

## OPINION

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### The Massacre in Israel and the Need for a Decent Left

Oct. 12, 2023

On Tuesday evening, I was drinking on the porch of my friend and neighbor Misha Shulman, the Israel-born rabbi of a progressive New York synagogue called the New Shul. All day, he'd been on the phone with congregants deeply distraught over the massacres and mass kidnappings in Israel. Of all the people he spoke to, he said, those most devastated were either people who had lost close friends or family, or young Jews "completely shattered by the response of their lefty friends in New York," who were either justifying Hamas's atrocities or celebrating them outright.

This sense of deep betrayal is not limited to New York. Many progressive Jews have been profoundly shaken by the way some on the left are treating the terrorist mass murder of civilians as noble acts of anticolonial resistance. These are Jews who share the left's abhorrence of the occupation of Gaza and of the enormities inflicted on it, which are only going to get worse if and when Israel invades. But the way keyboard radicals have condoned war crimes against Israelis has left many progressive Jews alienated from political communities they thought were their own.

By now, you've probably seen examples. There was the giddy message put out by the national committee of Students for Justice in Palestine, which [proclaimed](#), "Today, we witness a historic win for the Palestinian resistance: across land, air and sea." New York's chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America promoted a rally where speakers applauded the attacks, and the Connecticut D.S.A. enthused, "Yesterday, the Palestinian resistance launched an unprecedented anticolonial struggle." The president of N.Y.U.'s student bar association wrote in its newsletter, "I will not condemn Palestinian resistance," [leading](#) to the withdrawal of a job offer. Over the otherwise benign slogan "I stand with Palestine," Black Lives

Matter Chicago [posted](#) a photo of a figure in a paraglider like those Hamas used to descend on a desert rave and turn it into a killing field.

“I think what surprised me most was the indifference to human suffering,” said Joshua Leifer, a contributing editor at the left-wing magazine Jewish Currents and a member of the editorial board at the progressive publication Dissent.

“I’m trying to hold on, personally, to my commitments, my values, which now feel in conflict, in a way, with the political community that I lived alongside in the United States for basically my whole adult life,” he said. “It certainly has begun to feel like a breaking point.”

Conservatives reading this might take a jaundiced satisfaction in what some surely view as naïve progressives getting their comeuppance. But part of what makes the depravity of the edgelord anti-imperialists so tragic is that a decent and functional left has rarely been more necessary. As I write this, Israel has imposed what the Israeli defense minister, Yoav Gallant, called a “complete siege” of Gaza’s two million people, about half of whom are under 18. “No electricity, no food, no water, no gas — it’s all closed,” said Gallant. “We are fighting human animals, and we act accordingly.” Such collective punishment is, like the mass killing of civilians in Israel, a war crime.

Hunger was already [rampant](#) in Gaza before this conflict broke out; today the World Food Program estimates that 63 percent of its population, living in one of the most densely populated places in the world, is “food insecure.” “If there is a hell on earth, it is the lives of children in Gaza,” António Guterres, the secretary general of the United Nations, said in 2021.

If Gaza was already hell, we lack the language for what it’s about to become. Over the weekend, Ariel Kallner, a member of the Knesset from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud party, called for a new “nakba,” Arabic for “catastrophe,” which Palestinians use to describe being driven from their homes at Israel’s creation in 1948. This time, Kallner said, the catastrophe befalling Palestinians would “overshadow” the last.

When the Israeli ground invasion begins, there will be little political pressure to take pains to spare civilians. The American special envoy charged with monitoring and combating antisemitism has [insisted](#), “No one has the right to tell Israel how to defend itself and prevent and deter future attacks.” But if humanist principles spur

total revulsion toward the terrorist crimes in Israel, they also demand restraint in Gaza. Among those principles are these: Victimization and dispossession are not alibis for barbarism. The distinction between civilians and combatants must be respected. No cause, righteous or otherwise, excuses the killing of children.

It is not just disgusting but self-defeating for vocal segments of the left to disavow those universal ideas about human rights, declaring instead that to those who are oppressed, even the most extreme violence is permitted. Their views are the mirror image of those who claim that, given what Israel has endured, the scale of its retaliation cannot be questioned.

“At the strategic level, it would be much more helpful if there was a large group of American leftists who had the moral credibility to say, ‘We are horrified by the murder of innocent people by Hamas and we want the United States to put maximum pressure on Israel to not commit atrocities in Gaza,’” said Leifer.

There are, of course, leaders making exactly that argument. “Right now, the international community must focus on reducing humanitarian suffering and protecting innocent people on both sides of this conflict,” read a [statement](#) by Bernie Sanders. “The targeting of civilians is a war crime, no matter who does it.” That message is undermined when a loud part of the left insists that when it comes to Israelis, there is no such thing as civilians.

On Thursday, Students for Justice in Palestine, a network of pro-Palestinian campus groups, is holding Day of Resistance demonstrations across the United States and Canada. A planning document the group posted online refers to all of Israel as a “settler colony” and says, “Settlers are not ‘civilians’ in the sense of international law, because they are military assets used to ensure continued control over stolen Palestinian land.”

Perhaps such hideous dogmatism shouldn’t be surprising. The left has always attracted certain people who relish the struggle against oppression primarily for the way it licenses their own cruelty; they are one reason movements on the left so reliably produce embittered apostates. Plenty of leftists have long fetishized revolutionary violence in poor countries, perhaps as a way of coping with their own ineffectuality. Che Guevara didn’t become a dorm room icon only for his motorcycle and rakish beret.

We also shouldn't underestimate the role of antisemitism in warping people's moral sentiments. I'm reminded of the German New Left militants of the 1960s and '70s. Though they were radicalized by abomination of the Nazism of their parents' generation, some, in a grotesque irony, ended up committing anti-Jewish terrorism themselves. A group suspected of trying to [bomb](#) a Berlin Jewish center on the 1969 anniversary of Kristallnacht wrote in a communiqué, "The Jews, who have been driven away by fascism, have themselves become fascists, who in collaboration with American capital want to exterminate the Palestinian people."

The most sympathetic reading of the online leftists playacting as the [Baader-Meinhof Gang](#) is that their nihilism is a function of despair. As Leifer pointed out, even before the killings in Israel, it was a grim time for the American left, as the elation of the Sanders campaign and the revolutionary hopes of the Black Lives Matter movement gave way to backlash and retrenchment. "When the left loses, it enters into a cycle of self-marginalization," he said.

By valorizing terrorism, these voices on the left are effectively choosing to stop contending for power in a serious way — a slow and grinding process rife with setbacks — and indulge instead in messianic projection. There was a time not long ago when the D.S.A. seemed to be [emerging](#) as a political force, with several of its members, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Jamaal Bowman, ascending to Congress. Now it has made itself an embarrassment to most politicians associated with it. On Wednesday, Representative Shri Thanedar of Michigan, a former member of the D.S.A., [renounced](#) the group. Ocasio-Cortez disavowed the group's endorsement of a pro-Hamas rally in Times Square, [telling](#) Politico, "It should not be hard to shut down hatred and antisemitism where we see it. That is a core tenet of solidarity."

It's too early to know how the left's widespread failure of solidarity will change our politics, but I suspect some sort of fracture is coming. Part of me thinks this could be a moment like after the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary, which, coupled with revelations about the evils of Stalinism, led many left intellectuals to break with communism. Though perhaps that's too grandiose an analogy for an amorphous campus-bred left-wing tendency that communicates in hashtags and sound bites. On social media, some scholars and activists are repeating the line "Decolonization is not a metaphor," suggesting that the homicidal spree we just saw in Israel is not a departure from their ideology but the embodiment of it. I suspect they will come to regret it if people take them at their word.

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