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Words of war and quiet dejection

After Hamas' deadly attack and Israel's violent response, it is difficult to find the right words — because so much is wrong and right all at once

The world is on fire, and everything is wrong and right at the same time. Reading and watching the news, most of the phrases ring hollow, as if there were no words for what is right, no language to describe reality accurately.

The horrific massacre by Hamas of more than 1,400 people, the vast majority Jewish-Israeli civilians, was immeasurable even by the standards of war crimes. It was incomparable in its scale, cruelty and ruthlessness and the terror it spread — the panic into which it plunged an entire society, in fear with an omnipresent sense of threat. No state could refrain from a massive military response after such an event.

It is utterly wrong to 'contextualise' (not to mention justify) such a monstrous act by reducing it to the injustice, suffering, oppression and stigmatisation of Palestinians in 75 years of conflict. Yet, it is equally wrong *not* to adduce the history of occupation, injustice and resistance – the spiral of violence amid the transition from antagonism to hatred, the trampled seedlings of hope – nor the recent provocations by the radical-right government of Benjamin Netanyahu, including in the West Bank.

How to keep your moral compass?

One feels constantly tempted to shout 'yes' and 'no' at the same time. But the atrocities of Hamas do not make the criticism of occupation, socio-economic strangulation and settler radicalism wrong, just as the latter does not make Hamas' actions any less repugnant. Anyone who begins to make mutual offsets here has already lost their moral compass.

Nor does mass murder make Netanyahu – evil spirit of Israeli domestic politics for 20 years and a destructive national force – an angelic lamb, as he likes to portray himself by manipulating opinion. His delegitimisation of any criticism as 'anti-Semitic' is a cheap language-policing tool. It

devalues the very real hatred, the sense of danger, Jewish people face in many parts of the world.

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Even more abstruse, though, is deploying the rhetoric of 'anti-imperialism' to turn the blood orgies of Hamas into comprehensible acts of resistance. This shows once again, by the way, how problematic the jargon of 'post-colonial' theory is counterposed to the classical social-scientific canon, when it can be appropriated by all and sundry – from the Russian President Vladimir Putin to Islamist assassins – who would represent themselves as freedom fighters against 'the West'.

The reproach of the Global North by voices from the Arab and Muslim world – that Palestinian victims of Israeli policy or Arab victims of Western policy in general, from Iraq to Afghanistan, barely make it as news, unlike 'our' victims of Islamist violence – is an accusation of double standards which sticks. The aftermath of an horrific mass murder of Israeli human beings is, however, probably the most inappropriate moment to make it.

No moral free-for-all

With so much said so forcefully and with such certitude, the little bit of right is far too often crushed by the wrong, the malicious and even the stupid. Objective truths get in each other's way: the names and faces given to the victims of Hamas mean they do not become mere anonymous statistics, yet, the victims of Western military actions deserve the same dignity.

As has been emphasised for decades by the embattled Israeli peace movement, occupation and colonial violence brutalise the occupiers as well as the occupied. Yet, this does not imply a moral free-for-all in which those brutalised by circumstances are always absolved, as if exempt from any judgement or agency.

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To portray the Islamist fanaticism of Hamas – its radical-conservative 'purity' laws, its Manichean world of friend and foe – and its consequent war crimes as somehow comparable to the national-liberation movements of past times is, apart from everything else, an insult to the vast majority of those movements. Nothing

remotely similar was ever done by any anti-colonial movement, typically secular and left-oriented, with legitimate liberation goals. The confrontational rhetoric inciting war – that Israel deserves unconditional support, without any ifs, buts or maybes – is indeed wrong, but so is denying Israel any such support.

In reacting to a war crime, Israel is not absolved of the obligation not to commit war crimes against the civilian population itself and indeed must comply with international humanitarian law. At the same time, as Hamas realised with this provocation, a military operation against a militia entrenched in densely populated territory is very likely to bring further war crimes in its train — thereby shoring up support for an organisation that has not faced the electorate in Gaza since 2006.

Originally stemming from a 'welfare' grassroots Islamism, Hamas has mutated over the decades into a fundamentalist sect whose fighters, no longer restrained by any humanitarian impulse, do not shy away from bestial execution of the defenceless. Israel's democracy, in turn, has become dysfunctional due to polarisation and strife, undermined (though not alone) by the egocentric Netanyahu.

Hamas, too, thrives on radicalisation, which is why Netanyahu has been its best recruiting sergeant.

For years, he has pursued no other goal than to stay in power. He faces corruption charges, which he denies, and a jail term were he to be convicted. The opposition, united by nothing else, can only ever conjure ephemeral majorities against him.

To retain power, at the end of last year, Netanyahu formed a coalition with open fascists. He radicalised settlement activity in the West Bank because it is the obsession of his partners. The radical settlers, in turn, needed the protection of the military. Which is why, again in turn, the army was absent from the Gaza border — a dismantling of Israel's security architecture which made the Hamas massacre possible.

Hamas, too, thrives on radicalisation, which is why Netanyahu has been its best recruiting sergeant. Yet, he unashamedly made Hamas great because he prefers a diabolical enemy to an autonomous authority which might be willing to make the accommodations he is determined to prevent. This disastrous symbiosis has led to the shambles Netanyahu has now engendered, while Hamas is doing all it can to draw as many regional actors as possible into a war — a death cult of *jihad* and martyrdom committed to a world in flames.

Faded hopes

War and terror, a standard of history, often strengthen precisely those most at ease with antagonism, while conveniently marginalising those salving political forces most at a premium. This is an easily comprehensible, often proven logic, although – and this is the only chink of light – it has occasionally turned out to be wrong (take the relatively benign trajectory of North Macedonia, due to key moderating figures, from the Ohrid Agreement there following the conflict with the ethnic-Albanian minority).

Only a political solution for Israel-Palestine, promoted by humanitarians and peace-lovers internationally, and supported by practical good sense and rationality from believers in *Realpolitik*, can offer a way out. But this is a stale-sounding truism: we know how hopeless it is after decades of events that have taken us further away from such a solution than ever.

So, in this devalued discourse, even the right thing feels like a hollow phrase. Because hope sounds naïve, one takes refuge in the language of war or quiet dejection.

It is not often that I cry at the death of a statesman. The last time I did so was when I sat open-mouthed watching the news and footage of the assassination in 1995 of Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli prime minister who signed the Oslo Acccords with the leader of the (secular and left) Palestine Liberation Organization, Yasser Arafat.

That was nearly three decades ago. Slowly coming to the age of a witness of a vanished era, what distinguishes me from anyone younger is that they do not even have a memory of a hope that could be destroyed.

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