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Responses to the Israel-Hamas-Palestinian-Iranian-Hezbollah War

A Psychohistorical Analysis of Overinvestment in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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Abstract: The article utilizes a psychoanalytically informed historical approach to analyze disproportionate investment in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Explanations are found in the multiple and exceptional liminalities of this longstanding regional strife and the challenges it poses to the architecture of post-war global morality.

Keywords: fundamentalism, genocide, Israel-Palestine conflict, liminality, nationalism, orientalism, overidentification

Israelophobia, islamophobia, antisemitism, and orientalism: These ideologies of hate or fear have limited analytic value and tend to become redundant. Phobia, like unhappiness, as Freud averred, is entirely ordinary; it is phobic tendencies that go beyond “the necessary” that spill over onto pathology and ideology. The ritual trotting out of those above terms corroborates that psychic and libidinal investment in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reaches a realm of overidentification far beyond that of other similar vectors of strife.

A psychoanalytically informed approach must go beyond ideology and uncover deeper motivating processes. This Mideast conflict is a test case and point of comparison for bystander and spectator overidentification and underidentification. Overidentification here, at times, reaches a point of histrionic monomania. For instance, declarations that “everything” is connected through Palestine or that Palestine is *the* defining issue of a generation. In contrast, other ongoing conflicts like that in Darfur are regularly sub-

ject to dissociation. Why do some global conflicts mobilize and energize psychic and emotional investment while others produce little emotion, except for those involved? The basis of most conflicts—resource competition—remains the same, yet bystander investment levels and emotional arousal vary widely and wildly.

Minority oppression, land annexation, internecine conflict, and indigenous resistance may be found as norms on almost every continent. Associated levels of violence are, if anything, worse outside Israel and Palestine. The total loss of life in almost a century of fighting there has not exceeded 200,000. Yet there have been at least 5,000 recorded global public actions since the disastrous latest round of fighting (the 9th since 1923, if counted conservatively) in October 2023. The less conservative number for rounds of fighting between Israelis and Palestinians is actually 16 distinct “wars” (Rothstein, 2023).

If anything, one could claim that the conflict between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea is one of comparatively lower stakes globally for the following reasons: The populations and land tracts are relatively small, globally critical natural resources are not in play, there is no immediate risk of nuclear war, and both sides fall squarely into the global classification range of middle-income economies in terms of gross domestic product and per capita income. While future historians may categorize the current round as a case of genocide, it would still fall far below the consistent 25% baseline threshold for population loss common to all other canonically consensus cases for which the average is closer to a 50% loss. For instance, casualty rates in the Cambodian Genocide amount to 25% (of domestic Cambodians), while in the Rwandan Genocide, they reach as high as 77% (of Rwandan Tutsis) (Verpoorten, 2005). Furthermore, Israel has no stated intention of destroying the Palestinian population as a whole, given that approximately two million live as Israeli citizens with representatives in the Knesset and throughout the Israeli body politic. The Israeli military pursuit of Hamas is complicated by this terrorist organization’s strategy of maximizing civilian deaths to add to the list of its martyrs while minimizing the killing of its own forces.

Focusing on this conflict doesn’t shorten any path to resolution of the most urgent challenges facing humanity today. The response to this conflict seems to be a screen projection and possibly a stage-managed deflection from other major issues. A recent national poll amongst college students even had it placed 9th out of

nine (Habeshian, 2024). Psychologically, this displaced overidentification may be satisfying precisely because it has the psychic status of a luxury or an indulgence.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is, however, exceptional in its liminality. It forms a global transitional space, arousing a greater degree of uncertainty and anxiety over boundaries that inspires reactionary desires for boundedness and fixation. The territory straddles fault lines between three continents, three major world religions, and even three civilizational alliance systems. Within themselves, the Israeli state is also notoriously liminal, as it made a sudden ideological shift from a secular socialist in the first half of its existence to one voraciously capitalist and more aggressively theocratic. Population-wise, the Jewish state is split almost evenly between People of Color from North Africa, the Middle East, and the European descended. Palestinians arguably remain the least clearly defined among Arab national-state groupings.

The Palestinian nationalist discourse was suppressed and unrecognized for so long that its current strident outward declaration takes on the added psychic reward of breaking a former taboo. They are also internally split amongst the world's first and oldest Christians (containing the cities Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nazareth) and a nationalist movement that in recent decades veered rather suddenly from the secular Marxist to the Islamic fundamentalist. Jews always formed a haunting, internal other for so many nations on their wanderings. Now, they constitute a lost internal dimension of the national self throughout the European and Arab world. The Palestinians are currently the internal haunting shadow of the Jewish state: The fate of the Palestinian people is inextricably tied up with the Jewish tortured path to state normalization, a prospect now seemingly perpetually deferred, much like the Palestinian path to having any fully autonomous state at all.

This pair of spectral presences activates wish fulfillment along the political spectrum that suppresses the dialectical character of the conflict. Behind the overidentifying overinvestment in the conflict is a desire to repress dialectical thinking. For instance, American Christian Fundamentalists are heavily energized by a country whose largest city, Tel Aviv, has repeatedly been voted "the best gay city" and "the most gay-friendly city," while centrist liberals too often conveniently sidestep the authoritarian character of the Israeli government and the increasing power of Jewish theocratic and fundamentalist elements. At the same time, activists in Europe

and the U.S. exercise civil liberties to voice support for a Gazan society whose political rulers explicitly suppress all civil rights.

The incongruity of queer support for an Islamofascist homophobic regime has long been noted. Many revel in this facile contradiction but fall short of noticing the depth of psychological processes at work. The prevalence of using the *kaffiyeh* (traditional male headdress) as a face mask appears satisfying psychologically and is a kind of civic performance in the public sphere. The embrace of politicized masking provides an escape route, wittingly or not, from all-pervasive discourses of identity and public gender affirmation. Compounded by mass civic surveillance and self-surveillance via social media, many in the younger generation may have a barely repressed and understandable wish for non-identity altogether. This taking up of masking is a satisfying psychological retort to a present moment in which "being seen" is the requisite of humanistic and civic validation. One may also note the romanticizing orientalism of the wandering desert Bedouin, or *kaffiyeh* swagger, a stark contrast to the more specifically cerebral Judaic head covering, the *yarmulke*, of the wandering people of the book.

The resentful and impulse-laden claim often heard is that those most impassioned by this conflict hate the West or somehow exhibit self-hating tendencies. This conflict satisfies an urge toward psychic splitting into dichotomies of the villainous and the righteous, a stable demarcation that eases the path into a certain infantile regression of thought. By contrast, conflicts on the African continent, where there have been at least three significant genocides in the last century, do not allow for such facile disaggregation. In the case of Darfur, there is a current ongoing repeat genocide, which is arousing far less attention than the first case there around 20 years ago. If anything, in the case of Africa, this reinforces a sense of psychological helplessness in the onlooker and a familiar gaze onto Africa as the "dark continent." Conflicts there are reduced to tribal warfare or, worse, an evolutionary process of population control. The ongoing presence of such conflicts that are marginal to everyday consciousness may even have an element of comfort, an assuaging of ego security safely ensconced inside the psychic fortress of the West.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict enables moralizing narration because it activates strong centers of ego-identification. In particular, this conflict triggers latent yet deep religious and cultural messaging within the Abrahamic world. On a psychological level, any-

thing Holy Land-related evokes the apocalyptic, salvific, and eschatological so inextricable from the monotheistic imagination, such as the desire for an end of history and all things. In a more contemporary and secular sense, Israel is the most direct political heir to the transvaluation of global ideals and standards since the Holocaust, which, as many have observed, bears the attributes of a negative, secular revelation. Since that rupture in civilization, the moral lodestar of the post-war world has increasingly remained a negative heroization of the victim and their suffering. Paradoxically, the experience of dehumanization elevated one's position within the hierarchy of humanity and conferred great moral authority.

Today, Israel enjoys an entirely singular, liminal position, benefitting from the consecration of victimhood while also vehemently exhibiting all those vitalistic qualities long gone in the West: militarism, nationalism, pro-natalism, and religious enthusiasm. Israel maintains an overly strong, even ultra-nationalistic, sense of bonding with high rates of "measured happiness" and one of the highest birth rates among economically developed countries. The hyperbolic cathexis of this conflict is less about the toppling of Western civilization than a displaced mourning for a pre-Holocaust world. Israel is the archetypical "bad parent" in the current moral order, the fountainhead of a world system values covenant whose tacit injunctions it recurrently contradicts with spirited aplomb.

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