ISRAEL’S ATTACK ON GAZA: SOME REFLECTIONS

Peter Cave

For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?

(Mark, 8.36)

The beginning section, ‘Background’, consists of facts familiar to most interested readers and relates solely to the period resulting from the 7th October 2023 attack by Hamas; it ends with a few orientational clarifications regarding the reflections that follow. Those reflections are mainly philosophical and consistency inspired in nature; they are set out after the Background.

Background

As a result of Hamas’s attack on Israel (7th October 2023), many leading American, British and other European politicians and commentators — including certain religious leaders in Judaism and Christianity — have declared support for Israel’s ‘right to defend itself’ in attacking Gaza and Gazans, by way of seige, heavy continual bombing and subsequent and continuing ground assaults. The aim is to seek and ‘destroy Hamas’; that seems to mean the ideology as well as the military power. The politicians and commentators have rightfully condemned Hamas’s attack, ‘horrific butchery’ in some cases, that led to around 1,500 individuals in Israel, mainly Jews, mainly civilians, being killed or brutally harmed — including, as is usually emphasized, some babies, children, the aged and infirmed — with 250 or so initially held as hostages by Hamas.

Until very recently, those politicians, commentators and religious leaders have in the main been somewhat relaxed about the Israeli destruction of Gaza, the killing of tens of thousands of civilian Palestinians and the maiming, be it physical or psychological, of approaching two million Palestinians. In addition, there has been the displacement of nearly all of the two million Palestinians; most have followed Israeli instructions for seeking safety, yet have found that the ‘safe’ havens, refugee camps and the routes also undergo bombing, with numerous deaths and severe injuries in those areas of safety.

Most Palestinians, wherever they be in Gaza, for weeks and weeks have been lacking clean water, adequate food, sanitation facilities, medical supplies, fuel and secure shelters. There has been a deliberate destruction by the Israeli forces of the infrastructure overall as well as of Palestinian homes, hospitals and mosques and churches. There has been a reluctance to permit any substantial humanitarian aid to be brought into Gaza and a determination to provide no means for the Gazans to escape; over that latter point, Egypt has not provided much by way of escape.
The various aid agencies have described and filmed appalling conditions for the few remaining hospitals and the aid workers. They have documented the inevitable spread of disease, malnutrition and hopelessness.

The above Israeli actions have been justified by Israel as the need to find and kill Hamas fighters who have largely intermingled their locations with civilian locations.

The innocent Palestinian casualties have often been referred to as ‘collateral damage’. That is in contrast to the emphasis on the brutal murders by Hamas of Israeli babies, children and the infirmed. Only recently have political leaders tended to stress how those Gazan casualties include babies, thousands and thousands of children, women and the elderly and infirmed. Israeli attacks have also killed United Nations and other humanitarian aid workers, medical staff, as well as, it seems, three Israeli hostages waving a white flag. That latter example may (or may not) be indicative of how the Israeli forces have been treating Hamas fighters and Palestinian civilians who may have sought surrender — especially when Israel has managed at times to black out communications.

I say ‘until very recently’ regarding the Western concern for the numbers of suffering and killed Palestinian civilians. Only in the last few weeks have various Western leaders began to speak of how there have been ‘too many’ civilian casualties — as if, say, killing ten thousand was acceptable, but not now the well over twenty thousand. Many more bodies no doubt will one day be found beneath the rubble.

The Israeli leadership under prime minister Netanyahu made it clear immediately after the Hamas October attack that Israel would stop at nothing until ‘Hamas was destroyed’. Hence, Western leaders in support of the Israeli early bombings and seige knew well how it would develop into the humanitarian catastrophe.

The US had voted against UN calls for increased humanitarian provision or ceasefires until 22nd December when it abstained over a resolution that merely called for ‘creating the conditions’ for a ceasefire and for the provision of increased humanitarian aid.

The media in Israel, I gather, report very little of what is happening in Gaza, but replay the understandable distresses of the Israeli families affected with little reference to the hundreds of thousands of distressed Palestinian families — either orphans whose parents have been killed or parents whose children have been killed or are suffering malnutrition or spreading diseases. Israel has made it difficult for independent commentators to enter Gaza and, as noted, it has at times prevented communications from Gaza.

The Netanyahu government currently speaks of continuing the war for months, with repeated bombing and ground assault. Certain Israeli families of the hostages seem to be becoming increasingly sceptical of Netanyahu’s concern for the hostage release as a priority.

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What now follows considers a few of the oft-repeated arguments and considerations used by supporters of Israel to justify its actions and to condemn those who protest against those actions. I restrict myself to the UK.

For avoidance of doubt, I am writing of the Israeli government policies and the Israeli Defense Force’s (IDF’s) military actions and their supporters. Obviously, there are some Israelis and probably many Jews outside of Israel who do not support Israel’s policies; sadly, there are many, though, who do.

For further avoidance of doubt, I am writing of ‘for the most part’; no doubt in most movements, there are caveats and fringe protestors with conflicting agendas.

Allow me to emphasize that my questioning of Israel’s actions does not remotely imply that I thereby support Hamas’s actions and the destruction of Israel as a state. My questioning also does not in any way suggest that I support an ideology or religion, whether it be a version of conservative Islam or of ultra-Orthodox Judaism, that does not, for example, afford equal rights to men and women or to people of different religious faiths.

1. The protests against Israeli actions

These protests have come in for much condemnation; here are some examples of the condemnations.

1.1 Why, it is asked, have the large protests in the UK against Israel involved no significant protest against Hamas’s horrendous actions?

The answer is: because the UK government repeatedly and expressly condemns Hamas and is strongly supporting the policy of the elimination of Hamas. What has been needed — and is needed — to be challenged is the UK’s support for Israel’s attacks on thousands of innocents in Gaza.

Further, it should be noted that when there was a large march in London, protesting against antisemitism, with Israeli flags much waved, there seemed to be little concern for the plight of the Palestinians, a concern that would be much justified — yet the politicians and commentators tended to overlook that.

1.12 Some argue that the protest marches calling for peace, for a recognition of Palestine and condemning Israel’s devastation of Gaza and Gazans are responsible for an increase in instances of antisemitism in London. It is also said that Jews fear coming into London. Now, there may have been some increases antisemitism — and there may well have been increases in Islamphobia — but who quite knows the motives of those involved. There are a couple of observations that are worth making.

First, it certainly it not true that all Jews fear coming into London — many do not, including those who join the protest marches against Israel. Indeed, it is somewhat obscene for wealthy celebrities parading their Jewishness stirring fears of antisemitism without noting how any apparent fear of coming into London as a Jew
is minor compared to the fears of two million Palestinians being bombed day and
night.

Secondly, for various Orthodox Jewish groups and Celebrity Jews to keep repeating
this fear probably helps to generate it.

Thirdly, there are in London many Jewish supporters of Israeli actions in Gaza. It is
not antisemitic to argue against (not physically threatening, note) their position,
pointing out that they are then indeed supporting the killing and maiming of
thousands of innocent lives.

1.2 The protestors, it is insisted, must be supporting Hamas; this is because they
explain Hamas's actions, often referring to decades of Israeli mistreatment of
Palestinians.

The insistence does not stack up. To explain — indeed, to understand — is not
thereby to justify. For example, my explanation of the car crash is that the drivers
were drunk. I may even understand why the drivers had got themselves into an
alcoholic haze. That does not mean that I supported their drunken driving. Note too:
the protestors can explain Israel's actions — its reaction to Hamas’s attack — but
obviously they do not think those actions are thereby justified.

1.3 Many of the protestors waved Palestinian flags and some chanted ‘from the river
to the sea’; that shows, it is said, that they seek the destruction of Israel.

Of course, that does not follow. Many if not all, no doubt, support a Palestinian
state, but that does not mean the destruction of the Israeli state, though some may
well want a reformed Israeli state that does not discriminate so much against non-
Jews. Indeed various attempts at peace and ‘two-state’ solutions over the decades
have been recognized by many Israelis, though currently neither by the Israeli
political leadership with its religious right-wing nor by the Hamas leadership.

1.4 Supporters of Israel's military action insist that protestors against that action are
clearly denying Israel the right to defend itself.

The objection is ungrounded. Israel's right to defend itself is not a right to do
whatever it thinks necessary to defend itself. Let us reflect further. Even if the
destruction of millions of innocent Gazans were to be the sole means of ensuring the
destruction of Hamas, and assuming that end to be desirable, it does not follow that
those means are morally justifiable. A morally desirable end is not sufficient to
justify just any means to that end, even if those means are the only available means.

1.5 Protestors, it is claimed, are manifesting hatred of Jews and hence are
antisemitic.

It is true that there is a lot of hate in the protest marches, but it is hatred at the
Israeli destruction of innocent Gazans and Gaza. That does not thereby manifest
antisemitism — no more than the Israeli hatred of Hamas thereby is a hatred of
Palestinians.
True, some protestors, indeed some Jewish protestors, object to the existence of a state identified as Jewish, but that again is not thereby antisemitic and is not thereby calling for the eradication of Jews from the ‘Holy Land’. No doubt there are a few antisemites involved, but that is no evidence that the protestors overall are such.

Many of us oppose theocratic states such as the Islamic Republic of Iran where Sharia Law rules, but that does not mean that we want the destruction of Iran as a state.

Opposition to Israeli policies and indeed to Israel as a Jewish state is not thereby antisemitic. Witness, for example, the various Jewish groups that also take part in the protests against the Israeli actions. Witness those Jewish groups whose members object to Israel as a ‘Jewish’ state. There is no good reason to believe that they are antisemitic or ‘self-hating’ Jews.

1.6 Sometimes it has been suggested that in opposing Israel’s attacks on Gaza one is thereby supporting the existence of a Palestinian state with a highly conservative, authoritarian and brutal Islamic rule. That, of course, does not follow — just as support for an Israeli state is not thereby support for a highly conservative ultra-Orthodox Jewish state run on Hasidic lines.

2. **Israel’s right to defend itself**

2.1 As already noted, a right to X does not entail a right to do whatever is necessary for X. The end does not automatically justify the means. That holds even if the means are the only means available to secure the end.

Some actions are morally ‘beyond the pale’ — such as Hamas’s butchery of a thousand or so, mainly innocent people; also, such as Israel’s maiming and killing tens of thousands of innocent Palestinians, adults and children.

2.2 Did Israel have any other means to defend itself?

The answer is ‘yes’.

Israel had successfully defended itself over decades, in the main without such outrageous killings and destruction of non-Jews (though we may wonder about its assistance in a killing spree in Lebanon in 1982). In the particular case of the 7th October attack, Israel could have driven out the attackers and secured its borders as it had done for decades. It could then have negotiated the release of the hostages by offering release of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel, many indeed detained without charge.

True, Israel may then have felt it was continually under threat, but seeking to eradicate that fear by killing and maiming thousands of innocents does not justify the killing and maiming of those thousands of innocents.
2.3 Is Israel immoral — in attacking children and innocent adults?

Yes. It is disingenuous to claim that morality allows the killing and maiming of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian children and innocent adults because that outcome is unintended, although foreseen.

Consider an arsonist setting fire to a locked children’s home with the children’s resultant deaths. Would you accept his plea that he was burning down the house, but not intending the death of the children?

3. Comparability

3.1 Ever since the 7th October 2023 attack, Israel has frequently made the claim that the attack by Hamas has led to the biggest destruction of Jews since the Holocaust of Nazi Germany in the 1940s. That, of course, is to put us vividly in mind of the horrors for six million Jews, the extermination camps and the Nazi desire, it seems, to rid Europe of all Jews.

First, the thousand or so Jewish victims of Hamas’s attack is numerically radically different from the systematic killing of six million or so.

Secondly, the Nazi programme was run by an initially powerful German state. Contrast Hamas and its very little power with today’s Israel, a very wealthy, militarily powerful nation, nuclear indeed, with the backing of the US super-power.

3.2 Some have claimed that the actions of Hamas and those of Israel are not comparable. That is a curious claim for, of course, they can be compared. No doubt the claim is that they possess some highly relevant dissimilarities. Let us consider those.

3.21 It has been argued, for example, that Hamas’s attack was unprovoked in contrast to the Israeli retaliation. That example, though, would need to address the extent to which Palestinians have been provoked by Israeli actions over decades, effectively operating largely an economic blockade of Gaza and the West Bank, creating an impoverished Gaza sometimes referred to as an overcrowed open-air prison and illegally extending further into the Palestinian West Bank. Further, even if there is no similarity between Hamas’s actions and Israel’s on that score, it does not follow that there are no other similarities of which Israel should be ashamed.

3.22 Some argue that Hamas is committed to the destruction of the Israeli state, even to all Jews at least in the Middle East, whereas Israel is not committed to the destruction of all Palestinians. That contrast, though, would need much further examination.

The rhetoric of Hamas can, for example, be matched to some extent by the rhetoric of certain Israeli leaders who speak easily of Palestinians as animals or who support the Jewish settlers illegally taking over Palestinian homes in the West Bank and terrorizing the local Palestinian inhabitants, destroying their homes, farms, animals
and produce — while the Israeli state turns a blind eye. Some Israelis in power do indeed aim for Israel to encroach further and further, taking over all of the land as rightfully and historically belonging the Jews; witness the attitude of the leadership of the far right Jewish Power party, an element of the current Israeli government.

Further still, since 2017 the Hamas policy is to oppose the Zionist state, not the existence of Jews in the Middle East. Policies change and it is disingenuous to insist that all Hamas are still committed to eradicating Jews in the Middle East. That would be akin to Israel refusing to reach peace accords with Egypt and Jordan and possibly Saudi Arabia because those countries once engaged in the rhetoric against Israel.

3.23 Some seem to express outrage that in Gaza Hamas should have built a network of tunnels and developed capabilities to fire rockets — as if their attempt to secure some sort of homeland is illegitimate whereas Israel’s build-up of military might and gradual extension into occupied territories is perfectly acceptable.

3.24 Some focus on Hamas taking hostages, yet forget the numerous Palestinians, many from the West Bank, some children, detained by Israel over the decades, often without trial. Some Israelis point to the inhumanity of Hamas, shown by the hostages having inadequate food, facilities, medical help — as if unaware that virtually all the Palestinians are suffering thus, given the Israeli attacks.

3.25 The pro-Israeli line is to insist that a vital difference is that Hamas is a terrorist group whereas Israel is a legitimate state. Indeed, there are demands that public broadcasters should refer to Hamas as terrorists. Now, the territory of Gaza has been run by Hamas since it won a majority of seats in 2006. As with many such elections in numerous countries and territories, we may question the legitimacy; but if that and its attacks on other countries is the basis for insisting that Hamas should be labelled ‘terrorist’, then consideration could be given to deeming Iran’s leadership, Russian leadership and so forth as terrorist. It is true that Palestine is not a recognized state, but that is because Israel and its supporters have blocked attempts at the creation of a Palestinian state.

There is, as ever, the motivations in the application of the term ‘terrorist’. At one stage, the future first prime minister of Israel, Menachem Begin, was involved in the Zionist terrorist group, Irgun, that bombed the King David Hotel in Jerusalem (1946), killing and injuring well over one hundred individuals, many civilians. Terrorism can lead eventually to states that possess international legitimacy.

3.3 Whatever the extent of, and type of, differences between Hamas and Israel, as reviewed above, one feature regarding which they rightfully can be compared is that of wittingly causing horrific sufferings and deaths of innocents on the ‘other side’. In respect of that, Israel and Hamas can be compared and, using the term differently, ‘there is no comparison’: Israel’s continuing intensive destruction of lives, livelihoods and infrastructures of Gaza is radically, radically greater than Hamas’s attacks on Israel.

4. Underlying considerations
4.1 The conflicts in the Middle East — and elsewhere and indeed the UK and its policy towards migrants — rest on some sort of belief that ‘this land is mine’. Participants should wonder whatever justifies that claim to territorial ownership, wherever it may be, a claim apparently so strong that, in this case of the Middle East, it justifies the destruction of thousands of innocent people — be it via attempts by Hamas to kill Israelis or via Israeli bombing of Gaza leading to thousands and thousands of deaths and sufferings.

4.2 Political and religious leaders frequently assert support for human dignity, human rights and treating all people with respect, but when the chips are down, it seems that more or less anything goes — and those with the might decree what is right. Witness a whole range of deliberate destruction of innocents by countries that proclaim serious commitment to human dignity and rights — for example, the US dropping atomic bombs on Japanese civilians; the UK/US support for the Saudi military action in Yemen. Of course, there are plenty of countries that lack serious concern for human rights and which also behave appallingly, both to others and to their own citizens.

With the approach of ‘might is right’, there will be little that Israel could consistently complain about if, one day, tables are turned and there is a mighty Arab onslaught on Israel, perhaps with the backing of a new, as yet unforeseen super-power.

Sadly, these conflicts seem to display the truth of Immanuel Kant’s

*From the crooked timber of humankind, nothing entirely straight can be made.*

4.3 Although I write as a humanist and atheist, I applaud some words attributed to Jesus: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" That question also applies to nations:

*For what shall it profit a nation, if it shall gain the whole territory and lose its own soul?*

4.4 Israel’s appalling treatment of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank over decades was unlikely to generate a feeling of ‘fellow human beings’ and friendship being address by the Palestinians to the Israelis or, indeed, the typical Israeli to the Palestinians. It doubtless played into the hands of Hamas and connected groups with the extremist calls for the eradication of Israel by some of their followers.

The current Israeli destruction of Gaza is unlikely to have any beneficial outcomes, save for the political survival a little longer for Netanyahu and his right-wing ultra-Orthodox supporters. That may be beneficial to Netanyahu and friends, but not to Israel and not to Palestinians.

The Israeli destruction of Gaza certainly will not save Israel’s soul.

4.5 Israel is currently the most powerful nation in the region. Israel could have tried magnanimity, generosity and understanding; it could have sought to have made
amends for its mistreatment of the Palestinians over the decades since the late 1940s, making it possible that in the longer term Palestinians would no longer need to turn to the likes of extremist elements in Hamas for survival.

As it is now, that ‘hand of friendship’ is obviously a far, far, far more difficult scenario to see fulfilled; but, none the less, a future less extreme Israeli government could go for magnanimity, generosity and understanding — indeed display genuine remorse for how Israel has been and is behaving — and actively aid the development of Palestinian lands for the Palestinians. Maybe one day there could be a one-state secular solution, with religious rights within that state for both Islam and Judaism — and indeed for other religions and for the non-religious. Of course, even if logically possible — even if one day possible in practice — its realization would not be easy.

4.6 An incongruity deserves reflection, an incongruity manifest in my writing this in the comfort and safety of a home in London, an incongruity of millions of people with comfortable lives closing their eyes to, or making pronouncements on, surrounding horrors, from the malnutrition and homelessness in Britain to the appalling plight of the Palestinians and millions of others be they in the Ukraine, Myanmar or Yemen.

More locally, there is indeed the incongruity of the Israeli Supernova dance festival, with young Israeli people living it up, ‘raving’ in luxury, close to the border of the impoverished Gazans.

There is indeed the bizarre stance whereby some countries eventually now call for increased humanitarian aid to Gazans, while also supporting Israeli continuing attacks that lead to more and more sufferings of those who are hence in need of that aid.

That we seek to live lives — to flourish, to assert our lives — while so many, so many, others suffer appallingly is behind Nietzsche’s question:

*Have you ever said Yes to a single joy?*  
*O my friends, then you said Yes too to all woe.*  
*All things are entangled, ensnared, enamoured.*

Of course, I have no answers, but I am pretty sure that a good answer cannot be what Israel is now doing to two million people. I am pretty sure that a good answer cannot be the support given by the UK government and others to Israel’s horrific attacks on two million Palestinians already leading impoverished lives because of Israeli policies over the decades.

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For more discussion, before the latest disasters, of Israel, Zionism, antisemitism — and indeed what constitutes the survival of a people, be they the Jews, the Americans, the British — please see the 2020 Routledge book *Arguing about Judaism: a Rabbi, a Philosopher and a Revealing Debate* by Peter Cave and Rabbi Dan Cohn-Sherbok.  

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