

“I don’t want to make accusations here, but to try to make an assessment, to be able to determine the degree to which I, as an anti-Zionist, am willing to actively show solidarity with various Palestinian groups. Nonetheless, there remains an accusation on some level, but it is not directed against the Palestinians. It is directed against the local left, which has difficulties in making anti-imperialist politics through an analysis and assessment of a situation (and thus could come to critical support of anti-imperialist movements – an attitude that would require an ongoing process of political learning). Instead, there is often only uncritical identification with such movements. But if we don’t see these movements with open eyes, we run the risk of becoming disappointed or disillusioned later – without having learned anything. Instead, the next object of identification is selected. This anti-imperialism is like the RAF’s attitude towards violence: movements are justified in terms of their cause, not in terms of their political effects.” - Moishe Postone, “Stammheim and Tel Zataar,” 1977<sup>1</sup>

I fear that the American left’s adoption of the semiotics of Palestinian nationalism as the principle means of voicing opposition to American diplomatic and military support for Israeli warcrimes is an example of justifying a movement in terms of its cause, rather than in terms of its political effects. This adoption of Palestinian nationalism is most complete and pronounced within the student movements, which have become the center of this universe.

Almost 50 years after professor Postone wrote the words that open this piece, I find myself in the same position. To what degree am I willing to actively show solidarity with Palestinian nationalism?

I am convinced he is right about how to frame the answer to this question—as a matter of considering political effect rather than of political cause.

The root of the present problem in my local left stems from a specific opening move: to insist that one not judge the October 7th attacks for their effects, but for what caused them.

One of the faculty supportive of the student protest put it this way:

“ Hamas’ attack was horrific, and I think it was a war crime, and I think that questions about Hamas are a distraction,” she added. “So neither attacks by Hamas, nor violent settlers, should be overlooked or understated in importance, and comparing them is also not helpful. But what they both accomplish politically is they distract from the same thing, which is a massive settler colonial project which at the present has turned to genocide.”<sup>2</sup>

The focus should be on the cause of October 7th—“a massive settler colonial project turned genocide”—and not on the effects of October 7th (which we will get into shortly). My basic reservation about joining my local left’s endorsement of Palestinian nationalism stems from my suspicion around this opening move.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://determinatenegation.wordpress.com/2021/06/12/moishe-postone-stammheim-and-tel-zataar-1977/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://chicagomaroon.com/40665/news/pro-palestinian-uchicago-professors-discuss-gaza-crisis-in-divinity-students-association-panel/>

I do not think that October 7th was merely caused. I think it was planned. In fact, I think it was well planned. This is to say that I think October 7th was intended to have certain political effects.

I think that we should consider what those were. In my reading, October 7th was planned with three primary effects in mind: the expected, the probable and the hoped for.<sup>3</sup>

The expected political effect of October 7th was war with Israel. I do not think that the military-political leadership responsible for Operation Al-Aqsa Flood expected it to win a decisive strategic victory in this war. 3,000 fighters operating with minimal logistical support does not look like the beginning of a strategically significant offensive military operation. That these 3,000 fighters did not seem to possess military objectives beyond “kill or capture all immediately present IDF forces,” and that dominant portions of their attention were directed at villages and a music festival, confirms that the expected effect of October 7th was not a military victory.

The expected effect of October 7th was, instead, to provoke an overwhelming Israeli retaliation. In a very real way, the turn from “massive settler colonial project” to “genocide” seems to have been the deliberate and obvious intention of one of the two main existent Palestinian nationalist political organizations, Hamas. And in this, one could say that October 7th was extremely successful.

Why would Hamas intentionally invite a massive Israeli invasion of Gaza? This brings us to the probable political effect of October 7th: scuttling the Abraham Accords before Saudi Arabia could seal the deal.

The Abraham Accords were the cornerstone of Trump-era Middle East policy. An American team, publicly led by the President’s son-in-law Jared Kushner, endeavored to negotiate a series of bi-lateral agreements between the US and Arab majority nations to secure their recognition of the state of Israel. The intended effects of such a strategy were to remove the Palestinian factions themselves from the discussion of the status of Israeli statehood, and ultimately to isolate them from historical allies. They were the first instances of Arab states normalizing diplomatic relations with Israel since the Jordanians did in 1994, when the Clinton-era efforts seemed possible.

The deals involved were explicitly transactional. Morocco agreed to recognize Israel if the US agreed to recognize Morocco’s sovereignty over the Western Sahara. Sudan agreed to recognize Israel in exchange for being removed from the state sponsors of terror list alongside a \$1.2 billion dollar loan that served as a kind of debt re-structuring agreement for the government’s existing obligations to the World Bank. This general strategy, which appeared to be generating success (from a mainstream American foreign policy perspective) was adopted by the Biden administration and the negotiations were expanded to non-Arab, muslim majority countries around the world: Indonesia, Niger, Somalia.

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<sup>3</sup> Important disclaimer: I am not by any means an expert on these issues. I am a historian of 17th century England. I’m just doing my best as a critical member of our community. The analysis that follows should be interpreted in that light.

All of this began with Kushner's negotiations with the UAE and Bahrain, a clear signal that the ultimate prize was to sign a bi-lateral agreement with Saudi Arabia for the recognition of Israel. The deal, as it stands, would see the US agree to a "NATO-like" security partnership with Saudi Arabia, and to transfer them technology to enable a domestic nuclear energy program, in exchange for the Saudi recognition of Israel's statehood.

Saudi Arabia and Israel have been de facto cooperating since the early-mid-2010s, particularly because of their shared concerns about the increasing regional influence of Iran after the American dismantlement of Saddam's regime in Iraq. But there is widespread popular opposition in Saudi Arabia to transforming these back-channel relations into formal diplomatic partnerships. The Saudi component of the Abraham Accords is quite fragile.

From the perspective of Hamas, Saudi participation in the Abraham Accords was likely seen as an existential political threat. Hamas knows that its existence as a coherent political party is dependent on its relations with possible patrons. The Qataris are extremely helpful, but their carefully guarded neutrality means they are unwilling to pay for anything more than Gaza's civilian governmental sector. This means that Hamas, should they wish to preserve the ability to pose some kind of military threat to Israeli statehood, needs another regional patron.

There are theoretically four options: Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia or Iran.

The relationship between Hamas and Egypt is fundamentally colored by the complicated legacy of Sunni Islamist political movements in Egypt and their primarily antagonistic relationship to the secular state. This makes meaningful military partnership between Hamas and Sisi's Egypt almost certainly impossible. The two sides do not trust each other.

Erdogan's Turkey is much more politically hospitable to Hamas, and indeed the two governments share meaningful financial connections and symbolic diplomacy. However, Turkey's complicated status as a NATO partner, and thus its intimate security arrangement with the US, means that the relationship between Turkey and Hamas is forced to remain fairly clandestine. Hamas can use Turkey to attempt to access Western financial networks, but they should not expect Turkey's military to ever support its struggle against Israel.

If Hamas is structurally unlikely to receive support from either Egypt or Turkey, that leaves two options: Saudi Arabia and Iran. If the Abraham Accords are signed, that will more or less officially remove Saudi Arabia from that list as well. Hamas would be left with only one option, Iran. And a single option is no option at all, it is a necessity.

Such a diplomatic landscape would force Hamas into a corner. The nominal political commitment of the Lebanese Shi'ite Hezbollah to the destruction of the state of Israel and to the assistance of other nationalist groups helps lubricate the relations between Hamas and Iran, but the confessional differences make it an awkward fit. For example, Hamas (along with Turkey and the US) voiced support for the Saudi Arabian war in Yemen against the Houthis, and Hamas likewise refused to help the Iranian-backed Shi'ite forces in the Syrian civil war, choosing to back Sunni rebel forces instead.

This is a really long way of saying: Saudi Arabia signing the Abraham Accords was an existential threat to Hamas because it would have consigned them, permanently, to the status of “junior partner” in the confessional politics of the Iranian-led coalition, at least as long as they intended to preserve the possibility of a military struggle against the state of Israel through playing the patronage game.

This, then, was the real heart of the intended effects of October 7th: to freeze the possibility of Saudi participation in the Abraham Accords by provoking an extraordinary amount of Israeli state violence to be brought down on the people of Gaza. And amongst the rubble, Saudi Arabian popular political support for the Palestinian cause in general, and for Hamas in particular, would make it impossible for the monarchy to seal the deal with the Americans.

Incidentally, this was the same basic strategy that was used by Saddam Hussein in early 1991. Saddam fired 42 Scud missiles at Tel Aviv and Haifa on the same day that US-led forces began their bombing campaign in Kuwait and Iraq, a last ditch effort to fragment Arab cooperation with US forces by provoking an Israeli retaliation. Significant US pressure forced the Israelis to do nothing in response, and that was the end of it. Generating popular political pressure for (or against) a political cause by engaging in violence against Israel is a classic regional strategy, one that Palestinian nationalist movements are very, very well aware of.

I realize that this long journey into regional politics may seem to be guilty of the charge of being just a “distraction” from the extreme violence occurring in Gaza right now. Until one realizes that in many ways, this is *exactly* what that violence is most immediately about. That violence was the intended effect of a planned attack, and the attack was initiated with a clear political goal in mind: to prevent the Saudi Arabian consecration of the Abraham Accords.

To focus on the effects of October 7th, rather than the causes of October 7th, introduces a much more complicated political problem to the framing of this as about imperialism or settler-colonialism, and begins to involve other issues (for example, the overwhelming centrality of fossil fuels to the political economy of the region, or the complicated relationship between many of these governments and progressive politics of all kinds).

And it certainly makes me nervous about uncritically identifying with Palestinian nationalism, even if the organizations that advocate for such things domestically on American college campuses anchor that central goal of Palestinian nationalism within a broader coalition of Western-left positions. I do not mean to suggest that these affiliations are not sincere, either. But I do think they are complicated.

The final effect of October 7th, what Hamas might have hoped for as a kind of “best possible scenario,” was that the scale of violence in Gaza would force the hands of the Iranian-backed coalition into engaging in a true regional war against Israel. This would have the benefit of sidelining the Saudis from the conflict, as despite their “real politic” reasons for wanting to intervene against the Iranians it would be popular political suicide for the monarchy to actively go to war in defense of the state of Israel. Hamas and Iran could deal with the Israelis without having to worry about fighting the Saudi coalition at the same time.

This was, admittedly, an ambitious hope. But given the events of the last 7 months, it is hardly one that seems totally foolish or impossible. Such a war would not just have been fought in Gaza or Israel, but in Lebanon and Syria and—especially—Iraq (that is another story which involves an older nationalist darling of the American left, the Kurds). It is a great boon to the world that Hezbollah and Iran have thus far declined to escalate to such heights, despite how far all sides have been willing to push the envelope. Although we are not out of the woods yet.

For what should be obvious reasons I am totally unwilling to show any solidarity with Israeli nationalist movements. They are engaged in wide-scale warcrimes presently affecting the lives of millions, although exactly what to call such crimes is admittedly above my pay-grade.<sup>4</sup>

Yet I remain skeptical of showing solidarity with Palestinian nationalism, because in many ways this horrible situation was in fact a discrete political goal of one of the principle real-world organizations that currently stewards the Palestinian nationalist movement. And my local left is telling me that such things are not relevant to this moment, that they are distractions. Not only should I not bring attention to them, I should—deep down—understand their logics and sympathize with them.

I do. I really, truly do. But I am not willing to equate understanding or sympathy with political endorsement. In fact, I think doing so is an abdication of political responsibility. It is to have a politics of causes, not of effects. It is to conceal the real political objectives of actual Palestinian nationalist organizations in the region. And it is to render illegible a much broader geopolitical story that US foreign policy is, for better or worse, at the very heart of.

I think that there are two political effects that I would really like my local left to organize for.

The first is an extremely clear stance on ceasefire and negotiation, and demanding that the US do everything conceivably possible and more to force Israel to accept that ceasefire yesterday, and without launching a ground invasion into Rafah. “Hands off Rafah” is a slogan I would shout.

The second is to create a compelling popular political movement that advocates for re-structuring the American relationship to Israel in order to promote maximum pressure on the Israeli government to make meaningful concessions towards Palestinian statehood. That means sanctions and the ending of military assistance alongside the refusal to provide diplomatic cover in the UN and other international bodies.

But I do not know why one has to phrase these demands through the semiotics of Palestinian nationalism. This is particularly true because the attendant rhetoric is massively controversial in

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<sup>4</sup> I think we should be carefully considered here if we hope for that sliver of a chance of international justice that might, in time, be possible. And lessening the rhetorical distance our immediate demands must travel to be considered factually correct by something like a political center seems like good tactics. It would be enough to classify the IDF as a unit that has committed a “gross violation of human rights” in order to trigger the Leahy Laws, for example. This law is named after a senator from Vermont (just saying, certain Chicago Alum in the senate).

ways that these other demands (despite their radicality, their departure from the status quo) are not.

If one is interested in political effects rather than political causes, I worry that it is the semiotics of Palestinian nationalism which are the distraction. Thus, I am not only suspicious of the uncritical adoption of Palestinian nationalism by my local left for geopolitical reasons, but for strategic reasons related to achieving domestic-US political transformation. And the domestic-US political stakes seem to me quite high.

For all of these reasons, I am disappointed that the student movement opposing American involvement in Israeli warcrimes has adopted such a complete identification with Palestinian nationalism. Professor Postone seemed to have felt a similar disappointment in 1977:

“Can’t we stand on our own two feet? ... We became leftists by refusing to let this society dumb us down any longer. Our powerlessness made us all too susceptible to new forms of dumbing down.”

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With all of that said, I have decided to vote in the affirmative, that my graduate student union should endorse the encampment on the quad.

My local left is what I have. And I am so lucky. Their tenacity and organization, their care. Their trust.

I might personally think that the uncritical adoption of Palestinian nationalism is a form of dumbing down. I might personally think it is also a political mistake. But I love and trust my friends more.

To what extent am I willing to show active solidarity with Palestinian nationalism?

The answer is: to the extent that I trust, care for and believe in my friends.

I hope they would extend me this same trust, and think critically about what I have said here.

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