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FIRE

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The Destruction of Reason

That Wednesday my aunt, Orit Sabirski, was among thousands of Jewish and Muslim women who had gathered, all dressed in white, on Neve Bidbar Beach at the Dead Sea. The Israeli movement ‘Women Wage Peace’ and their Palestinian sister organisation, ‘Women of the Sun’ had spread out masses of prayer rugs, fabric squares handmade by women across five continents and set up a negotiating table in the centre of the covering. ‘We will not go on counting our children’s corpses,’ they chanted into the sunset, looking toward the mountains of Edom in the kingdom of Jordan and the Judean Desert, the lowest point on earth. United in ‘a mothers’ call’ they saw it as duty to work collaboratively and design a new reconciliation plan.

In our recent history a women’s movement has already managed to end one war and persuade an army to withdraw. Orit was there, too, at every crucial stage in the fight for peace and human rights. Both failed and successful. She was for years deputy head of Personnel in a major company and at the same time founded an art gallery and acted as curator. Later she moved into spiritual support for those in palliative care and became a grandmother. And when I got my first child, late on in the Covid pandemic, Orit asked me to promise her that I would rise above my innate pessimism. Do it for your little girl, she urged me, saying that hope is an act of will – just like training a muscle. Choose optimism. In return I quoted a remark that had followed me all my life,

an observation made by legendary film director, Billy Wilder, who had left Germany as soon as the Nazis came to power. ‘Optimists die in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and pessimists splash around in their pools in Beverley Hills.’

Growing up an Israeli child means being taught the only inference to be drawn from the Shoah is ‘we have nowhere else to live. There is no choice. Jews will only be safe here in our own state.’

However, I myself had derived something different from the murder of the six million in Europe and believe everyone has to ask themselves this one question – would I have left Germany and Europe in time? Or would I have stayed, unsuspecting and suppressing the reality? Do you bring up your children in the place you know or is it better to strike out, travel the oceans in search of a less dangerous nest in which to protect your young? When I and my partner decided to leave Israel and set up a new home in Boston, ten years and three months before that Sabbath last October, I knew how much I’d disappointed my grandmother and the entire community in Be’eri.

Like the rest of my mother’s extended family, Orit lived on Be’eri Kibbutz, the place to which I owe my magical childhood memories. When I was young, Be’eri symbolised everything that I dreamt about – my contemporaries were children of nature, their laughter warmer and freer than that of their urban peers. Their close attachments to one another as friends and cousins came across as profoundly rooted in the senses. The fire of fulfilment burned within them and remained aglow through the cultivation of land and the lived experience of social justice. This was a left-leaning, liberal community that fought against the occupation and yet also loved Israel deeply. Benjamin Netanyahu, leader of the right, polled last year only three percent of the vote. Three in every hundred. Even that was too many for the Kibbutz. Be’eri was not ‘a settlement’ and had not been built on occupied land although in the days that followed the attack many would persist in describing the kibbutz in that way and claim that every Jew in Israel was a colonialist.

By Friday lunchtime Orit was back home. Public holidays were coming up and her son, Itai, had come over from Tel Aviv to spend the weekend with her, his father and his grandmother as did many other city-dwelling children and grandchildren on that Friday. Many of my friends and relatives lived round and about there but the most special dwelling, with its view over the kibbutz cemetery and fields of anemones and poppies, had for seventy-four years been home to the head of the community, Aviva. This lady resided there with her carer, a lovely woman from Thailand who had long been like family.

At half six in the morning the sirens began to wail as Israel's towns and villages were hit by a tightly orchestrated attack from air, sea and land. Within seconds the skies were criss-crossed by the beams from thousands of missiles and bullets being fired from Gaza at every part of Israel. Drones launched explosive devices and hand grenades at border cameras. Dozens of paragliders came floating in and landed in fields and between houses. Palestinian commando boats stormed in by sea, heavy machinery tore down the border fence at thirty different points over a distance of 60 kilometres, and hundreds of vehicles piloted by members of the elite Nukhba unit, by Hamas brigades and by Islamic jihad now raced towards towns and villages by road, heavily armed fighters riding in the truck beds, dressed in black, green bandanas wound round their heads, all yelling 'Allahu Akbar'. Every road junction was covered by smaller ambush units ready to hinder rescue vehicles or those trying to flee.

The residents of Be'eri woke to the unreal. Columns of motorcycles roared up and surrounded the kibbutz, followed by Toyota pick-ups carrying heavy machine-guns, anti-tank rockets and missile launchers, creating clouds of dust as they raced in, loaded with hundreds of explosive devices, vacuum bombs and radio equipment. Over one hundred armed men forced their way into the kibbutz from three different directions, making use of maps and aerial views and obviously already familiar with specific residential districts which they split off from one another before unloading

masses of crates of ammunition, explosives and kamikaze drones. Then they spread out on rooftops and waited, their machine pistols and guns ready to fire. Others had already killed the kibbutz guards and obviously knew where the chief security officer lived and where weapons were stored under lock and key. The attackers had trained for this moment for five years. Even though Israeli intelligence services knew about Hamas' operational plans down to the last detail, nobody had warned my family, nobody had thought it necessary to inform the local superintendant or to reinforce protection of the residential communities. Because Israel's government persisted in the belief that Hamas wouldn't dare. Warnings vanished into the ether.

In the neighbourhood of HaZaytim – this means 'The Olives' – people had taken cover in their homes, locked and barricaded the doors that in this rural community would otherwise stand open. Orit and her son Itai lay together in the dark, under a blanket, and kept up a supply of voice message for us. This went on for a few hours but felt an eternity. They phoned the police to beg for help but in vain. The police weren't picking up. On that Sabbath there was no state. The state had collapsed like a sandcastle and become nothing more than a cloud of dust. No police, no army, no generals and no political leadership. Only the people, left to fend for themselves for the entire day. Not a single public institution was functioning. Twenty-seven rural settlements were abandoned as were two cities and several thousand revellers at two music festivals. A state had let down its citizens and betrayed them. Israel came into this war already torn apart by internal hatred, drained by its own smouldering civil war which had long threatened to become violent, a civil war between retrogressive, messianic populists and their opponents, between the religious and the secular, the democrats and the apocalypticists.

From our home in Boston we tried until deep into the night to make contact with all my family but one by one they became unreachable. We prayed they'd vanished only because their phone batteries were dead, power supplies were off or mobile phone masts had been destroyed. Gracy

sent us a selfie with our deeply respected leader Aviva, in bed with their arms around one another and heart-warming smiles. But soon after that she'd tapped out 'Help! People in the house! What should I do?' Aviva's grandsons would have come from their homes nearby to rescue them if they'd had the chance or been armed. But Aviva's little home, comprising nothing more than one bedroom and one tiny living area, was seized for use as headquarters by one of the Hamas unit commanders. Munitions chests were soon stacked on the front lawn while the ninety-seven year old wise woman sat in her rocking chair, a plate of chopped fruit prepared by Gracy on her lap. She had also packed a case with essential medicines because these armed men had already announced they'd be taking both women to Gaza.

Then a young mother, already severely wounded, managed to reach the veranda. Moments before that her ten-month old daughter had been shot through the head, as had her husband, and now she was holding her two remaining children in her arms. Later she was to tell us how Aviva had not once stopped chattering to herself. The terrorists kept telling her to be quiet but the old lady kept forgetting. 'It was her constant chatter that helped me not to fall unconscious,' explained the young woman. Her son had inhaled so much smoke in their burning house that he then threw up but Aviva comforted him. 'Don't you fret about that.' Then more and more neighbours were being driven onto the front lawn, all tied up. At some point the attackers had taken Gracy without explanation. Soon afterward they killed her. Aviva was now alone.

Orit messaged from the other end of the kibbutz. 'Pray for us.' She asked us to be sure the grandchildren wouldn't overhear what she was going to say. Then she described what was happening there. 'There's shooting outside. Only Arabic going on. Everyone on our street's either dead or been taken away.'

Like after the Chernobyl disaster, a whole nation now spent the following hours, days, weeks staring into a burning crater filled with horrific images. And all Israelis – Muslims, Christians, as

well as Jews – absorbed the radioactive fallout in the form of an estimated sixty thousand video clips. It is the ‘best’ documented mass murder to date. Recorded on Hamas’ GoPro devices, road traffic cameras, security systems on private homes, car dashcams, mini-security cameras on kids’ nurseries and the smartphones of citizens who, knowing they were to die, wanted to capture their final moments. Mothers receive by text message images of their children being executed, complete with the subtitle ‘Goodbye’, while fathers are confronted with videos online showing their abducted daughters, dressed only in panties, the crotch bloodstained, men beating them and spitting on them. Youngsters run for their lives and are shot.

The executioners document the abuse ‘live’ on victims’ own Facebook profiles. Decapitations amid singing and frenetic celebration. Babies torn from their parents’ arms. A little girl trying to hide behind a sleep-mat in her kindergarten is hunted down by the armed raiders and shot dead, her body whisked away. Bus drivers are summarily executed, anti-tank missiles fired on rescue vehicles, drones drop hand grenades.

The more voices from around the world are calling into question the veracity of reports of massacre or simply abstaining from expressing any empathy, the more Israelis are drown in evidence and cling to what they know they have seen: the image of a young woman’s dead body, a sharp instrument rammed inside her. Two adolescent girls, sisters, tied next to one another on the bed, their naked bodies spattered with sperm, haematomae and open wounds. The heads of three children, separated from the bodies. A father and mother next to their kids, all with their hands tied, the father’s eyes gouged out, the mother’s breasts cut off in front of her children before the attackers sat down and consumed the Sabbath meal waiting for the family. A father, made to sit naked and tied up in front of his own loved ones, his genitals cut off before their eyes.

Evidence later verified by the US secret service proves that emasculation and deliberate abuse of sex organs were not carried out in the heat of the moment but actually planned in advance in order

to bring the greatest possible horror and humiliation down on Israeli society. Castration as a symbol of victory and subjection. Others executed by shots aimed straight at the eyes.

The murderers took selfies with the dead bodies, documented how they had stamped on the skull of a murdered youth using the soles of their combat boots. It's said they later explained that the Koran had taught the legitimacy of smashing the skull and ripping out inner organs. A girl whose hand they had chopped off. Another whose leg they'd severed. Little corpses in Disney pyjamas. A ninety-four year old grandmother, her voice choked, recounted the abuse suffered by her granddaughter until her death before her very eyes.

Over many kilometres road traffic cameras documented systematic murder of car drivers. Rural roads with a seemingly endless stream of corpses spewed out from vehicles. Parents with their children, a boy of five and a girl of eight, travelling back home together after a camping trip, executed with one shot. Another couple are abducted with their three-year old twin daughters and taken to Gaza, one of the girls taken from them and given to another family. Seven armed raiders film on mobile phone their abduction a woman of around forty after she'd tried to hide in a wardrobe, then give her a beating and drag her away by the hair, kicking and screaming to the last. An eight-year old autistic girl is murdered with her grandmother. Similarly a brain-damaged sixteen year old girl whose father had dedicated himself to her care, had held her in his arms and danced with her, taken her to concerts. And it's at the music festival that she's shot at, transported injured from the site of the massacre only for her ambulance to be fired at by anti-tank missiles a short distance away.

Live on Facebook Hamas commando fighters film themselves as they threaten a sixteen and ten-year old to make them lure neighbours out of their safe room. And they threaten to murder their parents if they don't succeed. Or, disguised as Israeli soldiers, they burst in, shouting out in Hebrew and pretending to be rescuers. A ninety-year old woman is dragged out of her own living room

and shot at close range. Parents sit with two of their children next to the body of their eighteen-year old daughter and wait for hours, the phone camera still running, for the terrorists to decide their fate.

The dead bodies are booby-trapped with explosives to blow up any rescuers. Countless mobile phone videos show droves of young people at the music festival in a eucalyptus grove south of Be’eri, as they seek shelter from the rocket attacks in mobile concrete bunkers thought to be secure. Hamas fighters enter the frame, lob grenades inside the bunkers, mow down groups with machine gun salvos and hurl yet more grenades. Survivors are pulled onto pick-up trucks as one of the commanders repeatedly selects young women, hauling them out from the hostage group and carting them away in his own vehicle. ‘Sabaya’, he announces – a term used by Islamic State for the sex slaves they would also use for trade. The bodies of young women, their capture already filmed, are now to be seen, clad only in panties, clearly bleeding from inside, legs and pelvis broken, their faces contorted with pain, their dead fingers held stiffly curled, claw-like. Gang rape took place for six hours on the festival site. And at least one young woman was taken away on a motorbike in the Gaza direction but by a civilian who was nothing to do with Hamas.

And yet so-called ‘influencers’ are swiftly on the virtual scene, considering it their duty to write to their millions of followers that Hamas has taken those wounded at the festival to Gaza for medical care in hospitals there. This is a fact, they said! They went on to say they had died in a gun battle with the Israeli army and that it was definitely Israel ripping out Palestinian organs. ‘It’s confirmed!’ they maintain.

Meanwhile the Israelis cleave powerlessly to every video recording, every image, feel persecuted and misunderstood. Because the armed raiders at the festival make sport of hunting for victims, those who’ve hidden in drinks refrigerators, in trash bins and in chemical toilets, under the stage and behind the endless queues of cars trying to get off site and those who’ve simply fled on foot.

On one of the video clips a commander is heard giving the order to shoot but to save ammunition by making it one successful hit. Voicemails recorded by victims play on. Men from Hamas had seized one young woman, already stripped naked, raped her where she stood, seized her by the hair and cut off one of her breasts, tossed it around and then thrown it down on the road.

At the Supernova Festival there are 347 civilians and 20 police officers. Within hours that strip of land was littered with around a thousand corpses and, on top of that, something like two hundred that were barely identifiable. Video recordings later played to journalists document one hundred and thirty nine killings carried out in every conceivable way. Thousands of other video sequences are being held under lock and key at the request of the families. When I see a panic-stricken father pulling his little daughter from the car, holding her close as he runs for cover and the shooters set off after him, firing until he's down and his daughter gets up and runs on alone, I can't help but research her fate, ask who she is, whether she's survived... and end up viewing only the jubilation of her killers.

Israel was drowning amid sounds and voices, amid recorded messages of farewell, of beseeching cries from victims begging to be killed. And yet also amid signs of life, the crying of ten-month old twins hidden by their parents in a wardrobe where they survived for thirteen hours after their mother and father had been murdered. Or the voice of a little girl, left for hours, strapped in her child-seat in the back of the car while the bodies of her parents lay in the front. Social networks were soon filled with people reporting the disappearance of loved ones.

The aim of terror is always to destroy our faith in human nature. Millions of Israelis staring into this blazing nuclear reactor were contaminated by the radioactivity of cruelty and bestiality, a contamination of the human spirit which cannot fail to have an impact on the psyche and identity of any society. The result was a toxic cocktail of emotions: fear, powerlessness, frustration, grief, hatred and rage. And despair. Horror has the ability to drag something monstrous out of a society.

This is not the simple pop of a cork, this is an eruption, like lava that will go on flowing for years. In the weeks that followed a whole nation was to become glued to their television screens as if to a shocking reality show and, with it, the fate of 240 hostages. A whole nation was yearning for the little red-haired fellow of ten months, abducted with his four-year old brother, dragged away in their mother's arms, and when at last the release of child hostages began, they waited every evening for news of their return. But after two months the whole country was shown a video supposedly recorded inside the prison with the captor telling the weeping father that his wife and sons were no longer alive. And yet a further two months later another video surfaced, undated, showing the mother and children in Khan Younis, Gaza, being led away by twelve men. A roller-coaster for the emotions. And nobody knows the truth.

Homeland

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Here in Boston my partner and I have always talked a lot about the suffering, pain and emotional turmoil that can be stirred up by homeland but never envisaged agony on this scale. A deeply radicalised and polarised society sank in the maelstrom of five elections in under four years and experienced not only the battle between two identities, liberal-democrat or fervently religious, but also, with the passage of time and as is happening in many other countries, the battle between a hounding, chaotic, clamorous populism and a realism of an increasingly defensive nature. This was devastating for the national psyche and any sense of hope and no less disastrous for the functioning of public structures, also deeply affected.

When the radical right, driven by its own sensibilities, seized power in Israel, we felt exiled from a state that had ceased to exist. Every home visit only strengthened the feeling that we would never

get back that comforting sense of belonging, that feeling we'd had as youngsters, to society and country.

In the nine months prior to the 7 October attack, we saw our homeland changing at breath-taking speed in a way nobody had ever imagined. Israel had always transgressed and made errors but had, as a rule, always striven for a fairer and more humane future even if dogged by fear and caught in a kind of post-traumatic breakdown. But now this homeland was acting as if on steroids, running riot, as if someone was trying to turn her into a mixture of Hungary and Iran, tip her into a civil war on a par with the conflicts in Lebanon and former Yugoslavia.

Tel Aviv, one of the most liberal cities in the world, was up against a coalition that was trying to whip through 225 new laws with the aim of restricting human rights, freedom of speech and the independence of the judiciary, as well as demanding a proselytising control over the education system. I saw my seventy-nine year old mother demonstrating almost daily at road junctions, blocking the streets in the belief that civil protest has the power to save democracy and to strive for peace but privately I knew the battle was already lost. Israel was struggling with rampant corruption and shameless ministers who now indulged themselves in an orgy of politically motivated nominations. The resulting decay in all areas was rapidly evident. A state is far more fragile than it ever looks from the outside.

Even our personal state of being in love in our new home of Boston began to dissipate into the routine of everyday life and at some point I realised that I would always be a migrant here and never have that feeling of belonging anywhere again. Rootlessness calls for its own home and so we developed that particular sense of longing for the homeland felt only by those left behind. We persuaded ourselves that man is a collector of experiences and that anyone gifted the opportunity to cross the ocean is in fact a lucky guy. And even if this man decides to grow old in the streets where he took his first steps in diapers, it's good for his awareness to have seen the world a bit

and made a conscious choice. I'd tried to separate myself from my homeland so as to look ahead to the horizon. I'd always known it was delinquent.

Radicalisation

In the optimistic nineties when a whole raft of peace agreements between the Palestinians and Israel were signed, I had just turned twenty and started as a secret service officer, my main task being information gathering to help prevent failure of negotiations; specifically items that would make clear the red lines on which the other side, even if still saying no, would allow compromise and vice versa, anything that could cause talks to break down. This was largely a work of excavation, digging out the myths and misconceptions that both sides cultivated and which got in the way of trust.

On the street was a different story, where extremists on both sides would apply themselves to sabotaging any peace that would to them spell renunciation. Hamas started a wave of suicide attacks on civilians and the Israeli right launched a smear campaign which eventually led to the murder of Yitzak Rabin, Prime Minister of Israel, who had spearheaded peace efforts. Negotiations continued for a further five years, Israel withdrew from every town on the West Bank and the new Palestinian self-government set up the apparatus needed for its own security, police and secret service. Still on the negotiating table were the issues of Palestinian refugees, the status of Jerusalem and the proclamation of a Palestinian state. And in January 2001 when negotiations failed definitively, I was there, too, but this time as a journalist.

During those years as a news editor, my desk covered with photographic material of the theatre of war, including attack sites with dead children in every frame, my job was to protect my readers. In the end that's what gave me an escape. Escape into writing novels, creating fiction, where solace

can go hand in hand with drama, where misfortune plays a clear role in the plot and is there for a reason, where everything bad has a purpose and does not occur with the randomness of brutality in everyday life. The characters actually develop, even learn, too. Rage, love, loss, empathy, desire – they all fit within the structure of law and order, conform to the creation of the drama and, at the moment of truth, reward us for our tenacity, allow the heroes to have closure, a conclusion, an emotional transformation. The existence depicted in a drama is far easier than in real life and here is where I found control, here it's possible to correct and improve. To take a bird's eye view, looking down as might an angel, seeing who we are striving to be and what we might have been. At the beginning I was still travelling a lot in search of real news stories, sleeping on floor rugs on both sides of the conflict, here with a Palestinian family, there a Jewish. Travelling, dog-tired, trying to keep my eyes open while on the move in a tank with soldiers, and heading onward between olive trees, travelling the green glow from the mosque to the 4 a.m. call of the muezzin. It's a well-known but erroneous sign of addiction to believe that if you don't recognise and respect every single victim's story out there, if you slacken for just a moment your grip on reality and history, the world will cave in.

On those evenings spent in my sleeping bag I would dip into the work of the wonderful Palestinian writer Elias Khoury, resident in Beirut, and the more I heard his voice describing the anguish of this country, the more certain I felt there can't not be a solution to this conflict because we are so similar, the Israeli and the Palestinian fate is so intertwined that we can in fact view them as one person, albeit with a profoundly split personality. Khoury's books were proof to me that literature can bring solace to both sides. It is also the only place in which we can talk with the dead.

However, the second Intifada, to some extent the Palestinian war of independence after the failure of negotiations, brought at the outset images of the raging mob that had captured two Israeli soldiers who'd taken a wrong turn when out in a private car, first gouged out their eyes, then ripped

open their bellies and waved internal organs in front of rolling cameras against the frenetic backdrop of a jeering crowd. In Hebron a sniper shot dead a ten-month old Jewish baby asleep in its pram, just because his parents were settlers. In Ramallah people said to me, ‘You’ve got fighter jets and tanks, we haven’t. The point of the murders isn’t actually the victim, the aim is to leave everyone else living in fear. That’s why we’re forced to glorify death.’

Life in Israel’s towns was blown sky high by the fallout from suicide attacks on buses and cafes, and caused military responses to diminish as well as the chances of persuading Israelis of the possibility of peace. On the other side a new generation of Palestinian children was growing up to know Israel as an army that would force its way into homes at night, constantly initiating new waves of seek-and-seize, actions that would subject their mothers and grandmothers to humiliating body searches at the checkpoints, processes that forced everyone to stand in line for hours at a stretch, imposing curfews and fear.

Back then I always used an armoured bullet-proof car to get to Ramallah to see my friend, a Palestinian opinion pollster. We sat together in his comfortable living room just a stone’s throw from the official residence of the Palestinian ‘*Rais*’, Yasser Arafat. ‘There is hope,’ said my friend. ‘The majority of the people will agree to a compromise, even now.’ But then with a hint of resignation he qualified this statement. ‘It’s the youngsters we really need to worry about.’

Journalism made many things possible for me, including gaining direct knowledge of the Gaza Strip and making Palestinian friends. That’s how I came to be there in 2005 as well, when Israel withdrew to the last millimetre and cleared a total of twenty-one settlements. My friends there were moderate Muslims, supporters of the Palestinian national movement. Soon after the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces they lost the election to Hamas, a fundamentalist, pan-Islamic movement. But election victory wasn’t enough for Hamas so they snatched military power for themselves, too, murdered the opposition and took their revenge on the moderates.

Baha Baalusha was a secular management professional. After the military arm of Hamas had attempted on numerous occasions to wipe him out, they decided to murder his children. The car in which the children, aged three, six and nine, were sitting, was sprayed with 240 bullets before their father's eyes as he witnessed the execution from a window. That's how Hamas operates.

Its leaders denied any intention of transforming the Gaza Strip into an Islamic Caliphate and yet within two years Talibanisation looked to be embedded. What had started out as a ban on women riding a motor scooter or dancing in public now turned into so-called 'chastity patrols', aggressive raids on sports centres failing to separate boys and girls, attempts by the judiciary to forbid women freedom of movement by calling on Sharia law, brutal searches of any business owned by Christians and the burning of thousands of Christian books with a strict ban on the celebration of Christmas.

UN reports documented the fate of homosexuals at this time, suffering gruesome forms of torture at the hands of the Hamas police, days spent suspended from ceiling hooks, being subjected to beatings and forced to denounce other homosexuals on pain of death. Many were locked up for years. Iran is the patron of Hamas and has, according to German secret service reports, carried out large-scale execution of homosexuals since the Islamic revolution, between four and six thousand in that country alone. And by the way since 7 October, gays across the world are probably one of the principal groups categorised by Hamas as a freedom movement.

Under Hamas Gaza became a state with its own army and administration, with billions of dollars development and reparation aid from Qatar and the rest of the world, with Iran a powerful and constant presence. The Gaza Strip has two land border crossings, one with Israel and one with Egypt, and yet its rapidly accumulated weapons arsenal and Hamas' repeatedly proclaimed vision of the destruction of the Jewish state combined to move Israel to ensure that Gaza had no

independent control of these nor could operate its own airport or sea port. This is why it has been called ‘The World’s Biggest Prison’ and ‘Ghetto Gaza’.

All my life I have fought against the occupation. But it’s not easy to engage as a peace activist when faced with a fundamentalist regime or an opponent willingly subjected to sharia. Maintaining belief in a partner like this collides with our own. I was profoundly frustrated to realise that of all people it was Israel’s leader, Netanyahu, together with all on the right-wing, who were at ease with a terrorist organisation in power but specifically not Fatah, the movement for the liberation of Palestine. For as long as this was the case the world would not put Israel under any pressure to make progress with peace negotiations. In short, Hamas was for them a bargaining chip. Around 2019 Netanyahu said: ‘Anyone wanting to hinder the establishment of a Palestinian state will strengthen Hamas and enable Qatar to transfer money to that organisation. This is part of our strategy to separate out Gaza Palestinians from those in Judea and Samaria.’

As a liberal, gay man born in the Middle East I have spent many years engaging with countries where homosexuals are hung from cranes or thrown from rooftops, where women are brutally repressed and yet have also been permitted to step onto the stage at the United Nations and been regarded as an acceptable partner in that international family. More than anything I have dealt with the inner workings that create Islamic societies and the question of the chance of an uprising and recovery from the inside out.

The early twenty-first century is characterised by a strengthening of political Islam and the appearance of radical Islamic groups in most parts of the world. The steep pathway to the attainment of *maqasid ash-shari’a* (the objectives of Islamic law) does not, as a rule, make communities stone to death any woman deemed adulterous. This may be permitted under the law but is not generally put into practice, or if it is, then in rural places only and far from public view. It is probably the ultimate aspiration of those who preach radical Islam to see, in the distant future,

a day when sharia will be applied in all its holiness. There are numerous Muslim societies in which women who have had sex outside marriage are deemed worthless. It is mostly their own relatives who do away with them in what they describe as a community custom for ‘family honour’. In such communities a man is permitted to beat his wife while she herself is forbidden to drive a vehicle outside the town unless accompanied by a male ‘minder’. If she does not abide by the rules of dress, she can be flogged and locked up. Some of these countries also forbid girls from attending school because their only role is bearing children and serving in the house. Girls who insist on going to school are murdered.

Like-minded thinkers on the left see in Margaret Atwood’s novel ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ a shocking warning, God forbid, of the threat to us all from the right and then appear shocked by the dystopian images on the screen. They seem to forget that every horrifying detail in the book or the spin-off TV series is no dark vision of the future but already today’s reality in many countries. Yes, my like-minded brothers place great emphasis on the west’s historical share in social litigation, something which actually led to the rise of fundamentalism. They say the failings of the west contributed to a strengthening of the Taliban, the same Taliban that denies women and girls all possible rights. And yet must the west, therefore, see in its regime of terror a legitimate sovereign rule, a cultural choice that a nation might stand ready to meet?

What is remarkable is that religious leaders of this type declare their vision loud and clear while we liberals tend to dismiss it all as rhetoric, mere religious casuistry designed to whip up the masses, pure theory that the religious worthies don’t really believe. Look at the way they pronounce on the death penalty for homosexuals and at the same time call for non-Muslim women to be used as sex slaves or for their religious foes to be beheaded. Yes, the rules of the religious right permitted the terror of suicide attacks.

And yet Hamas is different from Islamic State. It has its origin in, and grew from, welfare organisations, charitable clinics and soup kitchens before stepping into the political arena. It went on to take root in people's hearts and even tried to win over the secular, quite a different approach from IS who would have killed any Muslim who didn't pray. But its declared ideology which strives for Islamic hegemony, a dominance free of Jews and Christians, and which extends from Qatar to Beirut and from Gaza to Tehran, is an 'Islamofascism' in favour of murderous ethnic cleansing in the form of Israel's destruction.

The decision on 7 October to imitate a form of IS havoc was, therefore, quite deliberate. It drew strength from Gaza's younger generation, influenced by extreme radical Islamic tendencies so that if Hamas were no longer 'live' there would be plenty of even more extreme players ready to come forward as is already the case in Somalia, Yemen, Sudan and other disintegrating states.

Back in 2013, a full decade before 7 October, the American human rights activist, Kayla Mueller, was abducted in Syria by IS and kept as a sex slave for eighteen months by the then leader of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, raped by his henchmen and tortured. IS gave its fighters the right to make judgments on the legality of raping captured women, girls as young as fourteen and the sale of hundreds of young non-Muslim women as slaves. Al-Baghdadi died by suicide when the Americans stormed his home but not without ensuring his belt full of explosives took his children with him.

Surveys suggest that if most young people in the US decide in the future not to believe that rape took place in the name of fundamentalism, not to believe there were decapitations and to persist instead in the belief that all this is an Israeli invention, then this will result in not only ignorance of this ten year period in history but of everything else that has become something akin to a quasi-aesthetic choice, because this would otherwise go against the Hamas 'branding' as an organisation of liberation and freedom.

This is because those of us on the left fail to express any criticism of minority groups and cultures and remain silent as if every possible value is in itself sacred, and because we lack determination and persistence when it comes to envisioning a scale of values, and so we end up consciously ignoring the real problems. And this act of averting our gaze leaves the field open to the Fascists until it looks as if they are the only ones dealing with the problem. And the public will always listen to those who address the problem.