

The Failure of Liberal Zionism

Israel has behaved exactly as its harshest critics predicted

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“‘ Hamas’ murderous actions must be met with unequivocal condemnation from the entire international community. We hope for their swift and decisive defeat, and urge the US government to do everything possible to assist the State of Israel in confronting this threat, defending its citizens, and preventing a slide into even further conflagration and suffering for Israelis and Palestinians.”

—Official statement from J Street, October 7, 2023

“I hope Biden is telling Netanyahu that America will do everything it can to help democratic Israel defend itself from the theocratic fascists of Hamas—and their soul brothers of Hezbollah in Lebanon, should they enter the fight.”

—Thomas Friedman, October 10, 2023

“We do want the IDF to win—not a war of revenge but a war for justice.”

—Jo-Ann Mort and Michael Walzer, October 18, 2023

“I hope Hamas is totally eradicated and the Palestinians of Gaza can finally choose peace.”

—Rabbi Andy Bachman, October 30, 2023

For a full year now, Israel has rained death on the Gaza Strip. Israel’s ostensible goal, which is also the ostensible goal of the Biden administration, is the destruction of Hamas and the recovery of the hostages taken on October 7—but as of this writing, Hamas remains in power in Gaza and ninety-seven hostages remain in captivity, roughly a third of whom are believed to be dead. Meanwhile, at least forty thousand Palestinians are confirmed dead, a large fraction of them women and children, though an accurate accounting has been impossible for months since Israel has destroyed most of the enclave’s hospitals. An estimate published by the medical journal *The Lancet* in July suggested Palestinian casualties by that point could have totaled 186,000 or even higher, representing nearly 8 percent of Gaza’s pre-October 7 population. The estimate’s methodology incorporated not only direct casualties inflicted by U.S.-made bombs but also “indirect” deaths caused by famine and diseases like polio, which in other recent conflicts have ranged from three to fifteen times higher than direct deaths. Death in all of these forms has continued unabated since July.

The city of Gaza, home to more than half a million people a year ago, lies in ruins, with much of its surviving population crammed into unsanitary refugee camps in the southern end of the Gaza Strip that Israel has also bombed and from which there is no escape. In January, Oxfam calculated that Palestinians were dying at a daily rate that exceeded civilian casualties in any other recent conflict, including Syria, Sudan, Iraq, Ukraine, Afghanistan, or Yemen. An International Court of Justice ruling that same month determined it “plausible” that Israel has committed acts of genocide in Gaza. This is to say nothing of the war’s expansion beyond Gaza, including Israel’s major attacks on the occupied West Bank and in Lebanon, killing hundreds more civilians in recent weeks.

For the most consistent and left-wing critics of Israel’s occupation, this inventory of horrors has become rote, while for Israel’s far-right governing coalition, it is an inventory of successes. In June, the Israeli government tweeted a video in which a freed hostage says, “There are no innocent civilians in Gaza,” and if one accepts that genocidal premise then it follows that Israel’s slaughter has been productive. Israel and its left-wing critics may be diametrically opposed in their goals, but they agree on some basic facts: that Israel is ruthlessly pursuing the destruction of the Palestinians of Gaza, with no regard for moral niceties or international law, and with the unapologetic belief that Jewish life is sacrosanct and Arab life is worthless.

But observers of the “liberal Zionist” persuasion insist that the situation is more nuanced. Liberal Zionism is exactly what it sounds like: liberalism’s general commitment to a more just and egalitarian society paired with Zionism’s commitment to a sovereign Jewish state on something like Israel’s current territory, usually with allowances, however slight, made for a form of Palestinian sovereignty. Though it suffered criticisms from both left and right for years preceding October 7, the liberal Zionist worldview remains hegemonic in the Democratic Party, the mainstream media, progressive Jewish organizations

like J Street and T'ruah, and Reform Judaism—the largest and most consistently liberal American Jewish denomination.

Liberal Zionists were shaken on October 7, and not without reason: Hamas did, after all, kill over 1,100 people (though some portion of these deaths appear to have been attributable to friendly fire by the IDF), more than half of whom were Israeli civilians, and while not every grisly account of that day has been independently verified, and indeed many have been debunked, there's no reason to doubt it was a gruesome spectacle. Hamas did take hostages and some of them have died in captivity, and their plight is understandably agonizing for many Israelis and especially for their loved ones. "It's very hard to hold both of these truths at once," the progressive Rabbi Sharon Brous told Ezra Klein last November, referring to the need to acknowledge both Israeli and Palestinian suffering in the context of the current war.

While that evenhanded framing may seem humane and reasonable, it obscures not only the horrifically lopsided human impact of the past year but also the context of what preceded it: over half a century of Israel's occupation and colonization of the West Bank, its stifling blockade and multiple previous bombardments of the overcrowded Gaza Strip, and, ultimately, the historical fact of the Nakba—the ethnic cleansing of around seven hundred thousand Palestinians in 1948-49 as part of the creation of the Israeli state. What the historian Rashid Khalidi has aptly characterized as a hundred-year settler-colonial war on Palestine is rendered, in the liberal Zionist imagination, as a tragic conflict between two peoples alike in dignity—though it is obvious most liberal Zionists identify more strongly with the people who are dying less.

Liberal Zionism's underlying contradictions were on display at August's Democratic National Convention, where organizers allowed the parents of the subsequently slain Israeli-American hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin to take the stage and call for a ceasefire, but categorically refused to allow any Palestinian speakers to address the assembled Democrats during the proceedings. This was consistent with Kamala Harris's remarks on the final night, in which she foregrounded the suffering of the Israeli victims of the October 7 attacks, robustly affirmed Israel's right to defend itself, and then added a perfunctory acknowledgment that "what has happened in Gaza over the past ten months is devastating. So many innocent lives lost. Desperate, hungry people fleeing for safety, over and over again. The scale of suffering is heartbreaking." That the suffering had been enabled at every stage by the administration in which she serves as vice president was glossed over, as was the fact that it is orders of magnitude worse than what Israel has suffered; Palestinians, unlike Israelis, are granted no corresponding right to self-defense. As Pennsylvania's Democratic Governor Josh Shapiro put it last month, Palestinians "need to make clear that violence has no part in their relationship with Israel, that Israel has a right to exist." (In this, one hears echoes of his comment in his college newspaper in 1993 that Palestinians "are too battle-minded to be able to establish a peaceful homeland of their own," which Shapiro brushed off but didn't actually apologize for when it resurfaced this summer.)

Aside from a handful of honorable exceptions in the House of Representatives, virtually every elected Democrat, including Bernie Sanders, endorsed Israel's war against Hamas, often qualifying their support with lip service about the need to minimize Palestinian civilian casualties, which Israel has consistently and shamelessly disregarded. President Biden and his aides spent months reassuring critics that they felt "frustrated" at Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's obstinate refusal to fight the war in accordance with international law. In May, Biden began making transparently empty threats to withhold certain types of weapons shipments, and a few weeks later he endorsed a ceasefire proposal, something the left had been demanding since the first week of the war, while imposing no material consequences on the recalcitrant Netanyahu.

More than four months later, the war not only continues but continually expands into new theaters, and in September U.S. officials admitted to the *Wall Street Journal* that they have no expectation Biden will achieve a ceasefire deal before his term ends in January 2025. The administration's unwillingness to recognize Israel's actual intentions toward the Palestinians has produced a corresponding unwillingness to use any meaningful leverage to rein in Netanyahu's prosecution of the war.

All of this was predictable, and many predicted it. It took no special insight to understand that the war Israel launched that week would be one of indiscriminate mass murder rather than the just, targeted, legitimate war against Hamas that so many liberal Zionists called for. It simply required being clear-eyed, both about the long history of Israeli treatment of the Palestinians and about the composition of the actual Israeli government headed by Netanyahu, which, as anyone paying attention knew going into October 7, included members of the far-right settler movement like Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich whose stated positions toward Palestinians were objectively genocidal.

Liberal Zionists knew this; indeed, many of them had already spent months championing the Israeli opposition to Netanyahu, which had organized mass demonstrations against the prime minister's corruption and illiberalism prior to the attacks and has since continued to march against his failure to prevent Hamas's incursion or to bring the hostages home. But in their grief and horror over October 7, they lined up to offer support for Israel's military response, even as they sometimes acknowledged that Netanyahu deserved blame for the attacks and expressed hopes that Israelis would elect a less odious leader to replace him. In the weeks and months that followed they reaffirmed their support and chastised Israel's left-wing critics again and again, even as the initial shock of the October 7 attacks grew more distant and reports of new Israeli atrocities in Gaza emerged daily.

As it became clearer to them that defending Israel's actual war was morally untenable, liberal Zionist politicians, spiritual leaders, and commentators increasingly shifted the blame to Netanyahu. In January, Josh Shapiro called the Israeli prime minister "one of the worst leaders of all time." In an April *New York Times* op-ed, Joshua Leifer optimistically cited polling showing Netanyahu's deep unpopularity and expressed hope that Israel's opposition movement could bring down his government and thereby end the war. In July, the progressive Rabbi Jill Jacobs characterized Netanyahu and his coalition as a small group of zealots who had hijacked the Israeli state and professed to stand with the majority of Israelis in supporting a ceasefire and a hostage deal.

That same month, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer attended Netanyahu's address on Capitol Hill but refrained from shaking the prime minister's hand. "I went to this speech because the relationship between Israel and America is ironclad and I wanted to show that," Schumer reassured CBS afterwards. "But at the same time, as everyone knows, I have serious disagreements with the way Benjamin Netanyahu has conducted these policies." It was a perfect encapsulation of the liberal Zionist position: unshakeable support for Israel and its war paired with boilerplate criticism of Netanyahu's wartime leadership, as though that were somehow separable and unrepresentative.

Yet Netanyahu's approval numbers in Israel, after a long decline, in fact surged in August; he is once again the most popular politician in the country, the protests in the streets of Tel Aviv notwithstanding. A poll in mid-September confirmed that Netanyahu's Likud party is poised to lead the next government should new elections be held. Israel's successful attacks on Hezbollah and the killing of its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, last month further boosted Netanyahu's standing domestically. "King Bibi is back," a former Israeli cabinet minister told the *New York Times* after Nasrallah's death. "If you compare Bibi now to Bibi 10 months ago, he's a different person. He's full of confidence." Just ahead of the anniversary of the attacks, Barak Ravid reported in *Axios* that Netanyahu is on a "winning streak," citing his recent successes against Hezbollah and Hamas leadership as well as his canny sidelining of any credible opposition.

Netanyahu's extremist coalition has endured, and his leading rival, the centrist Benny Gantz, joined his war cabinet after the attacks and served in it for eight months before resigning over Netanyahu's failure to negotiate a hostage deal. Gantz's complicity in the horrors Israel has inflicted on Gaza speaks to a more fundamental point about Israeli politics: regardless of the Israeli public's divided views on Netanyahu himself, support for the war is overwhelming. A poll conducted in March and April showed that only 19 percent of Israelis believed the war had "gone too far," a number that seems even less impressive when you look closer: 74 percent of Israel's Palestinian minority supported that position, while a meager 4 percent of Israeli Jews did. American liberals who wish to support Israel

while criticizing the excesses of the war on Gaza, in other words, are on the same page as roughly 4 percent of Israeli Jews—a rounding error.

By scapegoating Netanyahu, who has dominated the Israeli political system for most of the past fifteen years, liberal Zionists have been able to preserve in their imaginations the idealized Israel many of them fell in love with decades ago—the Israel that was founded by secular socialists from Eastern Europe and that branded itself as a paragon of enlightened governance, even as it engaged from the beginning in colonization, land theft, murder, and expulsion on a scale that Netanyahu’s coalition can only envy. By denying the essential nature of the Zionist project and its incompatibility with progressive values, liberal Zionists have also been in denial at every stage about the war to which they have pledged at least conditional support. They have insisted that the situation is “complicated,” which is the framing Ta-Nehisi Coates absorbed during his tenure at the predominantly liberal Zionist *Atlantic*, and which he denounced as “horseshit” following a trip to the occupied West Bank in the summer of 2023. “It’s complicated,” Coates told *New York* magazine last month, deriding that common talking point, “when you want to take something from somebody.”

A year after October 7, no one seriously believes there will be peace between Israel and the Palestinians in our lifetime. The bombed and starved children of Gaza will never forget what they’ve been subjected to, nor the world’s general indifference; while it’s not on the same scale, their counterparts in Israel will never forget the national trauma of the attacks. The “two-state solution” that liberal Zionists have verbally supported for years as the only possible just outcome is an obvious fantasy. Other, far more disturbing outcomes seem likelier; at present, it is hard to see what consequences Israel will face from continuing to kill and displace Palestinians on all fronts while seizing and occupying more and more of their land. If there is one lesson to be taken from the past dismal year, it’s this: the liberal Zionist interpretation of the conflict has no predictive value, no analytical weight, and no moral rigor. It is a failed dream of the previous century, and it is unlikely to survive this one.

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The Library of Unconventional Lives

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