

HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY

The difficult conversations we don't have



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After Trump's inauguration, Elon Musk did a salute and debates spiraled: was it "the Nazi salute"? Musk has been courting far-right parties in Europe, especially Germany since the president dissolved the parliament in December. The Anti-Defamation League, which tracks anti-Semitism, concluded that it was not a "Nazi salute," but an "awkward gesture." But Hitler references were bound to come. Musk spent last week responding to the backlash with Nazi-themed puns, which would be denounced as anti-Semitic had it not been made by the owner of a powerful tech giant. The current president, who has uttered many anti-Semitic dog whistles, has also claimed that immigrants are responsible for anti-Semitism, when clear evidence suggests that White supremacists and xenophobic extremists are the leading culprits.

Two days before Holocaust Remembrance Day, on January 27, which marked the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Elon Musk made a surprise videolink appearance at a campaign event for the far-right Alternative for Germany party (AfD), during which he told a crowd of around 4,500 people that "children should not be guilty of the sins of their parents, let alone their great-grandparents."

Musk's remarks align with the AfD's position that Germany as a nation should stop atoning for crimes committed by the Nazis in the past. The AfD's leaders have openly endorsed the revival of Nazi-era nationalist language, and made a spectre out of anti-Semitism as a ticket to shun Muslim immigrants. The chairman of the World Holocaust Remembrance Center accused Elon Musk of insulting the victims of Nazism with his speech.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu defended Musk, saying he has been a friend of the Jewish people and that Musk had been "falsely smeared." Had a Palestinian or a protester from the "pro-Palestinian" groups in the US stretched their hands out with the same awkward gesture, the Israeli leader's

reaction would certainly have been very different. Musk's actions as a powerful global figure provide a disconcerting dilution of Nazism and the Holocaust, when an estimated 6 million Jews were massacred industrially by Nazi Germany. The remembrance of Holocaust should sensitise us with human atrocities, but we live in a world where global figures like Musk make desensitising comments about Nazism on social media.

Since the October 7 Hamas attacks, and the following genocide in Gaza by Israel, backed by the US and the West—the word "anti-Semitism" stands for any criticism of Israeli policies. Now, more than ever, the world, particularly the West, must reflect on the politicisation of anti-Semitism and the widespread debasing of the Holocaust to justify the genocide in Gaza. US polemicist Norman Finkelstein had written about "the new anti-Semitism," as a concept to shape-shift history and the "Holocaust industry," which has exploited Jewish suffering for political gains in the geopolitical arena.

According to Finkelstein, the new anti-Semitism might also be called "antisemitic

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anti-Zionism," and it has three components: a political programme to abolish the Jewish homeland, a discourse to demonise it, and a movement to make it a global pariah state. We saw all these components come to light, as Israel turned the Gaza Strip into a grey wasteland, attacked Lebanon, and openly executed genocidal policies. Anti-Semitism as a concept has been thrown around so easily, by the left, right and centre in Western politics

to restrict immigration played into the eugenics movement to preserve the country's racial purity—which was embraced by Nazi Germany. The international precursors to Nazism are often ignored, and the Holocaust is largely viewed as one where only Hitler holds responsibility, not the international community.

On this Holocaust Remembrance Day, Jewish Voice for Peace called for "never

issue, remains unaddressed. The October 7, 2023 attacks, with the largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust, have been framed with the context of the Holocaust and detached from the image of the Nakba—the Palestinian Catastrophe of 1948, which began the persecution of Palestinians to occupy their land.

Acclaimed anti-Zionist historian Ilan Pappé has written about the nexus between the Holocaust, Israel and Nakba. In 1947, before the famous partition resolution, the United Nations suggested allocating less than half of the country and proposed they would share the economy and currency with the Zionist settlers who were allocated a larger part of it. Only one factor led the UN special commission on Palestine, and all those powers behind it, to abandon every conventional principle of statehood and independence for the sake of satisfying the Zionist movement: the Holocaust. According to Pappé, "It was much easier to rectify the Nazi evil vis-a-vis a Zionist movement than facing the Jews of the world in general. It was less complex and, more importantly, it did not involve facing the victims of the Holocaust themselves, but rather a state that claimed to represent them."

The complex and difficult discussions about the Holocaust, about Israel, about Palestine, are integral to ensure that human rights can be upheld in today's world order. It is not to say that the Holocaust should be compared with the genocide in Gaza, but the problematic weaponisation and revisionist history of the Holocaust in order to justify killings must be addressed by the international community. In October 2015, Netanyahu took the weaponisation to new levels in a speech in Jerusalem where he said the Palestinian grand mufti Haj Amin al-Husseini planted the idea to murdering Jews in Hitler's mind. After October 7, Netanyahu described Hamas in a press conference with German Okaf Scholz as "the new Nazis."

Deborah Feldman, American-German writer of *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*, wrote about how pro-Israel political consensus in Germany shut out her dissenting voice as a Jew criticising Israel. Raised by Holocaust survivors, Feldman writes in the essay, "the only legitimate lesson to be learned from the horrors of the Holocaust," is "the unconditional defence of human rights for all, and that simply by applying our values conditionally we are already delegitimising them."



Children of Holocaust survivors protest against the genocide in Palestine. PHOTO: CODEPINK

to the extent that it has lost its real meaning. The US media and Hollywood, particularly, sensationalised the Holocaust for decades, eschewing real lessons from history that are yet to be learnt.

The Holocaust should serve as a reminder of the darkest capabilities of the human mind, and the indifference of the global community. But 80 years later, the world has not reckoned with the mass murder of Jewish men, women and children on the basis of xenophobia, anti-Semitism, political opportunism and profiteering. Rarely do we discuss that Americans—the ever-welcoming champion of the oppressed—were not ignorant of the persecution of European Jews in World War II, but were rather indifferent. And American racism had its part to play in influencing Nazism. In the 1920s, a widespread push

again," now. Many liberals, but Zionists, have shunned the Jewish Voice for Peace as "anti-Semitic." Secular Jews are denounced and arrested in Israel, in the US, in Germany. Conveniently, disturbing facts are erased. Right after World War II ended, the US and the Soviet Union landed in a fight for global power. The so-called accountability for Jewish suffering during World War II seemed lost on US politicians as they sought to establish the nation as the most powerful in the world. The US began Operation Paperclip, a 14-year secret operation where approximately 1,600 Nazi German engineers, scientists and technicians were hired. After World War II, Germany was rebuilt with US aid to counter the Soviet Union and Jews who revolted against it were silenced. The atonement and lessons for the US where anti-Semitism is in fact a pervasive

GEOPOLITICS REWRITTEN

The Arakan Army's unprecedented rise



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The rise of the Arakan Army (AA) in Myanmar's Rakhine State marks a historic shift in South and Southeast Asian geopolitics, redefining regional power and security. Between October and December 2024, the AA seized over 80 percent of Rakhine State, including its 271 km border with Bangladesh—a rare instance of a non-state actor controlling an international border. The seizure of the regime's Western Command headquarters in Ann town, after the fall of Maungdaw, represents a territorial as well as strategic reshuffling that undermines the military junta's grip on power and raises fundamental issues for the region.

The shifting power dynamics

After decades of centralised military control, the AA has shifted Rakhine's power dynamics, emerging as the de facto authority. In particular, the past 15 to 16 months have seen the AA transform dramatically, seizing dozens of townships and army outposts, culminating in the seizing of Western Command headquarters in Ann town—marking a serious blow to the legitimacy of the military junta.

There are various reasons behind the group's success. Its military capabilities have increased tremendously and it can now mount effective operations against well-entrenched military positions. However, the AA has shown a level of military sophistication beyond that of many other armed organisations in Myanmar, proving its ability to capture and hold territory. Its capability to coordinate operations with allies in the Three Brotherhood Alliance was particularly evident as these forces secured important areas on multiple fronts.

Politically, the AA, as the United League of Arakan's (ULA) military wing, has established parallel governance in the areas it controls. It demonstrates a deep understanding of the need to synthesise military victories with political legitimacy, as seen in its efforts to weave a governance framework that



Rohingya refugees gather behind a barbed-wire fence in a temporary settlement set up in a "no man's land" border zone between Myanmar and Bangladesh. PHOTO: AFP

includes both Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim populations. The junta's loss of control in Rakhine State is the second regional military command to fall under the control of ethnic rebels in five months. The loss of the Western Command headquarters alone could signal the start of a domino effect, further weakening the military's grip on power.

The Rohingya question

With more than one million Rohingya currently in Bangladesh, the issue of their return and future status under AA control has become a major regional concern. The AA leadership—particularly through its political wing, the ULA—has outlined a vision of Rakhine that includes both Buddhist and Muslim populations, such as the Rohingya. This marks a significant departure from Myanmar's historically exclusionary stance.

However, this position must be viewed in the context of the AA's historically troubled relationship with the Rohingya community, whatever form that relationship has taken in the past.

Complicating matters are reports that both the AA and the Myanmar military recruit Rohingya for their respective causes. This exploitation of the vulnerable community raises questions about the AA's

has introduced a new dimension to the great power contest between China and India in the region. Rakhine is vital to China's \$1.5 billion investment in oil and gas pipelines to Kunming and its Belt and Road Initiative in the region. These investments, including a \$2.5 billion oil and gas pipeline project, a \$7.3 billion port project at Kyaukphyu, and a \$2.7 billion special economic zone (SEZ), are critical for reducing China's dependence on energy imports via the Malacca Strait.

In retrospect, China has enjoyed a close relationship with Myanmar's military junta and is its principal trade partner and biggest weapons supplier, but the ground reality has compelled it to move with a more nuanced attitude. Recent developments show that Chinese officials have been having talks with the AA's allies in an attempt to broker ceasefires, indicating a pragmatic accommodation with shifting relative power.

India's strategic interests in the region are equally significant but differ in focus. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport and Transit Project (KMTTP) represents India's major strategic investment in establishing connectivity between Kolkata, Sittwe port, and India's northeastern states via Mizoram. India's Act East policy has traditionally relied on ties with Myanmar's military but is now compelled to consider engaging with the AA to safeguard its strategic interests in the face of shifting ground realities.

Bangladesh's strategic dilemma

With the AA in control of their shared 271-kilometer border, Bangladesh faces an

unprecedented diplomatic and security challenge. Over the past few months, Bangladeshi security experts and former diplomats have increasingly called for engagement with the AA, given the new reality on the ground. Former defence attaché to Myanmar, Major General (Retd) Md Shahidul Haque, stated that engagement with the AA would be a "win-win situation" for Bangladesh, both from security and economic perspectives. This perspective reflects a growing sense within Bangladesh's security establishment that traditional diplomatic approaches may need reconsideration.

Nevertheless, Bangladesh's foreign ministry spokesperson Mohammed Rafiqul Alam and others have reiterated the country's official position of not working with non-state actors, stating that relevant ministry departments would take appropriate action. While engagement with the AA could address border security concerns and facilitate Rohingya repatriation, it might also complicate Bangladesh's relations with Myanmar's central government and other regional powers.

The battle for infrastructure control

The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project in India has been thrown off its course due to the changing security landscape. How the group stands in respect to this project will play an important role in India's strategic position in the region. Because of the AA's influence over maritime traffic and potential development projects in the Bay of Bengal coastline, its position along the Bay of Bengal shoreline is vital.

Also, the case of Kyaukphyu is particularly evident as the terminus for China's strategic oil and gas pipelines. Security expert Ye Myo Hein of the US Institute of Peace said the AA theoretically could launch a military campaign to seize Kyaukphyu, it appears to be employing a more calculated strategy, leveraging its control as a bargaining chip in broader regional negotiations.

The rise of the AA in Rakhine State demonstrates that non-state actors can reshape regional dynamics in ways that compel traditional power structures to adapt. It is worth recalling that the regional security architecture is not static, but evolves itself to the new power configurations. The future of South and Southeast Asian security will depend, in part, on how regional stakeholders navigate these changes while striving to preserve stability.

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The great power game

With its control over Rakhine State, the AA