

# A Left That Refuses to Condemn Mass Murder Is Doomed



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This weekend in Israel, a far-right Islamist group perpetrated the [largest mass killing](#) of Jews since the Holocaust, murdering entire families, including babies, in their beds and slaughtering 260 concertgoers. More than 1,000 Israelis were killed in all, and over 100 others taken hostage.

Israel's far-right government predictably responded by [choking off](#) all food, electricity, and fuel to Gaza's 2 million residents and then preparing a military assault more untempered by concern for [civilian casualties](#) than ever before. Israel's defense minister, Yoav Gallant, made the brutality of what is to come plain on Monday, saying, "We are fighting human animals, and we will act accordingly."

And no small number of supposed leftists found in all this cause for celebration. Others, meanwhile, loudly refused to condemn Hamas's atrocities, insisting it was not their place to decry the "military strategy" or "violent resistance" of oppressed Palestinians.

In my view, these responses constitute a betrayal of the left's most fundamental values. Either one upholds the equal worth of all human lives, opposes war crimes, and despises far-right ethno-nationalist political projects or one doesn't. What's more, cheering (or publicly announcing your refusal to condemn) the murder of children isn't just morally grotesque but also politically self-defeating.

The West's apologists for Palestinian war crimes have far less power than its apologists for Israel's [brutal domination of the Palestinian territories](#) and [discrimination against Arab citizens of Israel](#). But precisely because left-wing critics of Israeli apartheid lack power, we must not forfeit our moral authority. For decades, the Israeli government's knee-jerk defenders have sought to equate opposition to the occupation with contempt for the security of Jewish Israelis. Now, a loud minority of Palestine's self-styled champions are blithely affirming this smear, insisting that solidarity with Palestine requires callous indifference toward (or, at the very least, silence about) the mass murder of Jews. In so doing, they are making it easier for their adversaries to discredit and marginalize the broader cause of Palestinian liberation.

And that cause has never been more vital. It is therefore imperative for progressives to disavow all apologia for Hamas's atrocities and for the broader public to understand that the left's analysis of the conflict's origins, and its prescriptions for its resolution, are wholly extricable from the blood lust of a loud minority of pseudo-radicals.

It is not hyperbole to say that many left-wing supporters of Palestine celebrated Hamas's

atrocities. The national leadership of Students for Justice in Palestine [declared](#) the weekend's events a "historic win for the Palestinian resistance," touting Hamas's success in "catching the enemy completely by surprise." The Connecticut chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America [applauded](#) the Palestinian resistance's "unprecedented anti-colonial struggle," pledged its solidarity to that struggle, and vowed, "No peace on stolen land!" At a rally co-sponsored by socialist organizations in New York City, one speaker spoke approvingly of the mass murder of Israeli teenagers, [saying](#), "There was some sort of rave or desert party where they were having a great time, until the resistance came in electrified hang gliders and took at least several dozen hipsters."

Some left-wing intellectuals, meanwhile, chose to gussy up their ardor for war crimes in layers of impenetrable jargon. Speaking plainly would have required such thinkers to acknowledge that they were endorsing the mass murder of children, and thus to assume the extraordinary burden of justifying this stance; which is to say, the burden of explaining why we should believe that Palestinian liberation can be achieved through the killing of Jewish children and only through the killing of Jewish children. It's understandable, then, that instead of forthrightly making this case, many chose to convey the sentiment "Oppressed people have a right to commit mass murder" with as much opacity and pseudo-profundity as their hard-won vocabularies would allow. These [remarks](#) from an editor at *Harper's* are exemplary:

to search for an analogue seems almost inappropriate to Palestinians' world-historical(!) audacity to seize the components of self-determination for themselves, if only because the idiom of liberation invents itself anew with each instance that the yoke of bondage is sloughed off

a near-century's pulverized overtures toward ethnic realization, of groping for a medium of existential latitude — these things culminate in drastic actions in need of no apologia. the thrum of history as it develops is one of force; its inertia and advance require some momentum

In this intellectual's telling, the killings of entire families in their beds are not atrocities that contradict the left's fundamental commitment to the inherent worth of every human life; they are "drastic actions in need of no apologia." Such sentiments were not altogether aberrant among left-wing public intellectuals. A Marxist professor at Birkbeck University of London declared that the murder of 260 Israelis at a rave was a "consequence" for "partying on stolen land." Other academics, and a wide variety of campus student organizations, issued statements pointedly refusing to criticize "Palestinian resistance."

Meanwhile, social media was replete with claims that Hamas's atrocities constituted heroic progress toward decolonization and that Jewish Israeli civilians were fair targets for violence as they are settlers occupying stolen lands.

All this is morally sick and intellectually bankrupt. From my vantage, it looks as though a few leftists were eager to demonstrate their superlative moral clarity by fighting with liberals about the legitimacy of a Palestinian uprising aimed squarely at the IDF and conducted in the name of democratic equality; so eager that they would not be deterred by the fact that the weekend's events bore scant resemblance to that scenario.

What we actually witnessed was not "the Palestinians" mounting a violent struggle for justice but a far-right theocratic organization committing mass murder in the name of blood-and-soil nationalism. Hamas's project is antithetical to the left's foundational values of secularism, universalism, and egalitarianism. And it is also completely at odds with the progressive vision for Palestinian liberation. Western radicals' predominant prescription for resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict is a "one-state solution," in which Israelis and Palestinians all enjoy democratic equality in a single binational state. Hamas's atrocities have not advanced this ideal but set it back, lending credence to those who insist a one-state solution is a recipe for ceaseless civil war. This weekend was not a triumph for the left's project in Palestine but a disaster.

Meanwhile, although many aspects of Israel's relations with the Palestinians can be justifiably described as neocolonial, analogies between the conflict and paradigmatic anti-

colonial struggles can be misleading. This is not Algeria, and the Israelis aren't the pied-noirs. Much of Israel's Jewish population descends from people who were expelled from other Middle Eastern countries; which is to say, people who suffered the same sort of dispossession endured by the Palestinians. These people did not have anywhere else to seek refuge. And their grandchildren do not have any metropole to return to. The idea that they deserve to be shot to death while dancing because they were born in Israel, or for the crimes of a government many actively opposed, is hateful.

More broadly, the notion that an ethnic group can boast the exclusive right to occupy any stretch of land is *not* a left-wing one. Virtually all land is "stolen land" if one rolls the tape back far enough. Individuals who were dispossessed of property as a result of their ethnicity have a right of return and reparation. But ethnic groups do not have a right to cleanse any geographic area of outgroup members, whether they are Israeli or Palestinian.

For these reasons, it is a moral imperative for progressives to condemn Hamas's atrocities, affirm the human rights of Jewish Israelis, and reject the ethno-nationalist claim that Palestinians have a unique right to reside in the region. And it is also a political imperative for them to do so.

Those who approve or condone Hamas's atrocities constitute a small minority of the left. Yet since algorithmic social media favors incendiary speech, from the vantage of many X and Instagram users, the left's response to last weekend's events is characterized by bloodlust. In the face of that response, multiple progressive-leaning people in my life have expressed a sense of estrangement from leftists and newfound doubts about their worldview. Seeing an ideological group embrace a position that one knows to be intellectually bankrupt and morally odious will naturally lead one to view that group's other claims — especially those concerning matters one knows little about, such as the intricacies of the Israel-Palestine conflict — with greater skepticism. It's important, therefore, to ensure that the majority of progressives who abhor all war crimes makes itself as visible as possible. In the present context, pointedly refusing to condemn Hamas's atrocities

might help a leftist to perform a more radical solidarity than squishy liberals can muster and thus win some points in a subcultural status game. But doing so will make it harder for them to actually advance their ostensible aims.

The political necessity of criticizing Israel on universalist grounds, rather than ethno-nationalist ones, is similarly urgent. In defending their apologias for war crimes, leftists tend to cite the gross power imbalance between the Palestinians and Israelis as somehow exculpatory. But precisely because Palestinians cannot hope to prevail in a contest of brute force, it is incumbent on their champions to make the case for their liberation in terms that honor the basic rights of Israelis. If we posit that some ethnic groups have a unique claim to specific stretches of land, and that they also have the right to commit war crimes so as to secure this heritage, then we will do the Israeli far-right's ideological work for it. When supposed leftists embrace calls for the expulsion of all Jewish "settlers" from "the river to the sea," they pit one group's account of why its historical victimization gives it carte blanche to commit ethnic cleansing against another group's account of the same. In a contest between competing visions of ethno-nationalist domination, the Palestinians cannot win. Their primary strength is the moral force of egalitarian universalism; in other words, of the idea that all people are entitled to security, self-government, and equality under the law. The moment that Palestine's western supporters treat this idea as negotiable, they kick the legs out from under their own movement.

And that movement is needed now more than ever. The current Israeli government is the most far-right in its history and has been working to [de-facto annex](#) the West Bank and entrench Jewish supremacy in that occupied Palestinian territory. Israeli settlers in that region have been carrying out attacks that even Israeli officials recognize as "[pogroms](#)." Meanwhile, last year, Israeli troops in the West Bank [killed](#) a record number of Palestinians. And even before the present war, they were on pace to set a new one in 2023.

Israel's national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, is an open anti-Arab racist who has called for the mass expulsion of disloyal Arab Israelis and whose sympathies for Jewish terrorists prevented him from serving in the Israeli army. The nation's finance minis-



ter, Bezalel Smotrich, has called for [wiping out](#) Palestinian villages. This is a government that needed no provocation to demonstrate its contempt for Palestinian life. Now, Hamas has given it the largest mass murder of Jews since the Holocaust.

Israel has responded by promising that its military campaign against Hamas in Gaza will be unconstrained by concern for the lives of the 2 million civilians who are tightly packed into a strip of land twice the size of Washington, D.C. On Tuesday morning, IDF spokesperson Daniel Hagari announced that “hundreds of tons of bombs” had already been dropped on Gaza and [noted](#) that “the emphasis is on damage and not on accuracy.”

A member of Netanyahu’s Likud Party in Israel’s parliament [tweeted](#) in response to the attacks, “Right now, one goal: Nakba! A Nakba that will overshadow the Nakba of ’48.” This is a reference to the original ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from Israel.

At present, Israel’s allies in the West are giving it little incentive to temper its thirst for vengeance with concern for, say, the majority of Gazans who are under 18 years old. In his [remarks](#) on the attacks, Joe Biden offered the unqualified support of the U.S. for Israel’s response while lamenting Hamas’s use of Palestinian civilians as “human shields.” This is a real practice, but it also serves as an alibi for Israel to pursue aerial campaigns that emphasize “damage” over “accuracy.”

A precondition for a durable peace in Israel-Palestine is an Israeli government that honors its commitments under international law, ends its occupation of the West Bank, and forswears collective punishment as a tool of war against Hamas. To assert this is not to pretend that Hamas is an eager partner for peace. But that organization owes much of its popular legitimacy (and [power](#)) to Israel’s crimes.

The Israeli government will not honor the legal and moral rights of Palestinians absent concerted international pressure. And mounting such pressure requires a progressive movement with the moral authority to challenge popular narratives about the conflict that elide the crimes of the Israeli state.

Admittedly, the prospects for success on that front in the near term look bleak, irrespec-

tive of whether progressives denounce Hamas's atrocities or justify them. But a left that refuses to condemn mass murder will ensure (and deserve) its own political irrelevance. To celebrate the slaughter of Jewish children as "decolonial" struggle, or to refuse to condemn the "military strategy" of far-right war criminals, is to place the performance of radicalism above the demands of moral integrity and political efficacy.