

Herbert Marcuse's Visit to Israel: Rethinking Israel's Military Aggression in Palestine

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Abstract: This paper focuses on Marcuse's stance toward Israel and problematizes how his critical theory can help make sense of the longstanding Israeli occupation in Palestine. As a Jew himself, Marcuse experienced antisemitism both in Germany and the US. It is for this reason, along with the longstanding persecution of the Jewish people, that he was sympathetic to the state of Israel's right to exist. On the other hand, he provided critical perspectives on Israel's policies against the Palestinians, in that he also recognized the legitimate plight of the latter. Guided by this, I aim to answer three questions: 1) What is Marcuse's general critique of military aggression? 2) How did Marcuse's visit to Israel shape his stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict during his time? and 3) What is the current state of Palestine, and how does Marcuse's notion of radical imagination invoke a rethinking of Israel's hubristic and hawkish military stance today? Ultimately, this paper does not claim to offer a grand solution to the existing conflict in the said region; rather, it centers primarily around an exploratory use of Marcuse's critical social project in analyzing the plight of the Palestinians along with the possibilities for radical resistance.

Keywords: Marcuse, Gaza, critical theory, militarization

Most, if not all, members of the first generation of the Frankfurt School were Jewish. Horkheimer, Fromm, Lowenthal, and Marcuse, for example, were of Jewish descent and were fortunate enough to have survived the holocaust by fleeing to America.¹ After the Second World War, a few of them, such as Horkheimer, Pollock, and Adorno, returned to Germany, while others, like Marcuse and Fromm, chose to stay in the United States. It was in the US that Marcuse would spend his most

¹ See Jack Jacobs, "Critical Theorists and the State of Israel," in *The Frankfurt School, Jewish Lives, and Antisemitism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 111.

productive years in terms of teaching, writing, and even becoming a world-renowned public intellectual.

According to Douglas Kellner, two tendencies of critical theory emerged in the 1940s: 1) the philosophical-cultural leaning of Horkheimer and Adorno; and 2) the practical political orientation of the philosophical project of Herbert Marcuse and Franz Neumann.² Indeed, Marcuse's model of critical social project centered mainly on an ideological critique of capitalism and the search for agents of social transformation that would bring about liberation against forms of domination. We find in his analyses in *One-Dimensional Man*, for instance, a social critique of abundance and technical progress in Western liberal democracies that fosters, in a subtle manner, a decline in the critical impulse of the individual. In *Eros and Civilization*, he argues against the surplus repression pervasive in the late industrial civilization, which principally suppresses a particular life instinct called Eros in favor of performance, productivity, accumulation, and aggression. Indeed, Marcuse was critical of the ways in which liberal democracies engender new forms of social control in an economic system that alters the biological, psychological, and cultural aspects of the individual.

Conversely, despite Marcuse's pessimistic and critical analyses of the problems he found within advanced industrial societies, he was also actively engaged in the explosion of several liberation movements at the time. He wrote on and paid close attention to the emerging movements of his time, including the civil rights movement, antiwar movement, feminist, environmental, and anti-imperialist struggles, among others. In a dramatic and unexpected turn, he unwittingly became the guru of the New Left in the US. Philosophers are not always at the forefront of mainstream political discussions. However, his vocal advocacy for the struggles and resistance efforts of several groups, both in his writings and through political action, established him as one of the most prominent public intellectuals of his time.

Indeed, he took liberation movements seriously, despite their imperfections and failures. Candidly, however, I find it perplexing that in the many years of Marcuse's writings and political participation, not so much has been discussed as regards his views on Israel and Palestine, which is perhaps one of the longest modern conflicts the world has seen. Considering the Jewish background of the first-generation members of the Frankfurt School, one wonders about their relationship with the state of Israel, especially given its convoluted geopolitical conjuncture. As such, this paper focuses fundamentally on Marcuse's stance toward Israel and how his critical theory can help make sense of the longstanding Israeli occupation in Palestine today.

² See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), xxii.

Guided by this, I aim to answer three key points: 1) What is Marcuse's general critique of military aggression? 2) How did Marcuse's visit to Israel shape his stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict during his time? and 3) What is the current state of Palestine, and how does Marcuse's notion of radical imagination invoke a rethinking of Israel's hubristic and hawkish military stance today? Ultimately, I do not claim to offer a grand solution to the existing conflict in the said region; rather, my work primarily revolves around an exploratory use of Marcuse's critical social project in understanding the plight of the Palestinians, along with the possibilities for radical resistance.³ That said, let us first proceed to a discussion on Marcuse's critique of militarism in relation to some of his fundamental concepts in critical theory in order to establish some of the problems with militarism in general.

Marcuse on Militarism

Understanding Marcuse's critique of militarism warrants a brief sketch of his general impression of late capitalist societies and the immanent contradictions in the established order. Keep in mind that he did not necessarily offer an organized and philosophically sharp account and critique of militarism. Nevertheless, fragments from several writings, including *Eros and Civilization*, *One-Dimensional Man*, *An Essay on Liberation*, and *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, to name a few, guide us in reconstructing and explaining the core principle of militarism's aggressive force in Marcuse's view.

Marcuse advances an interesting analysis concerning the totalitarian tendencies present in Western liberal democracies that differ from previous forms of totalitarianism. In particular, he notes that the defeat of Nazism has not prevented the trend toward totalitarianism; reason has become an instrument for domination. He opines that the "defeat of Fascism and National Socialism has not arrested the trend towards totalitarianism. Freedom is on the retreat-in the realm of thought as well as in that of society."⁴ Furthermore,

³ I am fully aware of the sensitive, divisive, and emotional nature of the issue at hand. Likewise, I do not assume any technical and scholarly expertise on Arab and Jewish studies nor any policy expertise. This also is not a historical tracing of the Israel-Palestine conflict. It simply aims to present a decent understanding, at the very least, of Marcuse's political engagement with the Israel-Palestine conflict to expand the discourse on critical theory's function and relevance in examining existing social pathologies and unconscionable conditions of the day.

⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Humanities Press, 1954), 433.

contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian. For “totalitarian” is not only a terroristic political coordination of society, but also a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests. It thus precludes the emergence of an effective opposition against the whole.⁵

Marcuse alludes to the idea that, far from being purely rational and advanced, late capitalist societies also exhibit a propensity to be totalitarian, which is worth examining. In fact, Marcuse goes on to say that there appear to be new forms of social control in democratic societies. In his time, when individuals were relishing in the technical progress and abundance guaranteed by advanced industrial society—‘a society that delivers the goods’—production and consumption were at great heights. People were afforded the opportunity to exercise freedom—indeed, an unfettered freedom in the market. Fashionable gadgets, seductive car models, a booming entertainment industry, a sea of goods in the supermarket, flashy luxury items, name it, the market has it. Enlightenment, as promised, brought in a kind of rationality that assured more happiness and freedom. Given the seduction of capitalism, what is there to complain about? Who would not marvel at society’s abundance and progress, especially against a pre-technological society?

Indeed, modernity and reason have achieved more than one could imagine. Nonetheless, Marcuse, like the other critical theorists, recognized contradictions within modernity’s rationality. According to him, this same rational society that basked in the glory of modernity’s highly advanced innovations, conversely, brought in new forms of social control. According to Marcuse, the contradiction in this society that so appeared to be rational is that it simultaneously was irrational. He says,

And yet this society is irrational as a whole. Its productivity is destructive of the free development of human needs and faculties, its peace maintained by the constant threat of war, its growth dependent on the repression of the real possibilities for pacifying the struggle for existence—individual, national, and international.⁶

⁵ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xi.

Marcuse brings our attention to the idea that advanced industrial society is obsessed with the logic of production, accumulation, optimization, acceleration, productivity, and overconsumption; that all these come with a price. To be clear, Marcuse does not suggest that nothing good comes out of capitalism. Indeed, he is quite aware that this logic provides material stability and purpose to society to some extent. However, the trade-off in progress is that as the logic of late capitalist society is affirmed, it neglects the qualities in life that go beyond the grammar of quantities and metrics.

This becomes much clearer by identifying Marcuse's appropriation of Freud's psychoanalysis. He makes use of the latter's psychoanalytic terms to clarify this tension in advanced industrial society. In *Eros and Civilization*, he follows Freud in distinguishing two life instincts, Eros from Thanatos. In the interest of brevity, we may say that Eros or life-instinct aspires for the preservation and flourishing of life, while Thanatos or death-instinct is geared towards its destruction. These instincts, according to Marcuse, which are in constant antagonism, seek gratification. In the case of Eros, it seeks immediate gratification of sexual desire, whereas Thanatos seeks death. To be sure, their gratification ought to be satisfied, yet a level of repression is also necessary insofar as allowing limitless gratification for either could be detrimental.⁷ Put simply, when individuals are left to their own devices, social order and security will most likely be jeopardized.

Following the above, Marcuse characterizes late capitalist society as one that privileges Thanatos over Eros, which engenders certain problems. As society follows the logic of Thanatos, it becomes more and more aggressive, productive, and destructive.⁸ Inversely, it also reduces the value of Eros. This is worrisome insofar as the latter emanates a realm of ideas, images, and attitudes that propagate beauty, joy, emancipation, and the like.⁹ When these aspects of life are neglected in favor of aggression, production, and accumulation to optimize capitalist profit, we form a society that is dependent on waste, destruction, military aggression, and a host of other societal predicaments.

It is from this standpoint that he views militarization through a critical lens. He finds fault with the way in which Western liberal democracies have maintained their aggression through their hyper-militarization. Clearly, a society that is obsessed with production, consumption, and productivity, inevitably engages also in wars, destruction of the environment, and intense

⁷ See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Beacon Press, 1955), 154.

⁸ See *Ibid.*, 138.

⁹ See *Ibid.*, 224.

levels of accumulation.¹⁰ Reflecting on militarization, Marcuse, in *An Essay on Liberation*, opines:

Obscene is not the picture of a naked woman who exposes her pubic hair but that of a fully clad general who exposes his medals rewarded in a war of aggression; obscene is not the ritual of the Hippies but the declaration of a high dignitary of the Church that war is necessary for peace.¹¹

This points to the perverse attitude and behavior we have today, where military generals flash their medals with pride for having gone to war. Surely and sadly, war is inevitable and honoring the men and women in uniform for defending one's country matters. Yet, it is outright egregious to be displaying militaristic hubris. There is something problematic in normalizing wars as a means to maintain peace, as the case may be in the Middle East and various parts of the world.

Marcuse's opposition to the Vietnam War and support for anti-war movements demonstrate his practical critical outlook against militarism in general. The aggressive forces maintained in the established system have only led to torture, bombings, and burnings in Vietnam.¹² Wars achieve nothing in the long run. They only result in the casualties and displacement of innocent civilians. Truly, Marcuse was opposed to war as a means for peace. Kellner writes:

Marcuse was a sharp critic of militarism and a lover of life who hated death and killing. He feared that more sophisticated technologies would "instrumentalize" war and produce ever more brutal forms of destruction-a

¹⁰ The capitalist economy that is aggressive by design channels human instincts into destructive and dominating directions. This is chiefly institutionalized through militarization with the goal of espousing conformity and obedience, to name a few. In its overproduction and aggressive drive for economic growth, a war economy that incessantly demands for the creation of tanks, bombs, and other weapons of war appear necessary. Clearly, all this only becomes useful when wars are sustained. Hence, it is an economy that profits tremendously from wars. For more discussion on the link between technological progress and war, see Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*.

¹¹ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 12.

¹² See Herbert Marcuse, "Herbert Marcuse Denounces the Vietnam War (May 22, 1966)," trans. by Allison Brown, published in *German History in Documents and Images* (retrieved October 2024), <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/herbert-marcuse-denounces-the-vietnam-war-may-22-1966>>.

vision amply confirmed in the Vietnam and Persian Gulf wars.¹³

Notably, the arms industry, collectively referred to as the military industrial complex, is a significant contributor to the problem to a large degree. The celebration of capitalism, for Marcuse, comes with the “danger and insanity in its military-industrial complex.”¹⁴ The justification that war is inevitable becomes a convenient pretext for its valorization. Never mind that profiting from war, rather than maintaining peace, is often the primary consideration for maintaining wars. Commenting on war being profitable, Naomi Klein writes:

... the real money is in fighting wars abroad. Beyond the weapons contractors, who have seen their profits soar thanks to the war in Iraq, maintaining the U.S. military is now one of the fastest-growing service economies in the world ... Now wars and disaster responses are so fully privatized that they are themselves the new market; there is no need to wait until after the war for the boom—the medium is the message.¹⁵

All things considered, Marcuse provides us with a rationalization as to why aggression, military aggression in particular, is characteristic of an irrational society that valorizes the logic of performance and productivity. Ultimately, if his analyses prompted him to comment on the Vietnam War during his time, among other things, perhaps we can also use his concepts in rethinking the ongoing Israeli military operations in Palestine. A useful point of departure before doing that would be to revisit Marcuse's visit to Israel in 1971. This gives us an understanding of his critical stance against militarism, especially as a Jewish intellectual.

Marcuse's Visit to Israel and His Views on the Arab-Israeli Conflict in a Nutshell

In December 1971, Marcuse visited the state of Israel. Zvi Tauber notes that Marcuse was invited to deliver lectures at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute of Tel Aviv University. The lectures then became known as “The

¹³ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, xxxvii

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xxx

¹⁵ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2008), 13.

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Jerusalem Lectures,” in which Marcuse discussed aesthetics and politics.¹⁶ Interestingly, Marcuse also requested the director of the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, Yehuda Elkana, for a brief meeting with Moshe Dayan, Israel’s Defense Minister at the time. He also met with other dignitaries while in Israel and was even invited to the home of prominent Palestinian writer and journalist Raymonda Hawa-Tawil in the West Bank along with other dignitaries of Palestine.

Marcuse’s meeting with Israel’s Defense Minister, Moshe Dayan, was a crucial moment in this visit. It is extremely rare for an intellectual to have an intimate appointment with people in power, let alone the head of the Defense Ministry of a foreign country. Their conversation was particularly telling about Israel’s aggression in the Arab region. In the course of their meeting, Marcuse pressed Moshe to admit that Israel is occupying certain parts of the Arab region. In the interview, Moshe says the following:

(He points at the map of the Middle East). You are not a military man, but nevertheless it can be seen clearly. We came here, and (a) We have cut the two parts of the Arabic world off from one another. (b) We have taken from them an Arabic land and made it Jewish¹⁷

This is a major concession that especially came straight from the horse’s mouth—a top Israeli politician himself, admitting in front of Marcuse that Israel was built on the displacement of Arabs in the said land.

At the time, the meeting was never mentioned in any of Marcuse’s writings. However, the protocol has now become a public document detailing the conversation between the two.¹⁸ Apart from the protocol, Marcuse also published an article written in English in *The Jerusalem Post* called “Israel is Strong Enough to Concede.” A Hebrew translation was then published in Israel’s *Haaretz* titled, “My Opinions on the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Israel Must Accept the Existence of a Palestinian State.” The article was published days after a series of meetings he had with the individuals mentioned in this section’s opening paragraph, which is why his article begins with a note that his views on the Arab-Israeli conflict were hinged upon his “talks with many

¹⁶ See Zvi Tauber, “Herbert Marcuse on the Arab-Israeli Conflict: His Conversation with Moshe Dayan,” in *Telos: Critical Theory of the Contemporary*, 158 (2012), 173, <<https://doi.org/10.3817/0312158171>>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁸ See *Ibid.*

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people in different regions of this country, Jews and Arabs, and based on rather extensive readings of documents and secondary literature."¹⁹

This clarifies that Marcuse did engage with the issues surrounding Israel and the Arab region at large. The series of meetings and published writings demonstrates that he was paying attention to the geopolitical affairs in the Middle East as a Jewish intellectual himself. What is particularly interesting about Marcuse is that his views on Israel were nuanced and dialectical. On the one hand, he was sympathetic to the idea of a place for Jews:

You will understand that I have personal, though not only personal, feelings of solidarity and identification with Israel ... I cannot forget that for centuries the Jews belonged to the persecuted and oppressed; that not too long ago six million of them were annihilated ... When finally a place is to be created for these people where they will not need to fear persecution and oppression that is a goal which I must declare my sympathy ... I agree with Jean-Paul Sartre, who has said that under all circumstances a new war of annihilation against Israel must be prevented.²⁰

Markedly, Marcuse defended Israel's right to exist, especially against the threats to its security. At the same time, however, he was equally critical of Israel's policies. In an interview with *The Street Journal* in 1970, he says:

Up to now I have always defended Israel, because I cannot forget the fact that 6 million Jews were exterminated and that under no circumstances should conditions arise in which the same may happen again ... But it seems to me now, that the Israeli policy, far from preventing the recurrences of such conditions, may very well work toward their recurrence, unless the policies towards the Arabs radically change.²¹

¹⁹ Herbert Marcuse, "Israel is Strong Enough to Concede," in *Marcuse, The New Left and the 1960s: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, ed. by Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 2005), 54.

²⁰ Herbert Marcuse, "The Problem and the Hope," in *New Outlook: Middle East Monthly*, 11:6 (July/August 1968), 56.

²¹ "Marcuse on The University Music New Culture Ecology Personal & Social Liberation Workers The Mideast," in *Street Journal* (April 1970), 12.

According to Jack Jacobs, Marcuse came to this realization after the following incidents: “the alleged bombing of a school in Egypt in which 32 children were reported to have been killed, [and] the appearance of a report that accused Israel of torturing Arab prisoners,”²² to name a few. Significantly, Marcuse announced that “as a Jew, and as a member of the New Left, I can no longer defend Israeli policies, and that I have to agree with those who are radically critical of Israel.”²³

As it pertains to Palestine, Marcuse unequivocally states the following:

There is a Palestinian people which has lived for centuries on the territory part of which is now occupied by Israel. The majority of these people now live in territories under Israeli administration. These conditions make Israel an occupying power (even in Israel itself), and the Palestinian liberation movement a national liberation movement—no matter how liberal the occupying power may be.²⁴

At the end of the day, Marcuse, while supportive of Israel’s right to exist, did not identify with Zionism²⁵ in the sense of Israel being a home for all Jews. For him, Palestine had a right as well, which is why he was equally and reasonably critical of certain Israeli policies. As such, he was in solidarity with Israel, especially during the 1967 War, but later shifted his stance as a Jew in the aftermath of the war that greatly affected Palestine and the neighboring Arab countries. To be sure, Marcuse believed that antisemitism is real. He himself was a victim of antisemitism, most especially in the United States. However, he did not want criticisms against Israel to all be reduced to antisemitism. Indeed, when antisemitism is weaponized, it shuts down any reasonable criticism against Israel’s nefarious tendencies.

²² Jack Jacobs, “Critical Theorists and the State of Israel,” 118.

²³ *Ibid*, 119.

²⁴ Marcuse, “Israel is Strong Enough to Concede,” 56.

²⁵ In a nutshell, Zionism, as a response to widespread antisemitism in Europe, is a nationalist movement that pursues the creation of a Jewish state. Popularized by Theodor Herzl in the late 1800s, it has been characterized principally as a settler colonial ideology that has resulted in Palestinian dispossession. Because of its colonial model, scholars have noted its impact toward the Palestinians, especially in terms of occupation, militarization, and the repression of the latter’s self-determination. More nuanced analyses on the said political ideology can be found on work such as Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Times Books, 1979) and Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (New York: Verso, 2003).

What this section has demonstrated thus far is that we have accounts detailing Marcuse's engagement with the Arab-Israeli conflict during his time. This offers significant insights into the extent to which his model of critical social theory was willing to go. As a Jew, he felt the necessity of understanding the conflict and publicly expressing his views about it. Surely, Marcuse may not have written extensively on the conflict between Israel and Palestine, yet his visit to Israel and his published articles indicating his ambivalent relationship with Israel as a Jewish intellectual, especially with Israel's dangerous choices within the Arab region, along with his radical critique of advanced industrial societies, can perhaps help us appraise Israel's military aggression in Palestine today. I would be remiss if this conversation were not elevated to the current state of affairs between Israel and Palestine. In fact, a rethinking of Israel's military aggression is all the more urgent now that conditions are far worse than his visit more than 50 years ago.

Rethinking Israel's Military Aggression: The State of Gaza Today

Israel and Palestine have had a long-standing conflict that has probably spanned almost eight decades now. Yet, the conversation on the conflict has only intensified and gained more mainstream global traction just over a year ago. On 7 October 2023, Hamas assaulted Israel and terrorized more than 1,200 Israeli civilians and abducted nearly 250 hostages.²⁶ Hamas' terrorism, which deserves condemnation, shocked the global community and has provoked even more violence since then. Committed to rescuing the Israeli hostages taken by Hamas, Israel issued a statement and vowed that a response is on the way. While one mourns for the Israeli lives lost and the hostages taken, and recognizes Israel's right to defend itself, its response since October 7th has also incited political discussions and division reverberating all over the world, specifically as it pertains to the question of proportionality (or disproportionality).

Gaza was home to 2.2 million Palestinians, nearly half of whom are children.²⁷ Post-October 7th, and as we speak, Israel's collective punishment, disproportionate response, and indiscriminate attack against the civilian population of Palestine, has already taken more than 63,000 lives, most of which belong to the vulnerable population, women and children.²⁸ What is

²⁶ Mary Kekatos, "1 Year into the Israel-Hamas War: The Grim Human Toll by the Numbers," in *ABC News* (7 October 2024), <<https://abcnews.go.com/International/israel-hamas-war-death-toll-1-year/story?id=114458943>>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ "Gaza Death Toll Tops 63,000 as 5 More Palestinians Die of Starvation," in *Middle East Monitor* (29 August 2025), <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250829-gaza-death-toll-tops-63000-as-5-more-palestinians-die-of-starvation/>>.

even more unconscionable is that this might not even be the only number of fatalities on the ground, given that a number of Palestinian bodies have already been buried under the rubble of the buildings that have collapsed from Israel's bombs and which possibly may no longer be recovered and identified. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israel Defense Force (IDF) have consistently defended the position that their conduct of airstrikes and carpet bombing in various parts of Palestine is principally targeting Hamas fighters. However, Gaza's health ministry, which the World Health Organization considers trustworthy, states that more than 70% of those killed have been women and children.²⁹

Time and again, Israel has defended its actions by responding that these are done in view of retrieving Israeli captives or hostages taken during the Hamas attack in Israel on October 7th. Yet, the response has been called into question insofar as the airstrikes launched have indiscriminately killed civilians and destroyed buildings—buildings that could very well have the hostages in them. The strategy is, hence, counterintuitive to its purported aim. Indeed, Israel has been accused of genocide as its military aggression in the occupied Palestinian territories has elevated the death toll day after day. There seems to be a global consensus at this point that the systematic starvation and bombing, among others, in Gaza clearly points to genocide. In fact, two of the most prominent Israeli human rights organizations themselves, B'Tselem and Physicians for Human Rights Israel, have even issued definitive reports condemning Israel's actions.³⁰ Additionally, "the world's leading association of genocide scholars" has made international headlines after publicly recognizing Israel's actions in Gaza as a genocide. A report from BBC reads: "A resolution passed by the International Association

²⁹ Jake Horton, Benedict Garman, and Merlyn Thomas, "Israel Gaza: Checking Israel's claim to have killed 10,000 Hamas fighters," in *BBC* (29 February 2024), <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68387864>>.

³⁰ While using the term "genocide" in describing Israel's actions in the Gaza strip can be controversial especially months post-October 7th, a number of international human rights groups, nations, and organizations have already spoken out about Israel's genocidal intent and actions. See "Israeli Organizations Conclude Israel Committing Genocide in Gaza," in *Amnesty International* (28 July 2025), <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/07/israel-opt-israeli-organizations-conclude-israel-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza-in-another-milestone-for-accountability-efforts/>>; "End Unfolding Genocide or Watch It End Life in Gaza: UN Experts Say States Face Defining Choice," *OHCHR* (31 August 2025), <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/05/end-unfolding-genocide-or-watch-it-end-life-gaza-un-experts-say-states-face>>; and Jason Burke and Jason Burke International security correspondent, "UN Human Rights Staff Urge Leadership to Declare Israel's War in Gaza a Genocide," in *The Guardian* (29 August 2025), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/aug/29/un-human-rights-staff-urge-leadership-to-declare-israels-war-in-gaza-a-genocide>.

of Genocide Scholars (IAGS) states that Israel's conduct meets the legal definition as laid out in the UN Convention on genocide."³¹

One would think that the atrocity ends here. However, it must be noted that not only are Palestinians faced with the imminent threat of bombs and airstrikes, but the total siege of Gaza has also exacerbated their plight in many ways. Nearly all hospitals in Gaza, for example, are collapsing. In fact, 94% of all hospitals in the Gaza Strip are reported to have been decimated or severely damaged at the very least.³² Kids have been amputated without anesthesia, and medical volunteers are struggling to keep up with the increasing number of patients with dysfunctional hospital facilities. The population, especially children, also grapples with unprecedented levels of starvation and famine. Since the war began, their basic necessities have been cut off by Israel—access to food, water, electricity, and fuel has been cut off.³³ As of writing, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) has declared famine in the Gaza Strip for having reached “three critical thresholds—extreme food deprivation, acute malnutrition and starvation-related deaths.”³⁴ Thus, on top of the incessant bombing of infrastructure and communities, civilians are also experiencing starvation, dehydration, sanitation concerns, and poor medical services. Indeed, all sorts of damage are done to the Palestinians. Either you die from Israel's carpet bombing or from hunger.

On top of that, a report by BU School of Law's International Human Rights Clinic says that “over 70 percent of housing in Gaza, every single university, fully or partially destroyed hospitals, health centers, UN facilities, and most of Gaza's religious and cultural institutions”³⁵ have been decimated by Israel's military aggression. With homes and buildings wrecked, virtually all of Palestine is uninhabitable, and the displacement of thousands of Palestinians adds to the appalling conditions. Moreover, with Israel's occupation, several journalists face threats and are blocked from entering various parts of the occupied Palestinian territories. As of writing, approximately 278 journalists have already been killed by the IDF, which

³¹ Emir Nader, “Israel committing genocide in Gaza, world's leading experts say,” in *BBC* (2 September 2025), <<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cde3eyzdr63o>>.

³² “Health System at Breaking Point as Hostilities Further Intensify in Gaza, WHO Warns,” in *World Health Organization* (22 May 2025), <<https://www.who.int/news/item/22-05-2025-health-system-at-breaking-point-as-hostilities-further-intensify--who-warns>>.

³³ “Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territories 2023,” in *Amnesty International*, (n.d.), <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/middle-east/israel-and-the-occupied-palestinian-territory/report-israel-and-the-occupied-palestinian-territory/>>.

³⁴ “Famine Confirmed for First Time in Gaza,” in *World Health Organization* (22 August 2025), <<https://www.who.int/news/item/22-08-2025-famine-confirmed-for-first-time-in-gaza>>.

³⁵ Alene Bouranova, “Is Israel Committing Genocide in Gaza? New Report from BU School of Law's International Human Rights Clinic Lays Out Case,” in *BU Today* (5 June 2024), <<https://www.bu.edu/articles/2024/is-israel-committing-genocide-in-gaza/>>.

Amnesty International's assessment considers to be the highest number of journalists killed in modern history.³⁶ Moreover, foreign aid, especially from prominent organizations like the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNWRA), has had a hard time passing through checkpoints as trucks carrying loads of humanitarian aid are also blocked. This exacerbates the famine, sanitation, and medical concerns on the ground. Lastly, aid distribution sites, where Palestinians gather and scramble in desperation to seek food, have also become hubs for more Palestinian deaths as Israeli soldiers open fire on those seeking aid on multiple occasions, which effectively violates international law concerning aid distribution.³⁷

Putting this into perspective, i.e., why Israel remains belligerent and unscathed from being hawkish despite calls for an immediate and lasting ceasefire from the international community, would be a tremendous task considering its intricacies. Nevertheless, there exist clear indications and reasons behind their motivation. Firstly, Israel has been defending time and again that it is not targeting civilians but only Hamas members; that in the process, it is inevitable for the civilian population to become collateral damage, especially since Hamas uses them as a human shield. Yet multiple accounts of Israeli leaders' barbaric open admissions say otherwise. In November of last year, Israeli Heritage Minister Amihai Eliyahu brought up the idea of dropping a nuclear bomb on the Gaza Strip in order to end the conflict.³⁸ Further, immediately after the October 7th incident, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu uttered the following words: "We have decided to halt electricity, fuel, and goods transfer to Gaza."³⁹ As far back as 2004, Giora Eiland, the then Israel's National Security Director called Gaza a "huge concentration camp."⁴⁰ Hence, even pre-October 7th, there have been open

³⁶ "Al Jazeera's Salama among six Gaza journalists killed by Israel in attacks," in *Al Jazeera* (25 August 2025), <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/25/al-jazeera-journalist-mohammed-salama-among-14-killed-in-israeli-attack>>.

³⁷ Samy Magdy, "Dozens Killed as Palestinians in Gaza Scramble for Aid from Air and Land," in *PBS* (4 August 2025), <<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/dozens-killed-as-palestinians-in-gaza-scramble-for-aid-from-air-and-land>>. See also "Gaza: Nearly 1,400 Palestinians Killed While Seeking Food, as UN Warns Airdrops Are No Solution | UN News," in *United Nations* (1 August 2025), <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/08/1165552>>; "Gaza: Over 400 Palestinians Killed around Private Aid Hubs, UN Rights Office Says," in *United Nations* (24 June 2025), <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164846>>.

³⁸ Chantal Da Silva, "'Nakba 2023': Israel right-wing ministers' comments add fuel to Palestinian fears," in *NBC* (14 November 2023), <<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/gaza-nakba-israels-far-right-palestinian-fears-hamas-war-rcna123909>>.

³⁹ Vijay Prasad, "The savagery of the war against the Palestinian people," in *Peoples Dispatch* (10 October 2023), <<https://peoplesdispatch.org/2023/10/10/the-savagery-of-the-war-against-the-palestinian-people/>>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

admissions from Israeli politicians of their occupation in Palestine.⁴¹ These open admissions are heard straight from the horse's mouth. Even IDF soldiers publicly post videos of themselves bulldozing and running over Palestinian bodies, even cheering as bombs are launched in the background.

In the broader context, it must also be noted that Hamas has a role to play as well in this political situation. There is a considerable amount of accountability to be placed on Hamas, especially with how their purported use of human shields has endangered Palestinian civilians. As such, Hamas has to be condemned for the terrorist actions it has taken. There is no excuse for the terroristic and inhumane strategies and actions from their side. Indeed, two things can be true at the same time. As such, Hamas has faced some level of backlash from Palestinians themselves:

Open criticism of Hamas has grown in Gaza since war began, both on the streets and online, though there are still those that are fiercely loyal and it is hard to accurately gauge how far support for the group has shifted ... There was opposition to Hamas long before the war, though much of it remained hidden for fear of reprisals.⁴²

Taking this into consideration, reports assert that there is still no justification for the identified genocidal actions committed by Israel. This collective punishment, which goes against international law, is even more egregious considering that Israel is ranked 17th in global military power as indicated by the Global Firepower Index 2024.⁴³ By and large, Palestine pales outright to the military strength of Israel, which explains its unwavering aggression. More importantly, it is emboldened by the world's largest military power, the United States.⁴⁴ Since October 7th, the US has provided Israel with military aid of 17.9 billion dollars. This aid given to Israel "is a mix of military financing, weapons sales, and transfers from US weapons

⁴¹ The Israel-Palestine conflict predates October 7. For almost eight decades now, it remains as one of the longest conflicts in modern history. To be sure, Palestine's Hamas has had a fair share in exacerbating the conflict, but the conditions faced by the Palestinian population is clearly directly attributable to the Israeli occupation.

⁴² Rushdi Aboualouf, "Hundreds join Gaza's largest anti-Hamas protest since war began," in *BBC* (27 March 2025), <<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4g71lk09np0>>.

⁴³ Kersten Knipp, "Israel-Iran Escalation: How Strong Is Israel's Military?," in *DW* (18 April 2024), <<https://www.dw.com/en/israel-iran-escalation-how-strong-is-israels-military/a-68859030>>.

⁴⁴ "2025 United States Military Strength," in *Global Fire Power* (9 January 2025), <https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=united-states-of-america>.

stockpiles, according to the report, which is part of the institute's Costs of War project."⁴⁵ One can only imagine the bloating military budget of the US; other portions related to social services pale in comparison to the military budget allocation annually. Further, as a sitting member of the UN Security Council, the US has vetoed five UN resolutions calling for an immediate ceasefire.⁴⁶ Surely, Israel has no incentive to de-escalate tensions on the ground when powerful nations like the US, Germany, the UK, and others continue to offer unconditional support. For many activists, the US, along with other allies of Israel, is complicit in the genocide committed against the Palestinian population.

Radical Imagination and the Great Refusal

As I expressed in my introduction, this paper in no way offers any solution to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Palestine. Moreover, my appropriation of Marcuse is likewise not meant to provide a rationale behind the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Understanding the historical, political, and social conditions that shaped the ongoing conflict demands going beyond philosophy. But by virtue of exploring Marcuse's engagement with the Israel-Palestine conflict, as well as reconstructing his critique of militarism, we are provided with a decent understanding concerning the perils of military aggression, especially when problematized in the context of Palestine today. Moreover, by recalling Marcuse's visit to Israel, it becomes clear that as a Jewish critical theorist, he also engaged with the conditions in Israel and Palestine during his time. This is especially important since critical theorists have not been very vocal on the conditions in Gaza. Perhaps, Habermas is another one who paid attention to the conflict, albeit coming from a different vantage point and stance altogether.⁴⁷ That said, this section outlines briefly Marcuse's perspectives on radical imagination and the Great Refusal. Perhaps, by drawing on the idea of imagination and the Great Refusal, envisioning a better Israel-Palestine relations could provide radical alternatives and possibilities to think about.

Marcuse's model of critical theory has always centered around a radical critique of society, which was primarily motivated by the fact that, for him, society has a dialectical character. And while he maintained a

⁴⁵ "US Spends More than \$20bn in Aid to Israel, Middle East Conflicts: Report," in *Al Jazeera* (7 October 2024), <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/7/us-spends-more-than-20bn-in-aid-to-israel-middle-east-conflicts-report>>.

⁴⁶ Andrew Roth, "US Vetoes Resolution for Unconditional Gaza Ceasefire at UN Security Council," *World News*, in *The Guardian* (4 June 2025), <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/04/us-vetoes-gaza-ceasefire-un-security-council>>.

⁴⁷ "Habermas on Israel: A Principle of Solidarity," in *Reset Dialogues* (15 November 2023), <<https://www.resetdoc.org/story/habermas-israel-principle-solidarity/>>.

pessimistic attitude against late capitalist societies, he simultaneously held on to a belief in the possibilities for liberation. This requires the recapturing of Eros. Being a repository of imagination, hope, and images of social transformation, it opens a sensibility that goes beyond the logic of productivity, accumulation, and aggression quintessential of the forces of domination today. To be sure, Marcuse is not suggesting that Thanatos be removed outright. It is not a matter of disposing of one and preferring the other, but a balance between these drives. In fact, the aggressive instincts of Thanatos are not an inherently detrimental instinct that ought to be destroyed; it may also enhance life when used well alongside Eros. As Kellner opines:

Marcuse argues that release and enhancement of the life instincts will tame and control the destructive instinct, Thanatos (EC, pp. 22ff, 139, 231ff). Although he accepts Freud's notion of a death instinct, he thinks that in a non-repressive civilization the life instincts will control aggressive instincts and use the aggressive instincts for the purposes of enhancing life.⁴⁸

Eros must be recovered to offer an alternative view to capitalism's destructive appropriation of Thanatos. With Eros, a radical imagination of an established order that does not valorize wars, for example, can be made possible. The dimension of possibilities spawns a utopian vision that, when juxtaposed with the current war machine that is Israel, utopian visions of a more stable Israel-Palestine relations become worth imagining. The answer as to how this is to be materialized is an ongoing debate; nonetheless, in a world that has become so cynical of its possibility, Marcuse's belief in positing a different realm of ideas can be a starting point.

It is from the standpoint of radical imagination, awakening the critical impulse and revolutionary spirit, that forms of the Great Refusal emerge against that which is. For Marcuse, the Great Refusal is "the protest against unnecessary repression, the struggle for the ultimate form of freedom—'to live without anxiety'."⁴⁹ In other words, the Great Refusal is a refusal against forces and forms of domination and injustice through 'radical resistance and struggle.'⁵⁰ The 60s were particularly promising for Marcuse in that they breathed a myriad of liberation movements that signified the

⁴⁸ Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 187.

⁴⁹ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 151.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

refusal of oppositional forces against the pathological conditions of the administered society. In *An Essay on Liberation*, he writes:

In Vietnam, in Cuba, in China, a revolution is being defended and driven forward which struggles to eschew the bureaucratic administration of socialism. The guerrilla forces in Latin America seem to be animated by that same subversive impulse: liberation. At the same time, the apparently impregnable economic fortress of corporate capitalism shows signs of mounting strain: it seems that even the United States cannot indefinitely deliver its goods—guns and butter, napalm and color TV. The ghetto populations may well become the first mass basis of revolt (though not of revolution). The student opposition is spreading in the old socialist as well as capitalist countries. In France, it has for the first time challenged the full force of the regime and recaptured, for a short moment, the libertarian power of the red and the black flags; moreover, it has demonstrated the prospects for an enlarged basis. The temporary suppression of the rebellion will not reverse the trend.⁵¹

While conflicted with the efficacy of collective resistance movements, he nonetheless saw a promising potential in at least acting as a catalyst for social transformation. The student movement in the 60s was significant, for instance, because the university is one of the last bastions of critical discourse and hope. However, despite the efforts of the 60s counterculture failing to accomplish the purported goals, they nevertheless opened a radical imagination that opposes the rationality of extractivist and aggressive means of living. He considered those forms of solidarity as representative of the Great Refusal.

Anyone can rightfully doubt the viability of protest movements in resisting the system toward a radical social transformation; yet, one can also consider the potential they hold. As a matter of fact, we have seen a resurgence recently of worldwide protests against Israel's hawkish actions in Palestine. The global campus protests and international condemnation of Israel's actions, for example, reminiscent of the 60s revolutionary spirit, that reverberated throughout the world, calling for a ceasefire and arms embargo, amplified the clamor for international intervention. Indeed, Israel's

⁵¹ Marcuse, "An Essay on Liberation," 7.

occupation of Palestine has been going on for almost eight decades now. Deliberate killings of the civilian population are not new in Palestine; they predate October 7th. Yet the collective refusal of various groups since 2023 has made the issue more mainstream. In fact, it has become an important electoral issue, for example, in countries like the US, among others, as its importance has been brought to the fore at an unprecedented intensity. It is refusals like this that bring forth crucial conversations about the social pathologies and existing irrational conditions around us. In the end, "A full understanding of the impact of civil protest on the Gaza conflict may take years to assess, but the early signs are that this will be seen as the strongest example of transnational nonviolent public action in decades."⁵²

The world is exasperating and exhausting as when a country like Israel heightens its military operations and justifies killing Palestinian babies as self-defense. In such a situation, there is a tendency to lose the vitality to remain hopeful. What little credence is left in envisaging a free Palestine when a Palestinian life is not considered worth mourning and 'grievable' as opposed to that of an Israeli? Yet again, where there is oppression, there is resistance. And sometimes, art can offer a new dimension of refusal outside of the conventional forms of protest and resistance. Marcuse attributed great power to art as an expression that embodies the critical spirit and negative character of the Great Refusal—perhaps even the highest form. A radical imagination of a qualitatively better society can serve as a starting point in setting off and pursuing the struggle for liberation. As such, I wish to end with this excerpt from a poem by Palestinian poet Mosab Abu Toha, which inspires the possibility of imagining a reality that carries hope for a place that needs it the most:

If we stay in our houses, they bomb us.
 If we shelter in a school, they bomb us.
 If we run to a hospital, they bomb us.
 If we move into a tent, they bomb us.
 If we go to a toilet, they bomb us.
 If we run from an airstrike, they bomb us.
 If we do not do any of this, they still bomb us.
 If we stay like a tree, or temporarily leave like a leaf in
 the fall, they bomb us.

⁵² Paul Rogers, "Will global support for Palestine force Israel to honour ceasefire in Gaza?" in *OpenDemocracy* (20 October 2025), <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/gaza-israel-palestine-ceasefire-global-protests-demonstrations-trump-us/>>.

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But spring will come and they, those who bomb us, will
find no bombs among the flowers.⁵³

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⁵³ Mosab Abu Toha, “Exclusive: An Original Poem From Acclaimed Palestinian Poet,” in *Zeteo* (1 October 2024), <<https://zeteo.com/p/exclusive-an-original-poem-from-acclaimed>>.

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