

# Is 'Cultural Erasure' Only Wrong When Our Enemies Do It?

While I certainly join U.S. State Department Undersecretary Uzra Zeya in condemning all state-inflicted murder and ethnocide, I also condemn her ironic, genocidal omissions.

By Robert C. Koehler

of *Common Dreams*

*Oh Lord, kumbaya...*

As I absorb the daily news of war and global devastation, I sing these words to myself—quietly, yes, secretly, lest I ignite instant flash-bang sarcasm from the surrounding world. What next? A flower in a rifle barrel?

Sarcasm spits in the face of idealism—a.k.a., “feelgood-ism”—and life goes on. Any questions? Sure, war is hell and all that, especially when the bad guys wage it, but sitting around the campfire and lamenting musically for global niceness is a sin against our military budget. Don't be silly. We need to protect ourselves.

“The most defiant act of resistance is to sing.”

At least that seems to be the accepted consensus. And the word “kumbaya”—a cry for God and the relief of suffering—simply equals naivete. But here's the problem, as I'm coming to see it: Sarcasm—which sees itself as realism mixed with caustic humor—can easily wind up being nothing more than a defense of war... a defense of the worst of who we are.

*Oh Lord, kumbaya.*

All of which brings me back to Palestine, where what's happening is humanity's darkness—colonial conquest, theft of land, blatant murder and evisceration of a culture—in full view of the world. As IDF soldiers dance and laugh on their cellphone videos while they take part in the devastation of Gaza, the whole enterprise degenerates into armed sarcasm.

“What's happening in Gaza is a multi-layered act that extends far beyond the physical destruction of artifacts or the killing of individuals,” according to Mariam Shah, writing at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “These actions are part of broader destructive processes that undermine a community's heritage, identity, and existence—with profound symbolic and psychological implications for Palestinians not only in Gaza but globally...”

“This destruction, both physical and symbolic, serves a larger political agenda—the erasure of Palestinian identity and collective memory, which may amount to cultural genocide.”

Another term for this is “ethnocide,” coined, ironically, by Jewish exile from Poland Raphael Lemkin in 1944 (who also coined the word “genocide”). It's hardly something new, but every instance of it births anew the soul-deep question: why?

Perhaps even more crucially, it also births the follow-up question: What's the alternative? Sociocultural entities encounter one another and see only an enormous wall of differences: in language, in tradition, in certainties of all sorts. The automatic response tends not to be, uh... curiosity, a desire to understand and learn. The more likely response is fear, which can easily blossom into violence, especially if need is also part of the context of their meeting: a need (or desire) for the land that other culture occupies. Welcome to human history!

I write these words as a citizen of the United States of Irony. A few months ago—well into the Israeli assault on Gaza, with U.S. support and weaponry—U.S. State Department Undersecretary Uzra Zeya spoke about “cultural erasure” at a conference in Prague. “We are at a critical juncture in history,” she said, “where the very fabric of many



The Israeli military used hundreds of mines to blow up Israa University in Gaza on January 17, 2024. (Photo: Screengrab)

unique religious and cultural identities is being threatened by authoritarian regimes and extremist groups around the world.”

*Oh Lord, kumbaya.*

She proceeded to condemn Russia, China, and ISIS in Iraq for inflicting hell and ethnocide on vulnerable cultures in their domain. China is “systematically

dismantling” the identities and traditions of the Tibetan and Uyghur communities, and has destroyed thousands of mosques and sacred sites. Russia, of course, “has attempted to destroy Ukraine's distinct cultural heritage.” And ISIS has “inflicted unimaginable suffering on the Yazidi community as part of its genocide. ISIS fighters destroyed Yazidi shrines and massacred thousands...”

She then declared: “The United States will continue to speak clearly and forcefully against attempts to erase the culture and unique identities of vulnerable communities, and we will back up our words with our actions.”

By arming Israel? By separating migrant families at our southern border? By lamenting over the threat of “white replacement” and (maybe) re-electing Donald Trump president? By ignoring our own history?

While I certainly join Zeya in condemning all state-inflicted murder and ethnocide, I also condemn her ironic, genocidal omissions. It's not just the country's declared enemies—the bad guys—who do this.

We stole the continent, corralled the Indigenous occupants onto “reservations,” then decided to steal their children and turn them into white people via legally enforced boarding schools, a project known as “kill the Indian in him and save the man.”

“Some 100,000 Native Americans were forced to attend these schools, forbidden to speak Native languages, made to renounce Native beliefs, and forced to abandon their Native American identities, including their names,” according to the Equal Justice Initiative. “Many children were leased out to white families as indentured servants.”

“Parents who resisted their children's removal to boarding schools were imprisoned and had their children forcibly taken from them...”

Have we transcended this history? Are we better people now?

All I can do in this moment is reach for the spirit of hope... and kumbaya. In a remarkable *Al-Jazeera* interview, three Palestinians talked about their culture—their art and poetry, theater and song—and how not only is it being bombed and demolished, it's standing directly against the ethnocide, not simply resisting but transcending it. These are the words of Serena Rasoul, one of the interviewees:

***“The most defiant act of resistance is to sing... to one another, to God, to the land. You can level our buildings but you can't destroy our spirits. The majority of Palestinian folk songs are around joy and love. That's who we are.”***

**BIO:** Robert Koehler, a widower and single parent, is an award-winning, Chicago-based journalist and nationally syndicated writer. He explores both conditions at great depth in his book, “*Courage Grows Strong at the Wound*” (2016). Contact him at [commonwonders.com](http://commonwonders.com).

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