

Patrick Lawrence:

“Innocent Israelis”

Indifference in the desert.

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Of all the gruesome images and stomach-turning news reports to come out of Israel since Hamas launched its daring attack across the Gaza border last Saturday, one incident stays stubbornly with me. It occurred early on the morning of the assault near a kibbutz called Re'im, which lies in the Negev Desert just inside the boundary separating Israel and Gaza.

A large group of young people—hundreds, it seems—were having an all-night rave, according to press reports, when an unstated number of Palestinian troops paraglided across the border and landed amid the festivities. A witness said 50 more militiamen then arrived in vans. Death, mayhem, and panic ensued as the Gaza militias fired into the crowd and then continued firing as ravers ran for their lives. This incident, now much-noted, was among the bloodiest of the early hours of this new phase in the long war between Gaza and Israel, although the latter has already begun to deliver worse. Survivors and a local rescue agency put the dead at 260 and called it a massacre.

A rave, should you not know the social nomenclature, is a gathering of partiers among whom it is understood more or less anything goes. In my very limited experience, at a serious rave the shared thought is that no one has any thoughts: You leave behind your mind, your obligations, all connection to what we quaintly call the real world. You lose yourself, in a phrase, at least until your fantasy of escape exhausts itself.

What is it that causes the events at Re'im to linger in my mind? Having given this some thought, I conclude it has something to do with the old, archetypal encounter between innocence and experience. The imagery could not have been more directly to this point: There were these partiers with nothing on their minds set to rave it up for who knows how long, and out of the sky come heavily armed troops with a lot on their minds. The scene of a revel becomes the scene of horror. Youthful innocents, hardened militants with deadly intent: It was hard to miss the metaphysics.

The media accounts of the Re'im attack are many but sketchy and too reliant on official Israeli sources. The first video I saw, published without attribution in the *New York Post*, is 47

seconds and poorly recorded. *The New York Times* published another, of better quality, on Monday evening. There is enough in the plentiful press coverage and the footage of the scene, however well or badly done, to consider very carefully what exactly it is we are being told and shown about the Re'im incident, and so about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict altogether. This is not a new question. It arises every time the 75–year conflict between the state of Israel and the Palestinian population it displaced at its founding erupts into open violence as it just has. Now we must pose this question yet again: We owe a proper answer to the Palestinians, to the Israelis, and to ourselves.



The interpretation Western governments and corporate media have imposed on the available imagery since last Saturday has been as uniform and predictable as it is simplistic. It is as easily described as it is utterly standard: Virtuous, decent, minding-their-business Israelis encounter the “terrorists,” the “gunmen,” the “killers” of Gaza. The power of this rendering of events is beyond dispute, prevalent as it has been for many decades. With minor variations, it survives intact no matter what may transpire between Israel and the Palestinian Territories. It is impervious, let’s say, to history.

To consider the Re'im attack as an event in history, it seems to me there is something very off about a group of young and privileged Israelis having a carefree weekend in the sand hard by a land of daily, incessant suffering, a place where the innocence of its children and youth has been stolen by the state wherein the partiers do their partying. Something very off: By this I mean the revelers betrayed themselves as profoundly irresponsible, so it seems to me. Maybe unconsciously and maybe not, to me they displayed that indifference toward the lives of others for which many Israelis have unfortunately made their nation well-known.

For some days after violence erupted last Saturday I was struck by the absence in the mainstream coverage of any explanation as to why Hamas determined to launch an attack against a power it cannot hope to defeat. Why would the Gaza leadership decide on such a course? I eventually came upon reports indicating that the Netanyahu government had been again provoking Hamas, probably but not certainly with intent, by permitting ultranationalists to enter the grounds of the al–Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, a sacred site for Muslims.

Sequence: Hamas warned the Israeli government about such interventions on October 1. This was understood to be a Hamas red line. Three days later dozens of intentionally provocative

settlers forced their way into the mosque complex—this while thousands more had been touring the complex since Hamas issued its October 1 warning. So far as I have been able to find, accounts of these events have appeared only in *Al Jazeera* and other non-Western publications. You will search long and fruitlessly in Western media to discover the “why” of the Hamas offensive, the motive.

The al-Aqsa events may have lit the fuse, but if this is so, it is doubtful they alone explain the Hamas attacks. There are three-quarters of a century to take into account—the ad hoc persecutions and harassments, the confiscations of land, the raids on Palestinian towns, the arrests and murders—and altogether the punishing psychological humiliation of a people for 75 years. Gazans are as aware as anyone that Israel now has the most extreme-right government in its history. Even from a distance it looks as if the lines of the apartheid state will be drawn ever more sharply.

You would not believe it, but against this indefensible record, the Hamas offensive is put down as “unprovoked”—this favored new term the U.S. and its Western allies deploy to explain themselves out of this or that picture. Russia was famously unprovoked when it intervened in Ukraine last year. China is unprovoked as it builds its military and braces for a conflict across the Taiwan Strait. And now Hamas joins the list. This may be ridiculous, but we cannot call it surprising. America has never acted abroad but in the name of the highest principles. It has, since 1776, always been the innocent party—the provoked, not the provoking.

Caitlin Johnstone published a well-done column Sunday under the headline, “They’re Repeating the Word ‘Unprovoked’ Again, This Time In Defense of Israel.” In it the inimitable Johnstone quotes a preposterous list of leading American pols who immediately came forth to state that Hamas acted without provocation. To read this litany of assertions one after the other is briefly humorous but mostly offensive. “Calling Palestinian violence against Israel ‘unprovoked’ is easily even more ridiculous than calling the Russian invasion unprovoked,” Johnstone writes, “because the abuses of Israeli apartheid are so well-known by the general public at this point.”

We must understand the use to which this term is put in all cases, but let us stay for now with the events that began in Gaza and Israel last weekend. The fiction of the Hamas attacks as unprovoked is absolutely essential to the claim, as considered above, to Israeli innocence. And now to the questions that have accumulated in my mind since I picked up the paper last Saturday morning and read of the events in the desert near Re'im.

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Nobody at Re'im deserved to be killed, let there be no question of this. But did the revelers in the sands of the Negev have a claim to innocence? If so, on what would this claim rest? Taking this one step on, can people evidently indifferent to the suffering of others a few miles' distant be at the same time innocent people? What about people who appear to be fundamentally irresponsible? Note in the videos all the abandoned cars the partyers left behind: These were people who plainly achieved the age of reason. Can they be rightfully considered innocent?

You may have noticed the remarks of Yoav Gallant on Monday. The Israeli defense minister went all the way in the terrorists-killers-murderers line when announcing a "complete siege" of Gaza: Food, water, power, fuel, and medicines are all to be cut off. "We are fighting human animals and we act accordingly," Gallant declared. He chose to paraphrase rather than quote the Reich, but it is hard to miss his meaning: Palestinians are *Untermensch*, sub-humans, just as the Nazi ideologues would have put it.

Let us consider this sub-human remark in the context of our questions. What does it mean to live in a country where someone such as Yoav Gallant holds high and influential office, expresses the views he expresses, and plans the actions he plans? How can one be innocent in such a circumstance? If so, by virtue of what?

On Tuesday *The Spectator* quoted a survivor of the Hamas attack in Re'im saying, "I just want to live!" It takes a certain nerve for an Israeli to say such a thing—nerve, ignorance of history, and, I would say, indifference and irresponsibility. How many images have we seen of Palestinians fleeing the muzzles of Israeli rifles? How often must we read of Palestinians whose water supplies have been cut, whose farms have been burned, whose hospitals cannot function for lack of supplies? With this person so appreciative of human life in mind, let us consider what it means to be innocent. I think, at the outset, it is extremely difficult to be innocent in our time, in the world as we have made it—to avoid complicity, this is to say. Setting aside the very young and the otherwise powerless, who among us is not complicit, who is truly innocent?

I took up this question once before, when the September 11 Memorial and Museum opened, in May 2014, at the site of the World Trade Center towers in Lower Manhattan. All of those who lost their lives were commemorated as innocent victims in highly individuated

presentations—individuation being essential to all claims of innocence. None of those who died deserved to die, of course. But were they innocent? This was a difficult but necessary question to pose.

Those in the World Trade Center towers worked for JPMorgan Chase, Cantor Fitzgerald, Marsh and McLennan, television networks, advertising agencies, and a great variety of other banks, insurers, media companies, and the like. *The New York Times*, which published brief profiles of each of the victims, put them across as soccer dads, amateur chefs, do-it-yourself guys, good fathers and mothers, husbands and wives—innocent folk making their livings. But many of these people, maybe most, also served in the system of global capital that was and remains the cause of much exploitation and deprivation. It was their choice to work for these companies, to serve in this system. They were not innocent of this system's various forms of violence. In averting their eyes from this reality they surrendered part of their humanity to the system they served.

Personal responsibility in the way the French existentialists used this term: This was my point when I commented on the September 11 Memorial. We are all responsible for what we choose to do or not do in each moment we are alive. This is what Sartre meant by freedom: We are free to do what we like and we are responsible for our choices.

This question of responsibility, and the related matter of indifference, leads me to mention Emmanuel Lévinas, the Lithuanian-born thinker who was prominent in the postwar Parisian scene. Lévinas was preoccupied with our relations with the Other. It was necessary, he held, not only to recognize and eventually embrace others among us, but also to understand ourselves as others and—here comes the big one—that we are responsible to and for the Other in our midst and in whose presence we live. This is a matter of realizing our full humanity, as Lévinas reasoned it.

To assume the responsibilities that fall to us is to preserve some claim to innocence, it seems to me. To develop within ourselves a sense of empathy, or whatever is the opposite of indifference, is equally to retain or regain our innocence. Again, there is no defending the shootings at Re'im. But only those among the revelers who understood and assumed their responsibility for Israel's conduct and all the Yoav Gallants running the apartheid state can fairly be counted innocent of what we must recognize as a criminal regime. There is an honorable movement of such people in Israel, let us not forget. It is hard to imagine any of its members partying on the Gaza border, but let us allow for the possibility. For the rest, they must be counted as complicit.

I write of Israelis, but in truth we are all Israelis, especially we Americans. I say this not only because of the extravagant political, military, and propaganda support the U.S. provides the apartheid state. This is equally so because we face the same predicaments. The Israeli case is extreme, but is our case, the case of Americans, so much less so? Nikki Haley, and thank goodness she is a political never-will-be, appeared on Fox News Monday evening and, amid various bits of posturing nonsense, had this to say:

Let's step back because I want the American people to take this in for a second. Here the Israelis woke up and their families were murdered, women and children were taken hostage, dragged through the streets—all of this happened in front of everyone. This should be personal for every woman and every man in America.... I will say this to Prime Minister Netanyahu: Finish them. Hamas did this. You know Iran is behind them. Finish them.

Finally, at last, I am in agreement with Haley on something: Americans should indeed understand what is going on in Israel and Gaza and the Occupied Territories as very personal. We have an unfortunately prominent political figure publicly advocating war crimes—and she is very far from alone. It has come to this. Americans can either take responsibility for this or remain complicit in it. No available alternatives.

There is the question of Hamas, of course, and let us not pretend the question is simple. There is no arguing the justice of the Hamas attacks on noncombatants: There is none. Reports indicate that many of the dead were soldiers in the Israeli Defense Forces, and this is altogether another matter. Setting aside the IDF's casualties, the offensive Hamas they launched on civilians last weekend was in no particular order tactically, strategically, morally, ethically wrong. The only thing served was revenge, and revenge is never productively acted upon, never wisely served. Hamas left a lot of its claim to innocence on the ground as it tore through Re'im and elsewhere in southern Israel: There can be no question of this, all the civilian deaths for which Israel is responsible notwithstanding.

But I insist we draw a sharp distinction between what I judge irrational attacks, probably born of fatalistic frustration, and the right of all Palestinians to resist, with arms, Israel's sustained, inhumane conduct, its confinement of Gazans into what is commonly called an open-air prison. Resistance against the apartheid state's abuses is a legal right—see Security Council Resolution 37/43—as well as a moral right. I would argue it is also a responsibility Palestinians bear toward themselves and the principles that make us—sometimes, once in a while—human. In this way, resisting oppression is also a responsibility the oppressed have to the rest of us.

Who is answerable for the deaths at Re'im? This is the ultimate question, but only the first half. To say, " Hamas!" is not wrong but too shallow a reply. It is too far short of complete. To leave it at this is another form of complicity. Who is to be held accountable for the climate of abuse and violence that has characterized Israeli–Palestinian relations for 75 years? Who, we may even ask, made Hamas Hamas? These are versions of the second half of the question, the part that can lead us to assume our responsibilities and regain our humanity as we do.