

## **Palestine and condemnation – longer form notes**

These are actually notes: they are dense, overlong, have not been edited for flow or readability, and deal in pedantic detail with the minutiae of the left's debate over condemnation in the wake of the 7/10 attacks within Israel. I might adapt them into an essay at some point if there's interest, but they're currently just an attempt to record the main expressions of different positions that have been set out, and my first-draft critical thoughts in response. They might be of interest to just a handful of other people.

The first section, much the longer, begins with a 4,700-word series of bullet pointed paragraphs which claim, through the lens of three writers and one editorial statement, that what is mostly at work in pointed refusals to condemn violence against civilians in Israel on 7/10 is a novel, esoteric, and wholly unsustainable theory of political speech; not a specific politics of the conflict or its main actors. The bullet points are followed by long-ish excerpts copied from the texts I'm criticising, so readers can see them in context.

The second section takes the same form, but is much shorter – just 650 words of initial bullet points. It deals with a much better class of arguments, to the effect that the refusal of condemnation when one is asked is or can be a legitimate or necessary strategy to reject the racism that implicitly structures the question. In the bullet-point text, I conclude that it is possible to accept the value of these arguments, arising from the rejection of racism, and reject the implicit theory anatomised in the first section. The result would be a discursive strategy that deployed rejection of the condemnation paradigm, as well as other strategies, situationally.

Notes by [Tom Dale](#). Comments welcome.

### **1. A theory of political speech**

- The main point of this section is to show that the refusal to condemn any part of the 7/10 attacks, or even to expressly acknowledge that they included *inter alia* wanton violence against civilians was largely not attributable to a substantial political attitude toward the Israel-Palestine conflict, Hamas, armed violence, human rights, or decolonisation, but to a theory of political speech. It was in other words, a function of a belief about *discourse*, not about material reality or moral truth. The most important thing to recognise about that, in turn, is that this theory seems more or less a) latent, which is to say it lacks any sort of proper theoretical expression, in which it is stated in total and general terms, and its application to various cases considered, and is b) entirely novel. There is therefore the impression (at least for the sceptic) that it half-baked, unclear, and has been invented more or less for the purpose of allowing these writers to say things that they feel better saying.
- These writers are keen on error theories. They each seem unable to believe that those who want to acknowledge and condemn violence against civilians do so from the basis of their own substantive idea of what politics, and its language is, as well as substantive moral and political understandings of the formations mentioned above. Thus Winant sees these impulses as “an off-ramp for people hoping not to have to confront the actual political situation” or “last refuge of liberal zionists who are still looking for a way to have two sides in a one sided conflict”. Tankus thinks the same people are engaged in “opportunism”: “the only purpose it serves is “protecting” me among the liberal intelligentsia. It only serves to grease the wheels of my career.” (He also accuses Levitz of wanting to distract attention from

the occupation.) The New Socialist editors project a similar failure onto their imagined interlocutors: it's not about "how we 'feel' as spectators. We are not the story here. Our personal brands and public images do not matter." None of these accusations seem based on anything anyone has said, rather they arrive as pure figments of the writers' imaginations – projections, perhaps.

### **An argument from cause and effect: a functional theory of political language**

- The theory is justified as a tactical or strategic matter, which is to say by virtue of the consequences certain forms of speech acts are supposed to produce. Winant tends to stress that the sort of speech he advocates is the only "meaningful" or "ethical" thing to say. More expansively, he refers to it as "the only thing we can do that has any consequence". Tankus: "Spending time on denouncing Hamas only serves to facilitate averting eyes from the Occupation." The NS editors however introduce an element of confusion here. While adopting a version of this argument (they are concerned with what is "useful"), they simultaneously disavow the importance of "public opinion" or "compelling narratives". Do they have some other idea of the mediating categories through which words have political effect? Is some other group that the public supposed to be the target? How do words have political consequences without being compelling? They don't say, and the general effect is strident but confused.
- Given that they implicitly rely on an idea of the consequential character of different kinds of political speech, it is striking that none of these writers have even a shred of evidence that the main consequences are what they say they are, nor do they recognise or have any means to deal with the counter-arguments from Leifer and Levitz, that the effect of their choices is actually the reverse of what they think it is. To me, Leifer and Levitz's counter-arguments seem effective. The general effect of declining to denounce something that is clearly horrendous seems not to move the focus to other, more horrendous things perpetrated by another party, but to initiate a protracted debate over the left's discourse and moral standards, which mainly works to distract from the thing that it is the alleged objective to highlight.
- Winant's causal claim in particular is bound up with the idea that Israel "is a machine for the conversion of grief into power." But that this misses the mark: Israel is better thought of as a machine for turning fear into power. Grief looks backward and fear forward. The main argument for the war in Gaza is not that it will resurrect the dead, or wipe out grief. It is that it is a means to stop something similar happening again. This argument has huge flaws, but it is sincere. (It is not the only thing going on: there is also revenge.) So when Winant sets out to starve the machine of grief he shows many other Jews that he does not acknowledge their pain, which makes them feel more isolated, and fearful, and hence feeds real fuel to the machine he wants to stop.

### **Struggling with the clash between the novel theory of political language and the impulse of humanist universalism**

- Most of the writers in this section struggle to reconcile the main line of their argument with a clashing impulse, which is to acknowledge morally that wanton violence against civilians is wrong. Two of them deal this by moving to a language of abstraction. Tankus: "I don't want anyone to die". Raine responded with similar abstractions to an invitation to express sympathy with the Israelis who were killed at the Re'im rave, and another to recognise that it was morally wrong: "I don't think that anyone dying is ever a good thing, I think that anyone dying is a tragedy." On the one hand, both want to reject the moral terms of universal

humanism as an adequate foundation for political language, on the other they can't quite avoid wanting absolution on those same terms, so nonetheless need to find some way to affirm the principle. But they seek it in a manner that is sufficiently obscure and abstract that it will not have the effect that they implicitly want from it. If Keir Starmer responded to an invitation to condemn the massacre by air of more than eight thousand Palestinian children by saying "I don't think that anyone dying is ever a good thing", and declining to elaborate further, we would all know exactly what to make it: evasion through abstraction, and a refusal to recognise the worth of the lives of the particular ethnic group in question. Tankus and Raine involve themselves in a similar evasion, which is hard for people who already agree with them to recognise. But because political language, especially amidst the ideological ferment of an ethnic conflict cannot assume trust, but must create it, the effect is precisely analogous. Tankus and Raine's refuge in abstractions shows that they can't help themselves from responding to humanism's gravitational pull. Because it is part of who they are, and the whole spirit of the age which composed them; even as they reject giving full political effect to that fact.

- Winant has a slightly different, more interesting response, albeit one which fails on similar terms, which is to say, "Of course [murdering hundreds of young people at a festival is] bad but to say so is politically meaningless" – in which case, one wonders, why he conceded to say it all. If it was truly meaningless, there would have been no need, or there would be functionally no difference to saying the opposite – that killing civilians is "not bad", since both statements equally fall under the same criteria of lacking meaning. But he elsewhere, unprompted, describes those who celebrated the attacks as "callous", indicating that those celebrations had meaning (about who those people were and how they see the world), and indeed that his own rejection of those celebrations also has meaning. Or else why use the word at all? Like Tankus and Raine, Winant cannot escape the pull of universal humanism but does not want to accept its full implications polemically; so he needs forms of words that both acknowledge and disavow it at once.
- Winant has two different analogies that helps him do this, both to the politics of racial justice in the US. The first: "it's like demanding racial justice advocates denounce black on black crime. Is it morally acceptable? Obviously not." But racial justice advocates do not make any general, express defence of crime, still less crime by black people in particular. Palestinian solidarity activists, on the other hand, do make a general defence of resistance or even armed resistance, and in a context in which that armed resistance has spilled over into mass violence against civilians there is a need to clarify that defence that is not captured by the analogy. (Of note, Winant has himself not expressly said anything of the kind about "resistance": as discussed below, he has a radical theory of political imbrication which tells him that such statements would be meaningless to make as an American, whether positive or negative: in this respect he is consistent. But the main lines of his argument are taken up by others who do not accept the full implications of his theory, and do offer generic "support" to "resistance", without seeing the contradiction they involve themselves in; and indeed he is not always clear about what is involved in accepting his whole theory.) In this analogy, Palestinians and Israelis appear as two different "black" parties to black-on-black crime, a comparison which captures that both Palestinians and Jews are both liable to be subject to racialised violence, but captures nothing about the relationship *in situ* between them.
- In a later formulation, Winant offers that denunciation of Palestinian violence against Israeli civilians is "ethically mistaken in the same way that it's mistaken to say 'All lives matter.' It's not that all lives don't matter; it's just that we all know what it means to say that." Now,

Jewish Israelis are made analogous to white people in the US, while Palestinians are supposed analogous to African Americans. But this doesn't work because there's no case of Black-led massacres against white people in the US carried out due to anything that is related to their whiteness.<sup>1</sup> If there were such massacres, the political pressure to acknowledge that they were wrong would indeed be impossible to avoid (in the same way in which the Israeli left cannot but be clear and explicit about the moral content of Palestinian attacks on civilians, and indeed few of them want to try to do anything else). In short, both these analogies are a mess, and mainly work to confuse the important features of the case with two sharply dissimilar cases. At best, the analogy assumes away what Winant needs to disprove; the proposition that mass violence against civilians in Israel is politically relevant.

### On "military strategy"

- Some of these writers make specific claims about what one can and cannot say about what are termed strategic choices made by Palestinian armed groups. Winant: refers to "... a constraint on what I will say about the **strategic choices** of others in a different position, who are doing something I never would, whose position I'm nowhere near." Raine: "time spent condemning Palestinians for the **military strategies** they choose is frankly offensive" Tankus: "I... won't participate in contextless haranguing of **military strategy** launched from a **Ghetto**." These characterisations show mostly that these writers don't have an adequate engagement with the history and theory of war, ethnic conflict or mass atrocities, and that in particular they haven't thought enough about what happened on 7/10 in particular. (They are all scholars of matters related to the domestic politics and economics of the West.) First of all, as the slightest engagement with military theory reveals, what happens in war is not the dry product of mere plans. Per [Clausewitz](#), *rationality* combines with *chance* (circumstance) and *emotion* to produce outcomes. More than half of Israeli civilian casualties (just under half the civilian total), took place at the Re'im rave, which the operation's strategists *did not know would be present* – rather Palestinian militants happened upon it after they breached the fence. The sort of violence subsequently inflicted on civilians, there and elsewhere was, very probably, not planned a strategic level. Rather, it represented what happens when young men full of trauma and ethnic resentment, and lacking a chain of command and force culture resolutely committed to preventing atrocities, come to control civilians of an opposing ethnic group. If you doubt that these pathologies were in full force, watch the [video](#) of a young Palestinian man beheading a migrant worker with a mattock – it is blacked out at the end, so you're spared the full gore, but you can hear the assailant's screams. After you've done that, tell me that the acts concerning which condemnation is proposed are best characterised as a mere "military strategy". Consider also the agency of individual militants, displayed only in fleeting glimpses through the inadequate accounts we have so far. In some places, they kidnapped children, civilian women, and the very elderly. In other places, they declined to do so. In the [account](#) of a woman IDF soldier at Erez crossing, "a Hamas man tried to take her clothes off, another stopped him, and they left the room in which she was hiding." When we are asked to reckon morally with violence against civilians on 7/10, it is simply asked that we be able to distinguish, for example, the actions of the Hamas fighter who rescued the woman soldier from his comrade as right, and the decisions of those who proceeded to commit sexual violence, or kill civilians, as wrong. Neither of these choices were "strategic" in any meaningful sense; and to simplify them as such is to

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<sup>1</sup> I don't suppose that the Israeli and foreign civilians who were killed because they were Jewish as such, I do assume that it was because of something related to the Jewishness of most of them, i.e. their status as Israelis.

demonstrate a failure to understand the nature of armed conflict, and armed ethnic conflict in particular.

- The general idea that one cannot judge soldiers for this sort of violence because they bear trauma that you do not, or because they are fighting for some conception of their freedom, is deeply wrong, and destroys any possibility of a moral attitude toward war (as well as the foundations of the international law of war, the main normative structure that we have to moderate warfighting behaviour). It would mean, for instance, being willing to accept Ukrainian war crimes against captured Russians. In the documentary [Tantura](#), Israeli soldiers recount a massacre their brigade carried out in 1948, including rape and the use of a flamethrower on unarmed captives. Some of the fighters were not long out the camps in Europe. One soldier concludes (1:30:59): "Listen war is war. Not everyone can know what war is. And I say, whoever wasn't there can't judge anyone else. Really can't judge anyone else." This is more or less the attitude that Winant, Tankus and Raine advocate toward the Palestinian militants of 7/10. Of course, they do not make the same argument about Israeli forces in 1948, and nor should they. But making it in any case is a moral and political dead end that legitimises its use in any other.
- Also notable is the moralised conception of strategic judgment at work; as if strategy were not an objective matter of connecting means and ends. No doubt, we ought to listen long, and hard, and think carefully about a strategic case put forward by people subject to a certain regime of oppression. They probably understand things about the structure of that oppression; and their skin in the game makes it likely that they have put considerable thought into the problem. But there are inevitably debates between the oppressed national communities in oppression, and it is possible to assess these debates rationally from the outside. Furthermore, if we accept that Palestinian liberation fundamentally depends on action in the international arena, it follows that we ourselves are well qualified by virtue of our own location in the metropolitan countries to assess part of the strategic environment – perhaps better than Palestinians themselves.

### **On the political implications of one's position: Jewishness and national location**

- These writers tend to stress the specific role associated with their national location. Winant: "There's no meaningful sense in which what we say affects what form of resistance Palestinians pursue; the attempt to seize moral high ground in this way is purely about confusing what is otherwise a stark question. That's not because it's right to attack Israeli civilians. It's because wrong and right spoken by you and me here have no bearing on what happens." He later adds: "The only meaningful contribution Americans can make to stopping the violence is by confronting at every opportunity the vast public conspiracy of silence about the occupation." Tankus: Whether or not I, a Jewish writer living in NY, criticize Hamas is irrelevant. The only thing that truly matters coming from a U.S. citizen is whether you are truly against the occupation and want to see it ended- including through ending U.S. aid to Israel- or whether you don't." (Although in fact Tankus doesn't think that's enough; at least to judge by his polemic with Levitz. He also thinks it's important that you *don't* condemn anything that Hamas did.) Raine refers to his location in Britain as part of his defence of his position. The NS editors say that "nobody in Britain has any right to 'condemn' Palestinian resistance, whatever form it might take." There are several problems with this sort of approach, which goes beyond asking what tactical levers are available to people in different national contexts are, and planning accordingly. This approach demands that not only tactics be adopted with this consideration, but also that *our entire language of politics and account*

*of reality be distorted in order to deliberately exclude some empirical and moral truths, and to deliberately avoid asking or answering certain empirical and moral questions.* The main rationale for this, as indicated above, is that it is supposed to be strategically effective for the purpose of promoting Palestinian liberation, despite that there's no serious account of why this is supposed to be so, still less any evidence for that claim.

- One consequence of this approach, which the writers do not seem to recognise, is that this extreme discursive parochialism effectively destroys any possibility for an internationalist politics. If what it is possible to say is fundamentally restricted by national boundaries, how is a conversation supposed to take place that involves not only US socialists, but also leftists from Palestine *and* Israel? (It is notable that the language used by Palestinian and Jewish leftist citizens of Israel clashes directly with the theory of political language set out here.) Imagine further, formulating a conversation on the region, which would also involve contributions from Syria, Lebanon, Yemen. Consider trying to formulate a more general response to contemporary war, which might involve contributors from places further afield, such as Ukraine and Taiwan. If they are each committed to not saying certain things defined by particular, not universal, boundaries, that conversation will be impossible. And in turn internationalist politics will be impossible, except as a label claimed for all sorts of mutually irreconcilable positions within various national contexts. The only way to get round this is to have different rules for different sets of conversations, some public and some private; an approach possible only for a deeply alienated political subjectivity.
- A related problem is that it is simply impossible in the modern world. The position of migrants and those with dual citizenship illustrates the impossibility, only compounded by the internet. They are supposed to write different, and clashing, things in different languages; or post one thing before getting on a plane, and another contradictory thing when getting off at the other end.
- Three of the writers argue in part from what they take to be an imperative imposed by their Jewish identity and family history. Tankus: “**as a jewish grandchild of holocaust survivors** I am always on the side of the people imprisoned in Ghettos and not on the incredibly armed and modern army who serves as their jailers.” Raine says the prospect of condemning anything Palestinians do is “an insult to generations of my family members who were butchered by the same kind of brutality”. Winant, in *Dissent*: “It is a high threshold—and right now, perhaps implausible—to imagine that every shiva might become an occasion to curse the state that has made Jews, of all people, into genocidares. Nonetheless, it is the one that must be met by we Jews who wish to keep fidelity with the full meaning of ‘never again.’” I’m not Jewish, and I’m not going to say a lot about this. But I do note that when Marek Edelman, a leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and anti-Zionist, [wrote to Palestinian armed groups](#), he specifically urged respect for the “defenceless civilian population”, and criticised implicitly the then-nascent suicide bombing campaign for “mindlessly” wasting life. Whatever lesson Tankus and Raine draw from their forebears’ experience of the holocaust, Edelman shows that it is possible to draw a different one.

### **A different theory of political language**

- All this raises the question of what my theory of political language is, and how it differs from that of these writers (acknowledging that there are some differences between them, but they are comparatively minor). My reflections on the above have made clear to me some things I believe, foundationally, about political language, that it seems other people do not:



- Political language is a language, above all, of unflinching truth. There is no truth it cannot acknowledge, no evasion that it need tolerate. Its purpose is to teach the truth of the world: the mechanics of how it works, and the values with which human action within it is laden.
- Political language is accessible in its essential assumptions. We don't need to cite Habermas to recognise that we can't have mass-movement based conversations if those conversations are fundamentally premised on esoteric ideas about what it means to use conventional terms. It seems to me that the theory of political speech set out above is just such an esoteric theory, which can and will command no broad consensus. It states, in essence, that certain conventional formulations which appear to everyone to have meaning, such as "Palestinian militants killed many unarmed civilians in cold blood, and that was absolutely wrong" in fact do not, because the possibility of meaning is constrained by the tactics that are imagined to be possible for those hearing and speaking those words, and that thus if someone declines to say them nothing can be inferred from it, as it could in ordinary circumstances.
  - This claim, which is entirely wrong, arises from a conception of language that is not *political* but narrowly *tactical*. Thus, Winant gets it exactly back to front when he accuses others of acting like "their own little press secretary": rather it is he that is in this position. What press secretaries do, as anyone watching a Josh Kirby briefing can not help but be reminded, is deliberately refuse to acknowledge certain moral and empirical truths that everyone really understands because it is not considered convenient for their employers. They evade, and they deploy partial language, for tactical purposes, and this is precisely the approach that Winant urges on us. The approach I suggest, by distinction, works to situate a total account of the truth within a strategic framework by virtue of weight and precise statements of the relationship of each part to the whole, and in particular to the main current demand – in this case, an immediate ceasefire.
  - It means that the writers are committed to avoiding statements of empathy, grief or moral outrage even for victims of Palestinian violence. To be coherent, this approach would have to be applied even if one is personally close to someone who has lost friends or relatives in 7/10 attack, an approach which could only be destructive of a relationship, personally and politically, and serve to create an accurate impression of the left as packed with emotionally dead oddballs.
  - The claim has another, disturbing implication, particularly within the ideological penumbra of an ethnic conflict. The authors seem to be under the misapprehension that even if they pointedly refuse to condemn a certain act, people will nonetheless know – really – that they believe it's wrong (perhaps by virtue of the sort of half-hearted, abstract concessions to universal humanism set out above). This is naïve: the reality is that, following the left's response, many people absolutely believe that leftists are ok with some people – perhaps, in particular, Jews or Israelis – being massacred, or sexually assaulted. There is a temptation to greet expressions of this sort of view with an eyeroll, as if they're not serious: a symptom of the failure to understand how divisions in ethnic conflicts work, how reciprocal fear and

dehumanisation spread, feeding in each side off that of the other, and how they can spread even through expatriate communities. The choice made by the authors is to deliberately avoid a chance to halt that escalatory cycle and instead, supercharge it, causing people to have a real sense of being hated and – if their strength only slips for a moment – at real risk. This in turn, inevitably encourages security seeking behaviour; a reaction that could be avoided with only a little care. It is another symptom of the authors' theoretical and empirical lacuna surrounding such conflicts (or their decision to think of Israel-Palestine as *solely* a settler colonial conflict, and not bring to bear any other paradigm) that they do not appreciate the danger of the dynamics they are encouraging, even amongst Jewish communities in Europe and North America. To say “of course [murdering hundreds of young people at a festival is] bad” is that it would also be bad if it were done to you, or me, *and* that I don't hesitate to say that.

- Political language is not crudely additive, but works by function of meaning, and the relationship between that meaning and *the climate of thought present in the society at the time*. Raine twice talks about the choices of political language as a use of “time”, as if we had a certain amount of time to talk, and no matter what we said – no matter how crude, how dissonant with mass subjectivity or counter-intuitive – it could be rammed home to certain political effect by mere repetition of its main lines. This is absurd and obviously wrong. No “line” can be effective if it is fundamentally misshapen, counter-intuitive and offensive, no matter how often it is repeated.
  - The fundamental intellectual climate of our age is liberalism: a contradictory, incoherent melange, whose incoherence is nonetheless structured in particular ways. Without going into too much depth, the language of human rights and liberal universalism represents a powerful, accessible, broadly progressive current within liberal mass culture across the West, and beyond, and is quite sufficient for the purpose of explaining why it is that Israel's war on Gaza is immoral and needs to end, now. A hot mess of reheated mid-century post-colonial theory that explicitly claims some people's lives don't matter, or patterns of speech which implies the same by virtue of evasion, is none of these things. The idea that this set of notions is going to become a key reference point for European and north American society – which is what would be necessary in order to allow it to have the political grip necessary produce materially effective policies, like swingeing sanctions on Israel – is for the birds. The idea that anyone would be willing to consciously stake the Palestinian people's future on that gamble is disturbing.
- The political language of internationalism is fundamentally unifiable, even if perhaps at a relatively high theoretical level, and with some care and qualification. This does not mean that every internationalist position has to be amenable to popular opinion in every country, or even, necessarily, to the whole left in every country. It does mean that it has to be fundamentally defensible on universalist terms in all of those contexts.

## Winant

[Post 8/9 October and subsequent exchange w Levitz](#) (inc my interjection):



**Winant:** I think basically meaningful political speech is only possible from an implicated position and if I'm honest I admit that, while probably in the 99.9 percentile of American Jews who are critical of Israel, I often make cowardly choices not to argue with family, coworkers, etc

**Which is an index of how I'm implicated and not, and I take as a constraint on what I will say about the strategic choices of others in a different position, who are doing something I never would, whose position I'm nowhere near**

**Levitz:** I think it's ok to say that murdering 260 kids at a festival is bad actually, irrespective of one's position or complicity in other crimes, especially if one is not eliding the latter

**Winant:** **Of course it's bad but to say so is politically meaningless. If not worse—it's like demanding racial justice advocates denounce black on black crime. Is it morally acceptable? Obviously not. What role does political speech about it play?** Well that's a different question

**Levitz:** I don't think it's politically meaningless to affirm that one opposes the organized massacre of people on the basis of their ethnic identity, irrespective of the broader context... I don't think that the left can hope to have (or deserve) credibility in the eyes of ordinary people who aren't already committed to its causes if it refuses to condemn this sort of violence

**Winant:** To stick with my example, what makes this different from the idea that you have to denounce black on black crime before calling for justice for people murdered by police, in order to establish credibility with ordinary people. **There's no meaningful sense in which what we say affects what form of resistance Palestinians pursue; the attempt to seize moral high ground in this way is purely about confusing what is otherwise a stark question. That's not because it's right to attack Israeli civilians. It's because wrong and right spoken by you and me here have no bearing on what happens**

**Me:** Political speech isn't a purely tactical matter though, and never has been. It also carries, inevitably, broader social content about your values and analysis. It's right and inevitable that others interpret it in those terms, and for you to take that into account.

Thread 9 October ([screen-capped, public](#)) ([original](#)):

A real pathology of this platform is the way it turns everyone into their own **little press secretary**: I condemn, I demand that you denounce, I note who is silent, etc. **It causes the worst confusion about what political speech is and what it means to produce it.**

One effect of this is to produce all these second order arguments about how rhetoric can be properly balanced, whether it's okay not to engage in such balance, etc. **This kind of thing is an off-ramp for people hoping not to have to confront the actual political situation**

**The only meaningful contribution Americans can make to stopping the violence is by confronting at every opportunity the vast public conspiracy of silence about the occupation. That's the only thing we can do that has any consequence beyond seeing to our own conscience**

**The idea that such confrontation is only valid when accompanied by proper balancing denunciations of Hamas's violence is just the last refuge of liberal Zionists** who are still looking for a way to have two sides in a one sided conflict; to refuse to do this is not to defend Hamas

Article in [Dissent, 13 October](#), replying to Josh Leifer:

One way of understanding Israel that I think should not be controversial is to say that it is a machine for the conversion of grief into power.

**Comment:** Surely accurate to say that it is a mechanism for turning *fear* and *a sense of being hated* into power. Grief isn't an emotion that empowers action, it's characteristically paralyzing.

the apparatus of state grief runs so hot. It demands raw material. Its power, in turn, is such that **the most ringing dissents calling instead for peace and humane mourning for all—like Eric Levitz’s and Joshua Leifer’s—nevertheless resonate only as whimpers of sentiment.** Whatever the noble and admirable content of such humane efforts, their form is already molded. They are participating, presumably without intent, in a new Red Scare being prepared not against stray **callous** advocates of Hamas, but against all who defend the right of Palestinians to live, and to live as equals.

Levitz reply to Dissent article on [Twitter, 13 October](#):

Gabe’s view is that leftists expressing public grief and outrage at the slaughter of 1,000 Israeli Jews is politically counterproductive, as it helps Israel rationalize its war effort. After all, Jewish grief is the lifeblood of militant Zionism. **My view is that when leftists pointedly refuse to condemn the mass murder of Israeli Jews, they undermine their credibility on Israel-Palestine (and on other issues besides), in the eyes of the unconverted. This is ultimately an empirical disagreement!** And I’m not sure what evidence Gabe has for his view. For myself, I’ve heard from several people in my life who had been heretofore sympathetic to the left, and now feel themselves alienated from and distrustful of it. **The question is how the left can increase its power and influence such that it is a less ineffectual actor on this issue (and others) in the future. I think responding to mass murder like an ordinary person is more conducive to getting the unconverted to trust your judgement**

[Leifer reply to Winant](#):

**If the aim was really to disarm what Winant describes as the Zionist “grief machine,” then in the days of Hamas’s attack and in the immediate aftermath, many on the left should have tried to avoid confirming Zionists’ worst suspicions—that indifference to Jewish death is rampant throughout the world. Instead, some did precisely the opposite by celebrating the Hamas attacks, which most Israelis and most Jews saw as proof of the old Israeli slogan: the whole world is against us. Others simply felt no need to denounce them.**

[NY Mag article](#), 20 Nov, featuring quotes from Winant and others:

“There are moments in politics when polarization has to happen,” said Winant. He rejected the notion of a “middle ground” in this conflict, saying it was **“ethically mistaken in the same way that it’s mistaken to say ‘All lives matter.’ It’s not that all lives don’t matter; it’s just that we all know what it means to say that.”**

## Tankus

[Post 7 October](#)

I know which of you would have condemned the Warsaw Ghetto uprising for just "Killing more jews" and being "counterproductive".

[Thread 8 October](#)

Let me be crystal clear- **as a jewish grandchild of holocaust survivors** I am always on the side of the people imprisoned in Ghettos and not on the incredibly armed and modern army who serves as their jailers. You're not going to be able to bully me into another opinion.

**I don't want anyone to die but I also won't participate in contextless haranguing of military strategy launched from a Ghetto.** Whether it's Jewish partisans during WWII or, yes, even Hamas. **Whether or not I, a Jewish writer living in NY, criticize Hamas is irrelevant**

The only thing that truly matters coming from a U.S. citizen is whether you are truly against the occupation and want to see it ended- including through ending U.S. aid to Israel- or whether you don't. The rest is just noise.

## [Thread 9 October](#)

The thing about denouncing Hamas is the only purpose it serves is "protecting" me among the liberal intelligentsia. It only serves to grease the wheels of my career and soften the denunciation of occupation and oppression. I refuse to engage in that opportunism. [Endorsing Winant thread ] My statements only have impact here, so I will direct them where they have the impact. Spending time on denouncing Hamas only serves to facilitate averting eyes from the Occupation. It's no coincidence that Levitz is spending time on it

## Raine

Interview with [Novara's Michael Walker](#), 18 October:

10:50 Michael Walker asks him he's disagreeing with having sympathy for people getting killed for going to a party. Response: "I don't think that anyone dying is ever a good thing, I think that anyone dying is a tragedy. I have never been deliberately starved by a colonial power that chased me from my land. So I try not to judge the actions of people who have been in that position. I live in Britain where our government sends weapons to Israel. What we can do is not spend our time condemning and attacking the actions of the people killed with the bombs that our taxes fund but instead try to ensure that our taxes no longer fund those bombs." [Brief detour about the ANC and uMkhonto we Sizwe] . . . time spent condemning Palestinians for the military strategies they choose is frankly offensive given that many of us have never lived for decades under an occupation and blockade

12:59 [MW: up to this point has said that UWS violence of a different order to that carried out 7/10, and that the sort of violence used on 7/10 is not only problematic morally but also strategically, given that the French-Algerian model doesn't seem applicable to Israelis]. BR: "I really, really don't want people to be killed at music festivals . . . I really, really like music festivals, I want a world in which we can all dance at music festivals and be free. I don't want a world in which people dance at a music festival five miles away from an open-air prison camp . . . I want there to be strikes and non-violent resistance, and no one to be harmed in the march to freedom. Of course I want that, everyone wants that. But in a situation in which, for decades, has occupied and oppressed and besieged and bombarded Palestinians, for people in the West who've not been in that position, to spend their time condemning the things that Palestinians do when our governments fund the Israeli war machine – I just think it's the wrong choice of our attention . . . it's an insult to generations of my family members who were butchered by the same kind of brutality . . . so just as we had to break the back of Tsarism, and just as we had to break the back of every antisemitic regime... we have to break the back of the Zionist state so that everyone can be free and everyone can live in peace and freedom. I don't know what Palestinians are supposed to do [refers to possible Saudi normalisation, relative international isolation, PA as a puppet regime]. . . [ref Great March of Return] they tried to be Gandhi and Israel shot and killed them."

15:55 MW: "We spend 95% of our time talking about [Israeli violence, but some of the left want to say that] if you spend 5% of your time saying that you think massacring people at a music festival is wrong you are somehow undermining the Palestinian cause. I think we disagree on that."

## New Socialist

[Editorial](#), 16 October:

**any condemnation—however well intentioned, whatever qualifications are insisted upon—involves making yourself useful to genocide by accepting the terms that form the basis of Israel's justification . . . The logic runs like this: if everyone agrees that there must be punishment (and the word 'condemn', which contains within it a sense of marking-out for punishment, is deployed in order to bring about this agreement), then the only discussion to be had must concern the technicalities of how that punishment should be meted out. . . Because, ultimately, this isn't about individuals in**

**Britain and their personal moral stances. It isn't about what 'public opinion' thinks of anti-genocide protestors, or about forming 'compelling narratives', or about how we 'feel' as spectators. We are not the story here. Our personal brands and public images *do not matter*.**

**Comment:** Interesting point on the implicit relationship of condemnation to punishment. If these people are really serious about what they say, then should they be willing to expressly endorse e.g. rape and the mass execution of civilians as weapons of war and resistance, and to say they are as legitimate as any other? Not wanting to do so is either cowardice and a matter of running away from the real content of your politics, or a comms thing. Also a weird dissonance here between, on the one hand, organising one's theory of what one says around the real world effect of one's words – "making yourself useful" – but on the other hand rejecting the idea that "public opinion", and the prospect of "compelling narratives" matter. In what space does usefulness to a cause operate aside from that of compelling narratives and public opinion? A space of pure ideas, and damn the consequences of the articulation? But that removes the whole stated basis for refusing to condemn certain acts.

## Others

[Nick Riemer](#) [Australian academic and President of the staff union at University of Sydney]: No progressive should feel the need to publicly condemn any choices by the Palestinian resistance. Doing so just adds to the perception that their cause is unjust. Condemnation is the speech-act you perform when breaking contact off with someone, not when standing in solidarity.

Varoufakis [refusing to condemn Hamas](#): Relies on a comparison to armed struggle against apartheid South Africa. "The problem is here." "The criminals here are not Hamas, not even the Israeli settlers . . ."

## 2. The "condemnation paradigm", implicit racism

- Could Zomlot's interviews be the inspiration for the theory of political speech summarised above? None of the writers explicitly credit him, but some of the theory's features seem to reflect elements of Zomlot's approach, including his refusal to condemn, and his willingness to denounce violence against civilians in the abstract if not (when it comes to violence against civilians in Israel) in the particular, and concern to steer back to the context of the occupation. The interviews were widely circulated on social media before, and as, the writers were setting out their views.
- It is impossible not to admire Zomlot's approach, especially in his BBC News interview, and the dignity and clarity with which he draws attention to the implicit bias of the interviewer and the media in general. Can we hold this attitude without endorsing the theory of political speech set out above, which might seem broadly to operate as a justification of Zomlot's approach? I think so. Whereas the theory makes declining to condemn a matter of obligation and constant principle – at least in the US and UK – Zomlot shows something narrower, which is that such an approach is at least situationally possible, effective and legitimate. While recognising this, we can nonetheless hold onto the broad critique of the theory set out above: that a general failure of the left or Palestinian solidarity movement as a whole to make clear its moral rejection of wanton violence against civilians is strategically self-harming.
- Does Zomlot's effectiveness derive partially from his position as not only a Palestinian, but as an official representative of the PLO? We can't say this is entirely it, but Terrell Jermain Starr and Yassin al-Haj Saleh draw attention to the racism involved in who is asked to condemn;

which is broadly the problematic that Zomlot identifies. Starr goes to say that an obligation to reject the condemnation question devolves not only on Palestinians, Arabs, people of colour, or Muslims, but on all supporters of the Palestinian cause. Note, however, that this does not preclude them, as a matter of principle, *offering* a condemnation – as [AOC did](#) – in the way that the theory would. This is a narrower and more credible idea, which is that the act of *requiring* or *seeking* a condemnation is racist because of what it implicitly assumes, and because of the unevenness with respect to Israeli violence. (It is not obvious that the same position would persist in the event that a person were to generically celebrate armed resistance in the wake of the days after 7/10, say – under those circumstances we could take a different view, i.e. that some specific clarification of opposition to violence against civilians was indicated. But this consideration did not apply to any of the representatives Starr cites.)

- The Zomlot strategy makes refusal of the condemnation paradigm a means to recentre the value of Palestinian life; and alternative approach uses acceptance and broadening of the paradigm as a mechanism to achieve the same end. Hala Alyan, a Palestinian-American writer, and Al-Haj Saleh both adopt a version of this approach. That is, they accept the condemn of Palestinian violence against Israeli civilians, and use the common ground thereby generated to turn the weapon of condemnation against Israel; and even to deny the moral value of condemnations issued by those who condemn only Israel. There seems no reason to believe that this would necessarily be less effective.
- Tentative conclusion: one can accept the value of situational rejections of the condemnation paradigm as a means to refuse racism and draw attention to bias, while also believing that there are other legitimate and effective strategic responses. These may complement each other. Further, one can believe that it is necessary that as a movement or milieu as a whole deploy these alternative strategies in such a way as to create and safeguard the overall impression that Palestinian solidarity activists on the left do not greet the mass-killing of Jews with equanimity.

## Husam Zomlot

Husam Zomlot, interview with CNN, [7 October](#):

CA: First and foremost, do you condemn what Hamas did inside Israel to Israeli civilians?

HZ: . . . the Western media must really abandon this framework that has gotten us to where we are today. . .

CA: Do you support the killing of civilians?

HZ: Of course not

CA: Well then do you condemn that?

HZ: The loss of civilian life is tragic in all sides and what is happening is extremely worrying and very tragic, and as we speak . . . you have counted 70 Israeli deaths, there is more than 200 Palestinian deaths so far . . . what is more tragic, or equally tragic, is the blindness and deafness of the world. . . [overall just a brilliant performance, flips the script]

Husam Zomlot, interview with BBC News, [9 October](#) [on Twitter, perhaps broadcast day before]:

2:30 Interviewer: do you support what Hamas launched on Saturday morning?

HZ: . . . it is not the important question . . . I'm not here to condemn anybody [he's the first one to use the word] and if there's anybody that needs to be condemned it's what you call "the only democracy

in the Middle East” . . . I am not in the business of blaming the victim here, the real question is how do we stop this vicious, deadly cycle . . .

Interviewer: You just condemned Israel for killing civilians but you won't condemn Hamas for killing civilians?

4:25 HZ: How many times you have interviewed Israeli officials. Hundreds of times. Hundreds of times. How many times Israel have committed war crimes, right live on your own camera? Do you start by asking them to condemn themselves? Have you? You don't. You don't. . . you know why I refuse to answer this question? Because I refuse the premise of it. Because at the heart of it is misrepresentation of the whole thing. Because it's the Palestinians who are always expected to condemn themselves. I mean, come on. This is a political conflict. We have been denied our rights for a long time. This is the wrong starting point. The right starting point is to focus on the root causes. Is to try and get out of this extreme, dark tunnel as opposed to this business. . . [interviewer try to interrupt with a question: . . . and how do you?] and the mainstream media, for 75 years, you bring us here whenever there are Israelis who are killed. Did you bring me here when many Palestinians in the West Bank, more than 200 over the last few months, do you invite me when there are such Israeli provocations in Jerusalem and elsewhere? Because what Israelis have seen, which [was], as we started by saying, tragic, the last 48 hours, the Palestinians see every day for the last 75 years. You know the situation in Gaza, you have just described it . . . I'm saying this, just to say . . . perhaps this is about time we abandoned this rhetoric, very dangerous, this framework, and we start giving people the real ugly truth some times . . .

Husam Zomlot, interview with BBC Newsnight, broadcast [9 October](#):

[Kirsty Wark asks about the death of HZ's relatives in Gaza, and he describes their killing by Israel in a bombardment: his cousin Aya, her husband, their two children, her mother in law, and two other relatives, as well as two twins, two years old, now in intensive care.

KW: I'm sorry for your own personal loss. Just to be clear though, you cannot condone the killing of civilians, in Israel, can you, nor the kidnapping of families?

HZ: No we don't condone . . .

## Framing condemnation as racist

Yassin al-Haj Saleh, [Twitter post](#), 10 October:

Amazing how American broadcasters act like interroagtors when they interview Palestinian speakers, starting always by asking them to condemn the last act of their side. Rather than media people, they look like colonial officials, dictating what the subaltern are permitted to say.

Terrell Jermaine Starr, [Twitter post](#), 14 October

We really need to stop asking Arabs and other peoples who support Palestine to denounce terrorists as if it is some sign of allegiance that proves they are not enemies of the state. Neither Rep. Tlaib nor Rep. Omar is under ANY obligation to condemn terrorists. To say otherwise is xenophobic and it needs to stop! We don't have the same standard for Israelis when Israel's IDF and armed settlers kill Palestinians like its hunting season. Rep. Omar and Rep. Tlaib are not responsible for Hamas' terrorism anymore than any common white person should feel obliged to condemn white supremacists every time they target Jews, Black folks and other minorities. No one puts white congressmen and women through this ritual of insisting they condemn white supremacists each time one of them kills someone. **Only POC are asked to speak for our entire group of people. I, for one, will not participate in it and neither should any Muslim or anyone who supports Palestine.** If you don't like their politics, then say so. But they are held to a bar that [n]one of their colleagues are held to and I am calling that shit out.



## Only those who condemn universally have the right to condemn

Yassin al-Haj Saleh, Twitter [thread](#), 11 October:

**Hamas can be, or even should be, circumstantially condemned for its targetting civilians, by the ones, and only the ones, who condemn principally and unequivocally Israel's colonialism, racism, blockades, starvation, and dehumanisation of the Palestinian people for decades. Because the ethical basis of condemnation is only equal humanity**, dignity, rights, grievability, and sovereignty. If you deny essential equality of the Palestinian people with the Israeli Jews, you do not have any right to condemn the weaker side for their transgressions. If you do not deny this essential equality, you must say it openly and all the time: Israeli colonialism should end now, and there should be a sovereign Palestinian state, or full equal citizenship in on sovereignty. Say it loud and clear, or you are a hypocrite!

Hala Alyan, [NYT, 25 October](#):

“The task of the Palestinian is to be palatable or to be condemned. . . To earn compassion for their dead, Palestinians must first prove their innocence. The real problem with condemnation is the quiet, sly tenor of the questions that accompany it: Palestinians are presumed violent — and deserving of violence — until proved otherwise. Their deaths are presumed defensible until proved otherwise. . . **I don't hesitate for a second to condemn the killing of any child, any massacre of civilians — this of course includes Jewish life. It is the easiest ask in the world. And it is not in spite of that but because of that I say: Condemn the brutalization of bodies. By all means, do. Condemn murder. Condemn violence, imprisonment, all forms of oppression. But if your shock and distress comes only at the sight of certain brutalized bodies? If you speak out but not when Palestinian bodies are besieged and murdered, abducted and imprisoned? Then it is worth asking yourself which brutalization is acceptable to you, even quietly, even subconsciously, and which is not.**”

## Others

- [BBC 5 Live interview](#) with Palestinian woman in Gaza, 10 October
- [France 24 interview](#) with Palestinian Ambassador Majed Bamy, 17 October: “we believe in the protection of civilians. There are those who say that we cannot condemn what Israel is doing for fear that it will appear as legitimising what Hamas has done. And so, by this logic, I would be afraid of appearing as legitimising what Israel did before October 7, for decades, and what Israel is doing since October 7. But we can here to talk about putting an end to the killings..”
- [Australian television interview](#) with Randa Abdel-Fattah, 13 October. Interviewer repeatedly hectors her, asking her to condemn.