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Israel and the utility of terror.

Much has already been said and written about the significance of Israel's lethal sabotage of electronic devices in Lebanon last week. It is a new kind of warfare, it suggests the vulnerability of global supply chains, the possibilities of other such operations are at this moment impossible to calculate. Yes, yes, and yes. In some way one cannot yet fathom, the Israelis have turned yet another page in the twenty-first century story, which has so far proven a dreadful story, and the new page is not altogether legible.

I think Edward Snowden has so far had the most useful word for the Israelis' diabolic subterfuge in Lebanon. "Indistinguishable from terrorism," he remarked on "X" last Tuesday. Here is the former National Security Agency contractor's [full statement](#) after the first of Israel's cyberattacks, involving the exploding pagers:

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What Israel has just done is, via **any** method, reckless. They blew up countless numbers of people who were driving (meaning cars out of control), shopping (your children are in the stroller standing behind him in the checkout line), et cetera. Indistinguishable from terrorism.

<https://t.co/th4fYwa0jr>

— Edward Snowden (@Snowden) [September 17, 2024](#)

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It has been difficult even for Israel's most committed apologists to avoid this conclusion, even if they have been chary of the term. Here is David Sanger, a long-serving *New York Times* correspondent in Washington who has, to put the matter politely, a questionable relationship with the national-security apparatus, [in last Thursday's editions](#):

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The chief effect is psychological. Just as pervasive surveillance makes people question who might have access to the phones that now contain details, treasures and secrets of one's life — pictures, text messages, credit card numbers — the sabotage makes everyone fearful that ordinary devices can become an instant source of injury or death. It gnaws at the psyche.

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The purposeful inducing of fear in a general populace, gnawing at the psyche, is the very definition of terrorism. Or if you prefer, this is from the U.N. General Assembly's condemnation of terrorism in Resolution 49/60, passed thirty years ago this December:

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Criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious, or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them.

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I have taken to referencing the Zionist state as “terrorist Israel” since it began its terrorizing assault on the Palestinians of Gaza last 7 October. I am now prompted to reflect that we must consider the events of these last 11 months in the context of a long history of terrorism associated with the Zionist project. Israel has never known a time when it did not indulge in terrorist activities. It was, indeed, a terrorist state before, long before, one could speak even of the State of Israel.

Haganah, Irgun, Stern: These were founded and operated as terrorist organizations decades prior to Israel’s founding in 1948. Irgun was the group responsible for the infamous bombing of the King David Hotel in July 1946. David Ben–Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, was among those who founded Haganah in 1909: Ben–Gurion, who celebrated the violence Zionists would of necessity inflict on Palestinians as they founded “the Jewish state.”

Maher Charif, a Palestinian who earned a doctorate at the Sorbonne and is now a researcher at the French Institute for the Near East in Beirut, provided [a brief but excellent review](#) of this history in “The Roots of Zionist Terrorism,” published last year in *The Journal of Palestine Studies*. “Since the Great Palestine Revolt of 1936–39 and right until the establishment of the State of Israel, Zionist terrorism was used as a strategic military weapon to hasten the founding of an independent Jewish state,” Charif writes. “Numerous attacks were mounted against Palestinians to terrorize them and drive them out of their ancestral land, and against British army and police outposts.”

One of the notable features of this history is how many of Israel’s prime ministers were at one point active as terrorists in behalf of the Zionist cause. Ben–Gurion was but first in a long line. Menachem Begin, who took Israeli politics drastically

rightward during his premiership, 1977 to 1983, was Irgun's leader when it executed the King David Hotel operation in Jerusalem, which killed ninety-one people. Ariel Sharon, who directed the massacre of the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in 1982 and then served as prime minister from 2001 to 2006, is another such case.

We come to Benjamin Netanyahu. Bibi is too young to stand among these others in the Zionist state's bloody history. But he is their descendent. Netanyahu runs a terrorist regime by any serious definition of the term. As is well-known, his cabinet is the most fanatical in Israel's history—which is rather remarkable when one considers this history. The most infamous and objectionable of its members are Itamar Ben-Givv and Bezalel Smotrich. Both of them, respectively the ministers of security and finance, entertain grand visions of Eretz Israel, a Greater Israel wherein the terrorist project of the earlier generations of Zionists is completed. And both attach great importance to the expansion of illegal settlements in the Occupied Territories in the fulfillment of this vision. Both, indeed, live in illegal settlements.

Against this background, we should consider the ideology professed by such figures as Ben-Givv and Smotrich. It is arguably, and I would say almost certainly, the decisive force determining the Netanyahu regime's aggressive course since the prime minister, in a desperate fight for his political survival, allowed these and other radical religious elements into his government when he formed a new cabinet in December 2022. [As I noted in this space some weeks ago](#), these people are convinced that Israel has reached a millennial moment, that the appearance of the Messiah is at hand, and that they must prepare to re-establish the Biblical kingdom.

While Ben-Givv, Smotrich, and their allies enjoy considerable support in Israel—Smotrich enjoys the popularity of a celebrity—there are objections to the emergence of this religious strain in the upper reaches of Israeli politics. In some quarters there is alarm, indeed. But I do not see that people such as Ben-Givv and Smotrich, extreme as they are, are doing anything more than reasserting an interpretation of the Israeli project that dates to the emergence of Zionist ideology in the nineteenth century. Between a nationalist and a religious reading of Israel, they argue for the latter.

The distinction between the two now divides many Israelis. But are these interpretations so different at the horizon? What does a nationalist understanding mean when Israel calls itself “the Jewish state?” These are my honest questions.

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Bezalel Smotrich produced a lengthy essay some years ago in which he described in useful detail his “decisive plan” for completing the Zionist project. It rests on two fundamental presumptions. The first of these concerns the destiny and identity of Jews as a superior people with the hand of the Old Testament God upon their shoulders. I will quote Smotrich at some length to give an idea of his sensibility:

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I am a believer. I believe in the Holy One, Blessed Be He; in His love for the Jewish People, and His Providence over them. I believe in the Torah which foretold the exile and promised redemption... I believe that the State of Israel is the beginning of our unfolding redemption, the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Torah and the visions of the Prophets.

I believe in the living connection between the People of Israel and the Land of Israel; in the destiny and mission of the Jewish People for the whole world, and in the vitality of the Land of Israel for ensuring the realization of this cause. I believe that it is no accident that the Land of Israel is flourishing and flowering in the wake of the Jewish return—after so many generations of utter neglect.

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The second of the presumptions from which Smotrich's thinking flows derives directly from the first. This is the necessity to extinguish all hope among Palestinians that they might ever live on their own land in a nation of their own devising. To reiterate my earlier question, what is the difference between this view and those of many earlier Zionists who understood Israel as fundamentally a political project, beginning with David Ben-Gurion—a professed atheist, indeed—and running all through the thinking of his ideological inheritors? Does Bibi Netanyahu think differently on this point? I see no sign of this.

Here is Smotrich addressing the question of Palestinians:

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The existence of two conflicting national aspirations in the Land of Israel... cannot be maintained in tandem. The fantasy that these two ambitions can dwell one alongside the other has accompanied the Zionist movement from the beginning...

Peace will not emerge so long as we maintain our hold on starting assumptions that this land is fated to contain two collectives with conflicting national aspirations. If this is the case, our grandchildren and our great grandchildren will inevitably be destined to live by the sword.... The contradiction between the existence of the Jewish state and the national Palestinian aspiration is inherent; it inheres in the development of the very concept of the “Palestinian People.”

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Smotrich’s intent here, if this is not already obvious, is to destroy all thought of a two-state solution to the long Israel–Palestine crisis. Plainly frustrated with Israel’s participation in talks to this end over many decades, he dismisses them as nothing more than “conflict management.” But Smotrich knows as well as anyone else, surely, that successive Israeli governments have never been serious about a two-state settlement and have used negotiations merely as a means to buy time as they proceed with its illegal settlement policy in the Occupied Territories. Why this sustained argument, then?

Let us stop pretending our intent is other than it is, Smotrich means to say. Let us stop wasting time on impossible dreams that serve merely to prolong the conflict. And he blames the conflict, indeed, for inspiring the aspirations of the Palestinians. “Absent the ‘conflict,’ absent the struggle against Israel,” he writes in one of his wilder assertions, “there is simply no Palestinian nationalism.”

[Smotrich calls his essay “One Hope”](#) and published it in 2017 in a journal of Zionist opinion called *Shiloh* after a Jewish settlement mentioned in *Joshua* and one built on its remains in the late 1970s. A place in Netanyahu’s cabinet was

years ahead. Smotrich was vice-chairman of the Knesset at the time and a member of Ha-Ihud Hale'umi, an ultra-Zionist faction within the larger Jewish Home party. When he introduced his thesis in the Knesset, in May 2017, he referred to it as his “subjugation plan.”

“One Hope,” to my surprise, reads as if it is a very carefully reasoned essay, addressing its topic from numerous perspectives. It rests on an exceedingly primitive form of racism and, as the passages quoted above should suggest, a religious zealotry that allows of no recourse to ordinary reason or, indeed, morals. But there is nothing shrill in these ten thousand words. The piece is internally consistent, even if Smotrich’s vision of human nature and the world as we know it simply cannot withstand scrutiny beyond the hermeneutic universe of Zionism’s outer reaches.

“One Hope” is also very practical, suggesting that Smotrich sought seven years ago, as he may well continue to seek, serious consideration of his thesis as the basis of official policy. In gist, his solution to what Israel considers its Palestine problem offers the Palestinian people three alternatives. One, they would leave the Occupied Territories permanently and begin new lives elsewhere. Two, they would remain and accept their status as a subjugated people. Or three, they would remain and continue to resist Israeli domination.

Smotrich dresses up these various fates, or the first two at any rate, in the language of humane sympathy. Palestinians choosing permanent exile will receive government assistance as they emigrate “to one of the many countries where Arabs realize their national ambitions, or to any other destination in the world.” Those who decide to remain in what would be Greater Israel will be able to work, own

property, and prosper as residents of one of six administrative regions—Hebron, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jericho, Nablus, and Jenin—where their exercise of their political rights would be limited to electing local officials.

As to the third alternative:

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Those who think they will stay here and constantly, violently undermine the State of Israel's right to exist as the state of the Jewish people will find an IDF determined to defeat them with the help of God. The IDF, thank God, is a strong and astute army, with the will and the capability to defeat the terrorists within a short time frame: killing those who need to be killed, confiscating weapons to the last bullet, and restoring security to Israel's citizens.

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Let us understand what Smotrich proposes beyond what he says he proposes. “This plan,” he writes, “is the most just and moral by any measure—historical, Zionist, and Jewish—and it is the only option that can lead to quiet, peace, and real coexistence.” Peace, genuine co-existence? Here we see that behind the façade of reasoned statesmanship there is a deluded man—a vicious man who cannot accept his viciousness toward others, a terrorist, I would say, who cannot accept that his idea of himself and his nation depends on the terrorizing of others.

Under what conditions would Palestinians exercise their choice either to self-exile or remain, as non-citizens, in an enlarged Israeli entity, some version of Eretz Israel? Such decisions would be in no conceivable circumstances anything like free

choices. The most rational choice, if one has any understanding of the human spirit, would lead to the path of continued resistance. And of this Smotrich writes:

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I am confident that a determined and unequivocal political directive will enable the IDF to deal with this temporary threat, defeat terror, and complete the settlement victory in a decisive manner.

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Peace, in other words, by way of aggression against Palestinians yet further escalated from what they already suffer, the Israel Defense Forces given a freer hand than they already exercise. We already know what this comes to in Gaza and what it is going to come to in the West Bank. The peace Smotrich urges in “One Hope” will come to an increasingly naked form of terrorism.

There is one passage in Smotrich’s “decisive plan” that seems to me a key to the whole. In it he acknowledges the difficulty of getting Palestinians to accept his “most just and moral” plan. The bold-face in this passage is original to *Shiloh*’s English translation of the Hebrew:

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In the first stage, it is likely that the Arab terror efforts will only increase. Frustration with the inability of realizing the hope-illusion we cultivated will increase, as will the motivation and efforts to execute terrorist attacks in a last desperate attempt to actualize their goals. But at some stage, the point will come when **frustration** will cross the threshold of **despair** and will lead to **reconciliation** and a renewed understanding that their cause stands no

chance—it simply isn't going to happen. When that recognition penetrates the Arab consciousness, and terror becomes pointless, the motivation will decrease as will its practical expressions.

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To induce and heighten a generalized frustration in a population such that it leads to a shared despair and then a reconciliation with this state of despair: I do not find this in any of the accepted definitions of terrorism, but there can be no other word for any such program.

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I came to Bezalel Smotrich's "One Hope," as mentioned in the commentary linked above, by way of [remarks made recently by Moshe Ya'alon](#), who served as Netanyahu's defense minister for three years until he resigned in 2016. "Do you hear them talking in terms of the Last War, or of Smotrich's concept of "subjugation"?" Ya'alon asked. "Read the article he published in *Shiloh* in 2017. First of all, this concept rests on Jewish supremacy: *Mein Kampf* in reverse."

Ya'alon had a long career in the military behind him before he entered politics in 2008 as a member of Netanyahu's Likud Party. In 2019, he broke with Likud to form Telem, which is described as a center-right party, and entered an alliance with Benny Gantz, another retired officer, who served in the Netanyahu government before resigning earlier this year. Ya'alon favors increased West Bank settlement, supports various forms of Palestinian segregation, and thinks a confrontation with Iran is necessary "to stabilize the situation all over the world."

There may be various reasons Ya`alon is now publicly critical of Smotrich—generational animosities, interparty politics, differing political styles. I am not close enough to Israeli politics to say. But setting such matters aside, it seems clear that in Ya`alon and Smotrich we witness a confrontation between the nationalist and religious interpretations of the Zionist cause. Moshe Ya`alon was trained and served as a professional soldier and transitioned smoothly enough into the kind of rightist politics that prevailed prior to Netanyahu’s 2022 cabinet. Smotrich was born in the Golan Heights, grew up in a settlement, and was educated in various orthodox yeshivas, including one founded by Abraham Isaac Kook, a rabbi credited as the founding father of modern religious Zionism.

Ya`alon plainly does not approve of any notion that Israel’s current crises—in Gaza, in the West bank, along its border with Lebanon, with Iran—are to be cast as the beginnings of the “last war,” the war between Gog and Magog. To Ya`alon the solidier and pol, this is “hastening war,” and he looks for more rational assessments of the moment. His reference to *Mein Kampf* goes to the same point: To me it is evident—and a common-enough psychological construct—that Zionists such as Smotrich, and perhaps Smotrich himself, can be subliminally compelled to humiliate Palestinians as the Reich humiliated the forebears of Israelis. To what purpose, a figure such as Ya`alon would ask.

Does Ya`alon seem the kind of figure who would object to the notion of “Jewish supremacy”? His record makes it more or less impossible to draw this conclusion. In my read the former soldier finds it unnecessarily provocative for Smotrich to say so. It is to this he objects.

My mind goes to something I witnessed long ago when I contemplate why an Israeli officer and politician would object so vigorously to Bezael Smotrich's claim to Jewish supremacy over Palestinians.

During my years as a correspondent in Tokyo, a political figure serving in the Liberal Democratic government would occasionally deny the Nanjing massacre, make racist remarks against the Chinese or the Koreans, or commit some other such offense. He would instantly be forced to apologize publicly and resign his position. But this was widely understood as mere ritual: The man's views were not his transgression. His transgression was articulating views prevalent within the ruling elite in public.

As I have suggested, read Smotrich's "One Hope" carefully and you find Israel's long, familiar givenness to terrorizing others implicit within it. And as I speculated earlier, Smotrich intended it to be taken seriously as the basis of policy when he presented it in the Knesset. Now I must ask how much difference there is between Smotrich's thinking and Israeli policy as we know it. Has he sinned in the eyes of Moshe Ya'alon and other such establishment figures because he, Smotrich, is too honest when he describes, without using the term, the Zionist state's dependence on terror as it makes its way in the world?

Bazenheid

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