

## **False Prophecy (?)**

### **‘Let Us Not Hurry to Our Doom’ (?)**

#### **Seth Anziska**

In the aftermath of her country’s 1982 War in Lebanon, the Israeli poet Dahlia Ravikovitch subverted popular representations of suffering in “Get Out of Beirut.” For the past month, the end of the poem’s first stanza has been ringing in my ears:

How many children do you have?

How many children did you have?

It’s hard to keep the children safe in times like these.

It has been hard to think deeply....

How many children do you have?

How many children did you have?

It’s hard to keep the children safe in times like these.

- Dahlia Ravikovitch, Get Out of Beirut

[I am leaning towards the thought that we do not need anything by way of intro about the poem; we can let it stand there and speak for itself. Seems powerful as a framing. If you do feel we need something how about starting here:

“These lines of the Israeli poet Dahlia Ravikovitch have been ringing in my ears. Like much of what she wrote in response to her country’s 1982 war in Lebanon, Ravikovitch witnesses violence and subverts singular narratives of suffering. Now is also a moment to be capacious with grief.”

OR just this line:

“Can we be capacious with our grief?”

Then continue (or start):

It has been hard to think deeply about the current war amid so many competing expressions of communal rage, harder still to hold multiple horrors at once—to grieve both the young people slaughtered at the music festival near Kibbutz Re'im on October 7 and the entire families lying under rubble in Rimal and Khan Younis. Like many people close to me, I have spent the past month struggling to comprehend the enormity and speed of the moment: communing with colleagues and friends who lost loved ones in Hamas's gruesome October 7 attacks, which killed over 1,400 Israeli soldiers and civilians; worrying about the fate of the 240 hostages and clinging to the hope of their safe release; communing with colleagues and friends as they lose loved ones to the relentless bombing campaign in Gaza and the settler violence in the West Bank, which have killed thousands of Palestinians and continue to kill more.

To work as a historian ~~of war~~ in a time of war comes with its own form of fear and grief, especially writing about massacres in the midst of new massacres. In the days after presenting new research on a book project about Israel's 1982 war in Lebanon—exploring how the overreach of the invasion transformed regional politics, global perceptions of Zionism, and the Palestinian struggle for rights—I sit in my office and learn that Israel has inaugurated its ground operations in Gaza by cutting all communications from the Strip. Days later I leave the library after looking at archival photos of the IDF bombing the PLO Research Centre in Beirut and glance at the news, which reports that Israel has bombed the Jabalia refugee camp and Palestinian residents are pulling scores of bodies from the wreckage. Historians are always trying to look backward to make sense of the present, but when do we sound the alarm? What can understanding the past achieve when there seems to be an insatiable drive to repeat it?

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Like many in my profession, I always wonder what people were thinking in real time during moments of crisis. Over the last three weeks that curiosity has become sickening, visceral. In the history of the encounter between Zionism and Palestinian nationalism, these have been among the most significant weeks since Israel's creation as a state and the Nakba of 1948. Hamas's

attacks, which targeted military bases, civilian towns, and kibbutzim, killed more Israelis in a single day than were killed in the entire five years of the second intifada or in most major Arab-Israeli wars. Their significance lay less in their capacity, sophistication, or scale than in the fact that they reversed—in a matter of hours—the underlying assumption of modern political Zionism from the nineteenth century to the post-Oslo age: that a Jewish state could offer protection for its citizens without resolving the status of the non-Jewish population under the state's indefinite control.

The resulting panic and humiliation of Israel's government and military surely contributed to the ferocity of their response. The scale and devastation of the Israeli bombardment of Gaza has been staggering. Three weeks ago, over 1.2 million residents of Gaza were ordered to leave their homes in the north and head south, with no way out and nowhere to go. As of this writing, at least 10,022 Palestinians, including 4,104 children, have been killed, and the World Health Organization has declared that “a public health catastrophe” is imminent. Israel's leaders continue to imply that cutting off electricity and fuel to more than two million people will solve the “problem of Hamas,” that military force will eliminate the political motives that undergird violence even in the abhorrent and illegal forms it took on October 7, and that another mass ethnic cleansing will solve the problems instigated by the partial ethnic cleansing of 750,000 Palestinians that accompanied Israel's creation.

Eliminationist language and false analogies: neither are in short supply now. In Jewish circles close to me, far too close, I hear talk of needing to wipe out all Palestinians, to level Gaza, to embrace retribution and revenge. For these relatives and acquaintances, Hamas's attacks stand for a primordial Palestinian Jew-hatred and the scourge of an age-old antisemitism. There is a straight line, in this way of thinking, from the Kishinev Pogrom to the massacre at Kibbutz Be'eri, from Nazi violence in Germany to the attacks on Kfar Aza. On October 28, in his press conference laying out Israel's retaliatory intentions, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cited a passage from Deuteronomy urging the Israelites to “remember what Amalek did to you.” Those of us who studied Samuel I in Jewish day schools know that he was referring to the Biblical nation of Amalek, the symbolic power of their merciless attack against the Israelites wandering in the wilderness after their escape from Egypt, and God's commandment to King Saul to

destroy everything they had: “Spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and donkeys!” These are analogies enlisted to justify a thirst for vengeance not only against Hamas but against the Palestinian people as a whole—an impulse to kill without end.

Hamas’s attack may have been no less enraging than such tales from religious scripture or the state-sanctioned Cossack attacks against defenseless Jews in the Pale of Settlement, but it was produced by very different forces: it was an attack by a nationalist, Islamist armed party against a powerful state that maintains control over the fate of the Palestinian people. Scholars of Jewish history have worked for decades to understand how the structural conditions of diasporic life changed when Israel’s creation drew many Jewish people back into modern history as agents of their own future, asserting sovereign dominance, maintaining a monopoly of force with a strong and capable army, controlling a state, occupying territory, and carrying out violence of their own—and what those changes meant for the collective rights of the state’s non-Jewish inhabitants.

After the conquest of 1967 in particular, redemptive Israeli rhetoric stressed the messianic possibilities of territorial acquisition and the sanctity of military power. The Israeli philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz long ago recognized the danger of such ideas. “This is latter day Sabbateanism,” he remarked in a 1974 interview, “a modern incarnation of false prophecy, a prostitution of the Jewish religion in the interest of chauvinism and lust for power.” Soon after Israel conquered the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights, Leibowitz understood the implications of the occupation: “The only concern of the monstrosity called ‘the undivided land of Israel’ would be the maintenance of its system of rule and administration.”

A great deal has been written about the Israeli “decision not to decide” on the fate of these territories and the Palestinians living there. Many diverse critics insisted that Israel’s extension of military power would only serve to catalyze violence and lead to further dehumanization, that it would be no substitute for political engagement. The failed “peace process” of the 1990s and the suicide bombings of the early 2000s—when several Palestinian factions, including Hamas and

Fatah, targeted civilians and soldiers across Israel and the occupied territories—intensified the country’s right-wing political turn. Living in the West Bank at the time, I remember the fear unleashed by the attacks and the scale of the mass incursions by the Israeli army that followed. But there was also a deeper militarization of thinking, presaging wider trends in the region and the world. In the Hebrew press after September 11, commentators invoked the emerging American “war on terror” as something Israelis had long been fighting. Hamas then was al-Qaeda; the West Bank had to be neutralized to root it out; Gaza had to be bombed into regime change, just like Iraq and Afghanistan.

During these years Israel’s leaders also refined strategies for sidelining Palestinian national aspirations, quashing legal efforts to instill accountability in international forums like the UN Security Council or the International Criminal Court and suppressing alternative forms of protest, including peaceful resistance like the longstanding protests in the West Bank village of Bilin during the early 2000s or the 2018 Great March of Return in Gaza, where Israelis used live ammunition to kill hundreds of protesters and maim thousands. More recently, Netanyahu has been encouraged by a new culture of international permissiveness, led by the United States. The logic of the US-mediated Abraham Accords in 2020 was that Israel could pursue normalization with various Arab states without any meaningful movement on Palestinian self-determination.

Meanwhile, the expansion of the settlements, the entrenchment of a bureaucracy for controlling the Palestinian population, the corrosive ramifications of dual legal systems for Jewish settlers and Palestinians, and the explicit calls for further expulsions of Palestinians from their homes have only accelerated. Before he took office as minister of finance, the far-right settler leader Bezalel Smotrich wrote a startling, detailed text called “Israel’s Decisive Plan,” a blueprint for enacting a second Nakba and vanquishing Palestinian national identity. “It’s a mistake,” Smotrich told Palestinian members of the Knesset in 2021, “that Ben-Gurion didn’t finish the job and didn’t throw you out in 1948.” Recently the Israeli news website *Local Call* published an Israeli Ministry of Intelligence document from October 13 that recommends “the forcible and permanent transfer of the Gaza Strip’s 2.2 million Palestinian residents to Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula.”

Israel's insistence on "destroying Hamas" by causing mass civilian casualties and dispossession in Gaza is rooted in this longer-held desire to make "the Palestinian question" disappear. The scholar Raz Segal has called the wrath currently being unleashed in Gaza a "textbook case of genocide," a shocking turn of phrase for all of us who made sense of that term through the experience of European Jewry in the twentieth century. But Palestinian and Arab writers have long warned against the current attempt to eviscerate the Palestinian people, as have prophetic critics within the Jewish tradition and dissenting voices inside Israel itself. By disavowing the moral consequences of state power and sovereignty, Israel's leaders and many within Israeli society—as well as staunch supporters abroad—refuse to admit that they can be both victims and perpetrators. ~~one can be both a victim and a perpetrator.~~

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We might be better equipped to confront impoverished and lachrymose narratives about the Jewish past if we make greater room for contingency in our historical thinking. Moments of profound rupture like this one have implications that take decades to see. In the years that followed Israel's creation, traditional Zionist historiography shifted from focusing on Jewish powerlessness to thinking about the responsibilities of a Jewish state and army; after 1973, the state's lack of preparedness in the face of a surprise attack from the Arab military shifted revisionist scholarly attention toward Israel's failures of diplomatic imagination.

I have been thinking recently of another such moment. Last summer was the fortieth anniversary of the first Lebanon War, which began in June 1982, when Israel invaded Lebanon with the stated aim of targeting militants from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Despite a pledge for a limited incursion, the Israeli government, led by Prime Minister Menachem Begin, expressed far wider ambitions to rout out Palestinian nationalism. The army soon encircled the capital Beirut, while in the southern city of Sidon, the ground invasion and bombing campaign destroyed entire homes and hospitals, leveling the Palestinian refugee camp of Ain al-Hilweh.

The 1982 Lebanon War became what some have called Israel's Vietnam. By the end of the war over 19,000 Lebanese and Palestinian combatants and civilians, 650 Israeli combatants and

civilians, and more than 240 American marines and service members were dead. The PLO was expelled to Tunis, reconstituting Palestinian politics both in the diaspora and on the ground in Palestine, paving the way for the PLO's international recognition by Europe and the United States, and contributing to the outbreak of the first intifada. South Lebanon was occupied by Israeli forces and the South Lebanon Army (SLA), which remained there until Israel withdrew its forces and the SLA collapsed in 2000. Local opposition militias evolved into Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed paramilitary organization that in the 1980s emerged as a central player in the region.

Meanwhile a movement of military refusal emerged in Israel itself, starting in the opening days of the war, when combat veterans founded a group called Yesh Gvul ("There Is a Limit") to advocate for conscientious objection. The shocking accounts and images of the Sabra and Shatila massacre in September 1982—when IDF-backed Phalangist forces murdered between eight hundred and three thousand Palestinian refugees, including infants, children, and pregnant women—temporarily pierced support for Israel within the Jewish diaspora and brought 10 percent of the Israeli population into the streets. Many began questioning Israel's use of force and the eliminationist thinking about Palestinians that had enabled the violence, while others charged Israel's critics with promoting antisemitic blood libels. Despite the PLO's dispersal, the Palestinian quest for self-determination intensified. As the CIA's National Intelligence Estimate argued in November 1982, "Israel has been surprised to discover that its military victory has not produced the expected political dividends and seems to have strengthened its antagonists' political hand."

It was during the 1982 Lebanon War that Israel's army made its first entry into an Arab capital, fighting in city blocks and the narrow streets of refugee camps. As the Hebrew writers Ilana Hammerman and Irit Gal captured in *From Beirut to Jenin* [FN: Am Oved, 2002], their slim volume of testimonies from soldiers across infantry, armored corps, artillery, and the air force, the first Lebanon War was full of gaping performance failures in the field, war crimes, and intelligence coverups that loosened the military's ethics and anticipated its current pervasive culture of impunity.

The war also established the template for the Israeli saturation bombing of cities without due regard for civilian life—a precedent for the collective punishment of the civilian population in the West Bank during the second intifada and in the Gaza Strip today. In early August 1982 a young Thomas Friedman, then serving as the *New York Times* correspondent in Beirut, cabled his editors rebuking them for removing the word “indiscriminate” from a headline describing the relentless shelling of the city’s western half: “You were afraid to tell our readers and those who might complain to you that the Israelis are capable of indiscriminately shelling an entire city.” At the height of the second intifada, some of the pilots who refused their orders to bomb schools and hospitals in 1982 invoked their choices in an open letter. How many of the pilots who have been protesting the Netanyahu government for months will make the same decision when asked to destroy civilian targets now?<sup>1</sup>

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The saturation bombing of Beirut in the summer of 1982 was met with widespread international condemnation and pointed criticism from the United States. Among the critics was Ronald Reagan, who wrote in his diary in late July about the US’s support for a UN ceasefire vote (15–0) and the deployment of UN observers on the scene: “Israel will scream about the latter, but so be it. The slaughter must stop.” In another diary entry from August 12, 1982, Reagan wrote:

Met with the news the Israelis delivered the most devastating bomb & artillery attack on W. Beirut lasting 14 hours. Habib cabled—desperate—has basic agreement from all parties but can’t arrange details of P.L.O. withdrawal because of the barrage. King Fahd called begging me to do something. I told him I was calling P.M. Begin immediately. And I did—I was angry—I told him it had to stop or our entire future relationship was endangered. I used the word holocaust deliberately & said the symbol of his war was becoming a picture of a 7 month old baby with its arms blown off. He told me he had ordered the bombing stopped—I asked about the artillery fire. He claimed the P.L.O. had

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<sup>1</sup> In a September 2023 CBS [60 Minutes interview](#) about the protests, Israeli reserve combat helicopter fighter Shira Eting told Leslie Stahl that “If you want pilots to be able to fly, and shoot bombs and missiles into houses knowing they might be killing children, they must have the strongest confidence in the people making those decisions.”

started that & Israeli forces had taken casualties. End of call. Twenty mins. later he called to tell me he'd ordered an end to the barrage and pled for our continued friendship.

Forty years later, such a call would be considered treasonous. Instead of calming the waters, in the past three weeks the White House, Brussels, and 10 Downing Street have performed selective gestures of grief and doubled down on their refusals to rein in Israel's actions.

On October 13 the State Department issued directives to staff not to use the phrases “de-escalation/ceasefire,” “end to violence/bloodshed,” or “restoring calm.” The State Department's Office of Palestinian Affairs deleted a tweet condemning the Hamas attack and urging “all sides to refrain from violence and retaliatory attacks,” replacing it with a statement of unequivocal condemnation alone. A ministerial aide was sacked from Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's government for calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. The British home secretary, Suella Braverman, called pro-Palestinian demonstrations in London “hate marches,” only to be one-upped by President Biden's press secretary, Karine Jean-Pierre, who compared such protesters to the white supremacists who marched on Charlottesville.

During his visit to Israel and in his subsequent remarks, President Biden has not only failed to meaningfully contend with Palestinian death but outright questioned the number of casualties in Gaza, in comments that ignited fury across the streets of Arab and Western capitals. “I have no notion that the Palestinians are telling the truth about how many people are killed,” he told a reporter on October 25. “I'm sure innocents have been killed, and it's the price of waging a war.” On October 13 the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, shook the hand of Israel's president, Isaac Herzog, just as he finished saying that “it is an entire nation out there that is responsible” for Hamas's attack. Hundreds of staff members of EU institutions excoriated von der Leyen in a letter warning that the EU is “losing all credibility and the position as a fair, equitable and humanist broker.”

It is hard to defend the Biden administration's actions even on strictly political grounds. Israel's operations in Gaza could provoke a regional war: aside from the dangerous skirmishes on the Lebanese border, which could open a second military front with Hezbollah, there have been

escalations from other Iranian proxies across the region, implicating Iraq, Syria, and Yemen; mounting pressure on Egypt and Jordan to deal with the Palestinians massing at the Gaza border and under threat of expulsion by Israeli settlers in the West Bank; and the inevitable fallout across Jewish and Arab communities outside the Middle East. Failing to prevent a conflict on that scale would hardly protect Americans abroad and at home.

That members of the Biden administration seem not to see this reality, or choose to ignore it in a bid to maintain some form of regional or global hegemony, suggests that its officials lack a basic understanding of the region's history and politics. After October 7 the administration's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, made hasty post-publication edits to his latest *Foreign Affairs* essay on US foreign policy, revising unrealistic platitudes about Biden's success in the Middle East. As early as October 15, the US's ability to act effectively in the region was eroding: Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman kept Secretary of State Antony Blinken waiting for hours; Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi dismissed any suggestion that his country would take in Palestinians expelled from the Gaza Strip. In recent weeks scores of State Department employees have launched trenchant criticisms of the White House on the dissent channel, and on October 18 a senior State Department official who signs off on arms sales resigned over Biden's policies. Americans tend to be short on historical thinking, even given the country's recent experience in Iraq, but many of them may soon begin to understand the dangers of a new regional war.

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In language replicated across Europe, several prominent US spokespeople have underscored the extent of their support for Israel by invoking Jewish history and the Holocaust. "I come before you not only as the United States secretary of state but also as a Jew," Blinken told an audience during his visit to Tel Aviv, citing his stepfather's experience in the Holocaust as a reference point for the trauma of October 7. Israeli officials have drawn the parallel still more sharply: the country's representative to the UN, Gilad Erdan, and his staff have started wearing yellow stars of David to the chamber. But it is clear by now that the violence being unleashed in Gaza is engendering further ethnic cleansing, this time against a non-Jewish population. By greenlighting it, the Biden administration has both linked the US to a new forever war and enlisted the

American public into what Leibowitz—writing in 1968 against religious arguments for annexing the occupied territories—called the “transformation of Jewish religion into a camouflage for Israeli nationalism.” It is a conflation that many of us have studiously tried to untangle.

At minimum there are discrete, immediate actions we can all take, including calling for a ceasefire, the allowance of humanitarian aid into Gaza, and the end of Israel’s threats to displace Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank en masse—all necessary measures to open a diplomatic channel for the release of the captives still being held in Gaza and the Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails. Even these basic principles are under attack: Israel’s ambassador has slanderously charged the secretary general of the UN with “justifying terrorism”; progressive politicians like Senator Bernie Sanders have been unwilling to call for more than a “humanitarian pause” to the fighting; the leader of the British opposition defied members of his own party who have urged a ceasefire. Perhaps this lack of courage is not surprising, given that Israel’s own leadership has taken an approach to bombing Gaza that many of its own domestic critics are agonized to see will not prioritize the safety of the captives.

Under circumstances like these, it is hardly surprising that our collective outrage and grief have left us begging politicians for a cessation of killing and immediate humanitarian aid. This instinct might be necessary, but it also reiterates our faith in the status quo. In addition to contending with the West’s sordid contributions to the violence in Palestine and Israel, we need to imagine alternative political arrangements rooted in values of equity and justice. The current crisis is as much a failure of politics as it is a failure of imagination.

No amount of historical understanding can prevent people from indulging their worst capacity for violence. But there is also the capacity for love. If we are to learn anything in a time of war, we must listen closely to members of the bereaved families: those just burying their mothers, fathers, and children in the south of Israel, and those still likely unable to find gravesites for theirs in Gaza. Among them are some of the only truth-tellers worth paying any attention to, those who call not for retribution but for a cessation of rage. In this frenzy of killing and death, we need to pause long enough to hear their voices. During the first Lebanon War the late

Lebanese American artist and writer Etel Adnan wrote a poem called “Beirut 1982.” I have been trying to listen closely to one of its verses now:

Let us not hurry to our  
Doom  
let us stop and look at the Sea.

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