

Between Geopolitics and Genocide: Mapping Systemic Human Rights Violations in West Asia

Abeeta Hilal¹, Meha Pant² and Rahi Tongbram³

Abstract

This paper explores the systemic human rights violations in West Asia, focusing on Gaza, Syria, and Yemen, where geopolitical rivalries intersect with enduring patterns of violence against civilians. Despite the presence of international legal frameworks, enforcement remains selective and politically compromised. The study interrogates how foreign interventions, regional power contests, and global indifference perpetuate impunity, often resulting in violations that approach or fulfill the criteria for genocide. Existing literature tends to analyze these crises in isolation, overlooking the structural connections linking state violence, foreign policy, and international paralysis. Utilizing a comparative-historical methodology and drawing on human rights reports, UN documents, and secondary sources, the research maps patterns of abuse and identifies the systemic drivers behind their persistence. It reveals how strategic alliances, arms trade, and the silence of powerful actors enable and reproduce atrocities under the guise of political necessity. The findings challenge the normative assumptions of international human rights mechanisms, exposing their susceptibility to politicization. The paper ultimately advocates a shift from legal formalism to political realism in human rights discourse and calls for stronger global and regional advocacy to hold perpetrators accountable. It situates West Asia within a broader discussion on justice, accountability, and the structural dynamics of geopolitical violence.

Keywords: Geopolitics, West Asia, genocide, human rights violations, international law, state violence.

Introduction

The West Asia region has historically been a theatre of prolonged conflicts, authoritarian rule, foreign interventions, and persistent humanitarian crises. In countries such as Gaza, Syria, and Yemen, civilians' daily lives are marked by random violence, siege, displacement, and erosion

¹ Abeeta Hilal is a Research Scholar with Department of Political Science, Sharda University, Greater Noida, U.P., India.

² Meha Pant is an Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Sharda University, Greater Noida, U.P., India

³ Rahi Tongbram is a Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Sharda University, Greater Noida, U.P., India

of fundamental human rights. Despite the existence of robust international legal mechanisms designed to protect civilian populations and hold perpetrators accountable, such as the Geneva Conventions, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm, and numerous UN resolutions, abuses have persisted with disconcerting regularity and impunity. These are not isolated deviations but expressions of deep-rooted patterns of systemic abuse legitimized by silence, complicity, and geopolitics.

The primary research question of concern in this paper is the systemic undermining of human rights application within West Asia by geopolitical interests. Great power rivalry, arms trade groupings, and alliance politics have led to the strategic imposition of international norms, resulting in a double standard within the international human rights order. States and other actors aligned with influential states too often go unpunished, and the rhetoric of human rights is opportunistically invoked to justify or condemn violence on grounds of political expediency. Such geopolitics has not simply discredited the legitimacy of international institutions but has facilitated a space in which crimes against humanity, including acts plausibly amounting to genocide, are tolerated, if not facilitated, by global powers.

A regional and comparative framework is necessary to overcome fragmented analyses that address each conflict individually. The crises in Gaza, Syria, and Yemen, although contextually distinct, are interconnected through broader structural dynamics of regional rivalries (e.g., the Saudi-Iran competition), foreign interventions (e.g., those of the U.S., Russia, and Iran), and international inertia or complicity. Examining these cases side-by-side reveals a recurring pattern: the instrumentalization of violence for strategic ends, the failure of deterrent mechanisms, and the reproduction of impunity. A comparative-historical lens enables us to understand how geopolitical architecture influences the conditions under which human rights are consistently violated and how various actors, directly or indirectly, contribute to sustaining this architecture.

The objectives of this paper are fourfold:

- To map the patterns of systemic human rights violations in selected West Asian conflict zones.
- To investigate how regional and global geopolitical interests facilitate or sustain these violations.
- To assess the extent to which these acts constitute or approach the legal definition of genocide.

- To interrogate the effectiveness and limitations of international human rights frameworks in addressing such systemic crises.

Based on these objectives, the paper addresses the following research questions:

- How do geopolitical alliances and rivalries shape the prevalence and character of human rights violations in West Asia?
- In what ways do international legal instruments fall short in deterring or responding to these abuses?
- Can the violence in Gaza, Syria, and Yemen be understood as structurally connected phenomena within a broader geopolitical order?
- What normative and policy alternatives exist to address the gap between international human rights ideals and political realities?

The next section provides a critical review of existing literature on human rights enforcement, geopolitical conflict, and genocide in West Asia. This is followed by a theoretical framework that draws on the principles of political realism and theories of structural violence. The methodology section outlines the comparative-historical approach employed in this study, detailing the data sources and analytical methods used. The subsequent sections present case studies of Gaza, Syria, and Yemen, examining common patterns and structural logics of impunity. The discussion synthesizes findings across cases, highlighting implications for international law, advocacy, and global governance. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the limitations of the current human rights regime and proposes pathways toward more equitable and politically conscious mechanisms of accountability.

Literature Review

Andrew Clapham (2015), *"Human Rights: A Very Short Introduction"*, establishes a theoretical basis for human rights by describing the rationale for global protections and legal standards. His text provides an introduction to how human rights law in international society was developed to ensure the protection of individuals against state repression, specifically through instruments such as the UDHR, ICCPR, and the Geneva Conventions. Clapham's exposition is necessary to appreciate the idealistic reasons behind such instruments. William A. Schabas (2011), *"An Introduction to the International Criminal Court,"* develops this analysis by providing an authoritative legal guide to the International Criminal Court (ICC). He outlines both the potential and limits of criminal prosecution of war crimes, particularly in those cases

where state consent is absent. Legal accountability, as highlighted by Schabas, finds real expression through the formal institutions criticized here for selective enforcement.

Alex J. Bellamy (2014), *"Responsibility to Protect: A Defense"* is a work in favor of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm, conceding its potential on a theoretical plane as well as referencing political challenges such as UNSC vetoes. His work is essential in grasping how geopolitical interests tend to dominate humanitarian imperatives, a central issue discussed in this paper. Gerry Simpson (2007) in *Law, War and Crime: War Crimes, Trials and the Reinvention of International Law* is more analytical in his style by examining how trials for war crimes are not simply legal but politicized spectacles. He argues that international law, in various ways, is a reinvention of victor-based legitimacy rather than justice, an argument that corresponds to the problem of structural impunity.

Gilbert Achcar (2013), a Marxist historian, in his *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* interprets the Arab uprisings and what followed them in terms of class conflict and imperialism. He illustrates how powers at the global and regional levels exploit democratic ideals for their strategic interests. His book substantiates the point that West Asian conflicts are influenced by ideological and strategic competition to a greater extent than domestic considerations. Hili Mudriş-Even Hen, Nir T. Boms, Sareta Ashraph (2020) in their edited volume on Syria *The Syrian War: Between Justice and Political Reality*, offer a nuanced image of the war, combining legal analysis and geopolitical realism. The most significant contribution of theirs is the illustration of how mechanisms for justice, including international trials or ceasefire deals, are usually sabotaged by international power struggles.

Rashid Khalidi (2020) in *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017*, presents a historical account of Palestine as a case of settler colonialism and resistance. His long view shows how contemporary political arrangements are the result of decades of strategic manipulation, which sits well with the emphasis on continuity in state-sponsored violence.

Mahmood Mamdani (2009) in *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*, disrupts dominant genocide discourse by contending that legal definitions of intent blur structural and political root causes of violence. His writing on Darfur is particularly pertinent to this paper since it highlights how the world's discourses are framed to accommodate prevailing geopolitical agendas. Dirk Moses (2021) in *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression*, expands this critique by exploring the history of

genocide law, maintaining that its emphasis on "permanent security" is really in response to the interests of great powers and not the demands of justice for victims. Moses invokes a "permanent emergency" to legitimate interventions, but ignores similar crimes committed by allies.

Ilan Pappé (2024), *"Ten Myths About Israel"*, explores Israeli policy in terms of ethnic cleansing and "memoricide." His revisionist critical history is key to placing collective punishment and displacement as ideologically and systemically motivated, directly relevant to how to look into Gaza. Rob Nixon (2011), *"Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor"*, presents the concept of "slow violence", the slow, frequently imperceptible damage caused by systems of power over sometime. This is especially helpful when discussing economic siege warfare or infrastructure destruction in West Asia, which often fails to qualify as genocide but is just as lethal.

Makau Mutua (2001), *"Savages, Victims, and Saviors: The Metaphor of Human Rights"*, criticizes the West-versus-rest binary framework of human rights discourse, with the West as savior and the Global South reduced to victim or savage. His metaphor dissects the moral exceptionalism that makes selective interventions possible in the Middle East. Upendra Baxi (2007), *"The Future of Human Rights"*, cautions that human rights discourse tends to be a discursive armour for imperial and economic interests. His concept of "trade-related human rights" is important in understanding how diplomacy and aid are militarized in wars such as Yemen.

Balakrishnan Rajagopal (2003), *"International Law from Below: Development, Social Movements, and Third World Resistance"*, presents a Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL) perspective that contends international law has traditionally been used to further the interests of hegemonic states. His analysis helps situate the systemic human rights abuses within a broader neocolonial legal framework.

Theoretical Framework

Traditional legal systems or stand-alone geopolitical occurrences are unable to account for the systemic and persistent human rights abuses in West Asia. Rather, this research engages a multi-layered theoretical paradigm synthesized from Political Realism, Legal Idealism, Structural Violence, State Crime theory, and Regional Geopolitical Dynamics. These perspectives enable an examination of the disjuncture between normative obligation and realpolitik, institutionalization of abuse, and regional power structures facilitating impunity.

Political Realism vs. Legal Idealism:

Political realism, a dominant paradigm in international relations, posits that states primarily act in pursuit of national interests, defined in terms of power, security, and survival (Morgenthau, 1985; Waltz, 2010). From this perspective, international norms, including human rights, are subordinate to strategic calculations. This theory explains why states often selectively apply international law, condemning adversaries while shielding allies engaged in similar or worse conduct. The United Nations Security Council's paralysis, due to vetoes by permanent members, exemplifies the realist dynamic where power politics outweigh legal obligations (Baylis et al., 2020).

In contrast, legal idealism, grounded in liberal internationalism, posits that international law and institutions can constrain state behavior and promote justice, especially through treaties, accountability mechanisms, and moral norms (Slaughter, 2004). However, this idealist vision often fails in the face of asymmetric enforcement. For instance, the failure to prosecute war crimes in Gaza, Syria, and Yemen reflects how legal instruments are rendered ineffective when confronted with state interests and geopolitical alliances (Mutua, 2001, pp.210). Thus, the clash between realism and idealism is at the heart of the human rights crisis in West Asia. This study aligns with critical realist scholars who argue that legal norms alone cannot produce justice without redistribution of power in global governance (Chimni, 2004).

Structural Violence and State Crime Theories:

Structural violence, as conceptualized by Johan Galtung (2018), refers to indirect, institutionalized forms of harm embedded within political, social, and economic systems. Unlike direct violence, structural violence is invisible, normalized, and systemic, making it particularly relevant for examining long-term deprivation, denial of services, and institutionalized discrimination in West Asia. For example, Israel's blockade of Gaza or the bombing of water and health infrastructure in Yemen are instances of how state actions and international complicity sustain structural harm (Farmer, 2004).

State crime theory, specifically as it has been constructed by thinkers such as Penny Green and Tony Ward (2004), broadens this concept through identifying how state-permitted or state-sanctioned behavior infringes on international standards, usually with impunity. These crimes are state terror, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide, perpetrated actively or by systematic neglect. These actions, when politicized or tactically condoned, undercut traditional

legal strategies that tend to concentrate on single perpetrators instead of state institutions and institutional complicity (Kauzlarich and Kramer, 1998).

The intersection of state crime and structural violence theory provides a window through which one can view the process by which violence is bureaucratized, routinized, and legitimized in language, legal formulae, military doctrine, and geopolitics. It allows the current research to reflect not just on isolated instances of human rights violations but on a system of violence made possible by international complicity, strategic intent, and legal loopholes.

Regional Geopolitical Dynamics:

Understanding the systemic human rights abuses in West Asia also entails taking into account the intricate geopolitical alignments of the region. Overlapping zones of influence characterize the region, such as U.S. military dominance, the Iranian-Saudi rivalry, and the growing strategic influence of Russia, with specific reference to Syria (Achcar, 2013; Hen et al., 2020. pp.15). These states intervene directly or indirectly to compete for regional ascendancy, generally driving sectarianism and isolating governance structures, thus creating further conditions for mass violence and civilian vulnerability.

Additionally, regional blocs like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and alignment with the West facilitate geopolitical isolation of regimes that empower or commit atrocities. Arms sales, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic protection are all features of what scholars define as the "impunity architecture" (Ribeiro and Pires, 2024). Humanitarian assistance frequently fails to be an impartial relief instrument and is instead a tool of influence, with political loyalty dictating access. By charting these dynamics, the research in this book makes visible how Gaza, Syria, and Yemen's institutionalized oppression is not a product of civil war or dictatorship but is re-created by a system of militarized diplomacy and strategic dependency that transcends national borders. This method allows the paper to link micro-level human rights abuses with macro-level geopolitics.

By combining Political Realism, Structural Violence, and Regional Geopolitical Analysis, this theory goes beyond the narrowness of limited legalism or one-case reasoning. It facilitates systematic, historically aware, and multi-scale analysis of human rights abuses in West Asia. The combined perception enables the research to critically take into account not only the weakness of international law but also institutional and strategic configurations that underpin violence throughout the region.

Case Studies and Findings

This section describes three intertwined case studies- Gaza, Syria, and Yemen, which illustrate how foreign interventions, geopolitical agendas, and legal loopholes contribute to the perpetuation of structural human rights violations in West Asia. The cases detail different modalities of structural and direct violence, but in combination, reveal a grand architecture of impunity. Evidence is drawn from UN reports, NGO documents, and academic literature, uncovering patterns pointing to state complicity, normalized cruelty, and selective international law enforcement.

Gaza

The Gaza Strip is arguably the most enduring case of collective punishment in occupation. Israel, with Egyptian support, has enforced a land, sea, and air blockade on Gaza since 2007, leaving it an "open-air prison" (UN OCHA, 2022). The blockade limited the entry of goods, individuals, and medical equipment, leading to a humanitarian emergency marked by high levels of unemployment, infrastructural failure, and mental trauma (The Conversation, 2023).

Recurring cycles of military campaigns, including Operation Cast Lead 2008-09, Protective Edge 2014, and Guardian of the Walls 2021, have resulted in mass civilian fatalities, mostly with impunity. Attacks on residential buildings, schools, and hospitals in the name of ending "terrorist infrastructure" have been condemned by human rights groups as disproportionate and indiscriminate (Amnesty International, 2022). These incidents are characteristic of a regime of normalized violence in which international silence or diplomatic protection, particularly from the United States, has allowed Israel to escape serious accountability.

Scholars such as Ilan Pappé (2024, pp.25-28) contend that this type of violence can be compared with ethnic cleansing and settler-colonial tactics in which collective suffering is employed to demoralize and displace people. UN officials have branded the blockade itself as constituting a form of "collective punishment," which is prohibited under Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention (UNHRC, 2019).

Syria

The Syrian conflict, which started in 2011, was soon transformed into a multi-actor conflict space with the effect of foreign interventions, regional rivalries, and systemic state brutality. The regime of President Bashar al-Assad has been blamed for several war crimes against humanity, including chemical warfare attacks, arbitrary arrests, torture, and starvation sieges

(Human Rights Watch, 2021). Independent investigations by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria have documented repeated attacks against civilian infrastructure, including schools and hospitals, typically in violation of International Humanitarian Law (UNHRC, 2020).

Russia's armed intervention in 2015 and Iranian proxy support allowed the Assad regime to retake territory at the cost of massive civilian displacement and destruction. The United States, Turkey, and Gulf countries backed various opposition and militia groups, some of whom have also committed abuses. This geopolitical bipolarization of Syria has consolidated sectarianism and legitimized a political regime in which violence is at its core (Hen et al., 2020, pp. 22-24).

The use of sectarian violence, particularly against Sunni-dominated communities, by the Assad regime, and the deployment of barrel bombs and chemical weapons, reflects a collective punishment and demographic engineering policy (Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016). Notwithstanding extensive documentation of such atrocities, global accountability mechanisms have been perpetually belied by geopolitical stalemate, particularly Russia's veto in the UNSC.

Yemen

The war in Yemen has long been acknowledged as one of the world's most dire humanitarian crises, but it is underreported and politically overlooked. Since 2015, a Saudi-led coalition, backed by the United States, United Kingdom, and UAE, has conducted thousands of airstrikes, many of which have hit civilian targets such as weddings, schools, and hospitals (Mwatana, 2021). The coalition has also imposed blockades on ports and airports, contributing to widespread famine, disease outbreaks, and economic collapse (UNICEF, 2022).

The Houthi rebels, supported by Iran, have likewise committed war crimes, including indiscriminate shelling and the use of landmines. However, the asymmetry in resources and foreign support makes the coalition's role especially significant in terms of international law and accountability for arms trade. Shavana Musa (2017) and other watchdogs have traced European and American weapons directly used in strikes that caused mass civilian casualties, raising questions of third-party complicity. Despite credible evidence, calls for international investigations have been repeatedly blocked or weakened by diplomatic pressures from coalition members and arms exporters (Sowers and Weinthal, 2021). As a result, Yemen illustrates how proxy warfare and geopolitical alliances effectively shield violators from international scrutiny, while ordinary civilians bear the brunt of systemic violence.

Patterns of impunity, arms trade complicity, and legal paralysis

Across the three cases, several common patterns emerge that reveal a structural architecture of impunity:

- Normalization of violence through legal justifications (e.g., “self-defense” in Gaza, “counterterrorism” in Syria, and “restoring legitimacy” in Yemen).
- Weaponization of international diplomacy, where UNSC veto powers and political alliances block meaningful investigations or prosecutions.
- Complicity through arms trade and foreign support, wherein major powers profit from or politically support regimes and coalitions accused of atrocities.
- Civilian targeting as a strategy, not a byproduct, with healthcare, education, and food systems deliberately degraded to break resistance.
- Marginalization of international law, which becomes powerless where legal enforcement is at the mercy of power imbalances and strategic interests.

These findings show that institutionalized human rights violations in West Asia are not sporadic and isolated but a part of a geopolitically allied system of violence that escapes legal accountability and moral condemnation when coupled with existing strategic concerns.

Discussion

The following case studies reveal a consistent pattern of systematic human rights violations across Gaza, Syria, and Yemen that are driven not only by local political considerations but by broader geopolitical configurations and global inaction. The analysis distills those findings into four thematic vectors: geopolitical drivers, institutional failure, epistemological transformation of justice theory, and the power of transformation of civil society.

Geopolitical Drivers of Human Rights Violations

Deep at the center of West Asia violence is a common geopolitical rationale, wherein human rights abuses are mobilized for military, ideological, and strategic purposes. Whether utilizing Israel's occupation and blockade strategy in Gaza, Russian and Iranian sponsorship of the Assad regime in Syria, or the Saudi-led interventionist air campaign in Yemen, each illustrates state or coalition action facilitated by foreign patronage and international complicity (Achcar, 2013; Hen et al., 2020, pp. 30-33).

These structural connections are manifested in proxy warfare, arms trade entanglements, and sectarian narratives, which serve as legitimating tools for both state and non-state actors. The United States' military aid to Israel, the Russian veto shielding Syria, and Western arms sales to Saudi Arabia represent direct links between geopolitical alliances and the normalization of systemic abuse (Khalidi, 2020; Ribeiro and Pires, 2024). These alliances form a “geopolitical shield”, allowing perpetrators to evade consequences while deepening patterns of impunity. Rather than disparate crises, these cases are best understood as nodes within a larger architecture of militarized global governance, where power trumps norms and violations become strategic instruments.

Failures of International Mechanisms

The failure of international institutions to address or prevent mass atrocities in West Asia reflects a crisis of legitimacy. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC), as the principal body tasked with maintaining international peace and security, has been paralyzed by the veto system, allowing geopolitical interests to override humanitarian imperatives (Bellamy, 2014). This structural flaw has enabled ongoing atrocities in Syria, blocked independent investigations in Gaza, and undermined accountability mechanisms in Yemen.

Moreover, the International Criminal Court (ICC), while theoretically independent, faces jurisdictional and political limitations. Many of the involved states are non-signatories to the Rome Statute, and even when cases are brought forward, such as the ICC's preliminary examination into Palestine, they often stall due to a lack of cooperation or political pressure (Schabas, 2011). As Makau Mutua (2001, pp. 215) notes, international law frequently reproduces imperial hierarchies, offering justice selectively based on alignment with global power centers. This selective justice undermines the universality of human rights norms, creating a two-tiered system in which some lives are grievable and others expendable. This reinforces the perception of international law as a tool of geopolitics, rather than a shield for the vulnerable.

From Human Rights Norms to Political Realism

Given the systemic failure of legal idealism to halt or redress atrocities, there is an urgent need to shift from a normative to a realist framework for understanding and enforcing human rights. Traditional human rights discourse, rooted in legalism and moral universalism, often overlooks the strategic utility of violence in global politics. As B.S. Chimni (2004) argues, international

institutions often function as extensions of global capitalist and imperial interests, rendering legal interventions ineffective unless they align with dominant geopolitical agendas.

A realist approach does not reject human rights values but acknowledges the power relations embedded in their enforcement. It calls for a re-evaluation of the political economy of justice, such as how states create stories of legality, finance war by selling weapons, and hijack international institutions in pursuit of strategic interests (Simpson, 2007). Conceptualizing justice in this context calls for a critical political perspective that highlights systemic complicity and promotes power rebalancing within international systems rather than treaty reform or ad hoc tribunals.

Role of Global Civil Society and Advocacy Networks

Despite institutional stagnation, international civil society remains a crucial player in documenting abuses, setting agendas, and advocating for justice. Organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Mwatana, and others have played a pivotal role in gathering evidence, mobilizing transnational solidarity, and challenging impunity through international campaigns and legal petitions.

Grassroots and transnational advocacy networks work best when they ally with local stakeholders, amplify survivors' testimonies, and utilize alternative media tactics to counter state-capture narratives. Online activism, diaspora mobilization, and citizen journalism have also disrupted the monopoly of narratives, attracting worldwide attention to hitherto suppressed atrocities.

Nonetheless, legal repression, monitoring, and delegitimization of civil society agents escalate, especially in authoritarian environments. Their impact is also limited by denied access to international forums and the subordination of Global South epistemologies in dominant human rights discourses (Rajagopal, 2003). To introduce systemic change, civil society must transition from passive documentation to proactive political advocacy for reforms of global governance structures and for horizontal models of accountability that prioritize affected communities.

The structural abuses of human rights in West Asia are not mere dysfunctions in provincial government or isolated atrocities; they are products of a deeply entrenched geopolitical order, in which violence as strategic currency, selective law, and conditional accountability are the norm. The radical response must involve more than institutional critique or legal reform; it

must entail a rethinking of international justice that is grounded in power, history, and resistance.

Conclusion

Analyzing the interconnected Gaza, Syria, and Yemen crises through an examination of West Asia's systemic human rights abuse, this research has illustrated that such abuse is not haphazard or incidental but is rooted in larger geopolitics. Using a comparative-historical approach, the veil is lifted on how state terror, foreign intervention, and the collapse of international instruments cumulatively foster impunity cycles and structural violence. Legal systems, though nominally sound, are made ineffectual through power imbalances, strategic vetoes, and selective justice. In each of these environments, the practice of collective punishment, ethnic targeting, and destruction of infrastructure demonstrates an unsettling trend in which atrocities on the margin of, or tantamount to, genocide is accepted under the guise of national security or geopolitical imperative.

These findings underscore the urgent need to move beyond legal formalism and toward a realist and power-conscious understanding of human rights enforcement. A transformative agenda must include reforming the international legal system to curtail veto power, addressing arms trade complicity, and centering the agency of global civil society and affected populations. Moreover, future research should explore how emerging dynamics, such as climate-induced conflict, energy geopolitics, and intersectional vulnerabilities, interact with entrenched systems of violence. By mapping these structural connections, this study not only critiques existing institutions but also lays the groundwork for reimagining global justice in regions suspended between geopolitics and genocide.

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