

How to Not Talk About Atrocity

There's something I'd like to say is odd about conversations about Palestine, but unfortunately, it isn't unusual. The oddity is how few of the conversations are about Palestinians, even when they are about what is happening to them. An awful lot of these conversations end up in an awkward and unfortunate place where they end up talking about future possibilities more than present harms. There's this tendency to talk about how Israeli conduct in military operations across an increasing number of territories—like Lebanon and Syria in addition to Gaza and the West Bank—and how it justifies these operations is going to be bad for Jewish people outside its borders, how it will aggravate and broaden existing antisemitism, and make things unsafe for Jewish people globally. This is not an unfair point, and it should be made, but the problem is when this informed speculation ends up eating into conversations about present and ongoing atrocities against a separate people. I see this done even by well-intentioned people who are calling it genocide; they are willing to go that far, but then the conversations they have are mostly about how this will affect other peoples. It's especially bad on social media platforms in which there are length restrictions on individual posts, the character count is eaten up by this other concern, or a thread is started with that concern, and the conversation about Palestinians is buried further down, where fewer people will see it. People make statements that are front-loaded with clarifications about how anti-Zionism is not antisemitism, again, a good point. But, then it's at the start of—and frontloads—statements, while the war crimes and ethnic violence are topics that are gotten to rather than addressed first. It feels like Palestinians are not being treated as the real, existing victims of existential harm first, but primarily as a source of potential harm for an abstract notion of Jewish people. It's not exactly a problem you can call out on an individual basis; the conversation should be had, but the conversation creeps and encroaches where it doesn't need to be.

I do understand it to a degree. If you are making a statement, it's understandable you want to head off accusations of antisemitism and also communicate that you are uninterested in rubbing elbows with antisemites so they don't try to coopt your words. But, in my opinion, it feels like it is ultimately indulging the propaganda that individuals are trying to combat. If every conversation about Gaza and the West Bank is opened with qualifications, it looks like talking about those things as issues of their own is antisemitic. If talking about settlers stealing homes is not antisemitic, then we should be able to simply condemn it. If someone is going to call you antisemitic for saying “these specific people, in this specific place, are committing theft of property through use of violence due to notions of national and/or ethno-religious superiority and entitlement in contravention of both local treaties and international law is wrong,” make them explain how that could be the case. Why cringe away from straightforwardness by explaining for the umpteenth time that these specific people in this specific place are not representative of Jewish people everywhere first? If you're talking about the victims of violence by the state of Israel, why do people who are not involved need to be addressed first? And if you address a

specific issue and specify who is acting criminally, is there an actual need to specify that not all people who share one part of those individuals'—and organizations'—identities as circumstance of birth are also criminals every time, or after at a certain point is one simply raising the salience of Jewish identity in the context of crimes against humanity being committed by a specific nation rather than doing your part to disentangle the Zionist and Jewish identity?

When progressive Jewish Americans speak out on the issue of Israel feeding antisemitism, it's not wrong in and of itself, but they can find an audience in America, while something like the documentary *No Other Land*, made by Palestinian and Israeli filmmakers about the occupied West Bank, struggles to find distributors. The crew who worked on it have been attacked and even killed. Mahmoud Khalil has been around long enough to have law enforcement unleashed on him by different presidents. Palestinian voices themselves are restricted, which means that many conversations happen about them from which they are either *de jure* or *de facto* excluded. When people who talk about the downstream effects of the genocide are not restricted in the same way, even if they do still face social and professional threats, then the balance of conversation is thrown off if people who can speak out or provide platforms don't account for this imbalance, weighted more towards consequences of current events rather than the events themselves. Which have you heard more of: conjecture about what Khalil's arrest means for free speech in America, or the words that got him in trouble? Who have you seen on television news, or read in major publications, talking about Gaza? All kinds of people, but if you live in the United States, only a small number are from there.

And this is part of a long-standing trend. What's happening in Sudan isn't a thing that's happening to people in most conversations; it's this other event that isn't being talked about enough because Palestine is sucking up the air. It is an accusation of hypocrisy. People who ask why you aren't talking about Sudan often don't have much to say either, from my experience. Because Sudan doesn't matter, what matters is that it's a tool to argue with. There are even bad defenses of why people don't talk about it more: that the conflict is too complex, all sides too bloody, to offer uncritical support of; that the United States doesn't provide the same support to any side like it does Israel. Which is feeble, let's be honest. We do supply the UAE, who supply forces in the country, and we have the intelligence and economic capabilities to figure out who is proliferating arms and use legal tools to impede them. I wouldn't recommend the United States parachuting in and picking a side, but working towards general deproliferation is something the US could conceivably do if it had the desire or felt the pressure to. If it is willing, or at all sensitive to movement pressure, on the topic is debatable, but it's really not hard to say that, yeah, the international community could be doing more to at least reduce harm.

This is similar to the Uyghur population in China. You can see debates all about the veracity of this account and that, and oftentimes, you will find no words from a Uyghur person other than summaries of accounts from a document. People will try getting into the weeds about

recognized minorities, one-child policy exemptions—which is itself a more provincial and local issue than most people in the Anglosphere realize— and relative population growth before they actually explain what Uyghurs are and how they relate to other minority groups and central authorities. That’s because, to many Americans, they aren’t a people in the sense of being a collection of individuals with something in common; they are a people for the purposes of being able to make accusations. They are not people that things are or are not happening to; they are a proxy for arguments about hegemony, propaganda, capitalism vs communism, which means there is no great need for anyone to work out what exactly is being done to them. Claim they’re basically extinct, deny the existence of detention centers that the Chinese government has never contested, and openly justified as part of anti-extremism efforts. Who all went there and what happened is irrelevant, because no one who went actually exists in so many of these debates. All that exists is a category that claims and counterclaims can be made about. Who knows what East Turkestan means? It's probably not important.

I’m going to make a brief detour about a video game, which may seem unserious given the topic, but it ties back into larger points. There is a video game called “Spec Ops: The Line.” It’s a riff on Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” and “Apocalypse Now” about a special forces team sent into Dubai after sandstorms isolate it from the outside world, with a US infantry battalion that initially went in as part of a relief effort now ruling over it, countered by a CIA-led local insurgency. This game has gotten its flowers as a serious depiction of real war crimes placed in a fictional context, most infamously the use of white phosphorus as a weapon, which Israel and the United States have both done, with the US having used it in Iraq and Vietnam at least. My issue with this assertion is that none of the Emiratis, as far as I remember, exist in the narrative as more than almost entirely anonymous victims, with the named characters who are around to be impacted by these atrocities being foreigners. It’s the classic “look at how war does to our poor soldiers” narrative where the people having the war made on them are technically sympathetic, but are also little more than props to explore the grief of the people shooting them. It’s less egregious than a film based on a real war that doesn’t seem to think much of the locals who had it worse, but it’s in the same trap. And this entertainment phenomenon isn’t separate from the political problem of not viewing these populations as people in the same way as we view the more familiar.

People still talk about Afghanistan in a similar way. It’s easy to talk about how we should have stayed, or going back in when the people are an anonymous mass to be saved, but what does it actually mean? What would you do about the actual nation and its actual citizenry? Do we turn the cities into occupied, special administrative zones and leave the rurality to its devices? A lot of people won’t like that idea, but at least it is something actionable, it’s more than the idea of liberation by force as self-justification of force. “Is it something that the people of Afghanistan” would sign onto is its own question. Is there enough of a shared national identity to make a unified whole of the parts within its borders now that there has been a long war and the

Taliban takeover? Saying “let’s fix it” is not actually a serious idea by itself. The monologue in *Apocalypse Now* is well delivered, but the “they wanted it more and gave atrocity 110%” thesis is somewhat undermined when you consider all of the war crimes the US forces committed and the sheer volume of munitions expended in the region. It’s made with gravitas, but—unintentional or not, given that the character of Kurtz is, I dare say, a bit out there—it’s not serious. But people make that argument informed by both propaganda and pop culture, whether it be from good readings or bad of specific cultural products in question.

There is a large part of the issue, I think. Talking about serious issues does not make a conversation serious. So much of the conversation around the Epstein investigation is not serious, it’s content to be made into jokes and clickbait, or it’s a silver bullet that will banish the Trump years. A silver bullet that all else is a distraction from. Even blowing up civilians and beating the drum of war with Venezuela is mere distraction, because Venezuelans aren’t real. It’d be sad if they died, but they’re not really their own issue, the issue is that they might take the focus away from the magic spell that could make America great again.

And that’s how so much of Israel-Palestine coverage feels. It’s not serious. People throw out a two-state solution as the defensible, safe position, but there isn’t a two state solution. There are two state solutions, and in some of them, Palestine is a state whose borders are unilaterally secured and controlled by Israel, which is not a granting of full sovereignty. Where are these borders put, what happens in terms of reparations? These are not gotchas about the complexity of the question, the answers will literally shape those two states. Just saying they should exist means very little. That’s perhaps the wildest thing; we don’t only not talk about Palestinians, we also don’t talk about Israel for the most part, except to say that it doesn’t have ownership of Judaism. Netanyahu may not be too popular over there, but I think a lot of that two-state support would evaporate in the face of actual terms that have things like the return of property, reparations, and equal citizenship for all within Israel. Netanyahu might not be popular, but in May of 2024, a Pew poll showed support for the level of force in use or more. The mass violence against civilians enjoyed popular support among the population of Israel. If you’ve called it genocide or ethnic cleansing or any other kind of atrocity, you have to reckon honestly with that with majoritarian support, especially from the Israeli Jewish population (as opposed to Arab and other groups). It’s correct to say that Israel does not determine what it means to be Jewish, but there shouldn’t be delusions about the opinions of the majority of the Jewish people in Israel. The support for war has dwindled, but support for large-scale expulsions remains high, and that sort of mass, forced displacement is still a method of conducting genocide.

And here’s the niggling issue for me, we know what antisemitism can do, but I’m not sure we have ever been good at mass education on how that happened. I was taught about this economic rebound in the early years of Nazi leadership, which helped drive support, about national humiliation and how the defeat in World War One changed the nation, but how much of

that is true? There is this saying that has a questionable origin along the lines of "Hitler was a zealot, but he was a German zealot." That is to say, antisemitism had a history of violence in Germany, but it's more than that. The German Empire had already committed an ethnically targeted genocide in the 20th century, the Herero and Nama genocide. During WWI, they had a plan to forcibly depopulate part of Poland and have it settled by German colonists; the Polish Border Strip, ethnic cleansing within Europe, with the population moved into territory ruled by a puppet state (Vichy France, anyone). Anti-slavism was in the culture before the Bolsheviks. Their war bonds were backed with promises of, let's be frank, plunder upon victory. The autobahn was proposed before the Nazis took power; they took credit. Hjalmar Schacht used all kinds of tools to improve the economy when he was collaborating with the Nazis, until his work was frustrated by having to share authority with Göring, and he was eventually exiled. Brüning wanted to get out of war reparations obligations, too, but he did so with more plausible deniability as he pursued deflationary policies. Hitler had to be brought around to more public assistance for the Volk. Holocaust education is necessary, but have we even done a good job of that, or has it been made a little too neat of a narrative?

I ask because it would seem that neat narratives are a continuing issue. There's been much hay made of inquiring as to whether or not individuals support Hamas. What does this mean? I've said it before, I understand Hamas, in a sense. If Israel is targeting civilians, then I'm not surprised people join an armed opposition. Does Hamas teach antisemitic conspiracies or beliefs? I don't doubt it, but I can't speak to the exact details, and I don't imagine all the youths who join up after having their world shrunk and demolished across decades and generations are necessarily joining because they're enthusiasts of the literature. I think a good deal who fills its ranks now lost more than most of us who sit in judgment from across the ocean can imagine. A good way to have kept them away from Hamas would have been not to drop bombs on their heads. Do I have any sympathy for the Neo-Nazi in my proverbial backyard? None at all. But if I am expected to have sympathy for members of our own armed forces who volunteered to participate in wars that have ruined millions of lives so they could receive benefits, I can exercise sympathy and understand how someone fighting for survival may be open to rather extreme ideas about the forces trying to kill him. It doesn't much matter if I condone or condemn them; mere opinion is not why they exist, circumstance is. If one really wants them gone, that is what must change. Israel can try through eliminationism or equitable peace. I'd put the pressure necessary on them to do the latter, and if being pushed towards peace is detrimental to their society, is it really a society we should invest so much in defending? The Iron Dome gets called a defense weapon, one that happens to help them be more secure in belligerence. It is pure defense. Why not equip everyone with it? Or is it that a defensive weapon that gives such an offensive edge if you're the only one that has it is another type of offensive weapon? These little clichés abound, ways to talk about Israel and Palestine without having to talk about Israel or Palestine.

There, then, is a recommendation at the end of all this. Find some Palestinians to hear the thoughts of, knowing they don't all share the same opinion, just like other people. And get more in the habit of saying Israel is in the wrong without a preamble about a third party when it isn't necessary. If we are going to discuss what is happening to a people, let the conversation be about them.