



A world upside down

Charlotte Al-Khalili

May, 2024



In the wake of October 7th, I was asked by a fellow anthropologist if my Syrian friends and interlocutors - who participated in the 2011 revolution and are strongly opposed to the Syrian regime and its allies (Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah) - supported Hamas *and* called for the annihilation of Israel. It seemed to him that there would be some kind of contradiction (if not hypocrisy) in Syrian revolutionaries supporting Hamas since it is allied with and supported by countries and armed groups that are counter-revolutionary forces in Syria. His words also revealed that he could only imagine that my interlocutors, being Sunni Arabs, were Jew haters in favour of the destruction of the state of Israel.

My Syrian interlocutors strongly condemn Israel's colonisation of Palestine and



are horrified by its current genocidal war on Gaza. It is not only that it brings all too familiar images of death and destruction, but also that Palestine has long been a central political issue that brings together Syrians from various religious, ethnic, and national groups. Different, as well as (sometimes opposed) political parties, movements and ideologies thus met on the condemning of Israel as a colonial state. For most of my interlocutors, there is therefore no contradiction in condemning the crimes of the Syrian regime, Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah while supporting Hamas in Gaza. Yet, some do also denounce Hamas's actions while supporting Palestinian resistance and the Palestinian people.

I have felt very bothered by the assumption underlying my colleague's comment, an assumption that became increasingly widespread in public discourses and media outlets after the October 7th attacks, that not only *all* Palestinians but also *all* Arabs, *all* Muslims (and by ricochet *all* those supporting Gazans and Palestinians) are antisemites and want the destruction of Israel. This latter point is often expressed through the idea that slogans such as the iconic 'from the river to the sea' constitute a call to physically erase the state of Israel - while the same people are not bothered by Israel's map picturing a state from the river to the sea. Such assumptions are thus not only lacking nuance, they are also outright racist and Islamophobic.

But what is maybe more disturbing about such statements is that it reverses discourses and reality. [Calls for the death](#) of *all* Arabs - for the flattening of the *entire* Gaza strip and the killing of *all* Palestinians (from babies to the elderly) living there - are widely present in Israeli media, society, parliament, and the *democratically elected* (as people like to hammer) government. Since October 7th, such discourses have started to be aired on French TV, too, and have not been legally condemned, nor framed as problematic by officials. Moreover, these are not mere discourses, since a genocide is currently unfolding in Gaza that has so far resulted in the murder of over 35,000 Palestinians.



Israel has thus succeeded in demonising Palestinians and Arabs, making many believe that *they are the ones* calling for the very acts Israel is actually committing in front of the world's eyes. Such reversal of discourse and reality might explain why some people are so scared of pro-Palestinian protests, and of Palestinian flags and symbols. This might explain why peaceful protests and calls for ceasefire are, ironically and paradoxically, framed as violent acts and discourses fuelling antisemitism. This rhetoric justifies, in turn, that they be repressed accordingly, through the use of great violence.

In the French context, such a twist, through a simplistic and essentialised binary opposition, permits the conflation of speaking out against Israel's actions and in favour of Palestinian rights, with antisemitism and terrorist apology. A first step in exiting these dangerous dead-ends, fuelled by some kind of clash-of-civilisations discourse, is to add some depth to the current discourses and show that the reality is much more multi-faceted.

This text is a reflection on the essentialising inversion that has widely led to the perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity being turned into its victims, and vice versa. I mainly focus on the reverberations of this inversion in my home country of France, where those defending the rights of Palestinians and denouncing the colonial Israeli settler project and genocidal war are being increasingly and aggressively criminalised. The French government's (almost) unconditional support of Israel illustrates the colonial logic and the historical continuum that links the two countries - something apparent in the colonial administering of immigrants in France and of the *territoires d'Outre-Mer* - an obvious example being [Kanaky](#). It reveals an authoritarian climate in France, where far-right ideas are normalised, thus leading to siding with the Israeli far-right government even when it perpetrates horrific crimes.

Since October 8th, the space within which to denounce Israel's violent military campaign against Gaza, to express disagreement with Israeli policies, to simply



publicly claim to be anti-Zionist, and to explain and contextualise Hamas's actions has been drastically reduced, if not disappeared, in the French media and in public discourse. If such silencing and erasing is not new, it is exacerbated in the current context. In a maybe not-so-surprising twist, in the wake of October 7th, the Rassemblement National (RN) - a far-right French party which is the rebranding of the infamous Front National (FN), a party created by Holocaust deniers and Nazi collaborators - demonstrated alongside other political parties. Together they not only denounced the 'Hamas terrorist attacks' but also, ironically given its own history, declared themselves to be 'fighting antisemitism'.

The criminalisation of Palestinians and Palestinians' sympathisers is not new in France.

While marches in support of Israel took place in France in October, all protests in support of Palestinians and Gaza were then forbidden by the government. The double standard was later exposed when the State Council opposed the decision. The Eiffel Tower and the National Assembly were also illuminated with the colours of the Israeli flag soon after October 7th in a show of solidarity; but the Palestinian flag has yet to be seen on any governmental institution or famous landmark.

On a national and international scale, Israel is still immune from collective and systematic sanctions and continues to receive financial and military aid from the Global North. In another inversion, UNWRA, which is bringing vital humanitarian aid to Palestinians, has seen its usual funding stopped or cut drastically (although some donor states have resumed funding) following Israel's yet-to-be-proven accusations that a dozen of its 13,000 members participated in the October 7th attacks.

In light of these developments, one wonders why the French government and political elite have been so quick to recognise the October 7th attacks as a



barbaric event, while they are so slow in acknowledging the current war on Gaza as genocidal. And why is solidarity with Palestine so strongly criminalised?

In line with the logic of unconditional support to a criminal state and the criminalisation of an entire besieged population, various French MPs and the president of the parliament quickly took trips to Israel to express their backing of the country's so-called self-defence and its ongoing offensive against Gaza. Politicians' trips to Palestine were, however, much fewer, even after the French official discourse slightly shifted given the horrors perpetrated in the strip by the IDF. How to explain the coloniser's capacity to attract so much empathy and the colonised's inability to do so? Why are those supporting the latter being criminalised?

The criminalisation of Palestinians and Palestinians' sympathisers is not new in France. It started with the attacks on the BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanction) movement in the 2000s through a law allowing this political boycott to be treated as a hate crime. In 2022, the tentative shutdown of two pro-Palestinian civil society organisations 'Palestine Vaincra' and 'Comité action Palestine' by the minister of interior for their so-called 'calling for hatred, discrimination, violence' and 'incitement to terrorist acts', shows the French government's conflation of expressions of support for Palestine with terrorism. These decisions were, however, cancelled by the State Council as a violation of freedom of expression. In the post-October 7th context, these accusations have turned into legal pursuits and accusations of apology of terrorism.

In the same vein, the peaceful calls and protests in support of Gaza and against the Israeli war on the strip are systematically presented as signs of heinous antisemitism, which is equated with anti-Zionism. The latest manifestation of this tragic but powerful deployment of the label 'antisemite' is the violent shutdown of student protests in the country, which were preceded by the ban on [public](#) and [academic](#) lectures and conferences.



The criminalisation of defenders of peace and legality and of critics of Israeli policies and war has thus taken a dangerous turn. On October 10th, the ministry of justice recommended that any discourse 'in support of Hamas' and any declaration 'presenting the attacks against Israel as acts of resistance' be strongly condemned and treated as terrorism apology by courts. This has criminalised some forms of political discourse: [Trade-unionists](#), [journalists](#), and [politicians](#) - among them the head of the parliamentary opposition - have been summoned to the police station to look into accusations of terrorism apology, resulting in a [trade-unionist](#) being sentenced to a one-year suspended prison sentence for distributing a leaflet denouncing the current war on Gaza.

These grotesque accusations and now legal pursuits are not only dangerous attacks on pro-Palestinian voices; they also constitute worrying attacks on freedom of speech and democracy in France and elsewhere. They alert us, whether we agree or not with the opposition and their positions, to the poor state of our democracy and the authoritarian turn of the French government. One of the latest examples of such fascist trends in French politics is the authorised protest of Neo-Nazis who freely marched in the heart of Paris on the 11th of May. This is yet another example of an inversion of values, as pro-Palestinian protests were forbidden and are violently repressed by police forces.

This political trend has become clearer in recent years following the repression of social and ecological movements. Last year, mass demonstrations against the pension reform were violently crushed by over-equipped police forces. In another show of disproportionate use of police force against peaceful protesters, the government brutally repressed ecological activists who had assembled to fight against an ecocidal project in Sainte-Soline.

A blatant islamophobia is now being freely unleashed on televisions through discourses echoing Israeli ones

Police-unleashed brutality has also led to the murders of young racialised men



which have become increasingly frequent. The growing racism and islamophobia this illustrates and the colonial continuum it carries, leads to the further dehumanisation and criminalisation of Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinians (widely perceived as Muslims). If this is not strictly a French issue, it has a specific resonance in France especially since the [murder of teenager Nahel Merzouk](#) last June by a police officer. The latter became a millionaire as a result of this killing through an online fundraising campaign whose aim was to help with the officer's legal fees. On the other hand, Nahel, a 17-year-old of Arabic descent, was presumed guilty and criminalised despite videos quickly appearing online and showing how he was shot in the head.

A blatant islamophobia is now being freely unleashed on televisions through discourses echoing Israeli ones, and legitimising the indiscriminate killing of all Palestinians in Gaza. In [such discourses](#), all Gazans are presented as guilty of Hamas's actions and, in the most extreme speeches, all Gazans are defined as terrorists, even children. If one thinks back to the ways in which Russia's war on Ukraine led to widespread outrage and forms of solidarity at local and governmental levels, one clearly sees that subjects of violence are receiving different kinds and degrees of empathy according to their religion and skin colour. This is linked to engrained racism and Islamophobia as well colonial logics still very vivid in France.

Such colonial and racist logics have led to a dehumanisation of Palestinians that renders them indefensible: not only do they have no right to defend themselves, but their very massacre is justified. This is especially the case with the rhetoric of the war on terror that is being re-activated. The use of terrorism is a powerful tool to justify any exaction against an entire civilian population. An entire people is being criminalised while being starved, tortured, murdered, while its dead's organs are being stolen; a people who is witnessing a systematic attack on all its vital and essential infrastructures. This people is presented as terrorist, whose life is ungrievable, while Israel is presented as a democratic state acting in self-



defence.

This reversal also shows how [antisemitism is being used as a tool to criminalise anti-Zionism](#). Given France's antisemitic history, it is all the more dangerous to use antisemitism (reframed as anti-Zionism) to criminalise those standing against a genocidal war. This forgetting of '[historical antisemitism](#)' leads to a normalisation of political parties that were built on such ideas. This is one of the worrying inversions of discourses and realities that point to, along with the violent repression of political opposition, a growing authoritarianism in French politics. Failing to acknowledge the ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza and failing to condemn Israel for the crimes it has been committing for the last 75 years in Gaza and the West Bank is a political and moral failure, and a complaisance and complicity towards a fascisation of our world.