The Gaza Genocide and the War on Iran | TBEE Episode Zero

A new, intimate format to gain insights: The Black Elephant Experience brings together public figures, activists, and people on the receiving end of Western-manufactured disaster to share what's going on in the background and how it relates to current events. It starts from the personal before delving into substantive issues because that approach brings in-depth connection on top of critical analysis. The substantive question we tackle in this episode: Are the Gaza genocide and the war on Iran more the products of Zionism, American Empire, or Western modernity? Cohosted by Pascal Lottaz from Neutrality Studies and recovering globalist, New York Times reader, and drug addict, Felix Marquardt.

#Pascal

Welcome, everybody, to a special episode of Neutrality Studies, because today I'm joined not by one, not by two, but by five wonderful guests—and we have a sixth one coming soon. I'll put it like this: this episode is shared with Felix Marquardt, who's running a wonderful experiment called The Black Elephant, in which he's developed a very special format to talk with guests and to work with vulnerability as a way to get meaningful conversations going.

So what we said we'd do today is use that format and mix it a bit with a political one to discuss one of the problems of our time—the violence engulfing West Asia, which is doing very horrible things to many, many people. We have wonderful guests here, whom I'll actually leave to Felix to introduce to everyone. I'm Pascal Lottaz. I'm an associate professor at Kyoto University, originally from Switzerland, and now working and living in Japan. And our other guests are also from around the world. Felix, I'll hand it over to you.

#Felix Marquardt

Thank you so much, Pascal. What a great pleasure it is to co-host this with you. This episode zero of the Black Elephant Experience is the fruit of conversations that emerged with you, so I'm delighted that we're doing this episode together—this episode zero together. I'd like to start by saying we had a slightly larger panel originally, and much more gender balance, so this wasn't intended to be a manual. I just want to put that out there. Our last guest, who should be arriving any second, is Melek, who is from Gaza but currently based in Qatar. Aside from her, we have the legendary historian Ilan Pappé—thrilled to have you here, Ilan. Murtaza, great pleasure again—Murtaza Hussain from The Intercept. Welcome, Maz. And Mohammed Jalal from The Thinking Muslim. And there's Melek—welcome.

#Malak Zakoutova

How are you?

#Felix Marquardt

Thank you, thank you.

#Ilan Pappe

Good to see you.

#Felix Marquardt

Wonderful. Wonderful to have you. So, Melek, I was just saying that it wasn't intended that you'd be the only woman on this panel. Forgive us—there were some last-minute cancellations, and here we are. Let me tell you a bit about how Black Elephants started. During the pandemic, a motley crew of people—damaged in various ways, yours truly included—got together and realized that because we'd learned to wrestle with our trauma, and had done some work to heal and deal with it, we'd developed what we almost saw as a kind of superpower: the ability not just to talk about what we were thinking or what was going on, but to go to places most people don't go, with people they don' t know, and to talk about things that are more personal, more intimate.

So not just what's happening on the front of the stage, but what's happening backstage, in the background. My work is—I come from media. I worked for The New York Times Company, and then worked with The New York Times Company for years. But I've disconnected from that. Eventually, I came to the conclusion, as a drug addict in recovery, that there's a neglected relationship between propaganda on the one hand and addiction on the other. They sort of explode in terms of their importance in the 20th century around the same time—and it's not by chance. So here we have several people—I mean, almost all of you, I would say, apart from Melek and me—people who are really working hard on a daily basis to enlighten others about what's really going on in the world, rather than what we're told in various mainstream media.

What I took away from that experience I mentioned during the pandemic, and from the birth of Black Elephant, is that you don't just need meaningful information to function properly in this world. You do need it—you really do need information that's disconnected from power—but you also need something else. You need connection. You need to be able to connect at a deeper level with other people. And when you put the two together, it radically changes the way you interact with them. I'm not going to say more at this stage; I'll have a bit more to say at the end of this session. But for now, I'd just like to explain how this works.

So we do two rounds where we don't answer each other—we just answer the same questions. The first round is more personal, although not exclusively. And the second really goes to the question of the day, which is: are the genocide in Gaza and the war in Iran products of Zionism, the U.S. empire, or Western modernity? And I should have said "and/or" rather than "or," obviously. So before we go on, let's just dive into round one. I'm going to start, because this is sort of a muscle, and I think it makes sense that I have some training in this. I'll start, and then I'll call on one of you, and we can do this first round.

So the first round question is: where—so you guys who are here, dear guests, and for the public—where I was born. I was born in Paris. One last thing I should have mentioned: I'm going to use a timer. Please pay attention if I tell you, just to make sure we all divide the time correctly and share it in a relatively equal way. I'll show my timer if you've gone on too long, so to speak. So, let me start. Okay. I was born in Paris to parents who are both not French. I live in Athens, in Greece. My father was German, but he grew up in Austria.

Um, my mom was born in New York and grew up there. My parents met in New York, moved to Paris, and that's where I grew up. One thing people don't know about me is that I know a prodigiously embarrassing number of people in the Epstein files, as I understand it—as I've shared with Murtaza. I've been wrestling with that realization since the Department of Justice put them out. So, I'm going to speak about one parent or friend and how they connect to current events. I'm going to talk about my father. My father died a couple of months before October 7. He was a German man, born in 1945. And…

#Felix Marquardt

The fact that he was German and born in 1945 really shaped how he wrestled with history and with his German-ness. One of the ways he tried to deal with the Nazi era, as someone born in 1945, was that he almost instinctively gravitated toward people of the Jewish faith, and he made friends with them. He was really the definition of a philo-Semite. Because he died a couple of months before October 7, I went to his funeral in Vienna—literally a week before October 7—and about 90% of the people there were Jewish. And because they were mostly boomers, I knew a week later that conversations with this whole world defined by my dad, which was a big part of my life, were going to become very, very complicated. I've been wrestling with that since then, and it's a big part of the novel I'm about to publish, which is called *The Strange Collapse of the Times*. So that's me. And now I'm going to pass it on to Pascal Lottaz.

#Pascal

Thank you very much, Felix. And may I just interject, for everybody who's watching—we forgot to tell you that we've prepared two questions. The first one is for everyone to answer, one after another: tell us your first name, place of origin, current whereabouts, and one thing most people don'

t know about you. Finally, tell us about a friend or a family member and how they connect to current events. Then we'll move on to the second question after that. Apologies that we didn't mention this earlier. So again, my name is Pascal Lottaz. I'm the host of the YouTube show *Neutrality Studies*, currently in Japan.

And something that most people don't know about me is—I was kind of wondering which thing I should talk about—but I'm going to mention again that I'm Swiss. Both of my parents are Swiss, but one of my grandmothers was German. That German grandmother, who passed away a couple of years ago, was a child during the Second World War. She was very young, so she didn't have many memories of it. But one thing she did remember was her older brother, whom she loved dearly and often talked about, saying what a wonderful and warm-hearted person he was. Now, the problem is that this wonderful and warm-hearted person also died in the war, in an SS uniform somewhere in Eastern Europe. He was 26 or 27 when he died. And that event was from a very...

#Pascal

At that event—I mean, knowing that, and hearing how my grandmother talks about him as a lovely person she misses dearly, and knowing that he fought for such a horrible government and was probably involved in the extermination of so many innocent people—Jews, Roma, and other so-called "undesirables"—even if he wasn't directly involved in the actual killing, he was part of the machine that killed these people. Ever since I was 13 or 14, that's been in my mind—how it happened. I saw a picture of him, a good-looking young man, and realized that this kid basically participated in and perpetrated these kinds of things. He probably thought it was a good idea, that he wanted to do it, that he wanted to be part of this movement, and that, in his youth, he believed it was the right thing to do.

That's something that still keeps me awake. I mean, this question of why good people do evil deeds. And I think that's the connection to what's happening right now, because I don't believe that what's going on in West Asia can be reduced to the evilness of one or another person. It's a system, and we need to figure out what the different parts of that system are that, in the end, create mass dying. And with that out of the way, I'd like to call on Malak to give us your answers—your first name, place of origin, current whereabouts, and one thing most people don't know about you, and how a family member or experience impacts your view of current events.

#Malak Zakoutova

This is probably going to be the most Arab thing—I like my name to be pronounced as Malak, not Malak. I always get that. So my first name is Malak, and I'm from Gaza. I grew up and lived my whole life there, but I'm currently a resident of Qatar. I did my studies here—my master's—and then the genocide started. So I thought, okay, I don't have much of an option, I'll just stay here. I started working, and that's about it. One thing most people don't know about me—and this is very dear to my heart, I don't think I've ever shared it with anyone—is that most people are intimidated to come

near me or get close to me because they think I'm somehow privileged and self-absorbed, which hurts.

And so most people have this idea about me, and they avoid me for some reason. Once they get to know me, that's the first thing they tell me, and it's kind of shocking. It's like everyone avoids you because they think you're avoiding them, but in fact, you're just lonely because everyone is avoiding you. The one person I'm going to talk about—who had a great impact on my life and who has a strong connection to what's happening in the world—is Dr. Rifat Laraira. I think I've been very privileged to be his student. I was a student of Dr. Rifat's, a colleague, and most importantly, I think, a friend. So…

#Malak Zakoutova

I remember Dr. Rifat taught us this one sonnet by John Donne. It said, "Death, be not proud." It still shocks me to this day how Dr. Rifat explained that somehow John Donne himself—of course, he passed—but he outlived death because his writings and his sonnets are still with us. We still read them, reflect on them, and study them. This connects so much to Dr. Rifat, because Israel thought, okay, we killed Rifat—but Dr. Rifat, well, not kind of, he actually outlived death. Because to this day, we still read his poems.

We still remember him. We still talk about him. And one of the things I noticed about Dr. Rifat is that if you go back to his Twitter account, for example, and read his tweets, you can't just put them in a timeline—they fit perfectly with every situation. It's like he's still with us. That's why I refuse to talk about him in the past tense. When I do, I just feel bad, because it feels like he's here with us. He literally outlived death. I'd like to pass it to Mr. Lottaz.

#Muhammad Jalal

You're still muted. Thank you so much. Yeah, so my name is Muhammad Jalal. I was born in Britain—in the UK, in London—in a place called Hackney, which is in the east of London. I grew up in London, and I've been a Londoner really since birth. I'm here at the moment, talking to you from just outside London, but I reserve the right to call where I live London still. Something that not many people know about me: as you may know, I started a podcast that focuses on current events and the ideological fissures that exist within the broader world, as well as within the Muslim community. It's called *A Thinking Muslim*. And often, when people ask me why I began the podcast…

I normally say it's because we've got some great minds within the Muslim community and outside it—many of them on this panel—who really need to be heard by members of the Muslim community. But that's only part of it. I think, fundamentally, the reason I began the podcast goes back to 2018. My son passed away, and it was a shock to the system. It made me realize that life is temporary, and it isn't just about accumulating wealth or becoming successful in one's career. I used to be a

lecturer; I taught politics for a very long time. But life is more than that. Until and unless we make something meaningful of our lives, we're in a position—maybe a privileged position—and I think most of us are in a very privileged position.

Until and unless we're able to use our talents, our expertise, our knowledge—whatever we have at our disposal, the resources so many of us possess—until we use those for the sake of justice and for the sake of doing something good, then, in my case, as a believer, I believe in God, I believe in Allah, and I know that when I return to my Lord, I want to return with a semblance of work that adds something to my scale, to my weight. So I think it was really about death, and for so many of us on this panel, I suspect trauma or loss can really propel you in a different direction from where you were previously. And, you know, every loss has a silver lining.

You know, I think, of course, a loss of that gravity was a shock to all of us—my whole family. But for sure, I feel that if it wasn't for that loss, I wouldn't have focused my mind as I would have wished to. The next question was about someone who's had an impact on me, and again, to continue that conversation about loss—this time last year, in fact, my dear wife passed away. I just want to say a few words about her. She was a courageous individual, someone who never lost sight of diversity and of believing in and seeking justice. Even during her illness—she had cancer—she would go on demonstrations, she would go on marches, she would tweet, she would post on Instagram, she would put together podcasts to talk about Palestine, to talk about the Uyghurs, to talk about all sorts of areas where people are facing immense injustice.

And I think that was, again, something I look back on with admiration—that you have someone who's personally going through such hardship, yet she never really forgot her need, her duty to speak truth to power, to speak up for justice. And I think that's something that, you know, in the darkest days, when I think to myself, "This is too much going on, what's happening in Palestine just hurts us, hurts us intensely," I feel that—maybe just to end the point—we probably need to learn from people who are better than us, who are able to withstand those tragedies and just, day by day, work for justice. And I know so many on this panel are like that. And, you know, I salute all those people in Gaza in particular who just continue, despite all the hardships they face. So, yeah, that's my answer. Thank you.

#Felix Marquardt

Thank you, Muhammad. Thank you so much. I'll pass it on to Ilan. I'm going to—can you guys hear me properly? Can you hear me better, Ilan?

#Ilan Pappe

Oh, yeah. Okay, wonderful. Your early intervention was... muffled. Okay, okay.

#Felix Marquardt

Apologies.

#Ilan Pappe

Maybe it’s only on my side. I don’t know. Okay.

#Felix Marquardt

I’ll raise my—uh, I’ll raise my phone if the time’s running out, just to show you guys. Okay? Yep.

#Ilan Pappe

Sure, sure. So, uh, I was born in Haifa, where I'm from, where I'm talking to you now. And, um...

#Ilan Pappe

If I’m thinking about something nobody knows about me—well, I’m quite a public figure, so it’s difficult to say. When I saw the question, I actually thought of something relatively esoteric, but maybe it helps to understand some of the impossible realities we live in. Around, I think it was the 15th or 16th of July 2023, a friend of mine from another university in Gaza called me. He also put the director of the university on the phone, and they said, “Can you come to a conference we’re doing on the 10th of October 2023 at the university, about oral history—the importance of oral history?”

I spend most of my time in the UK, where I teach in Exeter, but my family and many of my friends—most of my Palestinian friends—are still here in the Galilee. So I commute as much as I can between the two places. I thought, of course, I’d say yes. And then I asked myself, how do I get into Gaza? This was, of course, before the 7th of October. But I’m sure you understand that even before the 7th of October, it wasn’t easy to get into the Strip, given the Israeli siege and blockade. I have a European passport in addition to my Israeli one, and I began to negotiate with the German embassy in Cairo, because I knew that in order to get in, I would need their—well, not exactly their permission, but their involvement.

I don’t remember exactly all the details now. Anyway, two things were very clear to me: first, that everything was ready for me on the 10th to cross through Rafah; and second, that I already knew what would happen to me when I came back to Haifa, and I was willing to take that into account. And then, well, the 7th of October came—three days before the intended conference—and I had to postpone that visit. But of course, everything has changed so dramatically, especially for Gaza and its people. The level of destruction is something unimaginable, horrendous, horrific—an Israeli criminal and genocidal policy that has escalated to levels we hadn’t seen before.

But somehow, sometimes the private story intertwines with a more collective one. The people I'm thinking about—well, I was particularly thinking about one of my first PhD students, Malaka Shwaiki. We managed to get her a scholarship to the University of Exeter, where she did a brilliant PhD on hunger strikes as a weapon of resistance. She finished with flying colors, and rightly so. She's now a lecturer at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. And thinking about her, and about my very, very good friend and co-author, Ramzi Baroud, who lost sixteen members of his family, including his sister and brother-in-law—how...

#Ilan Pappe

These traumatic, momentous events in the life of Palestine and its people—if you are intimately connected and involved with the Palestinians, I think you see them in an even more powerful way. You can only be active not just because of the general knowledge you have, which by itself should move people, I think, in the case of Palestine, but because it's connected to people who have names, who are friends—friends who, in my case, I've known for more than fifty years. That gives it another dimension. And the question is how to convey that dimension to a wider audience, because we still need to expand solidarity with the Palestinians in order to face the existential danger they are now confronting—not only in Gaza, but also in the West Bank and inside Israel.

I think that's how you humanize it and make it a personal issue, not just one of moral justice or principle. You feel committed to people you know, even if you don't really know them. That's why I think stories like Hind Rajab's became so powerful in galvanizing people—people feel like they know someone they don't actually know. These are the people I'm thinking about. I also have a few students from Tehran who were my PhD students over the years, and for me, what's happening to them is far more important than what's happening to Iran right now. Because it's this mixture—you care about individuals, then you care about the nation, then you care about the cause, and so on. And it's not easy to navigate.

#Felix Marquardt

Thank you so much, Ilan. Maz, the floor is yours.

#Murtaza Hussain

Yeah, thank you, everyone. So, I'm Mojtaba Al-Hussein. I'm a journalist. I live in New York. I grew up most of my life around here, but my family is originally from Pakistan. I think we were talking earlier, Felix, about our origins. I'm actually not very good at personal reflections, to be honest—that's probably one of the most notable things about me. But, you know, I was thinking about that. It's interesting because my family lived in India for a very, very long time. We actually had a family tree—we charted our lineage going back maybe 800 or 900 years. And then, when the partition of India and Pakistan happened, they left for Pakistan.

And it was a very traumatic thing, which no one ever really talked about. Obviously, we were uprooted, and then the whole family scattered all over the world, and there's not really any contact anywhere in particular. But it was always this very devastating thing. And, you know, being uprooted after so long kind of changes everything about the way you see the world and so forth. So… you know, most of my family now lives either in the Middle East or the West. Some of them live in Pakistan, some in India, and you can't really—well, you can feel alienated from them. And I actually can't return to Pakistan. I can't, because of political reasons related to my reporting. I can't go there myself.

And my wife is not Pakistani, so it's another level of attenuation. But it's interesting because a couple of years ago, my grandmother—she's still alive—went back to India. She grew up in Hyderabad; that's where that side of the family is from. She's in her 90s now, and when she returned to Hyderabad a few years ago, she met her old school friends from back then—Hindu friends and others from different minority communities in India. Of course, the partition was a religious-based partition, so she had left for Pakistan. And when they met, it was very touching, actually, because they shared all these memories.

And what Ilan was saying—the vast macro-political context was sort of distilled into this relationship all these old women had with each other, who had been friends when they were very young, just children. So it was a very poignant moment, and it made me realize this whole thing had been such a... or, if not a mistake, at least something that hadn't really been thought through very well, and it's impacted all of our lives—this huge ripple and so forth. So when I think about the origins, I think about that, how the origin points have been so kicked out, and then, you know, who knows what will happen in the future, even now that the story is still playing out. But yeah, that's kind of my background and how I got here, in that sense.

#Felix Marquardt

Thank you so much, Maz. And thank you all for this first round. Before we move into the second round, we have a short video we'd like to play. Are you ready, Pascal, to put it on?

#Pascal

Let's see if we can put it on together. Okay, here we go.

#Felix Marquardt

It feels like it captures this moment for...

#Pascal

The West. It's a very famous one—most of you probably know it. Let's just watch a minute of it.

#Video 1

Very well. They're coming. Now we'll see how these Russians deal with a crack SS division.

#Video 2

Hans.

#Video 1

Have courage, my friend.

#Video 2

Yeah. Hans, I've just noticed something. These communists are all cowards. Have you looked at our caps recently? Our caps? The badges on our caps. Have you looked at them? What? No. A bit. They've got skulls on them. Have you noticed that our caps actually have little pictures of skulls on them? I don't... Hans, are we the baddies?

#Video 1

We should be able to hold them at this point.

#Felix Marquardt

Thanks, Pascal. Are we the baddies? Are we the baddies? So, for the second round, we'll be answering the following question: Are the genocide in Gaza and the Iran war products of Zionism, the U.S. empire, and/or Western modernity? Maybe I'll just start by giving you a couple of examples—hints at why I came up with this question and why we decided to go with it with Pascal. I remember thinking, in the months that followed October 7, as I saw many testimonials from—well, I can't remember the name of that music festival that was taking place—I saw no comment anywhere in the Western press about a simple question, which I felt was really critical: what kind of society thinks it's okay, thinks it's imaginable, to have a music festival, a techno music festival, a stone's throw from a concentration camp?

And I just looked for references to this, for questioning, and I just couldn't find any. The other thing I want to mention is, I spoke about my dad earlier on. There was a moment that was really a wake-up call for me—when I read Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*. Césaire is like the cousin of Frantz Fanon, from Martinique. And in *Discourse on Colonialism*—I'm paraphrasing, obviously—he said something I found incredibly powerful: he was speaking to the French, but indirectly he was speaking to the West.

And he said, you pretend that what has shocked you to no end is what man can do to man—the realization and the horror of being confronted with the abject reality of what humans are capable of doing to humans. But actually, what disgusts you, what shocks you, is that you have done to white people in Europe what your civilization has been doing all around the world to people who don't have white skin. And, um, yeah, I think that's what's behind this question. And, um, I'll ask Ilan to go first in answering.

#Ilan Pappe

Yes. Uh, well, I think we should, in a way, look personally and differently at the genocide in Gaza and the war in Iran when unpacking the three elements you're talking about—Zionism, American imperialism, and modernism. I think in the case of Gaza, it is definitely the result of Zionism. Zionism is an ideology of a settler-colonial movement. And an ideology, like all ideologies, does not stay in the books or in theory but evolves in relation to realities on the ground. Some ideologies become softer; some become harsher, more fundamentalist. In the case of Zionism, the latter is the correct one. It started already as a settler-colonial ideology that viewed the Palestinians as the major obstacle to the project of building a Jewish state in Palestine.

And from that ideology came the strategy that other settler-colonial projects adopted—what the late Patrick Wolfe called "the elimination of the natives." It led to the massive ethnic cleansing of 1948. But the Palestinian resistance to it, and the inability to square the circle that Zionism always wanted to square—between the wish to have a liberal democratic state and, at the same time, maintain this basic logic of eliminating the natives, as if it were possible to reconcile the two—the total failure of that reconciliation hardened Zionism. It made it a much harsher ideology at its very core.

And probably the last 26 years were the phase in which Zionism escalated in two ways. One is that it kind of got rid of its more ambivalent margins—people who were still hoping somehow, what we used to call liberal Zionists or left Zionists, who tried to find a way to somehow reconcile universal values, whichever they were, with the actual racist nature of Zionism. This disappeared as we moved through the 21st century. Unfortunately, the outcome of that disappearance is that, if there were inhibitions—and there were some—in Israeli policy toward the Palestinians, they slowly disappeared.

And the last kind of obstacle, or hindrance, or the last kind of complication, if you want, in how to deal with the issue of Palestine and the Palestinians was removed when Israel decided to abandon, in a way, a policy of incremental genocide in Gaza and incremental ethnic cleansing in the West Bank, and move into an explicit genocidal policy in Gaza and an explicit policy of ethnic cleansing. So the first answer is that, when it comes to Gaza, the focus should be on Zionism. Of course, Zionism could not have been successful in its policies of genocide and ethnic cleansing without American imperialism. You take American imperialism out of the equation, and you get a far weaker Zionist movement in the past and a far weaker Israel in the present.

And America, with its imperialist orientation, is a very important—I'd say crucial—member of the international coalition that not only gives Israel immunity but also provides it with the material means to implement its ideology. Modernity has something to do with it, though I don't think "modernity" is the right term. I think modernization is more important than modernity. Modernity can be a fact; modernization is an ideology—and it's an ideology that goes together with imperialism, colonialism, and Zionism. Therefore, it provides the scholarly, philosophical, and sometimes moral scaffolding that allows people in the West to regard such atrocities as genocide as "self-defense" of the Jewish state. It allows them to look at Iran as another reincarnation of Nazi Germany, and therefore, even if it's a lunatic president of America leading the way, it's considered "justified," and so on.

So I think modernization, rather than modernity, is what I would put into the mix. For Iran—and with this I'll finish—the eternal question, of course, is whether the tail is wagging the dog or the dog is wagging the tail. We're always asking this question about the Israeli-American relationship, especially when analyzing American policy in the Middle East. I think each period of American imperialism and intervention in the Middle East has to be examined separately. I don't think you can, as a historian—that's my view—really have an overall analysis of American policy from 1945 until today, because it went through quite fundamental changes.

Right now—and that's probably more important than the historical roots—I'd say it's very clear that within the kind of Republican mindset that both brought someone like Trump to such a powerful position and allowed him to take the American national interest, the American military, and even the American economy into this horrific adventure, there were two camps within his base. One camp was totally opposed to this policy, and still is, and another camp, which also included Christian Zionists, was very enthusiastic about this behavior that totally violates international law and every kind of consensus we had in the past about world affairs. The balance was quite delicate, and I think that's where Netanyahu and Israel played a very important role in tipping it toward action and overcoming the internal hesitation about this move.

But generally speaking, American imperialism is going back to the harsh, territorial kind of imperialism. Leaving aside— I mean, if Trump and his orientation were to succeed—they've definitely put aside the clandestine imperialism that used to characterize American involvement in the Middle East. They're going back to the age of imperialism Eric Hobsbawm wrote about, namely what one should call territorial imperialism. Not only in the Middle East, but also toward Cuba, Venezuela, and God knows where else. In a way, this again exposes the connection between modernization—which in the West is equated with enlightenment, progress, and secularism—and it exposes again this pretense that these values are universal and can only be interpreted by so-called Western civilization, sometimes called Judeo-Christian civilization. I think, as with every moment of horror in history, it has a positive side to it, because the destruction is so total that we might rethink

some of the taken-for-granted— as Michel Foucault would have put it—taken-for-granted values, universal values, international law, and so on, that the West was able to monopolize over the rest of the world for quite a long time. Thank you.

#Felix Marquardt

Sorry. Thank you, Ilan. I'll pass it on to Murtaza.

#Murtaza Hussain

There was a book written many years ago by a gentleman named Zygmunt Bauman. He was a Polish philosopher, and I was very influenced by his writings, actually. He wrote a book called *The Holocaust and Modernity*. His contention in the book was that the Holocaust was, of course, caused to some degree by anti-Jewish sentiment and anti-Semitism and so forth. But he said it didn't really make sense that it happened in Germany for that reason, because at that time, according to his assessment, France was a much more anti-Semitic society—yet it didn't happen in France, and so on.

What he actually said was that the Holocaust was the product of a particular development in modernity— that the whole idea of modernity was about improving society through technology. It wasn't really a product of excessive hatred, although that was part of it, but rather a product of seeing technology as a means of solving a "problem" in society—namely, a certain group of people viewed as that problem. He compared the German attitude toward Roma people, Jewish people, Slavs, and others to the way one might think about gardening or reforming society in a technological way. And the tools for doing it were, of course, highly technological as well.

They were using locomotives and trains and gas and all these things to accomplish this in a more effective way. And the whole time, it was seen, from their perspective, as an improvement of society—from a genetic standpoint, from a hygienic standpoint, in all these ways. That was how it was described. So I noticed that the way the Israeli government now talks about the issue of Palestinians, and even Lebanese, and now to some extent Iranians, they're talking about it in the same way. They're not talking about it as political violence used as a tool to achieve a political end, or to change a political outcome, or to create more favorable conditions for their advancement in negotiations toward an end state, and so forth.

They're talking about it as if there's a group of people who are a problem. They don't have any political salience or any political claim to make. How can we use these technological methods to remove these people? And by removing them, we will have improved the situation in our own society and in the region. And that's it. So you see a lot of discussion about the use of AI, air superiority, and all these other tools. But the only goal, really, is the removal of a group of people who are deemed unwanted. And what Bauman argued was that this is very much part of modernity. It's not that genocide didn't happen historically—it has—but the motivations and the drivers were very different, and the way it was implemented was very different.

But he said that it was really a very modern worldview to think that, well, you know, if you see your goal as improving things from your own perspective, and you think you need to remove certain people to do that, then you can just apply technical methods to accomplish it. And then any other sort of human or political consideration can be swept aside or deemed irrelevant. That's even a break from, you know, traditional beliefs in the closed world and so forth. You also have violence, as we've seen, having a political end. But most of the Israeli application of violence now has no political correlation. It's very much like what was described as happening in the Holocaust—just a technical application of removing a certain group of people.

#Felix Marquardt

Thank you, Murtaza. This reminds me that an entire school of philosophy was based on some of those considerations—the Frankfurt School. So let me go to Malak. I'm sorry for mispronouncing. You're muted.

#Pascal

Malak, can you unmute yourself? You're still muted.

#Malak Zakoutova

Okay, can you hear me now? I wanted to say that your pronunciation is really good. So I wasn't referring to you guys—your pronunciation is good. It's pretty intimidating to answer this question after Ilan and Murtaza have already spoken. But my personal thinking, my personal take on this—the genocide in Gaza, in the simplest terms—is that it's basically Zionism, in the sense that Israel believes they are promised a state based on ethnic cleansing, and they're basing it on ethnic cleansing.

So it's basically Zionism. But what made it possible for Zionism, or what paved the way for it, is obviously American impunity. That, and also, when it comes to Western modernization—let's say it—they also made it easy, or kind of legitimate. It's funny to say "legitimate," but in that sense, because of their normalization of colonial powers and colonial domination. But I think the war on Iran is a little bit different. I think it's basically American, but it serves Zionism. That's my simple answer.

#Felix Marquardt

Thank you very much, Malak. I'll call on Mohammed, and we'll close with Pascal Lottaz.

#Muhammad Jalal

Thank you so much. I think the question itself maybe assumes that these are separable causes, and they're not. Zionism, the American empire, and Western modernity are really not competing explanations. I think they're nested together—mutually reinforcing logics. What we're witnessing today is less a single cause and more a convergence of ideological, structural, and, I think, civilizational forces. Let's take Zionism as the immediate driver, as a tactical and ideological engine here. Zionism operates as a proximate ideology of action, particularly in Gaza. It's a settler-colonial project with an internal logic of expansion, demographic engineering, and permanent insecurity. Gaza, in this sense, is not an aberration; it's the logical end of a project that cannot tolerate indigenous sovereignty.

Like with Iran, Zionism acts as a strategic instigator, seeking to eliminate any regional power capable of deterrence or resistance. But Zionism alone cannot explain this regional war, and it cannot even prosecute it on its own. It really does need imperial sponsorship. That's where the American empire comes in—as the enabler, the empire that provides material and strategic infrastructure. The U.S. provides the hard-power architecture: weapons, diplomatic cover, intelligence, and escalation dominance. And it's not just the U.S. The U.S. and its subordinate states, or its allies—such as the powers in Europe, in the European Union—are all firmly, apart from Spain, of course, to its credit, firmly behind this so-called expedition to Iran, or, as I think he called it, like Putin, a temporary military camp, whatever the term was that they used.

I think this is empire in its late phase—overextended, reactive, yet still overwhelmingly destructive. The Iran war in particular reflects a classic imperial pattern: preemptive wars framed as security, a regime-change logic, control of strategic geography, energy routes, and choke points. It's really a war of choice rather than a war of necessity. And crucially, I think the U.S. is not simply manipulated, as some in analytical circles argue. It's structurally aligned with Israel's objectives because of their shared strategic and ideological commitments. And that's where I think modernity comes in—or Western modernity—which provides the civilizational logic to Zionism, to American imperialism, to this war in Iran, to the genocide in Gaza.

If Zionism is the trigger and empire the vehicle, I think Western modernity is the operating system. It provides the moral vocabulary that makes this violence intelligible and justifiable: civilization versus barbarism, security versus terror, order versus chaos. It normalizes it. There's industrial-scale violence in Gaza, which has become a laboratory for high-tech warfare. It normalizes such extreme use of violence. There's technocratic killing—just think about how AI has been incorporated into this death machine. It's bureaucratized death we see in Gaza, and now we're seeing it in Iran and over the skies of Tehran.

It embeds these racial hierarchies in international law. Lest we forget, the German Chancellor argued that Iran was outside international law when talking about the moral leanings in this particular conflict. So it creates these hierarchies that have persisted within Western modernity for centuries, starting with John Locke and, today, ending with Donald Trump. I think this sort of European

chauvinistic logic remains embedded in the discourse that Western modernity brings. This is why outrage in the West is so selective—because the system itself has graded humanity in a particular way. And so Palestinians or Iranians are not seen as civilized.

And so they're not afforded the kind of consistency that Europeans, or even Ukrainians, were afforded when they were unjustly invaded by Russian forces. Zionism, I think, generates this immediate conflict. American empire scales and sustains it, and Western modernity legitimizes and normalizes it. In other words, without Zionism, there's no Gaza genocide—no mass killing of people as we saw in Gaza. Without the U.S., there's no ability to sustain or expand Israel regionally. And without Western modernity, there's no global tolerance for what we've witnessed over the past two and a half, almost three years. Yeah, thank you.

#Felix Marquardt

Thank you so much, Mohamed. The floor is yours, Pascal Lottaz.

#Pascal

Well, it's difficult to add anything to this because it's been beautifully, beautifully laid out by everyone here. Maybe the one thing I can add is something I was privileged to learn over the last one or two years, talking to a lot of academics. One of the most insightful things to me is that there are actually more Christian Zionists in the world than Jewish Zionists. And Zionism itself—I see it not even as an American or imperial thing, but as something with a European core, a fundamental way in which Europe as a civilization spread and grew and how it embedded itself in every corner of the world. I don't see it so much as an outcome of modernity.

I mean, very much as Mohamed said, modernity at the moment provides the vocabulary to kind of cushion all of this into a discourse of "the good world," the good Israelis keeping in check this evil that is terrorism—Muslim, Palestinian terrorism, and so on. I mean, there you've got the framing that you need. But just think about it: these genocides that Europeans have been committing over the centuries run through history like a red line. And the amazing thing is that there's one genocide, one that is very deeply embedded and remembered today—and that's, again, as you said, Felix, the one committed against fellow whites in Europe.

And today we connect the memory of Germany in the 1930s and 40s very strongly with the memory of that genocide. But when you talk about Belgium—who, when we talk about Belgium, would immediately connect it with the genocide in the Congo? Ten million people dead after 1885, right? It didn't happen much before that one. And the video we just watched, "Are We the Baddies?", was created to show how the Germans wouldn't question themselves. It was made by British comedians—the British, who committed several genocides in South Africa and in India—people directly connected to those who emptied three continents, North America, a good part of South America, and Australia, of their native populations.

So this drive for expansionism and for *Lebensraum*, as the Germans call it—the idea that whites replace others, and then even take the right to bring unwilling Black people as slaves and replace entire populations—that's just hundreds of years of the European way of doing things. They tried it in Asia too; it didn't work. It failed at a much earlier stage. But in my interpretation, what we're seeing is just the latest version of something that has happened so many times before.

And the effort to try to replace a native population with a non-native one, then call them the native population—and even insult the original natives by calling them the invaders—yeah, that's just incredible. And mixing it up with the whole discourse about foreigners in Europe and so on, it's mind-boggling to me. It's mind-boggling that people don't see this, which again is part and parcel of how the system works, right? That you're able to say, "No, no, the past is the past. Colonialism is long gone. European colonialism is like feudalism—it ended a long time ago. We know it was bad; we'd never do it again." And then, once we do it again, we just give it a new name and a new dressing. And the current dressing is what, Mohamed—what you pointed out.

But that's how the system keeps itself alive and then creates this enormous violence. I would never, ever only blame the Americans—not at all. It's a Euro-American settler-colonial, white, basically, crime. Because something just makes, apparently, this form of violence very digestible to large parts of Europe. And I can't put my finger on what it is yet. Maybe it's religion. Maybe it's this black-and-white thinking. I don't know. But something is there that makes this acceptable to them. And if we look at Iran, you see the difference in the standards with which they conduct a war, and with which others conduct a war, and with which the Euro-Americans conduct their wars. There's just something highly, highly violent—and I'll leave it at that.

#Felix Marquardt

Thank you, Pascal. Thank you all for that round. We're stretching—we're slightly pressed for time. So I don't think we'll have as long a discussion as we initially thought. But still, I'd like to start at this point. You can just jump in, but I'll start this part of the show with Ilan. Pascal was just referring to selective memory, and in a way, your job as a historian is to make sure we don't forget parts of the story. But somehow, as I look at all these genocides, I can't help but think about the research that's been done on the school manuals we were raised on. And I'd love for you to speak about the hidden costs—the increasingly obvious but still hidden costs—of selective hypermnesia.

#Ilan Pappe

Yeah, I think it's an important aspect—the ability to concoct narratives that justify inhumanity, barbarism, acts of mass killing, ethnic cleansing, and genocide in a way that's devoid of any historical context, or built on a distorted historical narrative. I mean, there was never such an example, I think, as when it became very clear that the very demand by academics, journalists, and activists after the 7th of October—to historicize, to contextualize in a historical analysis the events of the 7th of October and what happened afterward—was itself treated as illegitimate. I don't

remember another moment when the very notion of historical context was seen as an unacceptable act.

If you remember, this started with Israel's demand that the word "context" not be mentioned in any analysis of the background to the Hamas operation or the Israeli reaction to it. In Germany, it reached an absurd level—lecturers received letters from university administrations telling them not to use the word "context" when analyzing what happened in Gaza. I'm sure there were other periods in history when those in power, for whatever reason, either demanded that historical context not be mentioned or insisted that only one historical narrative be legitimized and the other delegitimized.

But I don't remember—especially not in countries that claim to be the shrines of freedom of expression, freedom of research, freedom of opinion—that in those countries, rather than in more authoritarian regimes, there would be a demand from the very people who claim they created spaces for others to be critical, to offer alternative views because the rest of society is so busy just living. I don't remember a case where it was said, "No, you cannot." It's a little bit similar to what happened, for a far shorter period, in American universities after 9/11. You probably remember the debate about the "core." Then it wasn't called "context"; it was called the "core issue." Its more popular version of the core issue was "Why do they hate us?"

I remember being in New York at the time, and I was asked by university authorities not to mention the core issue. What did the core issue mean? That there is a historical context you have to teach and be familiar with if you want to understand 9/11—even without all the conspiracy theories, you know, even if what you saw is what you got, right? And the American reaction to 9/11. So we were there, in a way, before. But never was the phrase "historical context" equated with antisemitism or Holocaust denial. It's unbelievable, especially when it comes from Germany. But it wasn't only Germany; there was a softer version of this, a total rejection. I mean, even in my own university in Exeter, we had to fight for this—that it's, first of all, our scholarly duty, not just our moral duty. It's our scholarly duty to give a historical context to what happened.

And immediately, the lobby was trying to tell our university that providing a historical context to what happened was supporting terrorism, antisemitism, and so on. I think it's bad enough that you have a battle of narratives. Most settler-colonial and colonialist historiographies try to erase Indigenous history—not just through academic research, but also by destroying landmarks, by appropriating Indigenous folklore, names, and so on. But that was something we were more used to, and I think we knew how to handle it. When it comes to such an explicit demand that history should not be factored into understanding moments of violence in our lives, it's such a dangerous development—especially when it comes from supposedly enlightened societies that claim to cherish academic research as a space of freedom, all kinds of freedom.

It's part of the—well, with this I'll end. I think it's part of the crisis I talked about before. The world order, the moral backbone—the alleged moral backbone—and the world order that the West built immediately after the Second World War, traumatized by the war but unwilling to face the fact that

it was building a new world while two-thirds of the globe was still colonized. And by totally ignoring, for instance, the Islamic contribution to what they call Judeo-Christian civilization, that was a very bad construction. But it took a while to become aware that there were already extensive cracks in those foundations. And now it's collapsing.

And collapse is never nice. I have a Palestinian friend whom I'm trying to encourage by telling him that I think empires fall, including the Zionist empire. He said, "Yes, but you have to be careful they don't fall on you." And he has a point—he really has a point. I understand what he means. He said, you know, this kind of optimistic long-term idea that empires... and history is cyclic, so surely this is going to happen. But he's absolutely right. There's something about the collapse of a powerful outfit where you have to be careful that it doesn't collapse on you, because you have to find a way of avoiding not the collapse itself, but the collateral damage that comes with it.

#Felix Marquardt

Thank you, Ilan. Thank you so much. I think we should slowly move toward closing. We're very grateful for your time—all of you. Maybe I...

#Felix Marquardt

As we were preparing for this show, I had a conversation with Melek about Rifat Al Arir, and I suggested that she read one of his poems before we finish. I'd like to dedicate this show to his memory.

#Pascal

May I suggest that we give the floor for one or two more minutes to Muhammad, then Malak, your final thoughts, and finally the poem?

#Felix Marquardt

That's a very, very good idea. My apologies, Muhammad.

#Muhammad Jalal

Not at all. I'd much prefer to listen to the poem by Rifat. I don't have much more to say, actually. Jazakallah khair. Thank you so much for this wonderful gathering—really wonderful.

#Pascal

BarakAllahu khair. In that case, Melek, please.

#Malak Zakoutova

Okay, so the poem is by Dr. Refaat Alareer. You might be familiar with it. It's called *I Am You.* I'm not going to elaborate—you're just going to listen to it. And again, it's such an honor to recite his poem. Two steps. One, two. Look in the mirror. The horror, the horror. The butt of your M16 on my cheekbone, the yellow patch it left, the bullet-shaped scar expanding like a swastika, snaking across my face, the heartache flowing out of my eyes, dripping from my nostrils, piercing my ears, flooding the place like it did to you seventy years ago or so. I am just you. I'm your past haunting your present and your future. I strive like you did.

I fight like you did. I resist like you resisted. And for a moment, I take your tenacity as a model. Were you not holding the barrel of the gun between my bleeding eyes? One, two. The very same gun, the very same bullet that killed your mom and killed your dad is being used against me by you. Mark this bullet and mark your gun. If you sniff it, it has both your blood and mine. It holds my present and your past. It holds my present. It holds your future. That's why we are twins—same life track, same weapons, same suffering, same facial expressions drawn on the face of the killer, same everything, except that in your case, the victim has evolved backward into a victimizer.

I tell you, I am you—except that I'm not the you of now. I do not hate you. I want to help you stop hating and killing me. I tell you, the noise of your machine gun makes you deaf. The smell of the powder overpowers that of my blood. The sparks distort my facial expressions. Would you stop shooting for a moment? Would you? All you have to do is close your eyes. Seeing these days blinds our hearts. Close your eyes tightly so you can see with your mind's eye. Then look into the mirror. One, two. I am you. I'm your past. And in killing me, you kill yourself. Thank you.

#Felix Marquardt

Thank you so much, Marek, for that reading. And thank you all for being with us. Murtaza unfortunately had to run to do the Dropsite news show, but we're very, very grateful. I know I'm speaking on behalf of Pascal as well, to have had you for this episode zero of the Black Elephant Experience.

#Pascal

Thank you all very much.

#Ilan Pappe

Thank you very much. It was nice meeting you all. Thank you, thank you, thank you.