan Pappé – The Palestine
Chronicle**



The Palestinians do not have the luxury for Western moral panic to have its say or impact. Not caving in to this panic is one small but important step in building a global Palestine network that is urgently needed.

The responses in the Western world to the situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank raise a troubling question: why is the official West, and official Western Europe in particular, so indifferent to the suffering of the Palestinians?

Why is the Democratic Party in the US complicit, directly and indirectly, in sustaining the daily inhumanity in Palestine—a complicity so visible that it probably was one of the reasons they lost the election, as the Arab American and progressive vote in key states could, and justifiably so, not forgive the Biden administration for its part in the genocide in the Gaza Strip?

This is a pertinent question, given that we are dealing with a televised genocide that has now been renewed on the ground. It is different from previous periods in which Western indifference and complicity were displayed, either during the Nakba or the long years of occupation since 1967.

During the Nakba and up to 1967, it was not easy to get hold of information, and the oppression after 1967 was mostly incremental and, as such, was ignored by the Western media and politics, which refused to acknowledge its cumulative effect on the Palestinians.

But these last eighteen months are very different. Ignoring the genocide in the Gaza Strip and the ethnic cleansing in the West Bank can only be described as intentional and not out of ignorance. Both the Israelis' actions and the discourse that accompanies them are too visible to be ignored, unless politicians, academics, and journalists choose to do so.

This kind of ignorance is, first and foremost, the result of successful Israeli lobbying that thrived on the fertile ground of European guilt complex, racism and Islamophobia. In the case of the US, it is

also the outcome of many years of an effective and ruthless lobbying machine that very few in academia, media, and, in particular, politics dare to disobey.

This phenomenon is known in recent scholarship as moral panic, very characteristic of the more conscientious sections of Western societies: intellectuals, journalists, and artists.

Moral panic is a situation in which a person is afraid of adhering to his or her own moral convictions because this would demand some courage that might have consequences. We are not always tested in situations that require courage, or at least integrity. When it does happen, it is in situations where morality is not an abstract idea but a call for action.

This is why so many Germans were silent when Jews were sent to extermination camps, and this is why white Americans stood by when African Americans were lynched or earlier on enslaved and abused.

What is the price that leading Western journalists, veteran politicians, tenured professors, or CEOs of well-known companies would have to pay if they were to blame Israel for committing a genocide in the Gaza Strip?

It seems that they are worried about two possible outcomes. The first is being condemned as antisemites or Holocaust deniers, and secondly, they fear that their honest response would trigger a discussion that will include the complicity of their country, or Europe, or the West in general, in enabling the genocide and all the criminal policies against the Palestinians that preceded it.

This moral panic leads to some astonishing phenomena. In general, it transforms educated, highly articulate, and knowledgeable persons into total imbeciles when they talk about Palestine. It disallows the more perceptive and thoughtful members of the security services from examining the Israeli demands to include all Palestinian resistance on a terrorist list, and it dehumanizes the Palestinian victims in the mainstream media.

The lack of compassion and basic solidarity with the victims of genocide was exposed by the double standards shown by mainstream media in the West, and in particular by the more established newspapers in the US, such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. When the editor of *Palestine Chronicle*, Dr. Ramzy Baroud, lost 56 members of his family—killed by the Israeli genocidal campaign in the Gaza Strip—not one of his colleagues in American journalism bothered to talk to him or show any interest in hearing about this atrocity. On the other hand, a fabricated Israeli allegation of a connection between the *Chronicle* and a family in whose block of flats hostages were held triggered a huge interest by these outlets and attracted their attention.

This imbalance in humanity and solidarity is just one example of the distortions that moral panic brings with it. I have little doubt that the actions against Palestinian or pro-Palestinian students in the US, or against known activists in Britain and France, as well as the arrest of the editor of the *Electronic Intifada*, Ali Abunimah, in Switzerland, are all manifestations of this distorted moral behavior.

A similar case unfolded just recently in Australia. Mary Kostakidis, a famous Australian journalist and former prime-time weeknight *SBS World News Australia* presenter, has been taken to the federal court over her—one should say quite tame—reporting on the situation in the Gaza Strip. The very fact that the court has not dismissed this allegation upon its arrival shows you how deeply rooted moral panic is in the Global North.

But there is another side to it. Thankfully, there is a much larger group of people who are not afraid of taking the risks involved in clearly stating their support for the Palestinians, and who do show this solidarity while knowing it may lead to suspension, deportation, or even jail time. They are not easily found among the mainstream academia, media, or politics, but they are the authentic voice of their societies in many parts of the Western world.

The Palestinians do not have the luxury for Western moral panic to have its say or impact. Not caving in to this panic is one small but important step in building a global Palestine network that is urgently needed—firstly to stop the destruction of Palestine and its people, and second, to create the conditions for a decolonized and liberated Palestine in the future