

Israel's Descent

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The State of Israel v. the Jews

by [Sylvain Cypel](#), translated by [William Rodarmor](#).

Other Press, 352 pp., £24, October 2022, 978 1 63542 097 5

Deux peuples pour un état?: Relire l'histoire du sionisme

by [Shlomo Sand](#).

Seuil, 256 pp., £20, January, 978 2 02 154166 3

Our Palestine Question: Israel and American Jewish Dissent, 1948-78

by [Geoffrey Levin](#).

Yale, 304 pp., £25, February, 978 0 300 26785 3

Tablets Shattered: The End of an American Jewish Century and the Future of Jewish Life by [Joshua Leifer](#).

Dutton, 398 pp., £28.99, August, 978 0 593 18718 0

The Necessity of Exile: Essays from a Distance

by [Shaul Magid](#).

Ayin, 309 pp., £16.99, December 2023, 979 8 9867803 1 3

Deluge: Gaza and Israel from Crisis to Cataclysm

edited by [Jamie Stern-Weiner](#).

OR Books, 336 pp., £17.99, April,

When Ariel Sharon withdrew more than eight thousand Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip in 2005, his principal aim was to consolidate Israel's colonisation of the West Bank, where the settler population immediately began to increase. But 'disengagement' had another purpose: to enable Israel's air force to bomb Gaza at will, something they could not do when Israeli settlers lived there. The Palestinians of the West Bank have been, it seems, gruesomely lucky. They are encircled by settlers determined to steal their lands - and not at all hesitant about inflicting violence in the process - but the Jewish presence in their territory has spared them the mass bombardment and devastation to which Israel subjects the people of Gaza every few years.

The Israeli government refers to these episodes of collective punishment as 'mowing the lawn'. In the last fifteen years, it has launched five offensives in the Strip. The first four were brutal and cruel, as colonial counterinsurgencies invariably are, killing thousands of civilians in retribution for Hamas rocket fire and hostage-taking. But the latest, Operation Iron Swords, launched on 7 October in response to Hamas's murderous raid in southern Israel, is different in kind, not merely in degree. Over the last eight months, Israel has killed more than 36,000 Palestinians. An untold number

remain under the debris and still more will die of hunger and disease. Eighty thousand Palestinians have been injured, many of them permanently maimed. Children whose parents – whose entire families – have been killed constitute a new population sub-group. Israel has destroyed Gaza's housing infrastructure, its hospitals and all its universities. Most of Gaza's 2.3 million residents have been displaced, some of them repeatedly; many have fled to 'safe' areas only to be bombed there. No one has been spared: aid workers, journalists and medics have been killed in record numbers. And as levels of starvation have risen, Israel has created one obstacle after another to the provision of food, all while insisting that its army is the 'most moral' in the world. The images from Gaza – widely available on TikTok, which Israel's supporters in the US have tried to ban, and on Al Jazeera, whose Jerusalem office was shut down by the Israeli government – tell a different story, one of famished Palestinians killed outside aid trucks on Al-Rashid Street in February; of tent-dwellers in Rafah burned alive in Israeli air strikes; of women and children subsisting on 245 calories a day. This is what Benjamin Netanyahu describes as 'the victory of Judaeo-Christian civilisation against barbarism'.

The military operation in Gaza has altered the shape, perhaps even the meaning, of the struggle over Palestine – it seems misleading, and even offensive, to refer to a 'conflict' between two peoples after one of them has slaughtered the other in such staggering numbers. The scale of the destruction is reflected in the terminology: 'domicide' for the destruction of housing stock; 'scholasticide' for the destruction of the education system, including its teachers (95 university professors have been killed); 'ecocide' for the ruination of Gaza's agriculture and natural landscape. Sara Roy, a leading expert on Gaza who is herself the daughter of Holocaust survivors, describes this as a process of 'econocide', 'the wholesale destruction of an economy and its constituent parts' – the 'logical extension', she writes, of Israel's deliberate 'de-development' of Gaza's economy since 1967.

But, to borrow the language of a 1948 UN convention, there is an older term for 'acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group'. That term is genocide, and among international jurists and human rights experts there is a growing consensus that Israel has committed genocide – or at least acts of genocide – in Gaza. This is the opinion not only of international bodies, but also of experts who have a record of circumspection – indeed, of extreme caution – where Israel is involved, notably Aryeh Neier, a founder of Human Rights Watch.

The charge of genocide isn't new among Palestinians. I remember hearing it when I was in Beirut in 2002, during Israel's assault on the Jenin refugee camp, and thinking, no, it's a ruthless, pitiless siege. The use of the word 'genocide' struck me then as typical of the rhetorical inflation of Middle East political debate, and as a symptom of the bitter, ugly competition over victimhood in Israel-Palestine. The game had been rigged against Palestinians because of their oppressors' history: the destruction of European Jewry conferred moral capital on the young Jewish state in the eyes of the Western powers. The Palestinian claim of genocide seemed like a bid to even the score, something that words such as 'occupation' and even 'apartheid' could never do.

This time it's different, however, not only because of the wanton killing of thousands of women and children, but because the sheer scale of the devastation has rendered life itself all but impossible for those who have survived Israel's bombardment. The war was provoked by Hamas's unprecedented attack, but the desire to inflict suffering on Gaza, not just on Hamas, didn't arise on 7 October. Here is Ariel Sharon's son Gilad in 2012: 'We need to flatten entire neighbourhoods in Gaza. Flatten all of Gaza. The Americans didn't stop with Hiroshima – the Japanese weren't surrendering fast enough, so they hit Nagasaki, too. There should be no electricity in Gaza, no gasoline or moving vehicles, nothing.' Today this reads like a prophecy.

Exterminationist violence is almost always preceded by other forms of persecution, which aim to render the victims as miserable as possible, including plunder, denial of the franchise, ghettoisation,

ethnic cleansing and racist dehumanisation. All of these have been features of Israel's relationship to the Palestinian people since its founding. What causes persecution to slide into mass killing is usually war, in particular a war defined as an existential battle for survival – as we have seen in the war on Gaza. The statements of Israel's leaders (the defence minister, Yoav Gallant: 'We are fighting human animals, and we will act accordingly'; President Isaac Herzog: 'It is an entire nation out there that is responsible') have not disguised their intentions but provided a precise guide. So have the gleeful selfies taken by Israeli soldiers amid the ruins of Gaza: for some, at least, its destruction has been a source of pleasure.

Israel's methods may bear a closer resemblance to those of the French in Algeria, or the Assad regime in Syria, than to those of the Nazis in Treblinka or the Hutu génocidaires in Rwanda, but this doesn't mean they do not constitute genocide. Nor does the fact that Israel has killed 'only' a portion of Gaza's population. What, after all, is left for those who survive? Bare life, as Giorgio Agamben calls it: an existence menaced by hunger, destitution and the ever present threat of the next airstrike (or 'tragic accident', as Netanyahu described the incineration of 45 civilians in Rafah). Israel's supporters might argue that this is not the Shoah, but the belief that the best way of honouring the memory of those who died in Auschwitz is to condone the mass killing of Palestinians so that Israeli Jews can feel safe again is one of the great moral perversions of our time.

In Israel, this belief amounts to an article of faith. Netanyahu may be despised by half the population but his war on Gaza is not, and according to recent polls, a substantial majority of Israelis think either that his response has been appropriate or that it hasn't gone far enough. Unable or unwilling to look beyond the atrocities of 7 October, most of Israel's Jews regard themselves as fully justified in waging war until Hamas is destroyed, even – or especially – if this means the total destruction of Gaza. They reject the idea that Israel's own conduct – its suffocation of Gaza, its colonisation of the West Bank, its use of apartheid, its provocations at Al-Aqsa Mosque, its continuing denial of Palestinian self-determination – might have led to the furies of 7 October. Instead, they insist that they are once again the victims of antisemitism, of 'Amalek', the enemy nation of the Israelites. That Israelis cannot see, or refuse to see, their own responsibility in the making of 7 October is a testament to their ancestral fears and terrors, which have been rekindled by the massacres. But it also reveals the extent to which Israeli Jews inhabit what Jean Daniel called 'the Jewish prison'.

Zionism's original ambition was to transform Jews into historical actors: sovereign, legitimate, endowed with a sense of power and agency. But the tendency of Israeli Jews to see themselves as eternal victims, among other habits of the diaspora, has proved stronger than Zionism itself, and Israel's leaders have found a powerful ideological armour, and source of cohesion, in this reflex. It is hardly surprising that Israelis have interpreted 7 October as a sequel to the Holocaust, or that their leaders have encouraged this interpretation: both adhere to a theological reading of history based on mythic repetition, in which any violence against Jews, regardless of the context, is understood within a continuum of persecution; they are incapable of distinguishing between violence against Jews as Jews, and violence against Jews in connection with the practices of the Jewish state. (Ironically, this vision of history renders the industrialised killing of the Shoah less exceptional, since it appears simply to be a big pogrom.) What this means, in practice, is that anyone who faults Israel for its policies before 7 October, or for its slaughter in Gaza, can be dismissed as an antisemite, a friend of Hamas, Iran and Hizbullah, of Amalek.

It also means that almost anything is justified on the battlefield, where a growing number of soldiers in combat units are extremist settlers. It is not uncommon to hear Israeli Jews defending the killing of children, since they would grow up to be terrorists (an argument no different from the claim by some Palestinians that to kill an Israeli Jewish child is to kill a future IDF soldier). The question is how many Palestinian children must die before Israelis feel safe – or whether Israeli Jews regard the removal of the Palestinian population as a necessary condition of their security.

The Zionist idea of 'transfer' – the expulsion of the Arab population – is older than Israel itself. It was embraced both by Ben-Gurion and by his rival Vladimir Jabotinsky, the Revisionist Zionist who was a mentor to Netanyahu's father, and it fed directly into the expulsions of the 1948 war. But until the 1980s, and the rise of the New Historians, Israel strenuously denied that it had committed ethnic cleansing, claiming that Palestinians had left or 'fled' because the invading Arab armies had encouraged them to do so; when the expulsion of the Palestinians and the destruction of their villages were evoked, as in S. Yizhar's 1949 novella *Kirbet Khizeh* and A.B. Yehoshua's 1963 story 'Facing the Forests', it was with anguish and guilt-laden rationalisation. But, as the French journalist Sylvain Cypel points out in *The State of Israel v. the Jews*, the 'secret shame underlying the denial' has evaporated. Today the catastrophe of 1948 is brazenly defended in Israel as a necessity – and viewed as an uncompleted, even heroic, project. Bezalel Smotrich, the minister of finance, and Itamar Ben-Gvir, the minister of national security, are both unabashed advocates of transfer. What we are witnessing in Gaza is something more than the most murderous chapter in the history of Israel-Palestine: it is the culmination of the 1948 Nakba and the transformation of Israel, a state that once provided a sanctuary for survivors of the death camps, into a nation guilty of genocide.

'There are decades where nothing happens,' Lenin wrote, 'and there are weeks where decades happen.' The last eight months have seen an extraordinary acceleration of Israel's long war against the Palestinians. Could the history of Zionism have turned out otherwise? Benjamin Netanyahu is a callow man of limited imagination, driven in large part by his appetite for power and his desire to avoid conviction for fraud and bribery (his trial has been running intermittently since early 2020). But he is also Israel's longest-serving prime minister, and his expansionist, racist ideology is the Israeli mainstream. Always an ethnocracy based on Jewish privilege, Israel has, under his watch, become a reactionary nationalist state, a country that now officially belongs exclusively to its Jewish citizens. Or in the words of the nation-state law of 2018, which enshrines Jewish supremacy: 'The right to exercise national self-determination in the state of Israel is unique to the Jewish people.' It's no wonder Palestinians and their supporters proclaim: 'Palestine shall be free from the river to the sea.' What many Zionists hear as a call to ethnic cleansing or genocide is, for most Palestinians, a call for an end to Jewish supremacy over the entirety of the land – an end to conditions of total unfreedom.

It isn't surprising that on the student left the word 'Zionist' has become an epithet for those who oppose equal rights and freedom for Palestinians, or who, even if they claim to endorse the idea of a Palestinian state, persist in thinking that the desires of Israeli Jews, by virtue of their ancestors' persecution in Europe, outweigh those of Palestine's indigenous Arabs. But, as Shlomo Sand reminds us in *Deux peuples pour un état?*, there was another, dissident Zionism, a 'cultural Zionism' that advocated the creation of a binational state based on Arab-Jewish co-operation, one that counted among its members Ahad Ha'am, Judah Magnes, Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt. In 1907, the cultural Zionist Yitzhak Epstein accused the Zionist movement of having forgotten 'one small detail: that there is in our beloved land an entire people that has been attached to it for hundreds of years and has never considered leaving it'. Epstein and his allies, who founded *Brit Shalom*, the Alliance for Peace, in 1925, imagined Zion as a place of cultural and spiritual rebirth. Any attempt to create an exclusively Jewish state, they warned, would turn Zionism into a classical colonial movement and result in permanent warfare with the Palestinian Arabs. After the Arab riots of 1929, *Brit Shalom*'s secretary, Hans Kohn, denounced the official Zionist movement for 'adopting the posture of wounded innocents' and for dodging 'the least debate with the people who live in this country. We have depended entirely on the force of British power. We have set ourselves goals that were inevitably going to degenerate into conflict.'

But this was no accident: conflict with the Arabs was essential to the Zionist mainstream. For the advocates of 'muscular Zionism', as Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin has argued, the creation of a Jewish state

in Palestine would allow Jews not only to achieve the 'negation of exile' but also, and paradoxically, to reinvent themselves as citizens of the white West - in Herzl's words, as a 'rampart of Europe against Asia'. Brit Shalom's vision of reconciliation and co-operation with the indigenous population was unthinkable to most Zionists, because they regarded the Arabs of Palestine as squatters on sacred Jewish land. And, as Ben-Gurion put it, 'we don't want Israelis to be Arabs. It's our duty to fight against the Levantine mentality that destroys individuals and societies.' In 1933, Brit Shalom folded; a year later, Kohn left Palestine in despair, convinced that the Zionist movement was on a collision course with the Palestinians and the region.

Ben-Gurion's movement was also on a collision course with those who, like Kohn and Arendt, sympathised with the idea of a Jewish cultural sanctuary in Palestine, but rejected the maximalist, exclusionary, territorial vision of the state associated with Israel's creation in 1948. Jewish critics of Israel who traced their roots to the cultural Zionism of Magnes and Buber - or to the anti-Zionist Jewish Labor Bund - would find themselves vilified as heretics and traitors. In *Our Palestine Question*, Geoffrey Levin shows how American Jewish critics of Israel were dislodged from Jewish institutions in the decades following the state's formation. After the 1948 war, the American Jewish press featured extensive, and largely sympathetic, coverage of the plight of Palestinian refugees: Israel had not yet declared that it would not readmit a single refugee. 'The question of the Arab refugees is a moral issue which rises above diplomacy,' William Zukerman, the editor of the *Jewish Newsletter*, wrote in 1950. 'The land now called Israel belongs to the Arab Refugees no less than to any Israeli. They have lived on that soil and worked on it ... for twelve hundred years ... The fact that they fled in panic is no excuse for depriving them of their homes.' Under Israeli pressure, Zukerman lost his job as a New York correspondent for the London-based *Jewish Chronicle*. Arthur Lourie, the Israeli consul general in New York, exulted in his firing: 'a real MITZVAH'.

Zukerman wasn't alone. In 1953, the American Reform rabbi Morris Lazon recited a prayer of atonement in the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut, declaring 'we have sinned' and calling for the immediate repatriation of a hundred thousand refugees: as members of the 'tribe of the wandering feet', he said, Jews should stand with Palestine's refugees. The leading expert in the US on the Palestinian refugees, Don Peretz, was employed by the American Jewish Committee (AJC). After the 1948 war, he worked with a Quaker group that distributed food and clothing to displaced Palestinians living under Israel's military government. Horrified to discover 'an attitude towards the Arabs which resembles that of American racists', Peretz wrote a pamphlet on the refugees for the AJC. Israeli officials responded by trying to have him fired; Esther Herlitz, Israel's consul in New York, recommended that the embassy 'consider digging him a grave' at the Jewish college in Pennsylvania where he taught. Peretz was not a radical: he simply wanted to create what he called 'a platform from which to voice not only eulogies of Israel, but a critical concern about many of the problems with which the new state has become involved', above all the 'Arab refugee problem, the condition of Israel's Arab minority'. Instead, he encountered an 'emotional environment' that made it 'as difficult to create an atmosphere for free discussion as it is in the South today to discuss interracial relations'.

Among the most illuminating episodes recounted in Levin's book is the campaign to smear the reputation of Faye Sayegh, the leading Palestinian spokesman in the US in the 1950s and early 1960s. A native of Tiberias, 'Sayegh understood acutely that any Arab flirtation with antisemites tarnished their cause,' Levin writes, and so steered clear of neo-Nazis and other anti-Jewish activists who turned up at his door. He joined forces with an anti-Zionist rabbi, Elmer Berger of the American Council for Judaism, who had already established himself as a critic of Zionism in his 1951 book, *A Partisan History of Judaism*, in which he assailed the movement for embracing 'Hitler's decree of separatism' and betraying Judaism's universalist message. Described by a pro-Israel activist as 'one of the most competent polemicists that American Jewry has ever had to counteract', Sayegh was

considered especially dangerous because he could not easily be painted as an antisemite. In their efforts to combat this Arab ally of a prominent, if controversial, rabbi who never succumbed to antisemitic rhetoric, Zionist activists were forced to invent a novel charge: that anti-Zionism was itself a form of antisemitism. The Anti-Defamation League developed this argument into a book in 1974, but, as Levin shows, it was already in circulation twenty years earlier.

Sayegh eventually moved to Beirut, where he joined the PLO. And in the wake of the Six-Day War in 1967, the American Jewish community underwent what Norman Podhoretz called a 'complete Zionisation'. As Joshua Leifer argues in his new book, *Tablets Shattered*, the Jewish establishment became increasingly 'particularist, their rhetoric blunter in its defence of Jewish self-interest'. That establishment continues to exert influence in American institutions of power and higher learning: the downfall of Claudine Gay, the Harvard president, engineered by the Zionist billionaire Bill Ackman, is just one illustration. As Leifer writes, the uncritical embrace of Zionism has 'engendered a moral myopia' with respect to Israel's oppression of Palestinians. The far left's denial that Hamas committed any atrocities on 7 October is mirrored by the genocide denialism of American Jews who claim there is plenty of food in Gaza and that Palestinian starvation is simply a form of theatre.

This moral myopia has always been resisted by a minority of American Jews. There have been successive waves of resistance, provoked by previous episodes of Israeli brutality: the Lebanon War, the First Intifada, the Second Intifada. But the most consequential wave of resistance may be the one we are seeing now from a generation of young Jews for whom identification with an explicitly illiberal, openly racist state, led by a close ally of Donald Trump, is impossible to stomach. As Peter Beinart wrote in 2010, the Jewish establishment asked American Jews to 'check their liberalism at Zionism's door', only to find that 'many young Jews had checked their Zionism instead.'

The conflict that Beinart described is an old one. In 1967, I.F. Stone wrote:

"Israel is creating a kind of moral schizophrenia in world Jewry. In the outside world the welfare of Jewry depends on the maintenance of secular, non-racial, pluralistic societies. In Israel, Jewry finds itself defending a society in which mixed marriages cannot be legalised, in which non-Jews have a lesser status than Jews, and in which the ideal is racial and exclusionist. Jews must fight elsewhere for their very security and existence - against principles and practices they find themselves defending in Israel."

Among many young American Jewish liberals, this contradiction has proved intolerable: Jewish students have made up an unusually high number of the protesters on campus.

They have also tried to develop what Leifer calls 'new expressions of Jewish identity and community ... untethered to Israeli militarism'. Some, like Leifer, express an affinity for traditional, even Orthodox Judaism, because of its distance from the anything-goes liberalism of American Judaism, even as they deplore Israel's human rights abuses. The most radical among them have espoused a 'soft diaspora nationalism', disavowing any ties to Israel, proclaiming their support for the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement and embracing the symbols of the Palestinian struggle. Leifer is troubled by the failure of some Jews to criticise the 7 October attacks. He accuses them of 'callousness towards the lives of other Jews, whose ancestors happened to flee to the embattled, fledgling Jewish state, instead of the United States'.

The cool response to the events of 7 October that critics such as Leifer find so disturbing, particularly when expressed by left-wing Jews, may not reflect callousness so much as a conscious act of disaffiliation, bred by shame and a sense of unwanted complicity with a state that insists on loyalty from Jews throughout the world - as well as a repudiation of the Zionist movement's claim that Jews comprise a single, united people with a shared destiny. Leifer's book is a critique of the

Jewish prison, written from within its walls: 'renunciation' of Israel, he insists, is impossible because it will soon contain the majority of the world's Jews, 'a revolution in the basic conditions of Jewish existence'. Those who prioritise their membership of a larger secular community seek to liberate themselves from the prison altogether, even at the risk of being excommunicated as 'un-Jews'. For these writers and activists, many of them gathered around the revived journal *Jewish Currents* and the activist organisation *Jewish Voice for Peace*, fidelity with the principles of ethical Judaism requires them to adopt what Krakotzkin calls 'the perspective of the expelled' - who, since 1948, have been Palestinian, not Jewish.

'We have no known Einsteins, no Chagall, no Freud or Rubinstein to protect us with a legacy of glorious achievements,' Edward Said wrote of the Palestinians in 1986. 'We have had no Holocaust to protect us with the world's compassion. We are "other", and opposite, a flaw in the geometry of resettlement and exodus.' Palestinians are still 'others' in the moral calculus of the US and Western powers, without whose support Israel could not have carried out its assault on Gaza. But they can now invoke a genocide of their own, and though it may not yet offer them protection, it has done much to diminish Israel's already eroded moral capital. Palestinian claims to the land and to justice, already embedded in the conscience of the Global South, have made extraordinary inroads into that of the liberal West, as well as that of American Jewry, in no small part thanks to Said and other Palestinian writers and activists. The birth of a global movement in opposition to Israel's war in Gaza, and in defence of Palestinian rights, is, if nothing else, a sign that Israel has lost the moral war among people of conscience. While the Palestinian cause is wedded to international justice, to solidarity among oppressed peoples, and to the preservation of a rules-based order, Israel's appeal is largely confined to religious Jews, the far right, white nationalists and Democratic politicians of an older generation such as Joe Biden, who warned of a 'ferocious surge' in antisemitism in America following the protests, and Nancy Pelosi, who claimed to detect a 'Russian tinge' to them. When the Proud Boys' founder, Gavin McInnes, and the House Speaker, Mike Johnson, descended on Columbia's New York campus to defend Jewish students from 'antisemitic' protesters (among them Jews holding liberation seders), they looked as though they'd convened a 6 January reunion. For all their claims to isolation in a sea of sympathy for Palestine, Jewish supporters of Israel, like the state itself, have powerful allies in Washington, in the administration and on university boards.

The excessive, militarised reactions to the encampments at Columbia, UCLA and elsewhere, along with the furious responses of the British, German and French governments to demonstrations in London, Paris and Berlin, are a measure of the movement's growing influence. As Régis Debray put it, 'the revolution revolutionises the counterrevolution.' A worrying development for anyone who cares about free speech and freedom of assembly, the clearing of the solidarity encampments by the police was a reminder that the rhetoric of 'safe spaces' can easily lend itself to right-wing capture. The antisemitism bill recently passed in the House of Representatives threatens to stifle pro-Palestinian speech on American campuses, since university administrations could become liable for failing to enforce the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism, which conflates anti-Zionism and antisemitism. Like the anti-BDS measures adopted by more than thirty states, the Antisemitism Awareness Act is an expression of what Susan Neiman, writing about Germany's suppression of support for Palestinian rights, has called 'philosemitic McCarthyism', and will almost certainly lead to more antisemitism, since it treats Jewish students as a privileged minority whose feelings of safety require special legal protection. It only adds to the unreal quality of the debate in the US that the threat of antisemitism is being weaponised by right-wing Evangelicals who have otherwise made common cause with white nationalists and actual antisemites, while liberal Democratic politicians acquiesce.

After a New York City police officer took down a Palestinian flag at City College and replaced it with an American flag, Mayor Eric Adams said: 'Blame me for being proud to be an American ... We're not

surrendering our way of life to anyone.’ This was, of course, a ludicrous expression of xenophobia – and it’s hard to imagine Adams, or any American politician, making such a remark about those who wave the Ukrainian flag. (The NYPD filmed the clearing of the Columbia campus for a promotional video, as if it were an anti-terrorism raid.) But it’s indicative of the casual racism, often laced with anti-Muslim and anti-Arab prejudice, that has long been directed against Palestinians. Said was called the ‘professor of terror’, Columbia’s Middle East Studies Department ‘Birzeit on the Hudson’. Bari Weiss, the former New York Times columnist who sees herself as a ‘free speech warrior’, cut her teeth as an undergraduate at Columbia trying to have members of the Middle East faculty fired. The campaign against Palestinian scholars, which helped lay the intellectual groundwork for the attack on the encampments, is instructive. Arafat was wrong when he said the Palestinians’ greatest weapon is the womb of the Palestinian woman: it is the knowledge and documentation of what Israel has done, and is doing, to the Palestinian people. Hence Israel’s looting of the Palestine Research Centre during the 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the attacks on professors who might shed light on a history some would prefer to suppress.

Has some of the rhetoric on US campuses slid into antisemitism? Have some Jewish supporters of Israel been bullied, physically or verbally? Yes, though the extent of anti-Jewish harassment remains unknown and contested. There is also the question, as Shaul Magid writes in *The Necessity of Exile*, of whether ‘the single umbrella of antisemitism’ best describes all these incidents. ‘What is antisemitism if it is no longer accompanied by oppression?’ Magid asks. ‘What constitutes antisemitism when Jews are in fact the oppressors?’

Amid all the attention on heightened Jewish vulnerability, there has been little discussion of the vulnerability of Palestinian, Arab and Muslim students, much less an academic commission or political bill to address it. Unlike Jews, they have to prove their right simply to be on campus. Palestinians – particularly if they take part in protests – risk being seen as ‘trespassers’, infiltrators from a foreign land. Last November, three Palestinian students visiting relatives in Vermont were shot by a racist fanatic; one of them will be paralysed for life. Biden did not respond to this or other attacks on Muslims by saying that ‘silence is complicity,’ as he did about antisemitism.

It was, in fact, the refusal of silence, the refusal of complicity, that led students of every background into the streets in protest, at far greater risk to their futures than during the 2020 protests against police killings. Opposition to anti-black racism is embraced by elite liberals; opposition to Israel’s wars against Palestine is not. They braved doxxing, the contempt of their university administrations, police violence and in some cases expulsion. Prominent law firms have announced that they will not hire students who took part in the encampments.

The political establishment and the mainstream press were largely disdainful. Liberal commentators belittled the students as ‘privileged’, although many of them, particularly at state colleges, came from poor and working-class backgrounds; the protests, some claimed, were ultimately about America, not about the Middle East. (They were about both.) The protesters were also accused of making Jews feel unsafe with their ritualised denunciations of Zionism, of grandstanding, of engaging in a fantasy of 1968-style rebellion, of ignoring Hamas’s cruelties or even justifying them, of romanticising armed struggle in their calls to ‘globalise the intifada,’ of being possessed by a Manichean fervour that blinded them to the complexities of a war that involved multiple parties, not just Israel and Gaza.

There is, of course, a grain of truth to these criticisms. Like ‘defund the police,’ ‘from the river to the sea’ is appealing in its absolutism, but also dangerously ambiguous, fuel for right-wing adversaries looking for evidence of calls for ‘genocide’ against Jews. And there was, as there always is, a theatrical dimension to the protests, with some students imagining themselves to be part of the same drama unfolding in Gaza, confusing the rough clearing of an encampment (‘liberated zones’)

with the violent destruction of a refugee camp. But the attacks on the demonstrators - whether for 'privilege', supposed hostility to Jews or fanaticism - weren't a fair portrayal of a broad-based movement that includes Palestinians and Jews, African Americans and Latinos, Christians and atheists.

For all their missteps, the students drew attention to matters that seemed to elude their detractors: the obscenity of Israel's war on Gaza; the complicity of their government in arming Israel and facilitating the slaughter; the hypocrisy of America's claim to defend human rights and a rules-based international order while giving Israel *carte blanche*; and the urgent need for a ceasefire. Nor were they cowed by Netanyahu's grotesque comparison of the protests to anti-Jewish mobilisations in German universities in the 1930s (where no one was holding seders). If Trump wins they will be blamed, along with Arab and Muslim voters who can't bring themselves to vote for a president who armed Bibi, but they deserve credit for mobilising support for a ceasefire and for helping to shift the narrative on Palestine.

The destruction of Gaza will be as formative for them as the struggles against the Vietnam War, apartheid in South Africa and the Iraq War were for earlier generations. Their image of a child murdered by a genocidal state will not be Anne Frank but Hind Rajab, the six-year-old girl killed by Israeli tank fire as she sat in a car pleading for help, surrounded by the bodies of her murdered relatives. When they chant 'We are all Palestinians,' they are moved by the same feeling of solidarity that led students in 1968 to chant 'Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands' after the German-Jewish student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit was expelled from France. These are emotions of which no group of victims can forever remain the privileged beneficiary, not even the descendants of the European Jews who perished in the death camps.

As the historian Enzo Traverso has argued, a particular version of Holocaust remembrance, centred on Jewish suffering and the 'miraculous' founding of Israel, has been a 'civil religion' in the West since the 1970s. People in the Global South have never been parishioners of this church, not least because it has been linked to a reflexive defence of the state of Israel, described in Germany as a *Staatsräson*. For many Jews, steeped in Zionism's narrative of Jewish persecution and Israeli redemption, and encouraged to think that 1939 might be just around the corner, the fact that Palestinians, not Israelis, are seen by most people as Jews themselves once were - as victims of oppression and persecution, as stateless refugees - no doubt comes as a shock. Their reaction, naturally, is to steer the conversation back to the Holocaust, or to the events of 7 October. These anxieties shouldn't be dismissed. But, as James Baldwin wrote in the late 1960s, 'one does not wish ... to be told by an American Jew that his suffering is as great as the American Negro's suffering. It isn't, and one knows it isn't from the very tone in which he assures you that it is.'

The question is how, if at all, these movements can help to end the war in Gaza, to end the occupation and the repressive matrix of control that affects all Palestinians, including Palestinian citizens of Israel, who make up a fifth of the population. While the justice of the Palestinian cause has never enjoyed wider or more universal recognition, and the BDS movement (vilified as 'antisemitic' and 'terrorist' by Israel's defenders) has never attracted comparable support, the Palestinian national movement itself is in almost complete disarray. The Palestinian Authority is an authority only in name, a virtual gendarme of Israel, reviled and mocked by those who live under it. It has been unable to protect Palestinians in the West Bank from the wave of settler attacks and military violence that has killed five hundred Palestinians in the last eight months and resulted in the theft of more than 37,000 acres of land, a creeping Gaza-fiction. Palestinians inside Israel are under intense surveillance, ever at risk of being accused of treason, and left to the mercy of the criminal gangs that increasingly tyrannise Arab towns.

The future of Gaza looks still more bleak, even in the event of a long-term truce or ceasefire. 'Gaza

2035', a proposal circulated by Netanyahu's office, envisages it as a Gulf-style free-trade zone. Jared Kushner has his eye on beachfront developments and the Israeli right is determined to re-establish settlements. As for the survivors of Israel's assault, the political scientist Nathan Brown predicts that they will be living in a 'supercamp', where, as he writes in *Deluge*, a collection of essays on the current war, 'law and order ... will likely be handled - if they are handled at all - by camp committees and self-appointed gangs.' He adds: 'This seems less like the day after a conflict than a long twilight of disintegration and despair.'

Disintegration and despair are, of course, the conditions that encourage the 'terrorism' that Israel claims to be fighting. And it would be easy for Gaza's survivors to succumb to this temptation, particularly since they have been given no hope for a better life, much less a state, only lectures on the reason they ought to turn the Strip into the next Dubai rather than build tunnels.

Over the last eight months, Palestine has become to the American and UK student left what Ukraine is to liberals: the symbol of a pure struggle against aggression. But just as Zelensky's admirers ignore the illiberal elements in the national movement, so Palestine's supporters tend to overlook the brutality of Hamas, not only against Israeli Jews but against its Palestinian critics. As Isaac Deutscher wrote, while 'the nationalism of the exploited and oppressed' cannot be 'put on the same moral-political level as the nationalism of conquerors and oppressors', it 'should not be viewed uncritically'.

In *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine* (2020), Rashid Khalidi writes that when the Pakistani activist Eqbal Ahmad visited the PLO's bases in southern Lebanon, 'he returned with a critique that disconcerted those who had asked his advice. While in principle a supporter of armed struggle against colonial regimes such as that in Algeria ... he questioned whether armed struggle was the right course of action against the PLO's particular adversary, Israel.' As Ahmad saw it, 'the use of force only strengthened a pre-existing and pervasive sense of victimhood among Israelis, while it unified Israeli society, reinforced the most militant tendencies in Zionism and bolstered the support of external actors.' Ahmad did not deny the right of Palestinians to engage in armed resistance, but he believed it should be practised intelligently - to create divisions among the Israeli Jews with whom a settlement, a liberating new dispensation based on coexistence, mutual recognition and justice, would ultimately have to be reached.

Today it is difficult to imagine an alliance between Palestinians and progressive Israeli Jews of the kind that flickered during the First Intifada. Groups pursuing joint action between Palestinians and Israelis still exist, but they are fewer than ever and deeply embattled: advocates for the binationalism sketched out by figures as various as Judah Magnes and Edward Said, Tony Judt and Azmi Bishara, have all but vanished. Nonetheless, one wonders what Ahmad would have made of Hamas's spectacular raid on 7 October, a daring assault on Israeli bases that devolved into hideous massacres at a rave and in kibbutzes. Its short-term impact is undeniable: Operation Al-Aqsa Flood thrust the question of Palestine back on the international agenda, sabotaging the normalisation of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, shattering both the myth of a cost-free occupation and the myth of Israel's invincibility. But its architects, Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif, appear to have had no plan to protect Gaza's own people from what would come next. Like Netanyahu, with whom they recently appeared on the International Criminal Court's wanted list, they are ruthless tacticians, capable of brutal, apocalyptic violence but possessing little strategic vision. 'Tomorrow will be different,' Deif promised in his 7 October communiqué. He was correct. But that difference - after the initial exuberance brought about by the prison breakout - can now be seen in the ruins of Gaza.

Eight months after 7 October, Palestine remains in the grip, and at the mercy, of a furious, vengeful Jewish state, ever more committed to its colonisation project and contemptuous of international

criticism, ruling over a people who have been transformed into strangers in their own land or helpless survivors, awaiting the next delivery of rations. The self-styled 'start-up' nation has leveraged its surveillance weapons into lucrative deals with Arab dictatorships and offers counterinsurgency training to visiting police squads, but its instinctive militarism leaves no room for new initiatives. Israel cannot imagine a future with its neighbours or its own Palestinian citizens in which it would no longer rely on force.

The 'Iron Wall' is not simply a defence strategy: it is Israel's comfort zone. Netanyahu's brinkmanship with Iran and Hizbullah is more than a bid to remain in power; it is a classical extension of Moshe Dayan's policy of 'active defence'. The violence will not cease unless the US cuts off the delivery of arms and forces Israel's hand. This isn't likely to happen anytime soon: Netanyahu is due to address Congress on 24 July, after receiving an unctuous, bipartisan invitation to share his 'vision for defending democracy, combating terror and establishing a just and lasting peace in the region'. Biden's call for a ceasefire has been met with another humiliating rejection by Netanyahu, who knows that the administration isn't about to suspend military aid or observe any of its own 'red lines'. But the encampment movement, and the growing dissent among progressive Democratic leaders from Rashida Tlaib to Bernie Sanders, foreshadows a future in which Washington will no longer provide weapons and diplomatic cover for Israel's crimes. Whether Palestinians will be able to hold onto their lands until that day, in the face of the settler zealots and ethnic cleansers who have captured the Israeli state, remains to be seen.

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P.S.

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<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v46/n12/adam-shatz/israel-s-descent>

• Adam Shatz is the LRB's US editor. He is the author of *Writers and Missionaries: Essays on the Radical Imagination*, which includes many pieces from the paper, and *The Rebel's Clinic: The Revolutionary Lives of Frantz Fanon*. He has written for the LRB on subjects including the war in Gaza, Fanon, France's war in Algeria, mass incarceration in America and Deleuze and Guattari. His LRB podcast series, *Human Conditions*, considers revolutionary thought in the 20th century through conversations with Judith Butler, Pankaj Mishra and Brent Hayes Edwards.