**[Hawks in charge](https://www.dawn.com/news/1817716/hawks-in-charge)**

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LAST Sunday, Aaron Bushnell, a 25-year-old senior airman in the US Air Force, set up a video stream and, outside the Israeli embassy in Washington, poured an inflammable liquid over himself and self-ignited, yelling “free Palestine”.

In a video posted on social media shortly before, he had declared that he would “no longer be complicit in genocide”, adding: “I am about to engage in an extreme act of protest but compared to what people have been experiencing in Palestine at the hands of their colonisers, it’s not extreme at all. This is what our ruling class has decided will be normal.”

His last Facebook post says: “Many of us like to ask ourselves, ‘What would I do if I was alive during slavery? Or the Jim Crow South? Or apartheid? What would I do if my country was committing genocide?’ The answer is, you’re doing it. Right now.”

Bushnell died seven hours after US Secret Service agents doused his flames. This tragedy might have been avoided if he had deemed anti-war activism more effective than martyrdom. Mainstream American media outlets seem reluctant to point out the parallel with Norman Morrison who, almost six decades ago, self-immolated outside the Pentagon.

The US is invested in both its proxy wars.

He was immortalised by the late British poet Adrian Mitchell, who noted (in part): “He did it in Washington where everyone could see/ because/ people were being set on fire/ in the dark corners of Vietnam where nobody could see… He simply burned away his clothes,/ his passport, his pink-tinted skin,/ put on a new skin of flame/ and became/ Vietnamese.”

Bushnell’s ‘new skin of flame’ turned him into a Palestinian in Gaza, where infants who survive the incendiary Israeli onslaught are dying of starvation. To Joe Biden, the unfolding genocide is merely ‘over the top’. He faced a potential reckoning yesterday in the Democratic Party primary in Michigan, where influential Democrats — from Arab and Muslim legislators to a variety of trade unions and progressives, including some Jews — have been demanding that the administration distance itself from Israel.

But even in the unlikely event that the ‘uncommitted’ votes trump the Biden partisans, it is unlikely that the self-proclaimed Zionist in the White House will shift his stance — which routinely involves mildly berating the Netanyahu regime for its indiscriminate slaughter while steadily supplying the weapons of mass slaughter and destruction.

There are obviously some differences with the other proxy war the US is engaged in — the one in Ukraine, against Russia, which had been brewing for years before Vladimir Putin’s brutal invasion two years ago — albeit one in which the civilian death toll, deplorable at any level, is considerably lower than what Israel has managed to achieve in just five months.

If anyone assumed that Ukraine would have automatically empathised with the Palestinians, they would have been wrong. The appeal of Israel’s ethno-nationalist proclivities and its genocidal tendencies is strong, particularly among neo-Nazis whose pivotal role in Ukraine’s military and civilian establishment over the past 30 years tends to be underplayed by those who seek to portray Kyiv as a democratic bulwark against authoritarianism.

Putin, mind you, isn’t just an authoritarian. His murderous tendencies have been evident since long before the West decided he was no longer a viable partner for Nato and its ilk. His regime’s brutality in Chechnya could be ignored as a part of the spurious ‘war on terror’, but the US had its eyes on Georgia and Ukraine as Nato recruits, after expanding the Cold War military alliance to Russia’s periphery — in violation of verbal promises that Mikhail Gorbachev naively trusted.

Nonetheless, there was no immediate provocation that pushed Putin into a war of attrition two years ago. His immediate goals — capturing Kyiv, for instance — proved elusive. Every arm of government has been deeply corrupted in the past three decades, and Moscow’s military strength fell short of the Kremlin’s expectations, thankfully. The robust resistance that Ukrainian forces put up restricted Russian advances. But last year’s much ballyhooed counteroffensive was a flop.

Despite the CIA being entangled in Ukraine’s security structure for 30 years, and particularly profoundly since the troubling events of 2014, Russia lately appears to have gained the upper hand. Halting the spiral would require compromise on both sides, but diplomacy is not a part of the picture at this point.

Waiting for Putin to kick the bucket, or for his regime to fold by other means, is not a viable strategy. But arming Kyiv in the expectation that Russia will eventually halt its ‘special military operation’ is equally delusional.

If Israel and Hamas can negotiate, there’s no reason why Moscow and Kyiv cannot — except for the American hawks standing in the way.

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