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## Reflections on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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## Reflections on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

In the remarks that follow, I focus on a few of the ways language is used to describe the violence unleashed by Israel on the Palestinians since October 7, 2023—with special reference to the university student protests against it. But I also want to speculate on what can be called “the seduction of power,” something to which not only humans in general but also victims in particular are liable. Power generates language which in turn often encourages and justifies cruelty.

I begin with an eloquent passage from an article by Brian Klug on the most recent (2023–2024) Gaza massacre:

Sometimes it is better to be lost for words. Perhaps we should remember this more often. Perhaps we should hold our tongue until we find words that approximate to reality—the brutal human reality of suffering, grief, loss, and despair. This means suppressing the impulse to appropriate the facts for our agendas, or resisting the urge to smother those facts with words that cushion their impact, euphemisms that soften their blow. Sometimes we should just stand open-mouthed, without a political analysis falling fully formed from our lips. There are times when we need to stop talking in order to start thinking—*thinking politically*. Now is such a time.<sup>1</sup>

Klug would, of course, agree that in the present situation, in which deliberate cruelty is being perpetrated, and denied by both its perpetrators and their enablers, what is necessary is not only *thinking* with the aid of clear and honest language but also *speaking out and acting* in a way that might help stop the staggering cruelty being inflicted by Israel on Gazans. There is language as a way of distancing, including language as analysis and speculation, and there is language as itself action in the world. And there are not only moments when, for moral reasons, *one must speak out*, but also moments when *one must stay silent*. Silence can signify more than a state of stunned disbelief at the spectacle of physical and spiritual suffering for which one struggles to find the appropriate words. When silence is not simply a result of fear or shock, it is itself a form of speech—a *moral refusal to enter into a particular discourse*, as when one is confronted at the very beginning of a discussion about the present disaster by the demand: “Do you or don’t you condemn Hamas?” Why does the questioner make this demand?

Do I need to say that my concern here is not “to defend Hamas” (as though either their defense or condemnation was the most urgent question)? It seems clear to me that the question “Do you condemn Hamas?” is a demand for a moral judgment on particular acts of violence, that ironically advertises the *questioner* as a moral person. More significantly, it attempts to frame the subsequent discussion: Hamas’s alleged atrocities on October 7, and not Palestinian subjection and suffering, must be central to the narrative. The

demand assumes that those atrocities (first made available by Israeli sources as the most terrible experience of Jews since the Holocaust) must be attended to as primary in any serious attempt to understand “the Israel-Hamas war.” In doing so, the demand constitutes Israel as morally superior to the Palestinians, and so legitimates its merciless assault on Gaza as just and necessary. To “condemn Hamas”—the leading political actor in the resistance—is, in effect, to impugn the most effective Palestinian action against Israeli power. To refuse that demand is to reject the frame that the inquisitor tries to impose. Because the Israeli “war” against Palestinians did not begin on October 7. It began with the establishment of Israel in 1948 and includes not only Israel’s escalating violence but also the many ineffective attempts at resisting Israeli expansionism.<sup>2</sup>

In media discussions of the conflict in Palestine, I have never heard anyone demand of an interviewee: “Do you condemn the Zionist project?” Anyone familiar with the history of modern Israel is aware that the success of the Zionist project—the establishment of a Jewish-majority state in a land already populated overwhelmingly by non-Jews—required the death or expulsion of vast numbers of Indigenous Palestinians from their homes, and the occupation and (since 1967) the repression of millions more. The cruelty involved in the Zionist dream has meant a Palestinian nightmare.

It might be objected that a question demanding the condemnation of Zionism is at best pointless because that project is a *fait accompli*. But then so, too, is the Holocaust as well as the attack by the Palestinian resistance on October 7—often analogized to the Holocaust. And yet that has not stopped people from making moral judgments about all three. What seems at first sight to be a *fait accompli*, a past that is over and finished, is still very much alive. Yes, a Jewish ethno-state now exists and has existed for seventy-six years. But my wish to question discourses about the Zionist project does not presuppose a call for the expulsion of millions of Jews who now live in Israel and have lived there for generations. Such a call, in my view, would be at once immoral (one cruelty does not justify another) and absurd (impossible in practice). My question seeks a more fitting framework for understanding the so-called Israel-Hamas war than the one popularly applied by contemporary Western mainstream media (“a defense against an existential threat to the Jewish state”), and for understanding some aspects of the power of an expansionist Israel, and so also for thinking about some possible kinds of future in that area.<sup>3</sup>

So, how *should* one think of the “Israel-Hamas war”? By first recognizing that this expression misdescribes what is happening in Gaza and justifies Israel’s onslaught against innocents since the October 7 attack. “War” is normally understood as a conflict between independent states—hence, the “laws of war,” the “right of states to defend themselves,” and so forth. In this context, we hear Western commentators speak of the IDF bombardment of Gaza as “a response to Hamas’s existential attack”: Israelis have gone to war because Hamas, “a terrorist organization,” attacked them savagely. To prevent a repetition of such an attack, Hamas must be “utterly destroyed.” And as for the suffering of innocent civilians in the “war on Hamas”—well, unfortunately, that is an *inevitable* consequence of all modern warfare, and particularly so in Gaza, where Hamas terrorists use their own civilians as human shields. End of story.

Later, I will examine in some detail the use of the word “terrorist”; but first more on the notion of the “Israel-Hamas war.” Should we describe the ongoing violence as the playing out of attacks motivated by Palestinian hatred of Jews on the one side and, on the other, as self-defense by the Jewish state against “a terrorist organization” determined to

wipe out all Jews? If we do, we are turning immediately—and inconsistently—to intentions to explain a historically developing structural reality. A lethal struggle going on for decades between highly unequal agents is more than a simple matter of one “attack” and one “defense.” It is better described as a continuous process of violent exclusion and repression by an extremely powerful state on the one side and of (unsuccessful) attempts by those excluded and repressed to break free from that process on the other.

In an interview with Michael Walzer, the German periodical *Zeit Magazin* asks, as it were naively: “The pressure to end the war rests almost exclusively on Israel. Why is hardly anyone asking Hamas to lay down its arms?” (That is, to surrender and be executed by the Israeli state as “terrorists.”) Walzer replies: “I’m often asked this question by American Jews who can’t understand that either. No one is putting real pressure on Hamas because it is clear that they do not care about the suffering of their civilians.”<sup>4</sup>

Walzer does not elaborate on what he means by “putting real pressure on Hamas,” as Hamas is a resistance group, not a state. But the idea of “putting real pressure” emerges more clearly if one considers what is happening in Gaza now *as an IDF strategy*: since appealing directly to Hamas’s sense of compassion for its own civilians will not do (because, unlike Israelis, Palestinians have none), it is necessary *indirectly* to get Hamas to surrender. Palestinian civilians must be made to suffer with increasing ruthlessness until their pain becomes so unbearable that *they* finally turn against Hamas. This strategy of the deliberate killing of innocent civilians in large numbers as an indirect means of exerting pressure on Hamas best explains the increasing scale of destruction rather than Israeli talk about Hamas using civilians as human shields. (But isn’t that, ironically, precisely the strategy used by “individual terrorists”? They kill innocent civilians and create an atmosphere of terror as a means of exerting political pressure on the government. If Israel’s ruthless killing and destruction can be seen as a political strategy, can we then call Israel a “terror state”?)

However that may be, there is no serious evidence that this Israeli strategy is working. Its ruthless destruction of innocent civilians and their habitation (including hospitals, schools, universities, churches, etc.) simply generates greater resentment among Palestinians, and therefore increases determination to resist Israel’s punishment by joining Hamas militants.<sup>5</sup>

The use of “strategy” in describing Israel’s “war” is of course key here. But I think that something more complicated is also at work in the way Israeli militarism works, and that also helps one to understand the enthusiastic support the military violence receives from virtually all of Israeli society: the sense of “victimhood” as powerlessness, to which I will turn in some detail later.

At any rate, it should be clear to anyone who knows anything about the history of that conflict that Israeli punishment of Gazans actually began long before October 7, 2023. If one bears in mind that a very large proportion of the Gazan population consists of the children and grandchildren of refugees who were forcibly expelled in 1947–1948 by Zionist forces from areas allotted by the UN to a future Palestinian state, one can recognize the need for a longer historical perspective than October 7, 2023. (At this point, it may be helpful to note that the common Zionist claim that the State of Israel was legally *founded* by the United Nations, and which then the Palestinians refused to accept, is false. What the United Nations actually did do was to *recommend* the partition of Palestine between Jews and Arabs, and this recommendation was accepted and supported by the Great

Powers as well as by Zionist leaders—but not by the Palestinians. The result was a massive victory for the Zionist movement, for whom it was a necessary first step toward a Jewish state, and a great defeat, the first of many, for the Indigenous Palestinian population that inevitably saw that its land was being formally taken away.<sup>6)</sup>

What for many witnesses has been especially striking and unexpected about the present violence is not only the scale of destruction and killing inflicted by the IDF on Gaza but also the enthusiastic military and political support given by America and major West European states as a continuation of their sympathy and material support for the Zionist project. It is the enablement by the United States government, incidentally, that distinguishes Israel's mass slaughter of civilians from mass slaughters in the global south. And the lack of excuse by the United States and other West European states for their support of Israel's violence suggests that we have reverted to the period when the United States slaughtered or expelled the Indigenous population in North America and imported an enormous number of African slaves ("inferior people"), and when European states conquered Latin American, Asian, and African lands without any attempt at moral justification.

However shocking Hamas's attack on October 7 was (exactly what happened on that day of violence is not crystal clear; Hamas has itself proposed that the events of that day be investigated by an independent third party), I want first to address briefly the question as to whether it was actually "an existential threat to Israel" to which Israel understandably had "the *right* to respond in whatever way necessary."<sup>7</sup> But the central fact remains that Israel is an extremely powerful state with a sophisticated economy, the most modern army and air force in the region, and arguably one of the most powerful killing machines in the world. It has a massive supply of the most advanced weaponry, including nuclear weapons. And, as I just said, it has the *unconditional* support of the most formidable state in the world—America—as well as of Britain, France, and Germany. Hamas, on the other hand, is a small, relatively ill-equipped resistance group in an occupied, impoverished territory, categorized formally as a "terrorist organization" by all of the countries mentioned. In short, it is absurd to say that the October 7 attack was "an existential threat" to Israel even if Israelis *imagine* (or pretend?) that it was. The disparity in power between Hamas and Israel is glaringly obvious: Hamas cannot bomb Israeli cities by air as Israel has been doing repeatedly to Gaza for nearly two decades. Hamas cannot turn off Israeli access to water, food, medicine, and electricity (as Israel has been doing to Gazans partially since 2006, and almost fully since October 7, 2023). It is the Gazans whom Hamas considers it is defending and who, as Palestinians, face a real existential threat—not the Israeli state.

The claim that the Israeli state has "the right to defend itself" seems incontestable in international law. But isn't *why and how* a state "defends itself" an important question? In the case of Israel, the state has been based on a project of achieving and maintaining a Jewish supremacist democracy that *necessarily* involves great cruelty against the Indigenous Palestinian majority whose territory it appropriated. A demographic balance has always been essential for a Jewish state, and the means by which this was sought included the conquest of territory ideologically claimed, and—wherever possible—"cleansed" (by slaughter and expulsion) of the Indigenous non-Jewish population in that territory. Where the Indigenous non-Jewish population in conquered territory was too large for *immediate* ethnic cleansing—as in the West Bank—its members were categorized as non-citizens without civil rights while being subject to the control and authority of the state. The

hostility this *entire history* generates is presented not as being provoked by the supremacist project of European settlers on which the State of Israel is founded but by “the enemy” (the Indigenous Palestinians) who are simply motivated by hatred of Jews. In brief, Israel’s “right to self-defense” has meant the *continuing expansion* of a supremacist state that is presented as the need for “security,” even if that means the inevitable suppression and ethnic cleansing of the Indigenous population.

The expression “Israel-Hamas war” also allows those who use it to point to its “beginning” and to envisage what the end of that war might/should look like: the decisive victory of the State of Israel against “terrorists” who attacked it so cruelly. And it encourages one to look for parallels with other truly existential conflicts, such as World War II. This kind of analogy allows the Israelis to claim that the Allied bombing of German and Japanese cities (part of an existential war) was the same kind of event as the terrible human loss inflicted by Israel on Gazan civilians. This language—especially “in war innocent people die”—also introduces a precise origin (World War II began on September 3, 1939; the Israel-Hamas war began on October 7, 2023) as well as a particular moral analogy (as Nazi Germany was to the Allied countries so is Hamas to Israel). And it can be used as justification for Israel’s repeated atrocities *as defense*. In short, what we have today is not “a war” but intermittent punitive assaults for seventy-five years on one side that have, inevitably, escalated to genocide, confronted by relatively unsuccessful resistance—nonviolent as well as violent—by the other.

In its confrontation with the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, Israel clearly regards their intermittent punishment (which, in the past, it has referred to by the graphic expression “mowing the lawn”) as essential to its own security—that is, essential to Israelis not being disturbed by Palestinians. The main purpose of punishment is at once to humiliate and to generate fear not only among those who are making a nuisance of themselves but also among those who might be tempted to challenge the established order.<sup>8</sup>

When someone attempts to narrate a different beginning than October 7 for the so-called Israel-Hamas war, one sometimes encounters the claim from liberal Zionists that “the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is very complicated.” Of course, with a little bit of ingenuity any conflict can be represented as “very complicated,” but anyone familiar with the Palestine-Israel conflict knows that an indisputable historical fact underlies this claim of complicatedness: without the active assistance of European powers (especially imperial Britain and neo-imperial America), the Zionist movement would not have been able to establish and then maintain a state with a Jewish majority in an already inhabited land.

One cannot, I believe, overstate that political Zionism is European in origin, in conception, and in orientation, that it arose in European countries where Jews had long faced discrimination and oppression (and “the final solution,” in the Holocaust) at the hands of Christians/post-Christians. One cannot, in other words, overstate that Christian anti-Semitism converged with, just as it helped to create, political Zionism. Both European anti-Semites and European Jews agreed that Jews did not properly belong in Europe (Christendom). It is not always remembered that Theodor Herzl, founder of Zionism, welcomed this convergence and internalized it: “The anti-Semites will become our most dependable friends,” he wrote, “the anti-Semitic countries our allies. We want to emigrate as respected people.”<sup>9</sup> What Zionism has done is to provide a so-called solution to the anti-Semitic “Jewish problem” by establishing a state in Palestine to which all Jews should go and in which (thus Zionism) they can become “new Jews.”

(A striking instance of how Germans have internalized the “Jewish problem” even after the defeat of Nazi Germany—a small but not trivial example—is reflected in a report written by a group of German observers at the Eichmann trial in 1961 in Jerusalem. The report admiringly describes “the new Jew” who has appeared in Israel as “the novel and very advantageous type of the Israeli youth . . . of great height, often blond and blue-eyed, free and self-determined in their movements with well-defined faces” exhibiting “almost none of the features which one was used to view as Jewish.”<sup>10</sup> The old view that European Jews were “racially” different from, and inferior to, European non-Jews is here replaced by postwar Germans who repeat yet again their repentance for their anti-Semitism in appropriately racial terms.<sup>11</sup> These assumptions about “racial difference” may be part of the reason that Germany has never properly confronted its genocide of Namibians at the beginning of the twentieth century—after all, so the new German reasoning must go, “they are only Black Africans.”<sup>12</sup>)

It is important to underline that Zionism did not emerge among Palestinian Jews (“Oriental Jews”) who had lived for centuries in what was part of the Ottoman Empire until the end of World War I together with indigenous Christian and Muslim populations, sharing the same culture and language with them.<sup>13</sup> Zionism brought essentially modern European ideas of nation-state and autonomous self, of politics and ethics, to the construction of Israel as a new settler-state. Jewish nationalists arrived in Palestine when there was already a nascent Arab nationalism (fanned in part by the Young Turks movement), which initially included Arab Jews as well as Arab Muslims and Arab Christians. Arab nationalism is often described as “an awakening” instead of what it really was: an entirely new aspiration to modernize “as a nation” according to a European cultural model to which they were made to feel inferior.<sup>14</sup> With the irruption of war in 1948 between Israel and the Arab states—and especially after the 1967 war—suspicion was generated in the latter against Arab Jews, a process encouraged and exploited unscrupulously by the Arab nationalist regimes as well as by the Zionist state, each side for its own political purposes.

It is sometimes suggested that Zionist aspiration to acquire the entirety of Palestine for the Jewish state is a relatively late development with the advent of a right-wing government in Israel. But that is not quite accurate. In an article published at the end of 1944 Hannah Arendt notes:

The end result of fifty years of Zionist politics was embodied in the recent resolution of the largest and most influential section of the World Zionist Organization. American Zionists from left to right adopted unanimously, at their last annual convention held in Atlantic City in October 1944, the demand for a “free and democratic Jewish commonwealth . . . [which] shall embrace the whole of Palestine, undivided and undiminished.” This is a turning point in Zionist history; for it means that the revisionist program, so long bitterly repudiated, has proved finally victorious. The Atlantic City Resolution goes even a step further than the Biltmore Program (1942), in which the Jewish minority had granted minority rights to the Arab majority. This time the Arabs were simply not mentioned in the resolution, which obviously leaves them the choice between voluntary emigration or second-class citizenship. It seems to admit that only opportunist reasons had previously prevented the Zionist movement from stating its final aims.<sup>15</sup>



As Arendt notes, Jewish supremacism, the claim to a state that represents Jews (and only Jews) in the whole of Palestine has clearly been present from very early on in the Zionist project—implicitly if not always openly. The phrase “Palestine will be free from the river to the sea” has expressed the territorial ambition if not always the declared policy of mainstream Zionism long before the establishment of Israel and the emergence of the Likud Party.

Nonetheless, since 1967, *a single Israeli state* does in fact occupy the entirety of Palestine, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. This state still has a considerable population of non-Jews whose invidious status is legally inscribed in the control exercised over them by the State of Israel. Because the Palestinians are still slightly over half the total population in greater Israel, it needs to adopt different techniques to exclude the possibility of an undesirable Palestinian majority.<sup>16</sup> More precisely, to maintain Israel as a Jewish supremacist state, Zionists see quite clearly that it is necessary either to cleanse all Palestinians from greater Israel or to maintain greater Israel as an apartheid state. The latter is of course the easier solution, but the former (complete cleansing or expulsion of Palestinians) is, in the long term, the more secure.

There has been much discussion about whether the slogan used by pro-Palestinian student protesters (“From the river to the sea Palestine will be free”) calls for the physical extermination of all Jews in the area, or for Palestinians in that entire area to be freed from their subordinate status and made secure against ethnic cleansing.<sup>17</sup> One may put it this way: Is the meaning of those words dependent on what hearers *want to believe* or in what is *actually the case* (Zionists: “This means they want to kill all us Jews”; Palestinians: “It means that we are actually living as a colonized people and wish to be free”)? One meaning points to feelings the other to political realities. It seems that in the context of the university protests in America and Europe, administrators and politicians must finally decide what the “real” meaning of the words shall be.

It should be said that Arendt’s use in the Palestinian context of the expression “voluntary emigration” (as well as its use by Zionists seeking the expulsion of non-Jewish Palestinians from conquered land) is a euphemism for ethnic cleansing. People may leave their native habitat because they reject the prospect of having to live under oppressive conditions or, more radically, because they fear for their lives, but neither case is properly described as “voluntary emigration.” As is widely known, three-quarters of a million Palestinians were expelled in 1947–48, both from the area that the UN allotted to what became the State of Israel and from the territory allotted at that time to a Palestinian state but conquered, cleansed, and incorporated into the nascent State of Israel.<sup>18</sup> The 1947–48 ethnic cleansing was not, of course, the only one undertaken by Israel—each of its later wars (1956, 1967, 1973) involved further acquisition of territory and/or further expulsion of Palestinians from their homes. And there are good reasons for describing the present onslaught in Gaza as the most recent example of attempted ethnic cleansing—which is also occurring in the West Bank in a smaller, less dramatic way than in Gaza.

Because Zionists claim that Israel is the true homeland of all Jews throughout the world, it is necessary to have a satisfactory definition of “a Jew.” How, in this political situation, does the state *identify* who qualifies as a Jew? Religious Jews say that one cannot define Jews without reference to their religious tradition since self-identified Jews differ, and have differed enormously, in language, culture, and way of life in different times and places. But for political Zionists Judaism (“a religion”) is not an essential criterion for



determining who is a Jew even if the Bible as a historical narrative is used to justify Jewish nationalist claims. (A Jewish friend attributes the following paradoxical statement to Ben-Gurion: “We do not believe in God but He gave us Palestine.”) Someone who is attracted to Israel does not have the right *on the basis of that feeling* to immigrate. If the person is a “non-Jew” the secular State of Israel would require such a person first to convert to Judaism. And yet Israeli citizens are not required to be “religious.” The category “Jew” is clearly a social construct, one that does not necessarily draw on Judaic observance. And yet Israel does draw on *either* the Judaic law of descent (one is a Jew because one’s mother was a Jew) *or* because one has been converted to Judaism. Maternal descent is, in this case, a “religious” criterion (a sacred law) employed for what we would now call a “secular” project (identifying and recruiting ethnically appropriate citizens for a nation-state). But there is one exception: a Jew by descent is not entitled to immigrate to Israel if he or she has converted to Christianity or Islam.

But if one sets aside for the moment Israel’s nationalist need for identifying “a Jew”—that is, for acknowledging that someone with a Jewish identity is entitled to migrate to the Jewish state—one can turn to another interesting point about identity.

When Sigmund Freud criticized the morally disastrous identification of civilians with their nation-state in World War I, he was speaking of actual not potential citizens.<sup>19</sup> And yet, despite the fact that he was not a Zionist, that he did not support the project of a Jewish state, Freud expressed in 1930 (in the brief preface to the Hebrew translation of *Totem and Taboo*) a “feeling” of being Jewish:

No reader of this book will find it easy to put himself in the emotional position of an author who is ignorant of the language of holy writ, who is completely estranged from the religion of his fathers—as well as from every other religion—and who cannot take a share in its nationalist ideals, but who has yet never repudiated his people, who feels that he is in his essential nature a Jew and who has no desire to alter that nature. If the question were put to him: “Since you have abandoned all these common characteristics of your countrymen, what is there left to you that is Jewish?” he would reply: “A very great deal, and probably its very essence.” He could not now express that essence clearly in words; but some day, no doubt, it will become accessible to the scientific mind.<sup>20</sup>

Freud’s point goes beyond Arendt’s simple dictum that if one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew, that one cannot respond to such an attack by denying that one is a Jew. He is making a point about having a particular sense of personal identity, which has direct relevance to Zionism despite his explicit rejection of its political project.

Freud’s logic here may appear at first sight contradictory to some of the things he had earlier expressed in his famous criticism of European nationalism during World War I—but only if we take his positive “feeling of being a Jew” to be an expression of the unconditional support of the behavior of one’s state, especially in war, something he explicitly rejects. Freud seems to be pointing to the possibility of feeling a sense of solidarity with a group of human beings for various reasons, to have a sense of “belonging” to them without desiring or identifying with a particular *nation* or a specific state that claims to represent them as a nation symbolically and legally.<sup>21</sup>

My concern is not, of course, with *personal identity*, as Freud’s text is, but with possible forms of moral connection with others, of which—so I argue—nationalism does not have

to be one. In fact, anchoring identity in “feeling,” as Freud does, seems to have a dangerous potential that is realized in the Zionist objections to the university student protests against the Israeli slaughter of Palestinians: and it is surely ironic that university administrators are willing to protect the feelings of *some* Jewish students by punishing *other* Jewish students (such as those who belong to Jewish Voice for Peace) for exercising their constitutional right to free speech and public protest—and thereby ignoring *their* experience of vulnerability. Claims to *feeling* have clearly become dangerous political weapons.

I stress that Israel is unique in claiming, on the one hand, that it *represents* a particular (i.e., Jewish) “nation” wherever in the world its members may live, and on the other hand in explicitly rejecting the idea that it represents *all* of its own citizens (i.e., its non-Jewish citizens are not represented by the Jewish state). Israel is, strictly speaking, the home only of Jews regardless of whether they are its citizens.<sup>22</sup> The use of “home” in this context derives, I suggest, not simply from the sense of security that a home normally provides, but from *the attractiveness of power* that justifies an identification with the source of power—one that is able to punish and repulse those who are outside one’s home—or even *within* the home when they have no legal or moral right to be there (they are “interlopers”).

When interviewed on the Western media, Israelis often speak of the “shock, fear and humiliation” they have been feeling *as victims* since October 7 when “terrorists” attacked them. “We no longer feel safe in our home,” I heard one interviewee say. “The shock of 7 October recalled the Holocaust for Jews,” so many Israelis and pro-Israelis have said.<sup>23</sup> This *feeling of being a victim*—one who not only carries painful memories but is always vulnerable to further pain as long as he or she remains powerless—seems to me extremely dangerous.

I try to explain by turning to an important insight of Iris Murdoch. In her unsettling novel *The Unicorn*, Murdoch describes the power of victimhood by reference to Até, the goddess of rashness, deception, and disaster:

Recall the idea of Até which was so real to the Greeks. Até is the name of the almost automatic transfer of suffering from one being to another. Power is a form of Até. The victims of power, and any power has its victims, are themselves infected. They have to pass it on, to use power on others. . . . Good is not exactly powerless. For to be powerless, to be a complete victim, may be another source of power. But good is non-powerful. And it is in the good that Até is finally quenched, when it encounters a pure being who only suffers and does not pass the suffering on.<sup>24</sup>

I have a vivid memory of an incident from over fifty years ago that comes back to me whenever I think about the seductiveness of power. My father’s stepbrother in London, with whom I often stayed when I visited that city, had come from Vienna as a young refugee in 1938 in the *Kinder Transport*, a desperate attempt by Jewish parents to send their children to the safety of Western Europe, away from the Nazi menace.

My uncle settled in England, practicing as a dentist, and always maintained that he did not believe in the establishment of a separate state for Jews and I never doubted him, even after the incident I am about to relate. He was a gentle, compassionate man who disliked violence of any sort, and was always revolted by injustice in any form. My memory relates to the Six Days War in June 1967, when the Egyptian air force and army were destroyed in a few days by Israel.<sup>25</sup> I was watching some newsreels of the defeat together with my uncle

on his television set, which included images of retreating groups of Egyptian soldiers (mostly peasants who probably had no clear idea of the war in which they had been drafted to fight) and of advancing Israeli tanks urging them along like cattle. The defeated peasant-soldiers were allowed to go home, said the newsreel voice, but made to leave their boots behind and walk home barefoot over the hot Sinai sand. Clearly this was done in order to further humiliate them. Israeli soldiers, standing or sitting on the tanks, exuded an air of triumph. Suddenly my uncle beside me burst out: “Ach! *We* are the Cossacks now!” It was evident not only from the words he used but also from the tone of his voice and the pride evident on his face, that the image of the classic pogrom was in his mind—something he himself had never actually experienced, since he was born and brought up in Vienna, but that was part of his family memory now being reproduced in the spontaneous burst of admiration at the reversal of the role of once-persecuted Jews—although, clearly, it was not the Cossacks who were now being punished. Or for that matter, not even the Nazis who were responsible for his mother’s death and that of his stepfather and stepsister (my grandfather and aunt).<sup>26</sup> They were peasants from Egypt, mere instruments of a power-state (*Machtstaat*), who had had nothing to do with the long history of European anti-Semitism that preceded the Holocaust. How had the word “Cossacks” that in family memory referred to horsemen who behaved cruelly and unjustly suddenly come to represent contemporary activity one could proudly embrace as one’s own? Precisely because of its ambivalence: at once as the cruel enemy and as the abstract demonstration of magnificent power. My astonishment and shock notwithstanding (it took me a few moments to grasp the sentiment he had expressed), my love for my uncle was not undermined nor his for me. He knew, of course, that I was a Muslim and that my mother was an Arab—and true to character, he did not regard those facts as relevant to his love for me. And there was no indication that he relished the suffering of the defeated soldiers—nor, more important, that he felt any compassion for them. There was simply clear admiration for the absolute power of the Israeli soldiers, the power over life and death.

But I now realized that our love for others always contained the very real possibility of self-betrayal—that is to say, the possibility of allowing oneself to be seduced by the desire for power *regardless of who the objects of that power are*. What we have here is power of a special kind: the ability to pass on one’s actual or potential suffering to others as a way of coping with one’s own sense of lack. It is the state of powerlessness, not the desire for revenge, that gives us a sense that it is only the ability to pass suffering on to others that allows one to confront the damaging experience of victimhood *as extreme lack*. In a personal, somewhat dramatic fashion, I had come to see that when we are rooted in victimhood, our desire for power makes our capacity to befriend and love other human beings difficult, if not impossible. Because love and friendship are precisely non-instrumental.

It is common knowledge that vast numbers of diasporic Jews previously skeptical of Zionism, were swept up into identifying themselves with Israel as a consequence of its demonstration of power in the crushing victory of 1967. It was not, in my view, fear and vulnerability as such that was primarily at work here but the *overcoming of the dormant sense of powerlessness*—something quite different from *nonpower*, which is simply the lack of any desire to exercise power over others, a form of what Murdoch calls “the Good.” The power of the victim to pass on suffering to others is not quite the same as revenge against someone who has done one harm (which is a kind of restoration of equality). And when the

power of the victim is exercised by the nation-state with which the individual identifies himself or herself, it becomes uniquely (“splendidly”) destructive, as Freud so clearly saw.

To return to October 7, 2023: in my view, what happened on that day was not the *casus belli* of the so-called Israel-Hamas war. I say this for two main reasons: first, because the genocide following October 7 is part of a long process of action and reaction over many decades, by Israelis inflicting punishment on Palestinians, on the one hand, and by Palestinians seeking to liberate themselves from the prison that enables that punishment on the other. Punishment has, from its very beginning, been central to Israeli strategy for dealing with occupied Palestinians whom it has always treated as obstacles to the maintenance and completion of its Zionist project. Second, as I mentioned briefly above, Israel very explicitly connected October 7 to the Holocaust, with a repeat affirmation of victimhood. But victimhood is a condition, not an event; it can continue indefinitely when power is one’s supreme measure of life.

Each time the Israeli state has carried out an attack against Palestinians, the United States and its European allies have described it as “self-defense.” But that term is never available for describing the activity of Palestinian partisans. The latter never “defend” themselves, they only “provoke” the Israeli state and Israeli society by their terrorism.

Whenever public protests have taken place in Western countries against the Israeli slaughter of Palestinians, Zionists and their friends have called them “anti-Semitic” (that is, as viciously essentializing Jews *as Jews*) and some Western governments, such as the German, have even prohibited such protests.<sup>27</sup> But the public protests, especially by university students in the United States, are not expressions of racism, they are not public condemnations of an imaginary “Jewish character.” They are not demanding revenge against Jews. They are denunciations of the *actual* mass slaughter in Gaza of old men, women, children, and babies by the overwhelmingly powerful Israeli army, continuously supplied by American and European states. There is, in other words, *no expression of anti-Semitic fantasy* by the overwhelming majority of these protesters (very many of whom are themselves Jews). The basic feature of the protests is simply *an appeal to stop very real mass murder*. Too many people have followed the lazy and dishonest habit of calling every criticism of Israel “anti-Semitism.”<sup>28</sup> One result of this, of course, has been to trivialize *real* anti-Semitism, with its vicious view of “the Jew” as essentially greedy, deceptive, and murderous.

The recent tendency in so many Western countries to forbid pro-Palestinian public expression is a provocative reminder that what is proudly referred to as “liberal democracy” in the West is not *essentially* different from what people have called “authoritarian society.” Even in the United States, this is increasingly apparent in the government’s attempt to control universities politically in the face of embarrassing student protests against U.S. complicity in Israeli genocide in Gaza. In this case, the attempted control takes the form of intimidating behavior adopted by university administrators (the suspension of students and faculty and resort to brutal police action) who claim to be “restoring safety and order” but are actually acting in obedience to the government’s wish to increase social control.

In one sense, this is a reminder that the *increasing* shift of liberal democracy toward authoritarianism has a long history in the United States—instanced in the brutal policing of workers and African Americans, and also in illiberal irruptions such as McCarthyism. And yet, there *is* something clearly different in the present world that the United States tries to dominate: an increasing general awareness of climate instability, ecological

degradation, global political and economic crises—problems that those in power seem unable to resolve. But there is not yet full recognition that this inability is due not so much to individual failure as to a form of life in which we are all embedded.

In the United States as in Europe, the shift in liberal democracy occurs not because its commitment to the ideals of tolerance and openness renders liberal society vulnerable to external and internal enemies, but precisely because it is intrinsically contradictory. One aspect of this relates to two of its central ideals: public interest (the domain of political authority) and private property (the domain of capitalist ambition). In this case, it means a concern for national interests (the dependence of American electoral politics on money and its connection with American militaristic foreign policy and its dependence on a major weapons and AI industry). The concern to encourage a flourishing capitalism, especially as embodied in the massive arms industry that is a crucial part of America's political economy, merges the concern for private property with concern about national—namely, state—interest (internal politics with foreign policy).

The arms industry is extremely profitable and is not only a significant source of the wealth of pro-Israeli billionaires who donate to electoral politics and elite private universities (and who therefore think they have the right to shape politics in universities and in civil society more generally). The arms industry is also an attractive place for the universities to invest their own funds for maximum returns. In other words, the repression of university students who protest against the Gaza genocide and demand an end to the transfer of arms to Israel is motivated not only by the threat of alienating rich Zionist funders but also, more significantly, by the threat the protesters pose to the income of university authorities—as well as to the sources of financial assistance to students themselves, in demanding the university divest from the extremely profitable weapons industry. In this, the interest of university authorities converges with that of the American government, which is the most important consumer of armaments—only part of which is transferred to Israel for conducting its slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza. Capitalism and nationalism are here, as always, mutually dependent.

So, it is not only the liberal democratic state that seems to be moving in an authoritarian direction but so too social institutions such as universities. Both are concerned with “maintaining order and security” and with ensuring “the safety of (vulnerable) citizens/students” by resorting to the police when deemed necessary. But why is the issue of the security and safety of students separated from that concern in society in general?<sup>29</sup> To answer that question, administrative authorities turn to the notion of the university as a community—which makes the language used in this context even more incoherent. Thus, a recent report from a committee set up in Columbia University to deal with “the problem of anti-Semitism on university campuses” (a matter of repeated concern expressed by politicians of both major parties) is remarkable for its continuous reference to the university as a “community” while at the same time introducing a number of new intimidating rules and penalties. There is little indication that the administration understands that a community is a body based on mutual trust, shared aims, and common morality that enables individual members (students and professors) to learn from one another. A community is not bound together by an organically unified culture or by a fixed set of coercive norms. It has a common language and a common tradition with all the different, mutually understandable, usages and behaviors that that encompasses. One cannot learn to live in mutual trust, from arrogant bureaucrats and politicians servile to the power of money

and to the power of the state. The report, in contrast, appears to think of “community” as being bound together by being *the unitary object of government*, and so it adopts a stance at once polemical and self-serving. There has never in any recent years been a “problem” of anti-Semitism in universities until the student protests in response to the U.S.-Israeli assault on Palestinians in Gaza. The shift in the United States toward greater authoritarianism that is crystalizing around the issue of student protests is therefore not unconnected with Israel’s obsession with “security” and “disorder” that leads it to curtail the freedom of a considerable part of the population that is under its control (i.e., Palestinians in occupied Gaza and the West Bank). And it is this that undermines the possibilities of an existence shared by Jews and Palestinians.

“The new Jew” Zionism has tried to create as a consequence of the anti-Semitic fantasies encountered by Jews in Christendom and then in secular Europe (though not really in contemporary universities) is neither exilic nor biblical; “the new Jew” in Israel is a secular European who *needs* to exercise a particular kind of power over people who are regarded as “inferior and backward.” Israel’s *ability* to punish others, regardless of the reason for punishment, is the supreme expression of the *imaginary* European self that exercises this power. It is this fact that makes it so attractive to many people—Jews and non-Jews, Europeans and non-Europeans. Israel’s many political, cultural, and technological achievements merely reinforce that status, and so contribute to the desire of Jews inside and outside Israel to identify strongly with “the Jewish state”—and thus to its claim that it is a *civilized, European* power that stands alone in “the Middle East jungle.”

My point here is that it is not merely the experience of collective suffering, such as survival from the Holocaust, that helps shape people’s identities and sentiments and their claim to statehood as a nation. It is, more precisely, the taste of power by a people who have been regarded by Christian Europe as “outside of History” and who now eagerly accept a secular version of that Christian story by insisting that the Jewish Return to History is finally accomplished by the attainment of a militarily powerful Jewish nation-state.<sup>30</sup> This history, with its narrative of Jewish experience as victims in Christendom, is a crucial part of the making of “the modern Jew.” Because even for most modern Jews, including especially Israeli Jews, the anxiety created by historical memories remains an unconscious part of the self, and a powerful state simply reinforces, through institutionalized memory-building, the unconscious sense of having been, *and still potentially being*, a powerless victim.

Politically, of course, it is the sovereign state that exercises the power that enables the victim (the collectivity of citizens) to pass on suffering to another. This other is simply the available object (*the means*) by which the victim can overcome an inherited sense of powerlessness. The fact that the “national” memory of Jews is soaked in the discourse of powerlessness reinforces the tendency of most Jewish citizens of Israel to support—and even celebrate—IDF’s determination to pass on Jewish victimhood to Palestinians who have been made to suffer from the beginning of the Zionist project in Palestine.

But however terrible the killing of innocents on October 7, 2023 may have been, it is surely absurd and self-indulgent to compare that act of violent resistance by Palestinians who have been cruelly repressed, deprived of their land, and murdered for three-quarters of a century, to the “Holocaust”—that is, to the systematic killing of millions of innocent people (largely but not only Jews) by the Nazi power-state in order to render Germany racially as well as politically pure.



In conclusion, I turn to the claim that the October 7 attack was carried out by “terrorists.” Why is it that when Israel deliberately creates fear and humiliation among Palestinians (that is, against those outside what is internationally recognized as its borders but within its absolute control), this campaign is never described by Western governments and Western mainstream media as “terrorism”? To be specific: Why is Hamas described as “kidnapping” Israeli civilians whereas the IDF is always said to “arrest” Palestinian women and children, imprisoning them without charge and terrifying them in the process? The answer may seem obvious: because Israel is recognized as a state and Hamas is not. But anyone who does not recognize any moral difference implied in the contrast between “kidnapping” and “arrest” will find nothing unreasonable about this usage.

There *was* a time when the word “terror” was used to describe the activity of states, whether Revolutionary France or modern states. Thus, the period known as the Terror in Revolutionary France (*La Terreur*, 1793–94) refers to the embattled revolutionary state’s ferocious onslaughts against what were perceived to be internal enemies. During World War II, the Nazi regime was not afraid of describing things as they are: their well-known slogan “terror against terror” was intended as the state’s merciless violence against those the Allies called “partisans” and the Nazis called “terrorists.” It is therefore only relatively recently that the term “terrorism” has been taken to refer almost exclusively to nonstate actors: liberal democratic states only engage in “*counter-terrorism*,” even though the techniques it uses in the process involve the creation of terror among suspects. This shift in language owes much to the influence of the United States and Israel in shaping policies. One consequence of this selectivity in the use of the word “terrorism” is a sharp rise in political suspicion—not to say hostility—toward those regarded as “liable to radicalization”<sup>31</sup>—especially Muslims in America and in Europe. As always, those with power determine the language we may use because they are the ones who can legally say who the enemy *essentially* is. Liberal democracies see “security” as their primary task, and “terrorists” as the principal enemy of security. It is the very exercise of legal and political power by the state in the identification of “terrorists,” and the absence not of alternative words but of *an opposing power*, that makes the term obvious, because that particular power is integral to the form of life of ordinary people. When those controlling the state categorize individuals and organizations as “terrorists” or as “*potential* terrorists” (now more often referred to as “radicalization”), they are able to deprive those so characterized of their legal rights—by indefinite imprisonment without trial, and by torture (what in the United States is euphemistically called “enhanced interrogation”)—because most ordinary citizens accept the state’s exercise of its power. Although the modern state *is* based on Law, it does not see such deprivation as contradictory. Because, as Carl Schmitt pointed out, in liberal democracies sovereignty is precisely the ability to decide on exceptions.

Even prior to the 9/11 attack by Muslim militants, the preoccupation with “terrorists” and “terrorism” in the United States was substantially promoted by the Israeli interest in “retaliating” (*striking hard*) against Palestinian resistance movements long before the emergence of Hamas. Remi Brulin notes that American presidents rarely used the word “terrorism” in the early years of the Cold War. Crucial to its newfound popularity were two conferences devoted to the subject of “terrorism”—the first in Jerusalem in 1979 and the follow-up in Washington in 1984—in which both Americans and Israelis argued not only for the importance of countering (and even preempting) “terrorist violence” when



directed at American military supremacy in the world but also for the need to see “terrorism” as a major threat to the very existence of the Jewish state—which inevitably meant a threat to Israeli military supremacy in the Middle East. But there were instances before these conferences when the two states stood together on the need to combat “terrorism” everywhere. The UN General Assembly debates that followed the murder of the Israeli Olympic team by Palestinian militants in Munich in 1972 were symptomatic of this effort in that they produced very different assessments of that event by the United States and Israel, on the one hand, and by non-aligned countries on the other. For the former, “terrorism” was uniquely and unequivocally to be morally condemned—and the Munich incident clearly belonged in that category. But when a UN representative from the Middle East pointed out that Irgun, Haganah, and Lehi (all Zionist militants described as “terrorist” by the British Mandate Authority in Palestine) had deliberately killed Palestinian as well as British individuals, and that with their terrorist experience of attacking Palestinians they eventually became the foundation of Israel’s military machine (the IDF), his point was brushed aside.<sup>32</sup>

So I return to Klug’s thought-provoking article with which I began: “What language can prevent language can promote: thinking politically. This requires using words that bridge the gap between the concrete and the abstract, without either flinching from the facts or appropriating them for the sake of a cherished theory or agenda. Only thus can we broach the most political of questions, not least for Palestinians and Israelis: how to share the common spaces we inhabit, so as to advance the common good.” But one cannot reach such a political solution before we understand what is morally at stake—not by political argument but by an attempt at understanding how we live and why we have come to live that way. What Klug here refers to as “the common good” now has very little value in our time. Even the phrase is more often than not replaced by another: “the general interest.” And the latter marks a moral loss, since what the former indicated is the development of individual virtue within a community where morality—and therefore the good—is shared, and in contrast “the general interest” is to be understood as a collection of individual desires that can be abstracted politically by separating majority from minority in one representative form. In other words, there can be no such thing as moral sharing (as opposed to political allocation) in a modern nation-state, whether it limits individual autonomy or defends it.

For most Israeli leaders, there is in fact no permanent solution to their conflict with Palestinians. There is only the possibility of minimizing its seriousness for Israel by apartheid (as at present) or more decisively by ethnic cleansing (over time). But if one hopes that Israelis and Palestinians can ultimately *share a common space*, shouldn’t one start from the fact that they have never been doing that—as the Palestinian Jews once shared a common social space with Palestinian Christians and Palestinian Muslims? Since the arrival of European settlers in the beginning of the twentieth century, determined to establish an ethnic state for Jews, this is no longer the case.

Palestinian citizens of Israel are officially called “Arabs” not “Palestinians” by the state, in order to stress their *primary* kinship with a large population that is mostly spread outside Occupied Palestine, and to disconnect them ideologically from Palestine, where they have lived for centuries, a land regarded by Zionists as the eternal home of the Jews. And the reason for this non-sharing, *in words and deeds*, is the enormous disparity in power between the Zionist state of the Jews and the Palestinians—whether the latter are citizens

or not—and the determination of Israelis to acquire self-confidence by showing that they can punish Palestinians whenever and however they want. Victimhood, as I have tried to argue, is often itself a source of the desire to exercise power over others. And the sense of victimhood among Jews was central to the self-perception of incoming European Zionists determined to establish a state secure enough for the Jews. This makes political negotiation between Zionists and those whom they have displaced—and are continuing to eliminate—highly asymmetrical. It not only renders the possibility of genuine sharing extremely difficult, but also leaves the new victims less and less able to devise fruitful, nonviolent ways of confronting the massive, power-hungry opponent they face. And so, ironically many “progressives” find themselves pointing to the horrific destruction of human life and habitation in Gaza as the inevitable consequence of the October 7 attack: as though Israel had no choice on how to react but the Palestinian resistance did. In the end, so it seems, these progressives *do* “condemn Hamas.” Perhaps this is yet another recognition that the Great Powers are unwilling, and the international legal bodies are unable, to secure a just world order.

The instrumentality of language is relevant not only to the way one thinks and speaks but also, and more importantly, to how one lives (and how one is allowed to live), because it is one’s form of life that to a large extent determines what one finds persuasive and possible. The specificity of how one lives is not easily captured simply by using different words. What, I think, is missing in our discussion is something that Freud taught us long ago: the differential access that we human beings have to our language and to the reasons we devise for deceiving ourselves through that difference. Very often we *want* to believe or we *want not* to believe that something is the case. And self-deception is not easily apparent to us because of the way aspects of our language relate the past to the life we now live, individually and collectively. What is so striking about the language used by Western politicians and by the mainstream media is that very often when they *do* know they are misdescribing reality *they do not care*; what matters to them in those cases is that the language should facilitate the consolidation of political power since that, as Max Weber argued long ago, is what modern politics and ethics is about.

Finally, a despairing addendum: a sensitive young man called Aaron Bushnell who is a member of the U.S. Airforce can no longer morally bear his democratic government’s complicity (and therefore *his* complicity) in the Gaza genocide, and so he immolates himself in front of the Israeli Embassy in Washington, hoping by that act to shock his compatriots’ consciences. For him, the pursuit of moral truth is ultimately more important than life itself. Bushnell seems to have grasped that the policy of absolute security leads to the abandonment of all genuine moral principles. What kind of a world do we live in where his self-immolation is simply dismissed by U.S. government officials and mainstream media as the act of a “mentally deranged person”—or even of “a leftist extremist”?<sup>33</sup> Answer: a modern, secular world in which the state can say, When your state is at war it has the right to order you to kill others—and to sacrifice your life when war and the necessity of death in war, your own and that of others whom you kill, is the only way the state can survive. And your own *willing* death for the sake of the state is the noblest act of all. (Hence the war memorials and rituals of secular states.) “But you yourself have absolutely no right to kill yourself for your own reason.” So, the state can tell you how and when and whom to kill. It can even tell you how to make other human beings suffer, but it cannot teach you how to befriend and love them. Because sometimes in befriending and

loving others, in feeling their agony and sense of injustice, it may be necessary for you yourself to be willing to die. That is why, it seems to me, Aaron Bushnell chose to die as he did.

## NOTES

1. Brian Klug, “George Orwell, Gaza, and ‘The Debasement of Language,’” *Contending Modernities*, December 15, 2023, <https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/global-currents/orwell-gaza-debasement-language/> (italics added). See also his thought-provoking book *Offence: The Jewish Case* (New York: Seagull Books, 2009).

2. I say “It began with the establishment of Israel” because before that, during the Mandate period, it was the colonial British forces that violently suppressed Palestinian revolts.

3. One theoretically possible future, proposed both by some Palestinians and some Jews is of a single, democratic state in the entire area from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean. In a short piece in the *New York Times* of May 16, 2024, David Leonhardt writes: “More recently, Palestinian activists have increasingly called for a single state, stretching from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, which would mean the end of the world’s only Jewish state—one place Jews could flee for safety if antisemitism took hold elsewhere.” “How Israeli Extremists Won,” *New York Times*, May 16, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/16/briefing/how-israeli-extremists-won.html>. Leonard’s observation echoes a recent public statement by President Biden on the Israeli onslaught on Gaza: “Jews must have a state of their own where they can feel safe”—implying that American Jews cannot feel safe in the United States! This kind of thinking is based on the assumption that there is no difference between being a Zionist and being a Jew. Ironically, this equation does not merely mean that anti-Zionism is identified by pro-Zionists as anti-Semitism, but that its malign consequence is that cruel military activity by the Zionist state, such as the genocide in Gaza, will be regarded by anti-Semites as essential to Jewishness—and thus it will promote more anti-Semitism.

4. “Interview with Michael Walzer: What is a Just War?” *Die Zeit*, April 17, 2024, <https://www.zeit.de/zeit-magazin/leben/2024-04/michael-walzer-just-war-israel-gaza-english/komplettansicht>.

5. See the interview with Mouin Rabbani, who offers an explanation for why Hamas is so resilient in the face of Israel’s savage campaign. “Understanding Hamas & Why That Matters: Session 4 featuring Mouin Rabbani,” *Just World Educational*, May 24, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YotZeSvsteo>.

6. “There is a widely accepted belief,” writes Jeremy Hammond in a detailed study of this question, “that United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 ‘created’ Israel, based upon an understanding that this resolution partitioned Palestine or otherwise conferred legal authority or legitimacy to the declaration of the existence of the state of Israel. However, despite its popularity, this belief has no basis in fact, as a review of the resolution’s history and examination of legal principles demonstrates incontrovertibly.” Jeremy R. Hammond, “The Myth of the U.N. Creation of Israel,” *Foreign Policy Journal*, October 26, 2010, <https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2010/10/26/the-myth-of-the-u-n-creation-of-israel/>.

7. See page 10 of the pamphlet published by Hamas shortly after October 7 entitled *hādhibi riwāyatuna: limādha rīfānu-l-aqsa*, (“This is our story: Why the al-Aqsa attack?”), which proposes that “an impartial and independent investigation” will give the lie to Israeli propaganda claims. Israel has, unsurprisingly, ignored the Hamas reference to such an inquiry. There is an excellent account of the event on October 7 by the Israeli dissident Adi Callai entitled “The Gaza Ghetto Uprising,” *Brooklyn Rail* (May 2024), <https://brooklynrail.org/2024/05/field-notes/The-Gaza-Ghetto-Uprising>. Although Callai, like many others, points out that there are many aspects of the event that need independent investigation, he concludes that “With Israel aggressively rejecting an independent investigation, the full extent of its killing of its own civilians remains unclear.” The recent documentary film by the English director Richard Sanders entitled *What REALLY happened on October 7th?* is a careful, non-polemical account, well worth watching. *Palestine Deep Dive*, March 20, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIqzVlBQBoQ>. On the other hand, the UN Report by Pramila Patten on the question of systematic sexual violence on October 7 (warmly welcomed by Israel) is the subject of a critical evaluation by Feminist Solidarity Network for Palestine, entitled “Here’s What Pramila Patten’s UN Report on October 7 Sexual Violence Actually Said,” *Mondoweiss*, March 11, 2024, <https://mondoweiss.net/2024/03/heres-what-pramila-pattens-un-report-on-oct-7-sexual-violence-actually-said/>. A preliminary caveat of the critique is that the report is *not*—and does not claim to be—*an investigation*. Although Western mainstream media has reproduced uncritically the Israeli claim that Hamas weaponized sexual aggression against Israeli women on October 7, they have ignored a UN report on the rape of Palestinian women by IDF soldiers since Israel’s subsequent attack on Gaza. See Meriem Laribi, “Women’s Rights: The Hushed Ordeal of Palestinian Women,” *OrientXXI*, March 15, 2024, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/the-hushed-ordeal-of-palestinian-women,7145>.

8. Zionists typically reject public criticism of the Israeli mass slaughter of Gaza by accusing critics of resorting to “double standards.” A well-known proponent of this complaint is Harvard’s Alan Dershowitz, who puts it this way: “So long as criticism is comparative, contextual, and fair, it should be encouraged, not disparaged. But when the Jewish nation is the only one criticized for faults that are far worse among other nations, such criticism crosses the line from fair to foul, from acceptable to anti-Semitic.” *The Case for Israel*

(Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 1. The words “contextual and fair” sound reasonable but are here extremely imprecise. The suggestion that criticizing a given state for acts of cruelty and discrimination is racially motivated (that criticizing Israel, the self-proclaimed state of the “Jewish nation,” is tantamount to criticizing Jews everywhere *for being Jews*) if the critic does not at the same time condemn other states for worse behavior implies that agents engaged in *particular* political opposition at a *particular* time and place should act like an international human rights organization that publicizes rights violations committed by all states. On this criterion, even citizens can be condemned for applying “double standards” when they criticize their own government, or, for that matter, a woman may be dismissed as biased in accusing a *particular* man of sexual harassment without accusing other sexual predators whose behavior was worse.

9. *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl* (New York: Herzl Press, 1960), 1:84.

10. Quotations cited from “Israel’s Emerging Religious Left,” *Jewish Currents: On the Nose*, February 8, 2024, <https://jewishcurrents.org/israels-emerging-religious-left>.

11. Hitler and his cronies must be dancing in their graves: yes, we lost the war, but we achieved one of our most important political aims—we have made Germany “Judenrein.” From the very substantial involvement of Jews in pre-Nazi German society—in its education, science, technology, literature, philosophy, politics—there are now a handful of Jews and Israelis living in a post-Nazi Germany that was never adequately de-Nazified. But what is now thought of as a serious “security concern” in Germany (as in other European countries) is the population of Muslim immigrants and their offspring.

12. See Eyal Weizman, “Three Genocides,” *London Review of Books*, no. 8 (April 2024).

13. It was the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II who, in the late fifteenth century, invited the Jews expelled by Catholic Spain into his realm.

14. The classical Arabic word *umma* acquired the modern sense of “nation” even though in its classical (Qur’anic) origin the word had a very different sense, one that was applicable to groups of animals as well as human beings.

15. Hannah Arendt, “Zionism Reconsidered,” in *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 343 (italics added).

16. Toi Staff, “Jews Are Now a 47% Minority in Israel and the Territories, Demographer Says,” *Times of Israel*, August 30, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/jews-now-a-minority-in-israel-and-the-territories-demographer-says/>.

17. David Leonhardt summarizes some aspects of settler violence in the West Bank: “The government has accepted settler violence for decades, leaving many West Bank Palestinians feeling frightened and helpless. An Israeli government report in 1982 documented the problem, to no effect. So did later reports in 2005 and 2012.” Although he mentions military violence in Gaza with reference to “ Hamas insurgency,” he has nothing to say about the *terror* among civilians *this* violence is generating. Leonhardt, “How Israeli Extremists Won.”

18. Much of this ethnic cleansing occurred before any military action taken by surrounding Arab states—and was therefore actuated not in self-defense but out of the need and the desire to create a Jewish majority in the cleansed territory. See Ilan Pappé’s authoritative study, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (London: One World Publications, 2006). Several Zionists have questioned this account, claiming that while it is a fact that about three quarters of a million Palestinians were expelled, there was no clear “intention” of ethnic cleansing on the part of the Zionist leadership—see, for example, Benny Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), who argues that there is uncertainty about how many of those who left their homes at the time did so as the result of “planned” expulsion and how many as a simple consequence of “escaping a war zone.” This argument seems to me at best tendentious. The suggestion that no *thought* was ever given by the Zionist leadership to the need for *strategic* population transfer in establishing a Jewish majority state in an area already inhabited by a non-Jewish majority and was therefore never expressed in the *behavior* of Zionist forces toward Palestinians, is extremely implausible. One obvious question is this: Were the escaping Palestinians welcome by the new state to return to their homes once military hostilities ceased? The answer to this question, as everybody knows, is “No.” That some areas were strategically more important for immediate cleansing than others is surely a better explanation of the difference that Morris alludes to than the claim that the very *thought* of ethnic cleansing never entered the minds of the leaders of the new would-be democratic Jewish state. Objection to the effect that there was no “plan” to expel Palestinian inhabitants is merely a quibble.

19. Sigmund Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. XIV (London: Hogarth Press, 1957).

20. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge, 1950), xi (italics added).

21. Having spent forty years of my life—from 18 to 58—in Britain, I have developed a considerable understanding of and affection for aspects of British culture, and for the English language, but I do not identify myself with the English nation or the British state. My point is not that my view is identical to the one Freud articulates in my citation, but rather that his statement enables one to see that nationalism is not the only way that people can have a sense of being positively connected with other people, or, for that matter, with various places. Furthermore, one can be attached to (be in solidarity with) more than one collectivity *at the same time*. One can “feel” oneself positively connected to several different groups of people who together have no common essence.

22. Ben-Gurion and Weizmann attended the meeting of American Zionist leaders in the Biltmore Hotel in Manhattan in May 1942 (referred to in the Arendt comment as the Biltmore Program that I cited above) at which they sought to persuade these leaders that Jewish statehood was essential for Jewish survival. The Americans agreed on the condition that “Jews in America would not be considered as living in exile (*galut*) but rather in diaspora (*golah*). It was a seemingly nominal request, but quite an important one for American Jews. These American Zionists did not want to be seen as living in a deficient state of Jewish existence—exile—but rather in a more neutral state of dispersion: diaspora.” Shaul Magid, *The Necessity of Exile: Essays from a Distance (Political Imagination)* (New York: Ayin Press, 2023), 13. Presumably American Jews also wanted to avoid political accusations of dual loyalty.

23. One might ask: How do those traumatic fantasies apply to Israelis of Arab origin who have not experienced the Holocaust? Answer: as with all—the overwhelming majority of Israelis—who have not personally experienced it, they acquire a particular mind-set by being subjected to the state’s educational and propaganda facilities as well as its media, which encourage the felt need to exercise punitive power at any cost. For an excellent study, see Nurit Peled-Elhanan, *Palestine in Israeli School Books: Ideology and Propaganda in Education* (London: I.B.Taurus, 2012).

24. Iris Murdoch, *The Unicorn* (New York: Avon Books, 1964), 102.

25. Because that victory was regarded by Israelis as “a miracle,” it came to be known as “the six days war”—although the war ended after five days. Since God created heaven and earth in *six* days, that war was seen by many as a sign of divine intervention—hence the number six. Matti Peled, one of Israel’s top generals in the 1967 war, affirmed that 1967 “was not an existential war but a war of choice.” See Miko Peled, *The General’s Son: Journey of an Israeli in Palestine* (Charlottesville, VA: Just World Books, 2016), 50–51.

26. My paternal grandfather perished in Theresienstadt and my father’s sister and step-mother in Auschwitz (his mother had died of natural causes in the late twenties and his father then married a widow with a very young child: my uncle). On one occasion when he visited London, my uncle reminded him that he was entitled to compensation from the Austrian Government. “Blood money!” my father replied in horror. “I will never accept blood money to save people’s consciences!” When I asked him later whether he didn’t want to forgive the German people for the murders they had committed, he replied: “Only God can forgive such a crime. It’s not something I can forgive.” This refusal to accept financial compensation, a position that other individuals also held (so I learned later) stands in ironic contrast to the eagerness with which Israel, the super victim that did not exist at the time of the Holocaust, eagerly receives indefinite compensation from Germany in the name of all the unknown dead—and in contrast to post-Nazi Germany as well because paying Israel blood-money enables it to articulate and affirm a new form of German nationalism through its unique relationship with the Jewish supremacist state.

27. “An army of antisemitism commissioners was supposed to help Germany atone for its past: Critics say it is evidence of a memory effort gone haywire.” Peter Kuras, “The Strange Logic of Germany’s Antisemitism Bureaucrats,” *Jewish Currents* (Spring 2023). See also, Pankaj Mishra, “Memory Failure,” *London Review of Books*, no. 1 (January 2024).

28. In a carefully argued article on the British Labour Party previously led by Jeremy Corbyn, Lorna Finlayson emphasizes the historical relationship between ex-empires and states that are now liberal democracies. Taking up the sustained establishment attack on Corbyn for not recognizing the antisemitism allegedly rampant in his Party, she observes: “The argument that it is antisemitic to apply ‘double standards’ to Israel is one that is often used to brand criticism of the country as racist, on the grounds that Israel is singled out although many nations commit human rights abuses. There are very good reasons for singling Israel out, such as the deep complicity of Western liberal democracies in its violence. The point is especially pertinent in Britain, which is implicated in everything that is happening in Israel and Palestine today, as in the Middle East more broadly. Britain, after all, occupied Palestine for the thirty years between the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the founding of the state of Israel, overseeing and facilitating the construction of Jewish settlements. Yet Palestine is conspicuously absent from the sporadic conversation about ‘coming to terms’ with our imperial legacy.” Lorna Finlayson, “Corbyn Now,” *London Review of Books*, no. 18 (September 2018). For Finlayson, “coming to terms” is not a matter of blame but of implicature, and it is an argument that applies to all European imperial interventions in the non-European world.

29. The dominant meaning of the English word “society” itself begins to shift in the early modern period from the earlier sense of “companionship or fellowship” to an “aggregate of persons living together in a more or less ordered fashion.” This quantitative notion is then spoken of as “the citizens” of the nation-state.

30. See Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, “Exile, History, and the Nationalization of Jewish Memory: Some Reflections on the Zionist Notion of History and Return,” *Journal of Levantine Studies* 2 (Winter 2013).

31. Peter Osborne rightly observes: “Anti-Semitism has not gone away. Jews are still a target. But Islamophobia is the most virulent phenomenon of recent decades, fueled by migration which brought millions of Muslims to Europe. It is becoming more powerful every year, and moved with ease from the far-right fringes to the political mainstream.” Peter Osborne, *The Fate of Abraham: Why the West is Wrong about Islam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2022), 21.

32. Remi Brulin, “Compartmentalization, Contexts of Speech and the Israeli Origins of the American Discourse on ‘Terrorism,’” *Dialectical Anthropology* 1 (2015). For details of Zionist terrorism in the 1930s and

1940s, see Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years War Against Palestine* (New York: Metropolitan Paperback, 2020). See also especially the Briefing Paper prepared by Palestine Legal and Center for Constitutional Rights, *Anti-Palestinian at the Core: The Origins and Growing Dangers of U.S. Antiterrorism Law*, February 20, 2024, <https://ccrjustice.org/anti-palestinian-core-origins-and-growing-dangers-us-antiterrorism-law>.

33. “Last Wednesday, Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., former Army officer and a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, sent a letter to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin asking why and how the Pentagon could tolerate an airman like Bushnell in its ranks. Calling his death ‘an act of horrific violence’ that was ‘in support of a terrorist group [Hamas],’ Cotton goes on to ask about the Defense Department’s internal efforts to address extremism and whether Bushnell was ever identified as exhibiting extremist views or behaviors.” Ken Klippenstein, “Will Aaron Bushnell’s Death Trigger Anarchism Witch Hunt?” *The Intercept*, March 7, 2024, [https://theintercept.com/2024/03/07/aaron-bushnell-fbi-anarchism-extremist/?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=The%20Intercept%20Newsletter](https://theintercept.com/2024/03/07/aaron-bushnell-fbi-anarchism-extremist/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=The%20Intercept%20Newsletter).

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