“Gaza No Longer Physically Exists” – Chris Hedges Presents His New Book Requiem for Gaza

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Joe Sacco (JS): Or there's a microphone.

Audience member: What's the definition of the word Hamas?

Chris Hedges (CH): Hamas, I was there in Gaza when Hamas was founded. Hamas is a national liberation group, a resistance group that like many resistance groups including the Zionist resistance groups before 1948 uses terrorism as a tactic. I mean I knew Rantisi, I was critical to Rantisi because I covered the bus bombings in Jerusalem, this is where Hamas suicide bombers would get onto a bus and blew up civilians including children. I've seen a lot of dead children and a dead child is a dead child, I don't really care whether they're Israeli or Palestinian. So, yeah, the tactics are unsavoury, often, but that was true. I mean, what? did the Irgun blew up the King David Hotel? And the reason resistance groups use terrorism is because they don't have access to an air force, to heavy weapons, to armoured units and so they use the cruder. I mean, bombing a refugee camp with a 1,000 pound bomb is an act of terrorism. But this is the nature of violent conflict. It's ugly, and it's always morally problematic. But Hamas was founded as a national liberation movement, one that Rantisi and Yassin, who founded it, made clear was not solely defined, although they came out of the Muslim brotherhood solely defined by adherence to a particular faith; there are, I think about 12% of Palestinians are Christian. So yeah, that's Hamas.

JS: We should mention that one of the journalists we spoke to, we asked her about Hamas and that's how she put it: It's a resistance organisation and it's part of the Palestinian resistance organisations but she loathed Sinwar, the leader of Hamas who organised what happened on October 7th – I mean, when Chris asked her: Did you ever meet Sinwar? She said: Fuck him. And that's not uncommon in a way. When I was in Gaza, most people I knew, I mean obviously you associate with people who maybe have certain viewpoints, but most people, most Palestinians I knew did not like Hamas. They thought of it as a resistance

organisation, but they didn't like living under Hamas control.

Audience member: How do you approach the recent admissions that were coming out in Israeli media about Netanyahu's foreknowledge of the attack and the admission that the Hannibal Directive was responsible for a lot of the civilian deaths? And do you think that these recent admissions are an attempt to sort of erase the agency of the Palestinian resistance groups, this kind of suggestion that it was all an inside job and Netanyahu pre-planned this as an opportunity, or are these admissions maybe designed to discredit Netanyahu for the elections?

CH: I don't think it was an inside job. I think it's clear that there were intelligence reports, just like in 9/11, that the Netanyahu government did not take seriously – part of that was hubris. There's no question that a significant number of Israelis were killed by the IDF. That has been reported, not very much in the, hardly at all, actually, in the American press. I don't think the New York Times has ever dealt with it. But in the Israeli press, Haaretz and Yedioth Ahronoth and others, it's clear that when Hamas, for instance, took hostages in kibbutzes, they sent in tanks and just blew away the whole house that had the Hamas fighters and the hostages. Orders were given to strike any vehicle headed back into Gaza, often those vehicles had Israeli captives in them. They blew up the border crossing Erez, which, so it had Hamas fighters, and I don't know the exact number, but probably a few dozen Israeli soldiers, so there's no question that, and this has been well documented by the Israeli press, Sinwar, I mean, he spoke fluent Hebrew, spent years in an Israeli prison, just made very terrible miscalculations. The first miscalculation was that by seizing a large number of Israelis, he could free Palestinian prisoners. The second miscalculation was that that incursion would see a Palestinian uprising, including in the West Bank, that there would be support within Arab regimes, which have done the opposite, largely they've been collaborated with Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and that Israel would not retaliate as it did. It was a terrible, terrible misreading. The Hamas fighters could take cover in the tunnels. Those tunnels did not provide any kind of protection for Israeli civilians who were left exposed. I have a good Palestinian friend who also told me that when Hamas came to power, most Palestinians had an AK-47 propped up in the living room. Hamas confiscated all the guns. Only the Hamas fighters and police were allowed to have weapons. And he said: October 7th – he was in Gaza for 81 days – those of us who would have defended ourselves had no ability to defend ourselves because Hamas had stripped us of our weapons. So I think Joe's experience and mine is and this is true with many journalists – I mean, I think this is the only thing that angered me so much about the attacks against Palestinian journalists is I happen to know for a fact that a lot of those journalists really didn't like Hamas at all.

Audience member: Hi. So I do organise some campaigns for the families in Gaza, and I do have many friends in Gaza. And I never heard them saying they hate Jews. They always say they hate occupation, and that they have a right to defend themselves, and also they don't like how they treat Palestinian people. But when I see Zionist comments, they never call Palestinian people Palestinian. They say Arab people; Arabs hate Jews, that kind of comments. And yesterday, I read an article about Gaza Children Village, which is a nonprofit

organisation in America. And the CEO is Dr. David Hasan. And he is born in Kuwait and he has Palestinian parents but immigrated to the United States. And I read the article saying that they are trying to create a school in Gaza and then they're trying to put AI to monitor the children or classroom and they don't want to teach radicalised ideas. They don't want to teach anti-Semitism or anti-Israel stuff, and they're going to monitor them. But what do you think about that kind of plan?

CH: We have to remember that for people in Gaza, it's an open-air prison and most of them have never left. So their only contact with an Israeli is an occupier. In Arabic, they use the word Yahudi, which is Jew, when they talk about Israelis; that's just a fact. They don't have any, I'm not sure I'd call it anti-Semitism, because every contact they've ever had with a Jew has been negative, with maybe a few exceptions of Jewish doctors or something that have come, worked in hospitals. So, there is the hatred of any oppressed, colonised people towards the oppressor. And Israel has hijacked Judaism, or Zionism has hijacked Judaism. And I don't read Hebrew, but my friend Raz Segal, an Israeli historian and genocide scholar who on October 13th wrote an article called: "A Textbook Case for Genocide", I mean he will send me passages, it's just appalling. So we have to be clear that Israel is not just a genocidal state, but a genocidal society. The ways that they speak about Palestinians, human animals, little snakes, vermin, you know, this is really racist and dehumanising. And they don't hide it. I mean, these calls to obliterate Palestinian children before they grow up to be terrorists that's almost a direct quote from a major rabbi in Israel, and so, I think one of the things that people like myself, who spent seven years covering Gaza, kept writing, is that when you deny people dignity and when you treat them like animals, eventually the hate and that is visited upon them is reciprocated. And that's, of course, what happened on October 7th. And let's be clear, I mean, there were very clear atrocities that were committed against Israelis. I actually consider the firing of the rockets a war crime, but so often Israelis or Zionist supporters are quick to condemn Hamas or condemn Palestinians without any kind of self-reflexion but technically having covered a lot of war, firing rockets, these rockets don't compare of course to cruise missiles or the kind of ordinance that Israel is dropping on Gaza but firing rockets on exposed civilian areas is a war crime.

JS: Well, unfortunately, I think people see each other as abstractions at this point. When I was in Rafah for a couple of months in the early 2000s, at this point the Israelis still occupied Gaza. They still had settlements in Gaza that were withdrawn later after I'd left. There were a lot of vehicles along the Philadelphi Corridor, which separates Israel and Egypt, and there were bulldozers, armoured personnel carriers, going up and down the corridor and bulldozing homes and all that. And the whole two months I was there, I never actually saw an Israeli soldier. I only saw armoured personnel carriers racing at people, firing, and bulldozing. So you can imagine the level of abstraction and think of it now with the drones, all the Israelis are to a lot of Palestinians these technical devices. So I mean that's where we're at.

House manager: Hi, I'm Sarah, the house manager, and I'm going to get some questions that we got from the Q&A either in the livestream or the chat. So bear with me, I might say these, but this one got a lot of votes from the audience as a question: So Palestinians have a long

history of commentary through cartoons like the works of Naji al-Ali – I'm sorry if I didn't get that right – and Mohammad Saba'aneh, could you juxtapose your work with respect to this work? Did you draw any inspiration for *Requiem for Gaza*?

JS: Okay, not directly, but Naji al-Ali, the great Palestinian cartoonist, I hadn't heard about him when I first went to Palestine in the early 1990s and I didn't really know how to tell people what I was doing, I wasn't sure what I doing myself, like comics about the Palestinians, but when I did get to know someone, I said: Well, actually I'm doing these drawings, I'm doing these comics; and people would just say: Oh, we have our own great cartoonist, Naji al-Ali; who in his cartoons attacked the occupation, but he also attacked the PLO and the Arab states. He was against anyone who was exploiting or victimising ordinary Palestinians. He was assassinated in London, I think it was in 1988. But in some weird way, he opened a door for me because there was a familiarity with cartoons and what they could do when I was discussing my work. And Mohammad Saba'aneh is a cartoonist in the West Bank and I've met him and he's a great cartoonist. He's able to sort of capture the Kafka-esque quality to the occupation. His work is really worth checking out. This is a funny little story; he came to Portland, he was on the tour with his book, and we met where the organisers took him, which was a Middle Eastern restaurant and at some point, he just leaned over to me and said: Why are people always taking me to Middle Eastern restaurants? I want to eat a hamburger. He's just a lovely guy.

Audience member: My question is more about you guys as journalists. I'm working on a project that involves Iranians, and I'm new to this. So I want to know how you separate becoming somebody who's working on a project, and how do you separate the emotional aspect? Or how do you take care of that emotional side when consuming so much trauma and so much emotion and then projecting that to the world? Like, how does that work for you? Do you separate...

JS: For us personally?

Audience member: Yes.

JS: Well, Chris might have a different answer, but it's sort of impossible to separate yourself. For me, I find journalism is sort of, or reporting can be sort of a cold-hearted profession. I think we're quite professional when we're doing the interviews and whatever emotion you're feeling, you can't let that interrupt the flow of someone's story. You can't get in the way of hearing what they have to tell you. And often you're so involved in trying to keep people on track, sometimes corral them a bit, and you're trying to organise them as they're telling you the story and that takes a lot of mental energy. So in that way, it's kind of good in a way because it keeps you a bit detached at the time but for me personally when I'm drawing, it's a very different experience. It's actually a lot harder than just listening to the stories, as hard as those stories are because then in some ways when I am drawing I have to inhabit people's stories in a way that I can only relate maybe to method acting somehow. If you're drawing people you have to really think about what they're going through under certain circumstances. And that is difficult. But then, that's just the job. I mean, that's what we've signed up for. So

how do you deal with it?

CH: I always say there's only two types of foreign correspondents, and it's those who care and those that don't. And those that aren't are very cynical, and they're very good careerists. But that often means that they either mask or distort the truth. One can be emotionally involved and yet truthful. If you look at Joe's, especially his book, *Palestine*, there are incidents in there that don't make the Palestinians look great. It's not our job. We're not propagandists. We report what we see. And the Palestinians have been cursed throughout their history with really poor leadership; whether it's Fatah or anyone else. And Orwell writes about this in *Homage to Catalonia*; Orwell fought with the anarchists, the POUM and in the Spanish Civil War. He was shot through the neck, almost killed. He's recovering in Barcelona, and they have the riots where they shoot all the anarchists, and he puts it in his book, *Homage to Catalon*ia and Victor Gollancz won't publish it because it makes the republican government look bad and Orwell isn't sensed. I mean, Orwell is an important figure for both of us. So being emotionally involved and caring does not preclude the obligation we have to tell the truth even when that truth, at least temporarily, may reflect badly on those who are oppressed.

JS: Yeah, I mean basically I separate the notion of objective journalism which I don't really subscribe to with honest journalism.

Audience member: So I have a question. It's more, honestly, a little biassed of a personal interest, but I'm curious if there's any plans to use illustration to maybe give a voice to those voices who are not as heard, whether actually sharing their voice yourselves or just giving them the tools to share their voice. And I say this is a personal interest; so I work with an organisation that does mental health for Gazans, whether in Gaza or outside Gaza, many of them, of course, in Cairo, so we did travel there. But it was interesting to see with the kids – and I see this across generations of Palestinians, across generations of those people who left since 48, intergenerational trauma, for people who never knew how to share their voices, who maybe their voices are heard through the tragedy, but they're tired of hearing the tragedy, they wanna share just the pain or something that they're going through – and I see, especially with the kid, it was saddening to see how many were struggling and they didn't even people don't even know what's going on. And you could see a kid just bouncing around and going around and playing with a bouncy ball just to put his head there and it would calm him down - it simulated bombing sounds and for him that gave him comfort. But those are things that are missed, like not shared with the world. The kid does not know to share that at the time and that may help the kid to move on and may help the mother also to understand what's going on. Kids who, even like one of them, actually I suggested one of your books after giving him some easier reads first, but because he struggled to do any work at all, he loved illustrating; did not know how to share anything at all, struggled to say any words and he was labelled ADHD, had some developmental issues. But then when we talked, he loved to draw. He really loved to draw and he would share his stories and he started writing and then he started showing some of them and a lot of them were to escape and run away. And I think for a lot of those kids, it would be lovely to see something where illustration seems like a great tool to

use, whether yourselves or teach them how to do it, to share their voices, because it gives them also hope. I think they always see their short stories in a sad way, but they never hear their pain shared, so they let it out; also never see what's the point of this life if it's all just gonna be sad. So that's my personal interest, if it is any at all, like if it is on your mind at all to do in the future at some point?

JS: Wait, say that again.

Audience member: Using illustration, whether to do something like sharing the voices of those kids, for example, voices of less talked about, I guess, voices.

JS: Well it is; I mean I've seen in the 90s when I was in Gaza I saw illustrations kids had done and they were all of a pretty violent nature, often showing a mother trying to pull a boy away from the soldiers, because often mothers intervene, they felt like they were less likely to be, in those days anyway, less likely be assaulted or harmed in any way. And I know I have a cartoonist friend and she managed to get out of Gaza and don't ask me how, but like in the last few weeks, and she's a young cartoonist and what I found out is that she was trying to teach kids about drawing in the tents in Gaza. I think expressing themselves in any way is going to be useful. I agree with you 100% in that regard.

CH: We also have children in the book, several; one boy who can't speak, another small girl who was paralysed, I mean, we didn't ignore the plight of the children.

JS: And the story I tell is about a number of children, I mean, teens and younger.

House manager: Just to make sure we're getting some more. Again, house manager here. So another one that got many votes to be asked is: You've been covering Palestine for decades, how has your audience changed over the course of the last three years? And what hope do you have for those just tuning in?

JS: What hope, sorry?

House manager: What hope do you have for those just tuning in?

CH: Well, I think when Joe and I were speaking out on Palestine a couple decades ago, it was a very lonely position. And we were constantly attacked, like anyone who stood up and decried the atrocities of the apartheid state of Israel. It's actually easier now, following the genocide, because I think the mask has been removed from the Zionist project. People get it. Hope? The book is called Requiem for Gaza. Gaza doesn't exist physically. And Israel has seized 70% of Gaza and crammed roughly 2 million Palestinians into tent cities and rubble, or they don't have access to clean water, or medical care and the agreement made under this, it's not a ceasefire because over 1,200 Palestinians have been murdered by Israel since the quote unquote "ceasefire" went into effect, but they have not abided by the agreement to let in humanitarian aid, food, reconstruction material, because of course, as they have publicly stated, they are still intent on emptying Gaza, on driving the Palestinians out. Now the issue is where the Egyptian government has been categorical that they're not going to the Sinai, but

I think Israel still holds out hope that they can depopulate Gaza.

Audience member: Hi, I just wanna say, first of all, thank you guys for coming and all of the hard work that you do. Chris, I think you're an absolute rock star. Kind of at the last question, I just wanted to ask you both how you tried to avoid succumbing to nihilism, and then another question, what do you think is the fate of the Israeli project in the long haul? Do you think it'll unfold in the same way that the South African liberation occurred, or do you think it's gonna be different in certain ways? What do you is gonna happen in the next ten years? Hard question to ask, but just curious.

CH: You're asking two questions, right? The first is, how do we not succumb to nihilism?

Audience member: Right.

CH: Well, you can't come away from a place like Gaza without having a kind of understanding of the capacity for human evil and human atrocity. I mean, that's something that I encountered in 20 years as a war correspondent. But at the same time, in the midst of that horror, you see these magnificent figures that rise up to challenge the oppressor on behalf of the oppressed. So war has a habit of stripping everything down, good and evil, but good exists. And these are inspirational figures, even if they don't survive. So that's my answer for the first question. What will happen to Israel in the long term? Well, Netanyahu has been quite clear that he doesn't see the future of the world as one where liberal democracy survives. And Israel, like the United States, will become, or is, a despotic state. I mean they're trying to strip these two filmmakers who did this documentary on AI targeting of their Israeli citizenship. And the entire world is moving in that direction, and Israel will be no exception. So its vestiges of democracy and the rule of law, which was always exclusively reserved for Israeli Jews, will vanish, much as our own. I mean, a very similar trajectory here in the United States.

Audience member: Hey gentlemen. On a collaborative effort like this book using two different mediums, what's the order of operations on something like this? Does the prose come first and then you base the graphic art off of that or do you read a couple pages of prose and work on that or vice-versa?

CH: Well, as I mentioned before, Chris was very generous. I wanted to do one particular story, and he said, go ahead. So I think the way we do it is we both go to our separate corners and work. And at some point – the prose has to lead into the comics section – so I'll just call Chris and say, can you please end that chapter talking about these figures and lead it up to this point. And he's such a good writer that he can just, you can do that quite well. And that's how it worked. It's like we sort of work separately and then come together to join things up, to basically sorter things together. But it works sort of effortlessly with us. We exchange what we've done, comments, we ask for comments. But we've worked together before a couple of times, we're quite close friends, so it never seems like a strain working with you, that's for sure.

CH: Well, I also understand that it's counterintuitive, and this was certainly true in *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, where in many ways the best narratives, the ones as a writer you prize, are handed to Joe. Why? Because he...

JS: Because I'm a better...

CH: Because he can give it an emotional punch through the visual aspect of the cartoons that's very hard to replicate in print. It can be replicated in print, I think, you can do it, but there's something about seeing it. And the other thing that's interesting, I mean, when we did *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, you always have a a rough kind of model in your head, maybe not for this book, actually, but that was *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* with Walker Evans as the photographer and the writer James Agee, but as we did the book, we wrote *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* written out of the poorest pockets of the United States, the sacrifice zones, those areas that capitalism has sacrificed before they sacrifice all of us globally. So, what was interesting, unlike photographs, is that – and Joe is very, very meticulous in terms of accuracy – is that he could go back in time. So for instance, we interviewed a miner, Rudy, whose father was killed in a mine accident when he was 17 or something, and in the 30s, and he goes in the mine, and Joe looked up all the mining equipment that would have been in the shafts of the mine in the 1930s. And in this book, the Palestinians we interviewed all had photographs on their phones, including of like dead children. So everything was visual and part of Ruba's job, because people were displaced so much, so I wrote mostly in the Princeton University Library, but Ruba was often there on WhatsApp, constantly fact checking. But she was also doing that for Joe. Joe would need photographic material for the drawings and everything in Gaza has been photographed. Palestinians have it on their phones.

House manager: Thank you. I'm just going to let you know, we probably only have time for maybe one or two more questions.

Audience member: I'll try to make it quick. I'm an escapee of Southern Baptist childhood forced. I'm curious about your take on the fundamentalist evangelical push behind our government's support of the government of Israel in Gaza.

CH: Well, I wrote a book about the Christian right, called *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*. I think they are heretics. I speak as a Divinity School graduate and actually ordained Presbyterian minister. They are not just heretics, they are fascists. They've used the Christian religion to sacralize the worst elements of white supremacy, imperialism, capitalism, it's magical thinking, all totalitarian movements as Hannah Arendt has pointed out are based on magical thinking; magic Jesus is gonna make us all rich. And they, of course, are seated throughout the Trump administration. J.D. Vance is one of them. And they hate democracy. They hate the open society. They are seeking and have gone a long way to destroy it. I mean, our Justice Department is just a Trump vengeance machine. We should all be very worried about the midterms. Because I don't know if he'll succeed, but Trump has no intention – if the Democrats prevail – of recognising that defeat. So what, I think the relationship between the Christian Zionists and the Zionists, or the Christian

Nationalists and Zionists is racism, a complete disdain for democracy, white supremacy, Israel is – and Avi Shlaim and others have written about this – is a European colonial project. Netanyahu's family comes from Poland, and this belief, it's a philo-Semitism on the part of the Christian right, they're actually anti-Semites of course, but they hold out this bizarre vision, which is not in the Bible, that in the last days, Armageddon, 177,000, that's Tim LaHaye's figure in the End Times, that 177 thousand Jews will convert the rest will be eviscerated and killed. So they want Jewish control over the quote-unquote "holy land" because it furthers their apocalyptic vision. It's a very twisted ideology and I spent two years with these people. But I think it's kind of all laid out in *American Fascists*, but there are very similar movements in terms of their goals and their ideology. But in the end, the Christian right, they're anti-semites. I mean, phylo-semitism is a form of anti-semetism.

Audience member: Thank you so much. I've been trying to unknot this stuff for decades.

CH: I think that book is worth reading because these are the people who now have power.

House manager: So this is gonna be the last question for tonight.

Audience member: So, good evening and thank you for your literary work, for your radio work, and also for your history of prison education. So my question is going to be about education and accountability. This past Saturday here in Seattle, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and Veterans for Peace held a People's Tribunal against US complicity in Gaza. And it was focused on the actions of the US government or the inaction as opposed to the actions of Israel. I had the honour to be the prosecutor and we looked at international law, starting with laws before even looking at the Genocide Convention because all of the argument has been distracted around is it genocide, is it not?, and yet there are at least 30 international conventions that are being violated that create a foundation to find genocide. We looked at corporate responsibility, we looked at complicity in all three branches, the legislative for passing the financial laws that have allowed all this to happen, looked at the fact that the legislators passed the Leahy Law and yet have taken no action on the requirement of the State Department and the Department of Defence to look at the behaviour of nations who receive funding from the US. We looked at the universities and their way of stifling the students, and we looked at companies like Microsoft for firing people for speaking out. So my question has to do with, what role do you see, if any, in people's tribunals as another way of educating people the same way your literature and your media programmes have been doing?

CH: Well, I think it's an effective mechanism to expose the complicity of institutions and governments. I think it's a mechanism and a good one. I mean, there have been The Winter Soldier Investigation, Bertrand Russell. And so throughout history – the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, so yeah, I think these are an important educational tool.

CH: And it's a democratic act. I mean, it's you citizens coming up with this thing spontaneously. And I totally appreciate this. It's part of the popular front, in a way, working

against what's going on. So I appreciate what you've done.

Audience member: And I'll just add, if anybody wants to see it, it's all online. If you look for the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom or Veterans for Peace, you can find the insider proceedings on YouTube. So thank you.

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