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America must face up to Israel's extremism

The resettlement of Palestinians from Gaza is slowly becoming a key official policy of the Israeli government

Two far-right members of Israel's Cabinet – the national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, and the finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich – caused an international uproar this week with their calls to depopulate the Gaza Strip. 'If in Gaza there will be 100 000 or 200 000 Arabs and not two million, the entire conversation on "the day after" will look different', said Smotrich, who called for most civilians in Gaza to be resettled in other countries. The war, said Ben-Gvir, presents an 'opportunity to concentrate on encouraging the migration of the residents of Gaza', facilitating Israeli settlement in the region.

The Biden administration has joined countries all over the world in condemning these naked endorsements of ethnic cleansing. But in doing so, it acted as if Ben-Gvir and Smotrich's provocations are fundamentally at odds with the worldview of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, to whom America continues to give unconditional backing. In a statement denouncing the ministers' words as 'inflammatory and irresponsible', the State Department said, 'we have been told repeatedly and consistently by the government of Israel, including by the prime minister, that such statements do not reflect the policy of the Israeli government.' Rep. Jim McGovern, a Democrat who has called for a cease-fire, thanked the State Department in a social media post, saying, 'it must be clear that America will not write a blank check for mass displacement.'

But it's not clear, because we're writing a blank check to a government whose leader is only a bit more coy than Ben-Gvir and Smotrich about his intentions for Gaza. According to *The Times of Israel*, Netanyahu told a Likud faction he is searching for countries that residents of the Gaza Strip can be sent to. 'Our problem', he reportedly said, is finding 'countries that are willing to absorb Gazans, and we are working on it.' The newspaper reported that 'the "voluntary" resettlement of Palestinians from Gaza is slowly becoming a key official policy of the government, with a senior official saying that Israel has held talks with

several countries for their potential absorption.'

Saying the quiet part out loud

Some in Israel's government have denied this, mostly on grounds of impracticality. 'It's a baseless illusion, in my opinion: no country will absorb two million people, or one million, or 100 000, or 5 000', one official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, told Israeli journalists. And Thursday, Israel's defence minister, Yoav Gallant, released a plan for the day after the war that said that, contrary to the dreams of the ultranationalists, there would be no Israeli settlement in Gaza.

But with its widespread destruction of Gaza's civilian infrastructure, including roughly 70 per cent of its housing, Israel is making most of Gaza uninhabitable for the foreseeable future. Disease is rampant in Gaza, hunger almost universal, and the United Nations reports that much of the enclave is at risk of famine. Amid all this horror, members of Netanyahu's Likud party – such as Danny Danon, Israel's former ambassador to the United Nations, and Gila Gamliel, Israel's intelligence minister – are pushing emigration as a humanitarian solution.

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'Instead of funnelling money to rebuild Gaza or to the failed UNRWA', the United Nations agency that works with Palestinian refugees, 'the international community can assist in the costs of resettlement, helping the people of Gaza build new lives in their new host countries', wrote Gamliel in *The Jerusalem Post*. Right now, this is a grotesque fantasy. But as Gaza's suffering ratchets up, some sort of evacuation might come to appear to be a necessary last resort. At least that's what some prominent Israeli officials seem to be counting on.

After Hamas' sadistic attack on Israel on 7 October, Israel was justified in retaliating; any country would have. But there is a difference between the war Israel's liberal supporters want to pretend that the country is fighting in Gaza and the war Israel is actually waging.

Pro-Israel Democrats want to back a war to remove Hamas from Gaza. But increasingly, it looks as if America is underwriting a war to remove *Gazans* from Gaza. Experts in international law can debate whether the forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza can be classified as genocidal, as South Africa is claiming at the International Court of Justice, or as some lesser type of war crime. But whatever you

want to call attempts to 'thin out' Gaza's population – as Hebrew newspaper *Israel Hayom* described an alleged Netanyahu proposal – the United States is implicated in them.

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By acting as if Ben-Gvir and Smotrich can be hived off from the government in which they serve, US policymakers are fostering denial about the character of Netanyahu's rule. Joe Biden often speaks of his 1973 meeting with Golda Meir, then the prime minister, and like many American Zionists, his view of Israel sometimes seems stuck in that era.

If you grew up in a liberal Zionist household, as I did, you've probably heard this (possibly apocryphal) Meir quote: 'when peace comes, we will perhaps in time be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill their sons.' There's much to criticise in this sentiment — its self-regard, the way it positions Israel as the victim even when it's doing the killing; still, it at least suggests a tortured ambivalence about meting out violence. But this attitude, which Israelis sometimes call 'shooting and crying', is now as obsolete as Meir's Zionist socialism, at least among Israel's leaders.

Among both American and European politicians, said my friend Daniel Levy, a former Israeli negotiator with the Palestinians who now heads the US/Middle East Project, there's a 'willful refusal to take seriously just how extreme this government is — whether before 7 October or subsequently.' I'm tempted to say that Ben-Gvir and Smotrich said the quiet part out loud, but in truth, they just said the loud part louder.

This article originally appeared in The New York Times.



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