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Why Arundhati Roy Should Not Support Hamas' 'Rockets of Resistance'

It is paradoxical for the Indian left to condemn state violence by Israel or India, in the name of national security, while endorsing the killing, suicide bombing and rockets of Hamas



Zen Read



A boy stands with members of the Al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of the Hamas movement, during a rally in Gaza City on May 24, 2021. Credit: Emmanuel Durand / AFP



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During the latest war between Israel and Hamas, Arundhati Roy and many other progressive-left-liberal intellectuals in India came out with a statement of support for the Palestinian cause, as they have done many times in the past. Solidarity for the Palestinian national movement and their existential struggle against mighty State of Israel is much needed. The question is how to support it.

What is problematic in the latest statement by member of Indian civil society is the endorsement of the rockets launched by Hamas, as well as the Damascus-based Islamic Jihad. According to their statement, "the rockets came as part of a resistance – backed by international law – of an illegal occupation".

The rockets are not supported by international law otherwise the international courts would not have accused Hamas of war crimes, along with Israel, in many past phases of the conflict. Hamas and Islamic Jihad are radical religious organizations, inspired by an extreme and violent religious ideology. Their objective and means are not in sync with international law or human rights. They preach fanaticism. They have been the staunch opponents of the Oslo peace process (problematic and failed as it was, it was the only peace process between Israel and the Palestinians in 1990s) and they do not speak for the two-state solution. They both denounce secularism, modern nation-states based on liberal-democratic systems or the principles of an open society. Hamas wishes to have a caliphate, whereas Islamic Jihad wants to impose Islam on all Arab as well as non-Arab states.

It is important to challenge the Indian left's approach to Hamas and Islamic Jihad; this is in no way an attempt to defend the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories or the policy of retaliation for the sake of deterrence. Yet, Arundhati Roy and others err here. It is paradoxical to condemn the violence used by a state, like Israel or India in the name of national security, while endorsing killing, suicide bombing and rockets of Hamas.

Palestinian romance

Yasser Arafat, a leader of the Palestinian movement who wore a military uniform, carried a pistol and earned his legacy as revolutionary and guerilla fighter, once believed that "Palestine had been taken away by fire and steel and it will be recovered by fire and steel".

He fought the Israeli occupation with violence and many recognized him as legitimate. India offered him political support. Israel was compelled to negotiate and sign the Oslo Accords in 1993. What helped at that time was Arafat's renunciation of violence against Israel and his decision to fight for the Palestinian cause through dialog and reconciliation. Arafat evolved from fighter to peace-maker and received Nobel Prize for Peace in 1994. He acknowledged that Palestine will be recovered by dialog, compromise and peace with Israel. The non-violent Arafat was called traitor and 'weak old man' by Hamas while he was negotiating with Israel for the two-state solution. Oslo failed due to the Israeli maximalist positions and rise of religious nationalist parties' push for settlements in Israel, but it was also spoiled by Hamas and Islamic Jihad on the Palestinian side.

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Arafat's renouncement of violence was pragmatic, constructive and much applauded globally. After raising the Palestinian question with guns and killings he was flexible enough to offer an olive branch. Organizations such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad answered the progress he made with suicide bombing, rockets, and religious radicalization that romanticizes violence as jihad (holy war) or shahadat (martyrdom). Hamas is problematic and many Palestinians, in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and in the diaspora, do not support it. The people of Gaza do not support Hamas, either, and we cannot gauge the extent of their struggle against the violence of Hamas since Gaza is tightly controlled by Hamas. Roy and others do not realize that their endorsement of 'rockets as resistance' is also unkind to the Palestinian discretion, political evolution and overall national wisdom. It is like calling Arafat a traitor once again.

Violence does not lead to peace

There are several other deeper problems in any endorsement of violence and killing. The major criticism of the State of Israel, India and many other places, is that they use indiscriminate amount of violence for the sake of national security. Defending its people is the sole objective of a state, but it cannot achieve this by any means. It has to respect the national rights of others, international peace, and the dignity of human life. The Palestinian national movement is globally supported because it is a legitimate national movement. However, Hamas and Islamic Jihad cannot use any means possible for this national objective. They need to respect international law, peace and human rights as well.

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The Indian left, intellectuals and activists, as well as the official leftist parties, have often ignored this simple catch about complexity of violence in international politics – just as they endorsed Stalin in Soviet Union and Mao in China, for the sake of communist resolutions, and they supported Fidel Castro's autocratic rule in Cuba in the name of anti-Americanism. Violence for the sake of a national/revolutionary cause, as well as violence in the name of national security, must be condemned if one wishes to make the world a better place for everyone. Supporting the violence of extreme ideological organizations like Hamas does not heal the violence-ridden world of ours. Ends do not justify the means to be precise.

Sari Nusseibeh, a Palestinian intellectual and activist, offers the critique of Hamas and other violent tendencies of national movements in his provocative book "What is a Palestinian state worth?" (Harvard University Press, 2011). He argues for compromise and non-violence among the Palestinian people and looks to learn a political/historical lesson from Gandhian philosophy. Nusseibeh, in this rather reflective book, warns that "political practitioners, unfortunately, often prefer surgeries to therapies, believing the use of force to be the most effective shortcut to solving problems".

Nusseibeh believes that violence does not do any good and it is better not to continue with violence for the Palestinian freedom "even though Israel deprived them, unjustly and by force, of the basic human values of freedom and equality, is their only choice to use violence themselves? Or would they, by resorting to violence, be simply digging themselves into a dead end of history rather than making use of history's moral lever?" He very urges the Palestinian people and their national struggle to set a different example – like they once did with the first intifada, through Gandhian methods of civil disobedience, boycott, and protest, without killing an Israeli soldier or civilian.

The Palestinian cause needs to consolidate its own moral order and not let the rockets of Hamas be its symbol of struggle. Civil societies, like the one in India led by many well-meaning individuals, have failed to offer a constructive solidarity for the Palestinian cause by calling 'rockets as resistance.'

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