

## Cataloguing Israeli Atrocities Against Palestinians in Kamal Hassan's "Complaining to Iqbal"

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### Abstract

Palestinians have been suffering at the hands of the British and then the Zionist state of Israel for about a century. Some of the tactics that Israel uses to oppress Palestinians have their antecedents in the British brutalities against them. While Israel has always received unfair support and blanket diplomatic cover from the USA and other countries, the post-9/11 global war on terror provides it with further ideological ammunition to continue mistreating and killing Palestinians. Against this background and based on Mohd. Kamal Hassan's poem "Complaining to Iqbal," this essay provides an account of some of the major Israeli human rights violations against Palestinians and concludes with a reflection on the current Israeli genocide in Gaza that began in early October 2023.

### Keywords

Great Revolt of 1936–39, 1948 Nakba, Deir Yassin, 1967 Arab-Israeli war, 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Sabra-Shatila-Jenin refugee camps, post-7 October 2023 genocide

### Introduction

One of Malaysia's leading intellectuals and poets, the late Mohd. Kamal Hassan<sup>2</sup> (1942–2023) composed his monumental poem "Complaining to Iqbal: Dialogue with the Dead" (also titled "SMS to Sir Muhammad Iqbal" [2002]) after his trip to Spain in 2002. Generally, Muslims' visits to Spain inspire two contrary "emotions of amazement and consternation" (Hasan, "Iqbal's and Hassan's" 208). They feel happy for the achievements of their predecessors who left among

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others incredible architectural artefacts, and sad over the humiliating end of nearly eight hundred years of Muslim rule in the country. Perhaps since Hassan's trip to Spain took place not long after the 9/11 event, that led to a sharp increase in anti-Muslim hostility globally, his tone in the poem is melancholic and suffused with a sense of profound loss and nostalgia. The visit seemed to have provided him with a fitting occasion to reflect upon the deplorable condition of Muslims on the whole.

Replete with references to the most horrific violence and pain inflicted upon Muslims in the pre- and post-9/11 world, the poem presents a concise description of the plight of various Muslim communities in different parts of the world. Hassan makes mention of trouble zones where Muslims were victims of mass murders and other appalling human rights violations. The list of such places to which the poem alludes is long; but since the poem was written in the early 2000s, it has grown even longer in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In this essay, I shall discuss Hassan's enumeration of the Israeli-inflicted violence and indignities that Palestinians have been forced to confront. Palestinians demonstrate extraordinary courage and resilience that defeats the cruelty of Israel and the hypocrisy of its backers and gains wide admiration and support from the peace- and justice-loving people from around the globe. I shall wrap up my discussion by commenting on the on-going genocide to which Palestinians in Gaza have been subjected since early October 2023 and in which, according to Amnesty International, "Israel has unleashed hell and destruction ... brazenly, continuously and with total impunity" ("Amnesty International"). It is an insult to the intelligence of the conscientious people in the world to say that the afflictions and unfolding human tragedies of Palestinians began only after Hamas's lightning ground attack across the border against Israel on 7 October 2023. In order to foreground the plight of Palestinians at the hands of Israel, in what follows, I shall shed light on the demonisation of Muslims as a religious community in a global order that is plagued by the Manichean logic of good versus evil and rife with hypocrisy.

### **Conditions of Muslims in a post-9/11 polarised world**

In "Complaining to Iqbal," Hassan uses the phrase "Slave Master" to describe colonial and neo-colonial oppressive powers in a world of securitised discourses. Using the poetic device of apostrophe, he addresses the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) and tells him about the predicament of the global Muslim population that is "languishing" in what he calls "the trap of the New World Disorder" (Hassan 110). He talks about oppressive situations in which Muslims find themselves and highlights the anxiety and fear in which they are

compelled to live. One reason why Hassan apostrophises Iqbal in the poem is that the latter visited Spain in January 1933 during one of his trips to Europe. Therefore, Hassan seeks to “retrace” Iqbal’s “noble steps” while visiting historic places like Cordoba that once attracted this prominent scholar and intellectual giant of the early twentieth century.

Hassan wrote “Complaining to Iqbal” one year after the 11 September 2001 (or 9/11) attacks on New York, in the aftermath of which the misconceived narrative of the global war on terror was constructed. The new discourse continues to enable some governments to formulate and conduct policies that negatively affect Muslims all over the world. Colonial and neo-colonial occupying powers that have already been oppressing and persecuting Muslims for decades gain a renewed impetus to persist with, or double down on, their unjust behaviours towards the followers of Islam. They capitalise on the dogmatism and polarisation that permeates an increasingly divided post-9/11 world. Hassan detests the simplistic dichotomy between the hegemonic west and the rest. As he informs Iqbal, stating:

You are either with the West or you are against it.  
If you conform, the Slave Master’s mercy  
will descend upon you, offering  
bread and dust and blankets  
(lest you shiver in the thunderstorm  
of the New Alliance rage). (Hassan 110)

Rejecting the crude Manichean rhetoric of ‘you are either with us or against us,’ Hassan points to the common attitude of dominant powers that breed polarisations and put innumerable people of the world, especially Muslims, on the wrong side of the false divide. Such an approach disregards the fact that the vast majority of the global population is uninvolved in any violent actions or in the wildly disproportionate acts of atrocities in the name of revenge and retribution. In all likelihood, Hassan has in mind what the former US president George W Bush said in the aftermath of the 9/11 incident. Standing before the US Congress on 20 September 2001, he gave the world community an unenviable choice, saying:

Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime. (Bush 1349)

The perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks were identified by their religious background, and, to a certain extent, together with them their religion and its followers were put on trial. Overnight, simply for sharing the same religious

identity, their coreligionists from across the world became suspect in the eyes of those who have prejudices against them and spread anti-Islam and anti-Muslim rhetoric. Accordingly, Hassan expresses concern over the hatred of and bias against Muslims, and laments that “today every Muslim is [treated as] a potential terrorist” (110). The negative consequences of Muslims being victims of caricature have caused longstanding anxieties among them and contributed to cycles of violence and human rights abuses against them in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority lands. One country that has taken full advantage of such a world order – somewhat shaped in line with Bush’s logic – is the government of Israel which is now widely viewed as an apartheid state.

### **Israeli injustices on Palestinians**

For decades, Israel has been dehumanising and slaughtering the indigenous Palestinians, demolishing their houses, bombing their hospitals, schools, colleges, universities, and refugee centres, dispossessing them of their land, torturing and humiliating thousands of them in the dungeons of its prisons, and assassinating their leaders and journalists. The degree and extent of such Israeli human rights violations against Palestinians significantly increased in the post-9/11 period amid other global crises.

Touching on what is now nearly eight-decades-old Zionist colonialism in, and Israeli occupation of, Palestinian territories, in “Complaining to Iqbal,” Hassan updates the poet of the east on the brutal injustices to which Israel has been subjecting Palestinians for generations. He says to Iqbal:

O Iqbal!  
 I wish you have heard the guns  
 of Israel,  
 the cries from Deir Yassin, Shabra [Sabra], Shatilla [Shatila]  
 and Jenin,  
 the savage rumblings of Sharon’s tanks,  
 the merciless bulldozers tearing  
 into Palestinian homes. (Hassan 111)

In 1948, in order to create the state of Israel, Zionist militias intensified a systematic campaign to murder, uproot, and deport Palestinians so as to depopulate and occupy their land. As Ilan Pappé states in his book *Ten Myths About Israel* (2024/2017), “The process began in February 1948 with a few villages, and culminated in April with the cleansing of Haifa, Jaffa, Safad, Beisan, Acre, and Western Jerusalem” (62) – all of which are now parts of the state of Israel. In an earlier work titled *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (2006), Pappé provides graphic descriptions of the atrocities wrought upon indigenous

Palestinians in 1948 which included “psychological warfare, heavy shelling of civilian populations, expulsions, seeing relatives being executed, and wives and daughters abused, robbed and in several cases, raped” (156). Eventually, Zionist militias killed tens of thousands of indigenous Palestinians and drove away from their homes hundreds of thousands of those who survived. Uprooted from their own soil, Palestinians were forced to become refugees in their own and neighbouring countries. That did not end their sufferings at the hands of Israeli forces which have continued ghastly attacks on them in their villages and cities and in refugee camps in Palestine and beyond, which the following discussion attempts to explicate.

### **Sufferings of pre- and post-1948 Palestinians**

What is now widely known as the 1948 Nakba (or catastrophe) of Palestinians was not the only occasion when they experienced collective trauma caused by violent atrocities, destruction of properties, and massive thefts of land. In the pre-1948 period, in May 1936 onwards, the British Mandatory government conducted village searches – a euphemism “for increased brutal British collective punishments” (Cahill 59) – and mistreated Arabs throughout the whole of Palestine. As Matthew Kraig Kelly points out in “The Revolt of 1936: A Revision” (2015):

The British claimed that these searches were intended to discover weapons and wanted men, but an abundance of testimony, both British and Arab, indicated that they were actually punitive expeditions, designed to frighten the population.... Soldiers and police, ostensibly searching for weapons in the area, had allegedly smashed up houses, destroyed food, and insulted women in front of their husbands. (32)

Kelly discusses a 1936 incident in which two Palestinian men went out to collect water for their cattle and took shelter in a cave after coming under unprovoked attack from a British plane. Then a British soldier fired shots into the cave, which triggered conditions of self-defence for the two men. They fought back and killed the soldier in order to “defend themselves against unjustified and potentially lethal British force,” for which they were convicted by the British (38). All such British crimes against Palestinians sparked a major anticolonial rebellion among them – the first of its kind – which is widely known among the Arabs as the Great Revolt of 1936–39. This early mass resistance movement was so widespread and popular that it took three years for the British to quell it. In the process, pro-Zionist British Mandatory forces killed innumerable Palestinians and demolished thousands of their houses. That is to say, the inhuman house demolition and some other crimes that Israel has been perpetrating against Palestinians for

decades can be traced back to the practices of British colonial rule in Palestine long before 1948.

The dismembering “of Palestine and devastating loss of hearth, home and land” (Masalha, “Liberating Methodologies” 34) in addition to the colossal loss of lives and livelihoods and the widespread dispossession of Palestinians during the traumatic events of the 1948 Nakba did not mark the end of their tragedies. They have continued unabated to this day. After establishing the state of Israel, successive Israeli administrations pursued a policy of denial towards Palestinians. They deny the existence of Palestinians, the historical injustices done to them, and the ethnic cleansing to which they have been subjected. They persisted with the “denial of any moral responsibility or culpability for the creation of the plight of the Palestinian refugees; denial of the Palestinian ‘right of return;’ denial of restitution of refugee property” (Masalha, “60 Years” 39). What is more, less than two decades after the uprooting of Palestinians in order to establish a country on their land in 1948, the Israeli army bulldozed more Palestinian villages including “Yalu, Beit Nuba and Imwas” in 1967 (Masalha, “Liberating Methodologies” 34). In the aftermath of what is now known as the 1967 Six-Day Arab-Israeli war that was fought between Israel on the one hand and Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, on the other, Israel emerged as a further emboldened brutal power in the region and extended its (illegal) jurisdiction to other Arab territories such as the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in Palestine, the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, and the Golan Heights in Syria.

The plight of post-1948 Palestinians has continued to be exacerbated by some of the worst human rights violations including genocides and ethnic cleansing committed by Israel. Ilan Pappé gives a cursory account of post-1948 Israeli atrocities and abuses against Palestinians, such as, the arbitrary detention and incarceration of thousands of Palestinian citizens in the 1950s, the 1956 Kafr Qasim massacre, war crimes committed against Palestinians throughout the 1967 war, the Israeli bombings of Palestinian refugee camps in 1982, and “the physical abuse meted out to Palestinian youth in the occupied territories in the 1980s and afterwards ... [and Israeli] military officers ordering the execution of innocent people and the laughter of the soldiers standing by and watching” (*Ten Myths* 66). The fact that Pappé is an Israeli historian who has lived and taught in Israel and in the UK suggests that there are Israelis (at home and abroad) who deplore the mistreatment of Palestinians by their government. Many places have witnessed Israeli atrocities against Palestinians, but in what follows I discuss four of them that Hassan mentions in his poem.

### **Deir Yassin, Sabra, Satilla, and Jenin**

One of the villages that the Zionist militias massacred in 1948 is Deir Yassin where roughly 700 Palestinians lived. On 9 April 1948, Zionist mercenaries

entered the village and killed over a hundred Palestinians in most brutal ways, as women, children, and the elderly “were tied to trees and burned to death” and “lined up against a wall and shot by submachine guns” (“The Deir Yassin”). In “The Historiography of Deir Yassin” (2005), Benny Morris quotes the then British High Commissioner to Palestine Alan Cunningham who in “Weekly Intelligence Appreciation” (17 April 1948) stated that the massacre on Deir Yassin “was accompanied by every circumstance of savagery. Women and children were stripped, lined up, photographed and then slaughtered by automatic fire and the survivors have told of even more incredible bestialities” (Morris 103). Cunningham added that the only choice left to the Palestinians was “to fight as strongly as possible against the Jews” (Morris 103). Commenting on the repercussion of the mass slaughter in Deir Yassin in 1948, Morris concurs with Cunningham’s conclusion and argues that “Deir Yassin triggered vengefulness” and “produced a belligerent resoluteness” among the Palestinians (87).

Long story short, the Zionist killings of native Palestinians in 1948 caused the mass forced migration of nearly one million Palestinians from their land, and thus the state of Israel was created on 14 May 1948 on a land that Palestinian Arabs rightly regard as their own. To add insult to injury, Zionist media and propaganda machines spread the false notions that in 1948 “Israel was a David fighting an Arab Goliath” and that the Palestinians left their houses and land voluntarily to facilitate the establishment of the state of Israel (Pappe, *Ten Myths* 56). Hassan touches upon this most dangerous form of Zionist media mendacity when he mentions to Iqbal in an apostrophic manner:

Never mind if the Zionist media  
terrorizes truth or Palestinians or Muslims. (Hassan 111)

Such media violence against Palestinians and other vulnerable groups is a common weapon at the hands of their oppressors and has become more explicit in the recent decades. Widespread epistemic violence in the form of misinformation and disinformation about Palestinians in Zionist and other media outlets – both print and virtual – magnifies and legitimises the crimes of various degrees to which Israel has been subjecting them. As regards the media coverage of the plight of Palestinians, Israel goes one step further and kills journalists as part of its efforts to keep the world in the dark about its crimes in Palestine. According to an Aljazeera report, the killing of Ahmed al-Louh on 14 December 2024 marked the death of the 195<sup>th</sup> journalist in Gaza at the hands of Israeli forces since 7 October 2023 (“Palestinian Journalist”).

As Hassan and Pappe indicate, one of Israel’s major mass killings and war crimes occurred in 1982 when it bombed Beirut, the capital of Lebanon –

one of the neighbouring countries that hosted tens of thousands of Palestinians who were expelled in 1948 for the creation of Israel. It enabled Lebanese Christian Phalangist forces to massacre thousands of Palestinians who were living as refugees in the Sabra and Shatila camps in south Beirut. The Phalangist forces “in coordination with the Israeli army” killed about three thousand Palestinian refugees and Lebanese civilians in “43 hours, from 6pm on Thursday 16 September, until 1pm on Saturday 18 September” in 1982 (“Sabra and Shatila”). As I wrote in an earlier essay titled “On the Palestine Question: Roald Dahl, Harold Pinter, and others” (2023):

Towards the end of the invasion, in September 1982, Israeli forces besieged the Palestinian refugee camp Shatila and the adjacent neighbourhood of Sabra in southwest Lebanon. They provided cover for the Lebanese Maronite militia group Phalange to carry out massacres, mainly against Palestinian refugees who had fled death and ethnic cleansing in 1948 when Israel was established in the land of Palestine. (Hasan 10)

Journalist Tony Clifton and war-photographer Catherine Leroy covered the 1982 Israeli invasion and destruction of Lebanon. In their 1983 book *God Cried*, they recount the killings and mayhems that they saw Israel and its allies committed in Lebanon. In the book, they also celebrate the bravery and selflessness of Palestinians and their Lebanese sympathisers who laid down their lives to defend Lebanon against Israeli incursions.

Commenting on the cruelty of Israelis and the diabolical nature of their warfare in Lebanon in 1982, the renowned writer of children’s literature Roald Dahl said:

[I]n June 1982, the Israeli forces were streaming northwards out of what used to be Palestine into Lebanon, and the mass slaughter of the inhabitants began. Our hearts bled for the Lebanese and Palestinian men, women and children, and we all started hating the Israelis. (Dahl 3)

Attacking Palestinian villages, cities, and refugee camps and terrorising their inhabitants again and again have become a routine practice of Israel. Another site of such repeated Israeli aggression is the refugee camp of Jenin in the West Bank. In “Complaining to Iqbal,” Hassan alludes to the 1–11 April 2002 Israeli massacre of the camp. The then Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon (1928–2014) – nicknamed Ariel ‘the bulldozer’ Sharon – ordered bulldozing and demolishing of Palestinian homes in Jenin; and, in addition to razing Palestinian houses to the ground, Israeli forces killed more than 50 Palestinians including the elderly, women, and children who were made refugees in their own land. Jenin and other

such densely populated Palestinian refugee camps have now experienced many more similar or even more egregious sieges, land-and-air raids, and massacres.

### **Israeli crimes in Gaza**

In the above discussion, I have argued that Israel has deceitfully and hypocritically exploited – to the fullest possible extent – the post-9/11 global war on terror discourse in order to intensify its attacks on Palestinians, especially those in Gaza. What is more, the post-7 October 2023 genocide – though unprecedented and the most inhuman – is not the only example of Israel’s gross human rights violations against Gazans in a post-9/11 world.

On 22 March 2004 morning, Israel killed the Palestinian leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin (b. 1936) by firing a missile from a helicopter gunship when he was returning home after performing Fajr (morning prayers) at a masjid near his house in the Sabra neighbourhood in Gaza. In a similar manner, on 17 April 2004, the apartheid state assassinated another Gaza-based Palestinian leader Dr Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi (b. 1947), his son, and his bodyguard.

On August 7, 2022, Aljazeera published a report titled “Timeline: Israel’s attacks on Gaza since 2005.” The chronology it provided presents a macabre testament to the apartheid state’s predilection to commit colossal crimes against Palestinians in Gaza. In December 2008, in a 22-day offensive, Israel killed about 1,400 Palestinians and lost 13 Israelis; in November 2012, it killed the Palestinian military commander Ahmad Jabari (1960–2012) and several others in air strikes that lasted for eight days. In July–August 2014, the Israeli military killed 2,100 Palestinians and lost 67 of its soldiers and 6 other citizens. Israeli troops opened fire on Palestinian protestors and killed 170 of them in 2018. In May 2021, a row occurred over the intrusion of Israeli forces into the Masjid al-Aqsa compound and obstruction of worshippers from praying in the month of Ramadan. It was followed by a 11-day air raid in which Israel killed 260 Palestinians in Gaza. In August 2022, Israel launched air strikes on Gaza and killed dozens of Palestinian children, women, and men. These atrocities happened only in the Gaza Strip. Needless to say, Palestinians in other places have been enduring such unspeakable atrocities, especially those by the IDF and the illegal Jewish settlers in the West Bank in both pre- and post-7 October 2023 periods.

### **Conclusion: Thoughts on a livestreamed genocide**

Israel’s ongoing genocide in Gaza – much of which has been livestreamed on social media platforms – is an elephant in the room in the above discussion. I intentionally avoided its elaborate treatment earlier in this essay, as in this essay I have sought to debunk the arbitrary, flimsy myth that the Palestine problem

began on 7 October 2023 when Israel came under attack by a Palestinian group and subsequently launched what many call the longest genocide in human history. The catalogue of Israeli's atrocities against Palestinians that Mohd. Kamal Hassan's "Complaining to Iqbal" and the works of other writers provide shows that their sufferings at the hands of the Zionist state is much older than Hamas's attack on it. It is common knowledge that Israel's post-7 October 2023 genocide in Gaza is a continuation of a long list of injustices to which Israeli forces have subjected Palestinians.

As regards Israel's current genocide in Gaza, initially, many applied cautions and did not call a spade a spade. That has now changed. For instance, a 5 December 2024 Amnesty International report concludes that "Israel has committed and is continuing to commit genocide against Palestinians in the occupied Gaza Strip" ("Amnesty International"). What is special about this genocide is that its extremity and length seem to have numbed the moral instinct of many of those outside Palestine. Initially, people in the rest of the world used to express horror and outrage and groped for words to articulate their indignation at Israel's escalation of violence. This does not seem to be the case anymore.

More than fourteen months on, Israel has reduced almost the entire Gaza Strip to rubble, killing over 45 thousand to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and Gaza-based healthcare workers, journalists, UN humanitarian personnel, and other professionals. While the indescribable ordeal of the surviving Gazans has increasingly worsened, ironically, the response of the world to this tragedy has by far become less sensitive. As a result, what previously used to make news does not seem to be newsworthy anymore. It seems that killings of 50 to 100 people in a day in any parts of the world merit a headline only if they do not take place in Palestine. It is true that the world has borne with other genocides and mass murders, but the lack of adequate sensitivity of the global community to such a well-documented and long-lasting genocide as the one in Gaza is baffling and shameful.

Remarkably, the response of Palestinians to the genocide on them is marked by enhanced courage, confidence, and inner strength. As the aforementioned British official Alan Cunningham said that the 1948 Nakba generated a strong "resoluteness" among Palestinians, their descendants in Gaza are showing the same strength of mind and will through conquering the fear of death. What is more, Gazans understand very well that Israeli forces kill them in their dozens, hundreds, and thousands only to depopulate and occupy Palestinian lands. Therefore, unlike in 1948, this time they have decided to stay put in their land; and thus, they are exposing the hypocrisy, cowardice, and moral bankruptcy of Israelis and their far-off backers who have been accomplices in the genocide

in the most selfish, inhuman, and unscrupulous ways. In this regard it is worth mentioning here that, in a 17 July 2024 article, Rachel Fink of Israel's Haaretz newspaper quoted a survey result that suggested that "[o]ne in four Israeli Jews ... would leave Israel and emigrate to another country, if given a practical opportunity to do so" (Fink). Perhaps, the contrast between Palestinians clinging to their land despite suffering a genocide and Israeli Jews desiring to settle down elsewhere despite enjoying first-world amenities in Israel tells us about their belongingness to their country or lack thereof.

On a final note, I interacted with and learned from Mohd. Kamal Hassan for decades. In many of my conversations with him, he expressed anguish and concern about the plight of the oppressed around the world and about the hypocrisy of colonial and neo-colonial powers. He had left this world on 23 February 2023, only months before Israel unleashed its current aggression against Palestinians, especially those in Gaza. In a small way, it gives me some relief that Hassan and other kind souls like him who passed away before 7 October 2023 do not have to deal with the pain and helplessness that many of us are experiencing while Israel is committing, and its backers are abetting, a genocide and gloating over the suffering of Palestinians.

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