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Israel, the United States, and the Rhetoric of the War on Terror

Image by Maria Oswalt.

In a *New Yorker* piece published five days after the attacks of September 11, 2001, American critic and public intellectual Susan Sontag <u>wrote</u>, "Let's by all means grieve together. But let's not be stupid together. A few shreds of historical awareness might help us understand what has just happened, and what may continue to happen." Sontag's desire to contextualize the 9/11 attacks was an instant challenge to the narratives that President George W. Bush would soon deploy, painting the United States as a country of peace and, most importantly, innocent of any wrongdoing. While the rhetorical strategies he developed to justify what came to be known as the Global War on Terror have continued

to this day, they were not only eagerly embraced by Israel in 2001, they also lie at the heart of that country's justification of the genocidal campaign that's been waged against the Palestinian people since October 7, 2023.

On September 20, 2001, President Bush delivered a speech to Congress in which he shared a carefully constructed storyline that would justify endless war. The United States, he said, was attacked because the terrorists "hate our freedoms — our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other." In that official response to the 9/11 attacks, he also used the phrase "war on terror" for the first time, stating (all too ominously in retrospect): "Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated."

"Americans are asking," he went on, "why do they hate us?" And then he provided a framework for understanding the motives of the "terrorists" precluding the possibility that American actions prior to 9/11 could in any way have explained the attacks. In other words, he positioned his country as a blameless victim, shoved without warning into a "post-9/11 world." As Bush put it, "All of this was brought upon us in a single day — and night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack." As scholar Richard Jackson later noted, the president's use of "our war on terror" constituted "a very carefully and deliberately constructed public discourse… specifically designed to make the war seem reasonable, responsible, and inherently 'good.'"

Your Fight Is Our Fight

The day after the 9/11 attacks, then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon gave a televised address to Israelis, saying that "the fight against terrorism is an international struggle of the free world against the forces of darkness who seek to destroy our liberty and way of life. Together, we can defeat these forces of evil." Sharon, in other words, laid out Israel's fight in the same binary terms the American president would soon use, a good-versus-evil framework, as a way of rejecting any alternative explanations of those assaults on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in New York City that killed almost 3,000 people. That December, Sharon responded to an attack in Jerusalem by two Palestinian suicide bombers by saying that he would launch his own "war on terror… with all the means at our disposal."

On the day of Bush's September 20th speech, Benjamin Netanyahu, then working in the private sector after holding various positions within the Israeli government, capitalized on the president's narrative by asserting Israel's enthusiastic support for the United States. In

a statement offered to the House Government Reform Committee, emphasizing his country's commitment to fighting terrorism, Netanyahu stated, "I am certain that I speak on behalf of my entire nation when I say *today*, we are all Americans — in grief, as in defiance."

Israel's "9/11"

Just as the 9/11 attacks "did not speak for themselves," neither did Hamas's attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023. In remarks at a bilateral meeting with President Biden 11 days later, however, Prime Minister Netanyahu strategically compared the Hamas attacks to the 9/11 ones, using resonant terms for Americans that also allowed Israel to claim its own total innocence, as the U.S. had done 22 years earlier. In that vein, Netanyahu stated, "On October 7th, Hamas murdered 1,400 Israelis, maybe more. This is in a country of fewer than 10 million people. This would be equivalent to over 50,000 Americans murdered in a single day. That's 20 9/11s. That is why October 7th is another day that will live in infamy."

But 9/11 doesn't live in infamy because it actually caused damage of any long-lasting or ultimate sort to the United States or because it far exceeded the scale of other acts of global mass violence, but because it involved "Americans as the victims of terror, not as the perpetrators" and because of the way those leading the country portrayed it as uniquely and exceptionally victimized. As Professor Jackson put it, 9/11 "was immediately iconicized as the foremost symbol of American suffering." The ability to reproduce that narrative endlessly, while transforming 9/11 into a date that transcended time itself, served as a powerful lesson to Israel in how to communicate suffering and an omnipresent existential threat that could be weaponized to legitimize future violent interventions. By framing the Hamas attacks on October 7th similarly as a symbol of ultimate suffering and existential threat, Israel could do the same.

Giving Israel further license for unfettered state violence under the guise of a war on terror, in remarks in Tel Aviv President Biden stated that "since this terrorist attack… took place, we have seen it described as Israel's 9/11. But for a nation the size of Israel, it was like 15 9/11s. The scale may be different, but I'm sure those horrors have tapped into… some kind of primal feeling in Israel, just like it did and felt in the United States."

It bears noting that while Israel quickly deployed the rhetoric of the War on Terror on and after October 7th, weaponizing the language of terror was not in and of itself novel in that country. For example, in 1986, Benjamin Netanyahu edited and contributed to a collection of essays called *Terrorism: How the West Can Win* that spoke to themes similar to those

woven into the U.S. war on terror narrative. However, in responding to Hamas's attacks, Israel's discursive strategy was both to capitalize on and tether itself to the meanings the U.S. had popularized and made pervasive about the 9/11 attacks.

"Surprise" Attacks

The power of that "primal feeling" was intensified by the way both the United States and Israel feigned "surprise" about their countries being targeted, despite evidence of impending threats both were privy to. That evidence included a President's Daily Brief that Bush received on August 6, 2001, entitled "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in US," and the possession by Israeli officials of a Hamas battle plan document detailing the potential attack a year in advance.

Just as Bush referred to the 9/11 attacks as a surprise, despite several years of conflict with al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden (who clearly stated that U.S. violence in Muslim-majority countries was the motivation for the attacks), Netanyahu claimed the same after the Hamas attacks, ignoring Israel's longtime chokehold on Gaza (and Palestinian areas of the West Bank). Addressing Israeli citizens on the day of the attack, Netanyahu asserted that "we are at war, not in an operation or in rounds, but at war. This morning, Hamas launched a murderous surprise attack against the State of Israel and its citizens."

By portraying terrorism as a grave, unparalleled, and unpredictable danger, both the United States and Israel framed their brutal wars and over-responses as necessary actions. Even more problematically, both tried to evade accountability for future acts by characterizing themselves as coerced into the wars they then launched. Netanyahu typically asserted on October 30th that, "since October 7th, Israel has been at war. Israel did not start this war. Israel did not want this war. But Israel will win this war."

All of these tactics are meant to create and perpetuate "an extremely narrow set of 'political truths'" (or untruths, if you prefer). Whether ingrained in the public consciousness by the United States or Israel, such "truths" were meant to dictate just who the "terrorists" were (never us, of course), their irrational, barbaric, uncivilized nature, and so, why intervention — full-scale war, in fact — was necessary. An additional rhetorical goal was to position the dominant narrative, whether American or Israeli, as a "natural interpretation" of reality, not a constructed one.

Israel has relied on such a framework to consistently peddle a depoliticized narrative of Hamas, which roots any violence committed in a fundamental and irrational opposition to the state of Israel and inherent hatred of the Jewish people as opposed to the longstanding regime of occupation, apartheid, and now genocide of Palestinians. Hamas and other non-

state actors are, of course, always portrayed as "driven by fanaticism," as Scott Poynting and David Whyte note, while state violence, in contrast, is "presented as defensive, responsible, rational, and unavoidable — and not motivated by a particular ideological bias or political choice."

The Threat of Terrorism and Moral Equivalencies

Terrorist violence in these years has regularly been weaponized in the service of state violence by conceiving of its threat as almost unimaginably dangerous. Both the United States and Israel have represented terrorism as "catastrophic to democracy, freedom, civilization and the American [or Israeli] way of life," and "a threat commensurate with Nazism and Communism."

As with Bush's argument that the 9/11 attackers were the "heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the twentieth century" and that "they follow in the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism," Netanyahu urged a mobilization of countries across the world to eliminate Hamas on a similar basis. To this end, he asserted that "just as the civilized world united to defeat the Nazis and united to defeat ISIS, the civilized world must unite to defeat Hamas."

American officials regularly frame U.S. violence as a function of the country's inherent goodness and superiority. For example, in September 2006, responding to criticisms of the moral basis for the War on Terror, Bush said at a press conference: "If there's any comparison between the compassion and decency of the American people and the terrorist tactics of extremists, it's flawed logic… I simply can't accept that. It's unacceptable to think that there's any kind of comparison between the behavior of the United States of America and the action of Islamic extremists who kill innocent women and children to achieve an objective."

By the time Bush made those remarks, the invasions of and wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as other "counterterrorism" operations across the globe, had been underway for years. Given the staggering number of civilians already killed, drawing a demarcation line between the United States and "Islamic extremists" based on the slaughter of innocent women and children should hardly have been possible (though when it came to those killed by Americans, the term of the time was the all-too-dehumanizing "collateral damage").

No stranger to weaponizing the language of moral equivalencies, Netanyahu has repeatedly highlighted the victims of Hamas's attacks in order to distinguish them from Israel's. For example, he described Hamas as "an enemy that murders children and

mothers in their homes, in their beds. An enemy that kidnaps the elderly, kids, youths. Murderers who massacre and slaughter our citizens, our kids, who just wanted to have fun on the holiday." But like the United States, Israel has killed women and children on a strikingly greater scale than the non-state actors they were comparing their violence to. In fact, in the last 100 days of Israel's war, it is believed to have killed more than 10,000 children (and those figures will only rise if you include children who are now likely to die from starvation and disease in a devastated Gaza).

Birds of Violent Rhetorical Feathers Flock Together

In a White House briefing a week after the Hamas attacks, Biden said, "These guys — they make al-Qaeda look pure. They're pure — they're pure evil." Then, nearly three weeks after those October 7th attacks, in a meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron, Netanyahu asserted that his country was in "a battle" with "the Axis of Evil led by Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthis, and their minions." More than two decades earlier, President George W. Bush had uttered similar words, referring to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an "axis of evil," who were "arming to threaten the peace of the world."

In each case, the "evil" they were referring to was meant to communicate an inherent and innate desire for violence and destruction, irrespective of the actions of the United States or Israel. As the saying goes, evil is as evil does.

As scholar Joanne Esch has noted, "If they hate us for who we are rather than what we do, nothing can be gained from reexamining our own policies." In other words, no matter what we do, the United States and Israel can insist on a level of moral superiority in taking on such battles as the harbingers of good. And it was true that, positioned as a battle of good versus evil, the all-American war on terror did, for a time, gain a kind of "divine sanction," which Israel has used as a blueprint.

In response to the recent International Court of Justice complaint submitted by South Africa charging Israel with genocide, a defiant Prime Minister Netanyahu tweeted that his country would continue its Gazan war until it was over. He also mentioned a meeting he had with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in which he told him, "This is not just our war — it is also your war."

If Israel's U.S.-backed genocide of the Palestinians has revealed anything about the power of discourse, it's that the war on terror narrative has proven to be remarkably enduring. This has enabled both states to make use of specific schemas that were constructed and deployed in Washington to explain the 9/11 attacks — and now to justify a genocidal war in a world where "terror" is seen as an eternal threat to "liberal democracies."

In his book *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, Donald Krebs argues that, when it comes to politics, language "neither competes with nor complements power politics: it is power politics." In this vein, it remains critical to subvert such destructive and pervasive narratives so that countries like the United States and Israel can no longer maintain "necropolitical" rule domestically or globally — that is, in the words of Cameroon historian and political theorist Achille Mmembe, "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die."

This piece first appeared in TomDispatch.

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