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OPINION

I'm terrified and torn on this dark anniversary, and by what's yet to come



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Nearly 40 years ago, I stood on a street corner in Jerusalem taking a straw poll on Israeli attitudes towards nuclear weapons. My interest was sparked by the fact that in late 1986 a young Jewish scientist, Mordechai Vanunu, was abducted by Mossad agents in Rome and smuggled back to Israel in a crate.

His crime? To reveal the secrets of Israel's nuclear weapons program to *The Sunday Times* of London, a crime Vanunu saw as an act of conscience, but one his country regarded as treason. Vanunu, the son of orthodox Jewish parents, had converted to Christianity in a Sydney church a few months before his kidnapping and would end up spending 18 years in an Israeli prison, 11 of them in solitary confinement.



Palestinian children wounded in an Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip are treated in a hospital in Deir al-Balah last month. AP

I wanted to ask Israelis: why no opposition to his abduction, why no public discussion about the country's nuclear program? (Israel was then thought to possess up to 200 nuclear weapons.)

A rabbi explained it thus. "Logically," he said, "nuclear arms should be an immediate problem, but they aren't [and that's] because we are engaged in conventional war and that is what is absorbing our physical and ethical energy. Besides, when you've already experienced a holocaust, nothing can be worse than that. There is no heat hotter than the ovens of Auschwitz."

I have never forgotten that phrase because it helps explain to me why Israel will go to whatever lengths it deems appropriate to ensure the security of its people. "No heat hotter than the ovens of Auschwitz" means nothing could be worse than the extermination of 6 million Jews during the Holocaust. "No heat hotter" means "never again" and it suggests, too, that no amount of injury to an enemy could ever rival the collective Jewish suffering.

Which makes the Jewish people – my own people – the ultimate victims of history, victims who have – over the past nearly six decades – also learnt, in the form of the Jewish state, to become the oppressors of a broken people.



People in Tel Aviv attend a rally demanding a ceasefire deal and the immediate release of hostages. AP

That is the victim-vanquisher psychology that has governed Israeli [policy towards the Palestinians](#) for generations, and the Israeli psyche that came into shocking focus a year ago after Hamas-led armed groups invaded southern Israel, murdering nearly 1200 and abducting 250 others. It was the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust: civilians shot at close range, women raped and tortured, children executed in front of their parents, bodies mutilated, families burnt alive in what Human Rights Watch reported were “war crimes and crimes against humanity.”

Israel responded with a fury that has still not abated. “I have ordered a complete siege on the Gaza Strip,” announced Israel’s defence minister, Yoav Gallant, on October 9. “There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed ... We are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly.”

One year later, the world knows what “acting accordingly” means. The Gaza Strip is a charnel house of slaughter, disease and hunger, with over 42,000 people dead, including more than 16,000 children, and thousands almost certainly still buried under the rubble. Israel claims that 15,000 of those killed were “terrorists”.

I understand the threats that Israel faces, threats that few, if any, nations in the world ever have to contemplate. I understand, too, that Hamas and Hezbollah, with Iranian backing, are sworn to the destruction of Israel and that Israel is justified in seeking to counter these threats.

But in order to obliterate Hamas in Gaza, Israel has also, during this past year, obliterated an entire people’s means of existence: [starving them](#), terrorising them, denying them adequate supplies of food, water and medicine, destroying farmland, while also razing to the ground schools, universities, hospitals, churches, mosques, heritage sites and hundreds of thousands of homes.

How can one bear to watch a country that claims to represent Jewish people destroy so utterly the very fabric of a society? I know I can’t, and I know that an increasing number of Jews, here and around the world, can’t either.

And yet, truth be told, I am torn in multiple directions – between my belief in Israel’s right to defend itself and my horror over what it has done in Gaza; between my abhorrence for Netanyahu’s marauding right-wing government and my even greater abhorrence for – and fear of – Hamas’ murderous doctrine; between the very legitimate security concerns Israel has, and the very legitimate rights of Palestinians everywhere to resist brutal occupation.

I am also torn between my condemnation of Israel’s almost certain war crimes in Gaza and the terrifying rise in antisemitism, here and around the world, and, no, not just because antisemitism has been conflated with criticism of Israel, but because hatred is being directed at Jews of all political persuasions.

I am torn between my revulsion over what Israel has done to Palestinian society – and is currently doing to Lebanese society – and my relief, barely uttered until now, that Israel might be on track to destroy Hezbollah, as well as strike a blow against its vile theocratic sponsors in Tehran. (Can you hear the private rejoicing in much of the Arab world?)

And here’s a bit more of my ripped and shredded soul on this darkest of anniversaries: I am torn by what to think and who to listen to because I know that nobody – including me – has the remotest idea of how to solve the world’s most intractable and deadly conflict. The more you know, the more you know you don’t know.

All roads now point to a regional war given that Washington seems no longer to be calling for Israeli restraint, short of not attacking Iran’s underground nuclear facilities. For the past year, Israel has continued to act unrestrained by the pleas of the United States – as well as sorely tested allies around the world – to not use disproportionate force against an exposed and vulnerable people in pursuit of Hamas militants; to not keep its forces in Gaza, but rather accept a ceasefire that would end the nightmare of 101 hostages (both alive and dead) still held in tunnels; to not launch a ground invasion of Lebanon, but to seek a diplomatic solution that could allow tens of thousands of Lebanese and Israelis to return to their homes on respective sides of the border.

To no avail.

As you read this, Jewish people are marking the high holy day period – Teshuvah – one that asks us to reflect upon the year that has been, and the year that will be. This is one final reflection: I am terrified that there is, in fact, a “heat hotter than the ovens of Auschwitz”, and it is the nuclear holocaust a young Israeli scientist was trying to prevent four decades ago; that Israel must be restrained by its friends from prosecuting a forever war that could engulf us all; that despite the provocations directed at the country, all the military and technological might in the world will never bring security, nor defeat the ideology that informs Hamas and Hezbollah. Nor, indeed, the idea that burns in the hearts of hundreds of millions the world over, namely the rights of Palestinians to their dignity and self-determination.

“I am not a number and I do not consent to my death being passing news,” wrote Palestinian author Noor Aldeen Hajjaj a month before he was killed in Gaza last year. “Say, too, that I love life, happiness, freedom, children’s laughter, the sea, coffee, writing, [Lebanese singer] Fairouz, everything that is joyful – though these things will all disappear in the space of a moment.”

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