

Antisemitism: Before and After October 7

THE BEINNER FAMILY RESEARCH SERIES ON ANTISEMITISM



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How the Media Promote Antisemitism

Reality versus Narrative

Bernard Harrison

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I. BIAS OR COMPLICITY?

In the spring of 2024 Danny Cohen, a former Director of BBC Television, wrote two articles in the London *Daily Telegraph* alleging anti-Israel bias in the BBC's coverage of the war in Gaza. One of these specifically attacked John Simpson, a very prominent BBC journalist, currently the World Affairs Editor of BBC News. In it he says:

... one of John's more recent tweets has prompted me to explain why I am so concerned about bias at the BBC. He said: "Over the years I've lost two friends, one Palestinian and one Lebanese, and nearly lost a third, a French cameraman, to the willingness of IDF [Israel Defense Forces] soldiers to open fire even though they knew perfectly well who they were. But they felt sure their superiors would protect them." In a post that reached hundreds of thousands of people, the BBC's World Affairs Editor accused Israel of knowingly shooting innocent people and, in addition, engaging in a high-level conspiracy to cover up their misdeeds.

These are obviously very serious accusations but no evidence was provided for the charges and no corroboration was sought. The claim was simply allowed to float out into toxic online spaces to be used and abused by those seeking to malign Israel. . . .

I sincerely like and admire John Simpson. He is a highly experienced and dignified journalist and truly one of the broadcasting greats of recent decades. But this also means that his words carry immense weight. They are treated as facts even when no facts are provided.

The same could be said about the BBC's reporting more generally. As one of the world's leading news providers, it has a special responsibility to ensure that it remains impartial and relies solely on facts. When it fails in its duty of impartiality, balance, and accuracy, as it has done on many occasions since Oct 7, the consequences are real and often frightening for Britain's Jewish community.¹

John Simpson duly replied in a *Telegraph* op-ed piece headed "The BBC is as fair as it can be on Israel-Gaza." In it he admits that Cohen's criticisms have some—as he believes, limited—force:

Yes, there have been mistakes; in all the thousands of broadcasting hours the BBC has devoted to the Gaza crisis since October 7, it would be amazing if there weren't. There was the snap judgment of a correspondent who speculated that Israel had launched the missile that hit Gaza's al-Ahli Arab Hospital and the suggestion by a BBC presenter to a former Israeli prime minister that the Israeli forces were "happy to kill children." Plus, there was the interview with Lord Cameron, when Nick Robinson said, "Israel attacks and murders tens of thousands of innocent Palestinians."

It was obvious Nick was quoting the view that many British people—a majority, according to polls—hold about Israel's operations in Gaza. If he'd used the same words about Hamas, I don't suppose anyone would have raised an eyebrow.²

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1. Danny Cohen, "I admire John Simpson, but he is wrong on the BBC's Israel Bias," *Daily Telegraph*, 11 April, 2024.
 2. John Simpson, "The BBC is as fair as it can be in its Israel-Gaza Coverage," *Daily Telegraph*, 21 April, 2024.

But a little further on he states his two key lines of defense against Cohen's complaints. The first is that Israel's actions in Gaza have in effect been morally equivalent to those carried out by Hamas on October 7, 2023—his grounds being that both involve the deaths of “innocent civilians”—but that Israel's have been worse than Hamas', simply in terms of the numbers involved.

... Which brings me to the key problem I have with your criticisms. I suspect that, rather than wanting the BBC to be impartial and balanced between Israel, Hamas, and Iran, you actually want the BBC to side with Israel: to accept without question the huge disparity between the numbers of Israeli and Palestinian deaths (something like 25 Gazans for every Israeli killed on October 7). Hamas is brutal as well as corrupt. But the wholesale destruction of Gaza, the uprooting of its people and the hunger they have endured aren't things that we can just ignore in our broadcasts.

The second is, in effect, that what the issue of BBC impartiality depends on, anyway, is not the truth of this or that statement put out by the BBC (since occasional untruth is unavoidable in journalism), but simply whether the British public at large believes the BBC to be impartial, which “research shows” that it does.

... slightly more people think the BBC is actively pro-Israel than anti-Israel. We can't be both, can we? As for the country as a whole, audience research shows that a big majority of viewers and listeners think the BBC is by far the most trusted provider of impartial coverage of the war in Gaza.

A day or two later, both these lines of defense of the BBC were ably demolished by the following letter from a reader of the *Telegraph*.

SIR—John Simpson's defense of the BBC's coverage of the Gaza conflict (Comment, April 22), far from dispelling concerns, reinforces them.

He acknowledges that it was a “mistake” when Nick Robinson said last week that Israel “murders tens of thousands of innocent Palestinians,” but contends it did not breach the BBC's statutory duty of impartiality, relying on two arguments.

First, he says that, if Mr. Robinson “had used the same words about Hamas, I don’t suppose anyone would have raised an eyebrow.” But this is to be remarkably indifferent to the truth. By any definition, “murder” connotes deliberate or intentional killing. It is well attested that, on October 7, Hamas deliberately killed Israeli civilians, some of its men openly boasting about this. By contrast, the civilian deaths in Gaza are the unintended consequence of Israel targeting Hamas; it makes no more sense to speak of their having been “murdered” than to speak of the thousands of civilians killed collaterally as a result of the Allied liberation of Normandy in 1944 as having been murdered by the British, American and Canadian troops.

Secondly, Mr. Simpson says that “many British people—a majority according to polls”—hold the view that Israel is murdering (i.e. deliberately killing) thousands of innocent civilians. But that is irrelevant; it does not make the claim true. It was never true that the Earth is flat, even when a majority of people believed it to be.

Impartial, objective news reporting depends on telling the truth, not repeating or amplifying popular misconceptions. It is extremely disturbing if senior BBC insiders no longer seem to think that matters.

M----- G----- London³

With that, the Cohen/Simpson dispute ceased for the time being to agitate the columns of the *Telegraph*.

Should it be allowed to rest there, with Mr. G----- allowed the last word on the issue of BBC impartiality? Well, no, not because Mr. G----- is wrong about the defects of John Simpson’s attempted defense of the BBC, but because the issue of impartiality is not the only one raised by Danny Cohen’s articles. There is also the question of antisemitism. In the second of his pieces, no doubt because he wishes to avoid appearing to tag Simpson as an antisemite, Cohen deals very gently with that issue. It is only in his concluding remark, “When it [the BBC] fails in its duty of impartiality, balance and accuracy, as it has done on many occasions since Oct 7, the consequences are real and often frightening for Britain’s Jewish community,” that it raises its head at all.

3. *Daily Telegraph*, Letters to the Editor, 23 April, 2024

But in his original article, which does not mention any specific figure at the BBC, the issue is raised sharply and explicitly. The title tells the story: “The BBC’s anti-Israel bias is becoming dangerous.” And the piece concludes:

... it [bias against Israel] is also a terrible failure of responsibility by the BBC in an environment in which anti-Semitism is exponentially on the rise and Britain’s Jewish community feels under a level of threat that many have not experienced in their lifetimes. The BBC is contributing to this poisonous atmosphere with reporting that is biased and highly emotive.

It is now more than five months since the October 7 attacks. The BBC’s errors, missteps and bias against Israel is being repeated again and again. At some point, someone in BBC management needs to take responsibility for these continuing and dangerous failures.⁴

This second charge is clearly the more fundamental one. But Simpson’s reply ignores it. He proceeds as if the first charge—of bias—is the only one he has to meet, and he mentions the Jewish community only in that connection.

As you know, some politicians and some newspapers are much given to attacking the BBC’s credibility. Your criticisms have a particular force, given your former BBC job. A sizeable proportion of British Jews now apparently believe the BBC is biased against Israel. These articles of yours must have encouraged that view.

The impression I have, as a non-Jew (a lapsed Catholic of working-class origins, as it happens), is that most people I talk to—the vast bulk of them non-Jewish—share Cohen’s concerns about the BBC’s treatment of Israel. But that is not, or not mainly, what concerns me about the passage. What concerns me more is the way in which, by creating the—entirely false—impression that “British Jews” are solely concerned with “bias against Israel” (are opposed, in effect, to any portrayal of Israel in

4. Danny Cohen, “The BBC’s anti-Israel bias is becoming dangerous,” *Daily Telegraph*, 19 March, 2024

a less than positive light), it allows Simpson—and the BBC—to sheer plausibly away from confronting Cohen’s far more important and worrying charge, that in allowing defamatory falsehoods to gain credence, the BBC gives comfort and encouragement to those creating “an environment in which anti-Semitism is exponentially on the rise and Britain’s Jewish community feels under a level of threat that many have not experienced in their lifetimes.”

I do not, of course, think that this is an issue that arises only in connection with coverage of Israel. by the BBC. The bulk of the press in most Western countries, and most television news coverage, is similarly implicated. In any event it is the issue that will concern me in the remainder of this essay. I shall argue that Cohen is only partly right about its nature. It is, of course, in part a matter of defamatory falsehood, of words “treated as facts even when no facts are provided.” But the problems go further than that.

II. WHAT IS ANTISEMITISM?

When we speak of antisemitism, what precisely are we talking about? Its consequences are beyond question, given the innumerable pogroms suffered by the Jewish people over many centuries of diaspora, of which the Shoah stands out as the most destructive. But both its nature and its influence are currently matters of controversy. Touring the public debate at present, for instance, are two arguments designed to show the issue of antisemitism to be entirely irrelevant to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Let’s begin with these.

The first argument says that Jewish complaints to the effect that this or that hostile comment about Israel is “antisemitic,” or “gives rise to antisemitism,” give one no reason to suppose that antisemitism is actually a factor in the debate, because such complaints are never more than a wholly disingenuous political ploy, advanced merely in the hope of smearing, and in this way silencing, “all criticism of Israel.”

This argument is flawed in three respects. The first is logical. From the possibility that a speaker, in making a claim, may have some motive other than that of simply stating the truth as it appears to him or her, it does not follow that the claim is not true. The second flaw is factual. There are, after all, plenty of Jews, both in the diaspora and in Israel, who protest the undercurrent of antisemitism present in much media criticism of Israel, while themselves remaining bitterly and noisily critical of the current Israeli government.

The third flaw has an element of black humour about it. One of the oldest tropes of traditional antisemitism is that “the Jew” complains of being ill-treated by Gentiles only in the hope of obtaining thereby some illegitimate advantage in terms of power or money. The argument that Jews complain of antisemitism only in the hope of “silencing all criticisms of Israel,” therefore, far from freeing the critic who uses it from the charge of antisemitism, merely serves to demonstrate how justified, at least in his or her case, that charge is.

The second argument widely vented at present, for doubting whether antisemitism has much bearing on the Israel/Palestine conflict, is more interesting. It claims that “by definition,” antisemitism is *hostility to Jews as Jews*. From that it infers that no criticism of Israel, even false and defamatory criticism, can be antisemitic, because such criticisms express only hostility to a *state*, Israel, not hostility to *Jews as individuals*, and therefore not hostility to *Jews as Jews*.

This argument is sound if its definitional premise is correct. But is it? One cannot offer a definition without identifying, implicitly or explicitly, whatever one is attempting to define as *a thing of a particular kind*. Thus, when one defines, say, Chancery as (in the British legal vocabulary) “the Lord Chancellor’s court,” one has automatically identified what kind of thing the term “Chancery” names: it names a kind of court. In the same way, defining antisemitism as “hostility to Jews as Jews” implicitly identifies antisemitism as a *state of mind*: specifically, a type of hostility. But is that the *only* kind of thing to which we apply the term “antisemitism”?

If one asks directly what *kind of thing* antisemitism is, the obvious and most basic answer is that it is a form of prejudice. But how, exactly, is one to define “prejudice”? It seems safe to go with the excellent definition put forward by the American psychologist Gordon Allport, according to which prejudice is “thinking ill of others without sufficient warrant.”

That gives us a definition of antisemitism as “thinking ill of Jews without sufficient warrant.” But that description picks out (at the very least) two quite different kinds of thing; one of them a state of mind, the other a body of pseudo-explanatory political theory. Antisemitism as a state of mind—call it “social antisemitism”—consists in disliking Jews as such, feeling uncomfortable in their presence, not wanting them to join the Country Club, preferring one’s children, and particularly one’s daughters, not to hang around with them, and so on and so forth. Social antisemitism is in no way unique to Jews. It is simply commonplace ethnic prejudice, of a type encountered by many other diasporic groups, applied in this instance to Jews. It is accurately defined as “hostility to Jews as Jews.”

Antisemitism as a body of delusional pseudo-explanatory theory—call it “political antisemitism”—is another matter altogether. It sets out to explain whatever aspect of world affairs most distresses the antisemite by blaming it on “the Jews.” For the purposes of the explanation, “the Jews” are a people (sometimes but not necessarily a “race”) blessed not only with astonishing political coherence, but with astonishing powers of conspiratorial organization and financial manipulation; powers which have enabled them to achieve secret control over an astonishing variety of non-Jewish institutions (Wall Street, Hollywood, the media, the American presidency) with a view to diverting them to the service of Jewish interests, which the theory invariably presents as profoundly evil, though the exact nature of the evils alleged will naturally vary to some extent, depending on what the current crop of antisemites are currently blaming “the Jews” *for*.

This type of antisemitism—antisemitism as pseudo-explanatory theory—is the lethal type: the type promoted by the Nazis. It is lethal because, unlike social antisemitism, it deals, not in contempt and

hostility, but in fear, not to say panic. One does not commit enormous resources—to the detriment of the war effort, and thus possibly to the continued existence of the Nazi regime—to the extermination of masses of people, merely because one happens to dislike and despise them. One does it because one believes them to constitute, collectively, a serious threat to interests one regards as central: in the case of the Nazis, to the entire future of the Third Reich. This was the essence, after all, of the “Jewish Problem” addressed by the Wannsee Conference and the reason for the radical nature of the *Endlösung*: the Final Solution.

At the heart of political antisemitism is the claim that Jews are collectively committed to evil ends; that, in effect, the Jewish community is intrinsically evil, and that the presence of this community in the world represents a permanent threat to non-Jewish interests and is actually to be blamed for whatever the antisemite sees as going wrong in the non-Jewish world. A common accusation in this vein is that “all wars” are fomented by “the Jews,” and serve Jewish interests.

Part of the attraction of such ideas to receptive minds is that in heaping responsibility for the evils of the world on to Jewish shoulders, they remove it from non-Jewish ones. The believer can thus not merely enjoy the pleasures of righteous indignation at all the suffering inflicted upon humanity by this abominable race, but can in addition congratulate himself not only upon his own perfect personal innocence, but on that of his friends and political allies, since if all human suffering is, in one way or another, the fault of the Jews, none of it can be his fault, or that of any non-Jewish agency. An American Jewish friend recently mentioned to me a remark attributed to a city council member in Oakland, California: “It is a contradiction to be pro-humanity and pro-Israel.” One can perhaps see the above sad little complex of motives operating here. Though the logic of the transition is shifty, one can see that for many minds it would seem to follow that anyone who hates Israel must be entitled by that very fact to regard himself as a friend of humanity.

For the past twenty years claims of this type concerning Jewish iniquity, specifically, the iniquities of the State of Israel, have been increasingly heard, not only from a fringe of neo-fascist groupuscules on the far

right of politics, but from large tracts of left-wing opinion, from “anti-Zionist” organisations such as the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement and latterly even from governments. The burden of these claims is that Israel is an “illegitimate state,” which should never have been allowed to come into existence; a state whose very existence constitutes a permanent threat to peace in the Middle East, and more generally to world peace. People who think in this way appear genuinely to believe that Israel is a greater threat to peace than far more powerful presences of the world stage—Iran, Russia, China, North Korea, for instance—which not only fail to arouse as much animosity on their part as Israel but appear to arouse none.

Many of the same people appear to believe that it would be a very good thing if Israel did actually cease to exist as a *Jewish* state: if it could be replaced by an Arab Muslim-majority state. This, after all, is the burden of the slogan “From the River to the Sea, Palestine Will be Free,” shouted since the Hamas pogrom of October 7, 2023 by pro-Palestinian groups on campuses in both the US and the UK, and by mobs parading through London every Saturday since the Hamas pogrom of October 7, 2023, many of whose members are not Muslims and have no personal connection at all with Israel or the Middle East.

Israel is the only state in the world who’s right to exist, at least as a Jewish state, is denied by substantial numbers of people in the West, including academics, journalists, politicians, bureaucrats, and other members of elite groups. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to ask what it is about Israel that could be reasonably held to deny it the right to exist? When this question is asked, however, the answers it evokes never consist in detailed comparisons between Israel and other states or regimes—Iran, North Korea, the present military regimes in Myanmar or the Sudan, for instance—whose existence might on the face of it be considered more objectionable than that of Israel. Instead, what tends to be offered are one or more of a series of very general claims concerning the alleged intrinsic nature of Israel as a state: that Israel is a Nazi state, that it is a settler-colonial state, that it is a racist state or a state that practises Apartheid against Palestinians. There is nothing new about these claims, which have been running since the mid-1960s. More recently, since the

Hammas pogrom of October 7, 2023, and the resulting war in Gaza, it has been commonplace to hear Israel accused of “war crimes” and of “genocide” against the Palestinian people.

These accusations are certainly reminiscent of a central theme in traditional versions of antisemitism, since they accuse a Jewish collectivity—the people of Israel—of being, in effect, collectively committed to evil. Nazism, racism, colonialism, Apartheid are, after all, widely accepted in the Western world, especially on the left of politics, to be evils, and moreover evils of such an extreme kind that they deserve to be uprooted from the world. The argument for denying Israel the right to exist is, thus, that Israel has no right to exist, deserves to be expunged from the world as a state, because it is committed *intrinsically*, as a condition of its very nature as a state, to evils that deserve to be expunged from the world.

Because those who hold these views also hold that there would be no reason to deny Israel the right to exist if it were to be re-founded as an Arab-Muslim majority state, there can, furthermore, be no doubt that those who consider Israel to lack justification for its very existence as a state believe that lack to have something essential to do with Israel’s present character as a *Jewish* state.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, many have taken both the denial of Israel’s right to exist, and the attempt to justify that denial in terms of the alleged intrinsic character of the state (as ‘racist,’ ‘Nazi,’ ‘Apartheid,’ and so on) to constitute antisemitic libels. The IHRA Definition, for instance, widely accepted by governments and non-governmental organisations across the world, offers the following among its “illustrations” of antisemitism:

- i. Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.
- ii. Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.
- iii. Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel.

At the same time many opponents of Israel argue that the rejection of even these accusations as antisemitic defamation, despite its limited and specific character, is merely an attempt to smear and suppress *all* ‘progressive’ criticism of Israel.

Who is right? If antisemitism is, as it is, a form of prejudice, and if Allport’s definition of prejudice as “thinking ill of others with insufficient warrant” is sound, then a simple and obvious answer to that question would be that it depends on the truth of the above accusations. If it is simply and demonstrably true that Israel is a Nazi, racist, colonial, or Apartheid state, then these claims are not merely defamatory abuse but serious criticisms, and very possibly Israeli Jews do lack any right to self-determination. If, on the other hand, these accusations are demonstrably false, then equally plainly they are not contributions to rational political debate but antisemitic ravings of exactly the type made familiar in Europe by the Nazis from the 1920s onwards.

I think the second is correct, and that “antisemitic ravings”—and ravings, moreover, of a nature entirely redolent of the Nazi magazine *Der Stürmer*—is a justified description of much of the “analysis” of the October 7th Hamas pogrom and subsequent events presently coming from voices self-described as “progressive” or “anti-Zionist,” and from many left-leaning news outlets. But more needs to be said if not only the justice but the full implications of this depressing conclusion are to become apparent.

III. POLITICAL MORALITY OR JEW-HATRED?

Suppose someone believes all of the above accusations against Israel: that Israel is a Nazi state, a colonial or racist enterprise, practices Apartheid, is engaged in a policy of genocide against the Palestinians, is guilty of war crimes, and so on. It would seem to follow from those beliefs that anyone, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, who supports Israel, is by that very fact a supporter of Nazism, colonialism, and so on, and hence deserves for that reason to be attacked and exposed. Since non-Jewish supporters of Israel—Conservatives, Republicans, Evangelical

Christians, whatever—are not only far more numerous than Israel’s Jewish supporters, but also far more influential, one would expect, therefore, to find pro-Palestinian organizations devoting far more attention to these non-Jewish groupings than to Jews.

But this is not what has happened since October 7th, 2023, either at pro-Palestinian encampments on American or British campuses or at the vast Pro-Palestinian demonstrations that have been allowed to march through central London every Saturday since the Hamas pogrom. What we hear, whether from the students or the marchers, are not fulminations against supporters of Israel (very large numbers of whom, of course, are non-Jews) but solely fulminations against Jews. It is *Jewish* students who find themselves under attack from pro-Palestinian groups in our universities, not conservative or Christian students. It is *Jews* who are told that they are not wanted on campus, or that they “ought to go back to Poland,” not right-wing or Christian non-Jewish supporters of Israel. It is “openly Jewish” bystanders, according to the Metropolitan Police, who risk being physically attacked at pro-Palestinian marches through London.

It is difficult not to conclude, therefore, that what animates much current “progressive” outrage against Israel is primarily Jew-hatred of a very traditional type, and that the interest of the accusations—of genocide, war-crimes, colonialism, and so forth, which ostensibly sustain that outrage, is primarily that they provide convenient sticks to beat Jews with. The point of these accusations, in other words, is that they can be used to give contemporary support to the main traditional tenets of political antisemitism: that the Jews are an inherently evil people, that they are solely responsible for some intolerable evil currently affecting the world, and that the only way to address that evil is to eliminate the Jewish entity responsible for its existence: in this case, the state of Israel.

A further curious feature of the current outcry about Gaza supports this analysis, namely, the strangely exclusive, not to say obsessive character of the concern with the Israeli/Palestinian conflict displayed by the Left in Western countries at present. If the primary motive of “progressive” anti-Zionism were concern for civilian deaths in warfare or

opposition to fascism or colonialism, then one would expect to encounter at least equally vehement antagonism from progressive voices towards the many states and regimes whose guilt in such respects is far easier to establish than Israel's. But that is not at all what one encounters. Over the years, progressive opinion has been strangely silent on the immense number of civilian deaths that took place during the foundation of the states of India and Pakistan in 1947 and during the Iraq-Iran War of 1988. Nor do I recall Western 'progressive' opinion showing much concern for the three million Igbos estimated to have died during the Biafran war (1967–70) as a direct result of Nigerian Government policy. At present, similarly, the currently ongoing wars in Myanmar or the Sudan, devastating in terms of civilian deaths and casualties as these have proved, receive scarcely any coverage in the Western media. They certainly excite no mass protests either in our streets or on campus. Progressive opinion is similarly silent on the colonial-style repression visited by China on the Tibetans or the Uighurs, on the Indonesian occupation of Western New Guinea, where there is an ongoing conflict between the Indonesian Government and the Free Papua movement, or on the illegal Turkish occupation of half of Cyprus. The silence and indifference of the Western left to these obscure disasters contrasts sharply with the extreme and sometimes violent hostility displayed towards Israel and towards Jews—but not towards non-Jewish supporters of Israel—since October 7, 2023. The sharpness of that contrast would suggest that for large sections of the present left, man's inhumanity to man is of political interest only to the extent that it can be plausibly blamed on "the Jews." But such an outlook could make sense only to someone persuaded of the central doctrine of political antisemitism: that all evil is ultimately Jewish evil and would vanish with the Jews if they could only be got rid of.

IV. THE SUBSTANCE OF THE ALLEGATIONS

Back now to the question of the truth of the allegations on which the denial of the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state appears to depend. Is Israel a Nazi, racist, Apartheid, or settler-colonial state? Is its conduct

of the war in Gaza “disproportionate” and hence criminal under international law; and is it currently conducting genocide against Palestinians?

Let us begin with the last two allegations of war crimes and genocide. One problem for the anti-Zionist case is that both these charges are unquestionably true of Israel’s opponents in the present war in Gaza. In its attack of October 7, 2023, on Israeli towns and kibbutzim near the border, Hamas massacred, raped, and tortured some 1200 people, many of whom were civilians attacked in their homes, while others were simply attending a music festival, and took more than 240 hostages.

In international law, taking hostages is a war crime. So far as the notion of proportionality is concerned, what the law of armed conflict opposes as a failure of proportionality is not, in fact, the death or injury of civilians *per se*, but failure to consider whether the incidental loss of civilian life, injury, or damage to civilian buildings or institutions risked by a given military action would be excessive or disproportionate *in relation to the concrete military advantage anticipated from the action*. It is difficult to see how that murders carried out by Hamas personnel on the morning of October 7, 2023, could be supposed to yield any military advantage whatsoever. Their object was simply to kill as many Jews as possible, in the most brutal and savage ways possible. Like the associated kidnapping of hostages, they therefore constituted war crimes under the international law of armed conflict.

Hamas has since made no attempt to deny that it committed these acts. On the contrary, its spokesmen have repeatedly spoken of their pride in having carried out the pogrom of October 7. The term “genocide” is commonly defined as the commission of acts intended to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. Genocide is notoriously difficult to establish in law, because of the need to prove intent. But that difficulty seems to have been removed by Hamas’ repeated assertion of its wish to reenact, again and again across Israel, the mass butchery of Jewish civilians that took place on October 7th, until the entire Jewish population has either fled or been eliminated. Both the October 7 acts and the longer-term ambitions of Hamas thus appear to qualify as genocidal.

In December 2023, in proceedings before the International Court of Justice, the government of South Africa alleged that Israel's subsequent actions in Gaza violate the Genocide Convention. These allegations have been widely echoed since by "anti-Zionist" voices across the Western World. But have they any substance? In its Order of January 26, 2024, the court formally ordered Israel to take all measures within its power to see that the terms of the Genocide Convention were met in Gaza. However, it took no decision as to whether or not genocide has been committed or even whether it has jurisdiction to hear the case. Nor has the court ordered a ceasefire, although South Africa had requested it to do so.

The ruling also included the words "In the Court's view, the facts and circumstances... are sufficient to conclude that at least some of the rights claimed by South Africa and for which it is seeking protection are plausible." Many, including a few legal commentators, took this to mean that the court considered it "plausible" that Israel was in fact committing genocide in Gaza. That was denied by Joan Donahue, then the president of the ICJ, in a BBC interview in April. All that the "plausibility" section of the ruling intended, she said, was that South Africa had a right to bring its case against Israel and that the Palestinians had "plausible rights to protection against genocide."

The question remains, therefore, whether there exist grounds for supposing Israel to have violated those rights.

No nation having suffered an attack on its civilian population on the scale, and of the nature, of the Hamas pogrom of October 7 could be expected to refrain from military retaliation. Given the genocidal nature of Hamas' ambitions, and the militarily and politically entrenched dominance of Hamas in Gaza, it is also hard to see how Israel's war aims could be anything less than the extirpation of Hamas' military resources and the end of its control of the Gaza Strip.

Has Israel's pursuit of these war aims resulted in "disproportionate" costs to the non-combatant population of Gaza? And are these costs so disproportionate as to amount to war crimes or to demonstrate genocidal intentions towards the Palestinian population of Gaza on the part of the current government or the IDF?

For a start, causing non-combatant death and injury by military action is not in itself a war crime, for the obvious reason that in modern warfare, with its emphasis on airborne attack, such deaths are inevitable. According to UN figures the usual ratio of non-combatant to combatant fatalities in urban and semi-urban combat wherever it occurs is three to four non-combatants to every combatant killed. One would presumably need, therefore, to show that proportion to have been seriously exceeded through Israeli action in Gaza, in order to have the basis for an argument capable of commanding non-sectarian assent.

In Gaza, matters are complicated in this respect by two salient facts. The first is that Hamas is accustomed to use the civilian population of Gaza as human shields on an industrial scale, siting a huge network of tunnels containing military control centres and factories, along with vast amounts of military hardware, beneath schools and other civilian infrastructure. The second is that, according to leaked internal messages published by the *Wall Street Journal* in June 2024, the leaders of Hamas in Gaza regard the rising civilian death toll in Gaza as useful to the war aims of Hamas (as “necessary sacrifices,” according to the main architect of the October 7 pogrom, Yahya Sinwar), specifically as a means of increasing global pressure on Israel to withdraw from Gaza.

The data on which the current accusations against Israel depend have been for the most part provided by the Gaza Health Ministry, which is to say, by Hamas itself. These figures make no distinction between combatant and non-combatant deaths; nor do they distinguish between those killed by Israeli action and those killed by Palestinian rockets misfired, either by Hamas itself or by one of the other jihadi groups active in the strip, or in fighting between Hamas and Palestinian clans (*hamulas*) such as the Dogmush, or other groups opposed to it, or executed by Hamas or other jihadist groupuscules on grounds of actually or reputedly cooperating with Israel.

From the outset they have represented deaths among women and children as greatly exceeding male deaths. In February 2024, Ministry officials said that 75% of the dead were women and children, though this was never confirmed in the detailed reports. In March the figure was given as

72%, though underlying data showed the proportion to be much smaller. On 6th May 2024, the United Nations stated that 69% of reported deaths were of women and children. Two days later it reduced this estimate to 52%, explaining that the earlier estimate arose from incomplete information, and that it was now using data by the Hamas-run health ministry rather than the Government Media Office. This shift of sources reduced the claimed numbers of deaths by approximately half, from 9,500 women and 14,500 children dead, to 4,959 women and 7,797 children.

One may accept that, under war conditions, immense uncertainties must attend the collection of such numbers. However, a statistician, Abraham Wyner, Professor of Statistics and Data Science at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, has pointed out that when statistics are fraudulent or invented there may be “evidence *in the numbers themselves* that can demonstrate it.” His arguments are too complex and technical to rehearse here, but his conclusion is that “the numbers are not real. That much is obvious to anyone who understands how naturally occurring numbers work. The casualties are not overwhelmingly women and children, and the majority may be Hamas fighters.”

A further problem, unconnected with the possible inflation of the figures by Hamas to serve the purposes of its press agency is that initial estimates of deaths made during a war are generally later revised downward. In the Bosnian War of the 1990's, for instance, deaths resulting from the conflict were estimated during the war to be 200,000, but later, as more accurate information emerged, the figure was revised downward to 100,000.

Let us leave all these doubts aside, however, and suppose that the Hamas figures are accurate. And let us accept that the death of any civilian in armed conflict is regrettable. Regrettable as it may be, virtually every nation in the world has such deaths on its collective conscience. Something more is needed to support the claim that Israel, alone among the nations of the world, is an “illegitimate” state, which deserves to be dismantled *as a Jewish state*. That is, after all, what the supporting claims, that Israel's response to October 7 has been grossly disproportionate, and that Israel is planning, or actually conducting, a genocide against

the Palestinian people, are supposed to establish. But the Hamas figures, even if one accepts them as accurate, fail to support either claim. Let us suppose that close to 40,000 Palestinians have indeed died so far. Hamas figures do not distinguish between combatant and non-combatant deaths. Estimates by other sources, both hostile and favourable to Israel, arrive at fairly similar figures. Thus, a study in the *Lancet*, by the London School of Economics, covering the period, put the number of non-combatant casualties at 68.1%. An analysis published in December in the left-wing *Ha'aretz*, by the Israeli sociologist Yagil Levy, put the number at (at least) 61%. Again, in December, IDF sources estimated it at 66%. If we take the highest of these estimates, 68%, then the ratio of non-combatant to combatant deaths is a little under 2 to 1. But this ratio has been reached or exceeded in many modern wars, including the Second World War, fought by many other nations. It is difficult to see, therefore, how this could serve as the basis for a specific accusation against Israel, especially when one remembers that the war was begun by Hamas, with a massacre of civilians which it is impossible not to regard both as a war crime and as genocidal in intention, since it served no military purpose whatsoever, and that the war in Gaza could always have been, and still could be, brought to an end by Hamas, simply by laying down its arms and returning the Israeli hostages still in its power.

What about the accusation that Israel is preparing or conducting a genocide against the Palestinian people? On the basis of the evidence, the claim seems simply vacuous. The Palestinian population in 2022 included approximately 3 million in the West Bank, two million in Gaza, and another two million (with full Israeli citizenship) in Israel itself. These are sufficiently small numbers of people, as the Nazis demonstrated in 1933–45, to be got rid of almost completely, but only by means of a vast and expensive machinery of destruction: trains, death camps, crematoria, and so on, impossible to conceal in a small country. It may be, of course, that the accusation is not that Israel is actually executing genocide but merely that it intends it. But if Israel intends, or has ever intended any such thing, it has shown itself to be a very poor hand at it. Dropping leaflets on an enemy population to tell them when to expect

attacks so that they can move out of the way (standard in all Israel's wars with enemies hiding amongst the Palestinian population) is, for a start, a hopeless way of conducting a genocide, as is allowing the population supposedly marked out for destruction to increase its numbers incessantly over a period of seventy years, in territories over which one exercises overwhelming military control. One may conclude either that genocide is not the sort of thing that Jews, unlike Gentiles, care to go in for, or that they are so absurdly bad at it that their intentions, one way or the other, hardly matter.

What about the other grounds for denying Israel's right to exist: that Israel is, essentially, by its very nature, a Nazi, Apartheid, settler-colonial, and intrinsically racist state?

Let us begin with the charge of racism. To accuse Israel of being a "racist state," and therefore "illegitimate," is presumably not merely to claim that the population in Israel includes racially prejudiced individuals. So does that of any state. Those who make this accusation must, therefore, intend the charge to be that Israel is somehow *essentially*, institutionally racist, racist in its very nature as a state.

In America the term "racism" has always meant hatred and contempt for black people on the part of white people. Critical Race Theory, developed in American universities but widely accepted by the university-educated left abroad, has developed this into the absurd idea that racism is an exclusively white phenomenon, unknown outside the West. From this standpoint, if Jews are to be racists, they have to be white.

This fits nicely with two popular but entirely fantastic beliefs about Jews and Israel. The first is the belief that all Jews are of white, European (Ashkenazi) origin (an interesting inversion of the antisemitism of the previous two centuries, which classified Jews as non-white and as alien to Europe for that reason among others). The second is the fantasy of Israel as a homogenously "white" Ashkenazi Jewish society, supposedly established by the violent expulsion of its entire former non-Jewish population on territory subsequently occupied by "white" Jews. That is presumably what accounts for the shouts of "Go back to Poland" heard at "pro-Palestinian" demonstrations since last October.

These beliefs are wildly at odds with the multicultural realities of present-day Israeli society. Jews are a people, not a race. There are black, Middle Eastern, Latin American, Indian, and East Asian Jews. The population of Israel is only 73.2% Jewish. Other groups holding full citizenship include 21% classified as Arab, including Palestinians, both Muslim and Christian, Druzes, Circassians, other Muslims, and Armenians. A further 5.7% are classified as “Others” and include persons with Jewish ancestry but not recognised as Jewish under religious law, non-Jewish family members of Jewish immigrants, Christians other than Arabs and Armenians, and citizens fitting no distinct ethnic or religious category.

Of the Jewish citizens of Israel, fewer than half (approximately 45%) are of Ashkenazi origin. Of the non-European majority (55%), the bulk are Mizrahi from Arab countries, Iran, Turkey, and Central Asia. Over 200,000 are of Ethiopian and Indian-Jewish descent. Neither Hamas nor Fatah, of course, pay much regard to the dictates of Critical Race Theory that animate so many of their western supporters. They do not confine themselves to killing only Ashkenazi Jewish Israeli civilians. They regard Israeli civilians as targets, irrespective of whether they belong to the Ashkenazi Jewish minority, the Middle Eastern, African, or Indian Jewish majority, or the non-Jewish (Muslim, Christian, Druze, Circassian, or non-denominational) 26.8%.

In addition, the events through which this immensely culturally diverse society came into existence are very hard to construe as a tale of white European colonialism. Until 1918 Palestine was a part of the Ottoman Empire with a population of 300,000 to 600,000, mainly Muslim but with sizeable minorities of Christians and Jews. From the 1880s onwards, immigrant Jews began to buy land from local landowners and set up agricultural communes (*kibbutzim*) using modern methods. The resulting rising economic prosperity created Arab immigration from Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. After 1918, with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the League of Nations made Palestine a British Mandate territory. Jewish immigration into the territory continued on a small scale, but things remained quiet until in 1929 a pogrom in Hebron massacred 65 Jews and injured many more. In view of this murderous attack and other

continuing hostilities, the British Government, as part of the discharge of its Mandate responsibilities, in 1937 set up a Royal Commission into the future of Palestine, which produced a Report, known for short as the Peel Report. The Peel Report, faithful to the Wilsonian principles of self-determination which guided the work of the Commission, concluded that under international law both the Jewish and the Arab population possessed equal rights to land and settlement in Palestine. It—or rather its successor, the Woodhead Commission—proposed to address the problem of hostilities between the two communities by partitioning the land between them, giving the bulk of the land (about three-quarters) to the Arab community but reserving a much smaller and discontinuous portion, where Jews happened to be in the majority, for Jewish residence and settlement. This proposal was reluctantly accepted by the (Jewish) Yishuv but rejected by the Higher Arab Committee (then under the leadership of the Mufti of Jerusalem, whose links with the German Nazi movement are a matter of record), which demanded that all of Palestine be placed under Arab control and the Jewish minority expelled.

After World War 2, a seriously weakened Britain announced its intention to abandon its mandated responsibilities in Palestine and pass them to the newly-formed United Nations. In 1947, the General Assembly of the UN established the UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP). A report by UNSCOP in September 1947 again recommended partitioning Palestine between an Arab and a Jewish state; and in November 29, 1947 the UN, by a two-thirds majority, adopted a partition resolution sanctioning the creation of a Jewish state. This again posited the creation of separate Jewish and Arab states on the territory of Palestine. It also proposed a partition, again one very much to the advantage of the Arab side, which encountered in-principle responses from each side very similar to those of 1937–8.

On November 30th, immediately after the passing of this resolution, war broke out with various armed Palestinian forces, the strongest being those of the Arab Higher Committee on the attack. When these forces were completely defeated by those of the Yishuv, the armies of Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq joined the war, only to be comprehensively

defeated in their turn. The War of Independence ended formally in 1949, with the signing of peace treaties with all the Arab states save Iraq. But by that time Israel was already a year old, its Declaration of Establishment having been proclaimed by David Ben-Gurion on May 14, 1948, on the expiry of the British Mandate, and accorded de jure recognition, first by the Soviet Union and then by the United States and the bulk of UN member states either at once or over the following year.

That what came into existence was a Jewish state only, and not the two states proposed by both the League of Nations and the United Nations partition proposals, was entirely the fault of the surrounding Arab states, which, as soon became clear, had been united only by their desire to ethnically cleanse Palestine of Jews and had not the slightest interest in conferring political autonomy on the Arab inhabitants of Palestine. Some 750,000 of these had fled the territory at that point occupied by Israel, partly because they had been advised by the Arab League to do so, and to return only when the Jews had been eliminated, but no doubt also because they feared being overrun by the advancing Jewish forces.

Those Palestinians who fled faced a difficult future. Only Jordan offered them citizenship. In Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza (at that time part of Egypt) they were offered neither citizenship nor civil rights. On the thin and fictional excuse that their situation would last only until the Jews had been driven from Palestine, the Arab refugees were treated as permanently stateless persons. Held in refugee camps, they became, in effect, wards of the United Nations, which created a new agency, UNWRA, to look after them.

On the other hand, those Palestinians, about 160,000, who stayed put when they were overrun by the Israeli forces, were granted Israeli citizenship. This is one of the major reasons why present-day Israel society includes such a large non-Jewish component, with Arab political parties and members of the Knesset, and numbers of non-Jews, including Druze, Circassians, Christians, and even some Muslims serving in the Israeli army. In addition, the founding of Israel was to make things so difficult for the ancient Jewish communities of Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Egypt and the Lebanon that about 750,000 of these people migrated to Israel,

which is why Jews of Ashkenazi origin now compose less than half of the Jewish population, the rest being Middle Easterners—just Jewish Middle Easterners: Iraqis, Lebanese, Moroccans—whatever.

In sum, the history of Israel's origins makes nonsense of the claim that its founding was a colonial enterprise. It is in fact the history of the achievement of political autonomy by a threatened minority, in the face of determined efforts on the part of the majority to erase it from the region by ethnic cleansing.

Similarly, the readiness of the victorious Jews to accept as fellow-citizens, with full civil rights, the 160,000 non-Jewish Palestinians who remained within the new borders of Israel at the conclusion of the War of Independence further serves to make nonsense of the claim that Israel, in its nature and origins, is a fundamentally racist state. No doubt the Yishuv could at that point have quite easily got rid of the 160,000 remaining Palestinians, simply by giving them as good reasons to leave as the Middle Eastern or Maghrebini Jews who then flooded into Israel were given elsewhere in the region. But that is not in fact what it did.

Finally comes the claim that Israel is a “Nazi” state. Given the abundantly documented nature of the Third Reich, I do not know how one could even begin to construct a serious parallel. But we are dealing here with a slogan, which like all slogans, does very well as long as one is careful to steer clear of critical analysis.

V. NARRATIVE VERSUS REALITY

News media exist to inform us of the human realities unfolding around us from day to day. Some of the time their apologists draw on the language of the natural sciences to describe what it is that they offer. They speak of “truth,” “fact,” “verified fact,” and so on. But equally often, journalists and commentators identify what occupies them as “stories,” or “narratives,” terms drawn not from the sciences but from imaginative literature. As used by journalists, it is true, both of these terms have a foot in both worlds. The initial “breaking” of a journalist’s “story” is very often a matter of certain fascinating facts coming to light—for example,

say, the fact that when the lock of a certain dignitary's briefcase happened to fail in front of the cameras, what fell out included a quantity of cocaine that should not have been there. Similarly, the term "narrative" can denote the recital, by a police witness in a magistrate's court, say, of a series of blankly factual observations made in the course of duty.

But such blank recitals of fact may not only be profoundly tedious, they may not repay the tedium with very much in the way of enlightenment either, since they may raise many more puzzles than they resolve, leaving those present, as the phrase goes, "not knowing what to think."

In journalism, moreover, while puzzling the readers may be a useful strategy for a time, leaving them not knowing what to think is not good business. It will not sell copies or improve ratings. Fifteen years ago I enjoyed the pleasure and honour of a brief acquaintance with the late Edwin M. Yoder Jr., for many years a syndicated columnist with the Washington Post Writers Group, whose work appeared in newspapers around the world, and who was later Professor of Journalism at Washington and Lee University. One of his books is entitled *Telling Others What to Think: Recollections of a Pundit*. While this title in one way displays a self-deprecatory irony typical of the man, in another way it is simply accurate: telling others what to think is a big part of what journalists do. And one cannot discharge that duty by leaving one's readers gaping at impenetrable mysteries. The "stories," the "narratives" that journalism deals in, have to convey not merely nuggets of fact but also understanding: some grasp of "what it all means."

They can only do this by sharing some of the attributes of literary storytelling. In particular, just as is the case in a novel, the events and actions they relate have in the end to form a *pattern*, in terms of which one can say what the story is *about*, what, morally speaking, the narrative *reveals*.

In a novel, of course, the "facts" of the fictional situation, as both the characters and the reader slowly discover them, do come together to form just such a pattern. But in a novel, there is no possibility of *further* facts emerging to disturb that pattern, revealing that author, characters, and reader were alike mistaken about what pattern the story made,

because they happened not to know, or not to have been told, all the relevant facts. There is no possibility of any such thing happening, because the “facts” which compose the invented fictional “world” of the novel *fall within the power of the author to determine.* It is she or he who decides what the “facts” of the novel are.

Unhappily, the stories that journalists and commentators tell us, and that we tell ourselves, about *our* reality, enjoy no such immunity. Journalists and commentators, like novelists, tell stories that sell, are read, because they give shape and moral significance to events that might otherwise seem not only disturbing or threatening but unintelligible. But *unlike the novelist’s stories, their stories concern, not the obedient realities of an invented world, but reality itself, whose content they have no power to control or constrain.* The object of a journalistic “story” or “narrative” is to impose a certain structure on reality; to make it illustrate certain politically or sectionally convenient moral pieties. But at any point reality may refuse to co-operate, may belch out sometimes a string of new facts, sometimes only a string of hitherto unknown or disregarded ones, by whose light the alleged structure stands revealed as factitious and the associated pieties as hypocritical special pleading.

One has two choices in this situation. One can acknowledge the awkwardness of the facts and change or abandon the story. Or one can choose to preserve the credit of the story and suppress, as far as one can, the facts that call it into question. One advantage of the latter method is that it secures one against Danny Cohen’s critique by allowing one to keep clear of actual falsehood, defamatory or otherwise. Everything one says in developing a given story may be verifiably true; it is just that one fails to mention other facts less hospitable to the account it offers.

Selection and suppression of fact on these grounds seems to have played a major part in the construction of news stories and comment on Israel since October 7, 2023. The horrifying facts of the initial outrage by Hamas were initially covered in some detail. However, most news media paid far more attention to the horrors than to the moral nature of the act. Little was made of the fact that, under international law, both the taking

of hostages and the mass butchery, rape, and torture of helpless civilians are war crimes. Nor do I recall much mention of the fact that Hamas chose its victims on that day not because they presented any military threat but because they were Jews. The intention of the Hamas leadership, which hoped, vainly as it turned out, to draw others including Iran into war with Israel, was to create a situation in which it would be able to repeat these acts throughout Israel either until the entire Jewish population was dead or its remnants had fled. Little was made, in other words, of the fact that what the world witnessed on October 7th was not only a pogrom, of exactly the same type as the pogroms repeatedly carried out by European antisemites down the centuries, but a pogrom with genocidal ambitions. Nor do I recall seeing it prominently mentioned in the media that in October an agreed ceasefire was in place between Hamas and Israel, which Hamas broke.

As attention to the events of October receded, interest shifted to the resulting war in Gaza. Large sections of the international media now began to present these developing events as a story of massive over-reaction by an essentially European state against an imprisoned (or “ghettoised”) non-European people, leading rapidly to a humanitarian crisis—to which the Israeli population has been widely represented as indifferent—engulfing the population of Gaza. It has now become common in the media to refer to the Hamas action of October 7th simply as an “attack,” and to those who carried it out not as “terrorists,” or even more accurately, as “murderers,” but simply as “attackers,” and to make no reference to the genocidal ambitions of the Hamas pogrom. This is no doubt partly because the terms “genocide” and “ethnic cleansing” are now widely used to characterise Israel’s putative intentions in Gaza. All that is now mentioned concerning the events of October 7th is the number of Israeli dead, usually given as around 1200. The main ground for the not infrequent charge that Israel is conducting “war crimes” or even “genocide” in Gaza is the one offered by John Simpson in reply to Danny Cohen: the alleged “disproportion” between the rising number of civilians killed in Gaza, according to the estimates of various agencies

controlled by Hamas, and the 1200 Israelis killed on October 7th. Such accounts carry conviction because little attention is given to the distinction, vital in the international law of armed combat, between the deliberate butchering of non-combatants and the unintended deaths of civilians inseparable from modern warfare; or to voices warning that Hamas' statistics may be less reliable than many Western journalists seem to imagine (the *carte blanche* given to Hamas in this respect contrasts oddly with the widespread suspicion visited by the Western media on Russian statistics regarding its war with Ukraine). In particular, I have rarely seen it mentioned that Hamas' statistics, whatever their accuracy, make no distinction between combatant and non-combatant death and injury. Nor is the public reminded that in all modern wars non-combatant deaths exceed combatant deaths by a multiple of 2 to 3. Nor is much attention given, in the main popular news outlets, to the on-going detail either of Israel's efforts to keep civilian casualties to a minimum, or of its efforts to assure safety plus basic food and medical supplies to the mass of the civilian population in Gaza, though details of these efforts are freely available from many reliable sources.

There are other, more general aspects of the situation that are seldom mentioned, let alone fully explored, in media reports on Gaza, though they are certainly relevant to the overriding issue of whether or not Israel is currently fighting a just war. In 1948, at the time of the War of Independence that created Israel, the Gaza strip was controlled by Egypt, which is why it became a refuge for Palestinians displaced by the war. Egypt, however, neither offered these refugees Egyptian citizenship nor self-government in Gaza, though it could easily have done the latter, as Jordan could have done prior to 1967, in the West Bank. Nor did Egypt annex the Strip: it ran it as an occupied territory under military control, with access to Egypt by its inhabitants severely controlled by the Egyptian authorities, as is still the case. In the war of 1967, Israel obtained control of Gaza, and for a time ran it in the same way. But in 2005, in the hope of achieving a permanent peace with the Palestinians following the

1995 Oslo Accords, Israel, at considerable cost, withdrew all its settlements, ended its military presence in the Strip and placed it under the control of the Palestinian Authority created by the Oslo Accords, and run then, and to this day, by Yasser Arafat's party, Fatah. However, in 2006 a brief but bloody war between the secular Fatah and the Islamist Hamas left the latter in control of Gaza. Hostility between Fatah and Hamas has continued to this day. Both secure their control over the Palestinian inhabitants of, respectively, the West Bank and the Gaza strip by violence, including the arbitrary liquidation of opponents, particularly people who favour co-operation of any kind with Israel in the interests of peace; leaving the question of who, if anyone, would control a Palestinian state, if one were ever to be established, very much open.

There is, of course, a strand of Palestinian opinion that rejects both Fatah and Hamas, as does much Israeli Palestinian opinion, and regards the long dominance of both as a disaster for the Palestinian people. Those who wish to begin acquainting themselves with such voices will find it useful to Google the names of the eminent journalist and film maker Khaled Abu Toameh, and the scholar Bassam Tawil. Both stand in the long tradition of Arab and Muslim support for a Jewish state. I have rarely seen either mentioned in the many media reports on Gaza that have come my way.

One thing that *has* been mentioned from time to time in media reports on the conflict is the ability of Hamas to spend vast amounts of money not on the welfare of the Palestinian population it controls but on the construction of a vast network of underground military infrastructure sited in heavily populated areas, including under schools and hospitals. As the anti-Israel tone of much Western media reportage has sharpened over recent months, however, journalists and commentators have increasingly taken to mentioning it only briefly, almost as a dubious possibility, for which only Israeli assurances exist.

In fact, the evidence for the existence of the vast Hamas network of tunnels, rocket factories, and other military installations under the

streets of Gaza is overwhelming and quite independent of Israeli sources. In effect this amounts to using an entire subject population as human shields, a practice forbidden under Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions. It constitutes a war crime under international law.

The indifference of the Hamas leadership in Gaza to such considerations was recently revealed in the e-mails by the Gaza Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar, obtained by the *Washington Post* and mentioned earlier, in which Sinwar welcomed Palestinian civilian deaths in Gaza as “necessary sacrifices,” which could only help to advance the Hamas war effort by further weakening Israel’s support abroad. In short, we have the allegedly genocidal forces of Israel doing their best—as they surely must, if we accept Sinwar’s argument, for self-interested reasons if for no others—to reduce the number of civilian deaths and casualties in Gaza, while the other side, for reasons self-admitted to be entirely self-interested, welcomes their increase. Small wonder, it seems to me that since the original *Washington Post* report, we have heard little of these e-mails in the broader media. It evidently makes it difficult to accuse one side in a conflict of ignoring civilian casualties if the other side not only acts in ways that suggest that it not only doesn’t give a damn how many of its own civilians it loses but actually regards these losses as advantageous to its own war effort.

I shall touch on one final fact seldom or never mentioned in the Western media, before concluding a list which could easily be much longer. The string of kibbutzim along the border with Gaza that sustained most of the Hamas atrocities on Oct 7th were for the most part inhabited by stalwarts of the Israeli left, people strongly sympathetic to the Palestinian cause and strongly opposed to the Netanyahu government. and For years they were active in a variety of causes and practices aimed at bringing the two people together. Such people are just the kind that Israel and the world need if the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is ever to be brought to a peaceful conclusion. The events of October 7 demonstrate how little the present Palestinian leadership cares for the prospect of any peace not achieved by way of the genocide or mass expulsion of the Jews. It is

not the first such demonstration. Indeed, their frequency over the years might begin to explain to the uninitiated why Jewish opinion in Israel seems so far to the right of opinion in the Diaspora.

VI. ANTISEMITISM AND MEDIA ECONOMY OF FACT

I suggested at the outset that Danny Cohen was right to see the media as complicit in the current rise of antisemitism across the West. But I questioned whether defamatory falsehood was the only or even the main problem. It should now be clear what I was driving at. The problem is not that the media *tell lies* about Israel, Gaza, or the Jews, They do, of course, but not all that often. The problem lies not with false reporting but with *what is left unmentioned in order to save a good story*, or at any rate a politically popular and profitable one. Certain sections of Western opinion, on the liberal centre and moderate left, as well as on the extreme left and parts of the extreme right, are now committed to a view of Israel and “the Jews” having almost no contact with reality: that it is a colonial, racist, Apartheid, Nazi state which should never have been allowed to come into existence and deserves to be removed from the world stage as soon as possible. Along with this goes a romantic indifference, on entirely misplaced grounds of “anti-racism,” to the genuinely racist and genocidal ambitions of groups like Hamas.

We have seen all this before, of course. It might seem unkind to compare the young people demonstrating their hearts out at campus “pro-Palestinian” encampments across the Western world to the Hitler Youth. Unfortunately, the parallels are evident. The ideas concerning Jewish conspiracy and world dominance, the belligerence, the fanaticism, are all there. The very slogans shouted or displayed by these groups (“No Jews on Campus,” “Go Back to Poland” and so on), show by their concentration, not on Israel, or on supporters of Israel, but on the wider Jewish community (“the Jews”) that the feelings they express have little to do with progressive politics, but everything to do with the delusions and the satanic bargains that have always underlain antisemitism in the West

Progressive politics is, or ought to be, about achieving a rational assessment of how things stand in the world, and then changing them to make things better. If these young people, or the quasi-totemic elders their ideas lean on, really thought that Israel is a Nazi, colonial, Apartheid state, then they would surely have a moral duty, not to go about shouting “Jews off Campus,” but to attempt to bring round to their way of thinking the vast multitudes of non-Jews who support Israel and regard the ideas of the radical left as clever rubbish. But these young enthusiasts have not bought into politics, perhaps because they find it too difficult and too unfulfilling in the short run. What they have bought into is the old fantasy that all evil is bound up in the Jews and that once the Jews can be got rid of, things in our richly deluded, endlessly war-ridden, mutually destructive non-Jewish world will be just perfect.

Conspiracy theories of this sort are not only dangerous to society at large; they are dangerous to those who hold them. At the moment, therefore, it is disturbing that reportage and comment on Gaza in the so-called “liberal” media tends to leave out, for the sake of the story, so much in the way of relevant (and awkward) fact as to create an environment in which those who wish to believe in fantasies redolent of Julius Streicher’s pre-War Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer* can easily come to believe that reality is on their side.

VII. POSTSCRIPT

Since Danny Cohen’s intervention, others have continued to voice concerns regarding the accuracy and fairness of the BBC’s reporting from Gaza. Since October 2023, a group of British lawyers and data scientists led by Trevor Asserson, the founder and senior partner of Asserson Law Services, in association with the Campaign for Media Standards, has applied AI to the detailed examination of BBC reports from Gaza over the same period across television, radio, online news, podcasts and social media. In early September 2024 it presented its conclusions in the widely publicised Asserson Report. A summary of its conclusions can

be found at <https://asserson.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/asserson-summary.pdf>. In its coverage of Gaza, the Report found, the BBC has breached its own editorial guidelines on impartiality no fewer than 1500 times. It found that in BBC coverage, Israel was associated with genocide 14 times more than Hamas, and that the criminal and genocidal nature of Hamas' acts was systematically downplayed in favour of the representation of Israel as a belligerent and warlike nation. In particular, its analysis of the BBC Sounds podcasts on the war presented by Jeremy Bowen and Lyse Doucet rated 84% of the content as pro-Palestinian and/or anti-Israel.

Danny Cohen has since called for an independent inquiry into BBC coverage of the Israel-Hamas war, as have two leading Jewish groups, the campaign Against Antisemitism and the National Jewish Assembly. On the non-Jewish left, Lord Austin, a minister in previous Labour Party governments, has accused the BBC of "high-handed arrogance" for continually dismissing these and other criticisms concerning its impartiality. The debate continues.

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