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The center isn't holding: the Israel-Hamas war crushes moderate discourse

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Even as it has wiped out people with terrible speed and cruelty, the Hamas-Israel war has also dried up moderate public discourse about Jews, Palestinians, and the war itself, more quickly and widely than any other conflict in our lifetimes.

People all over the world, even many who have no ties to either side, are squaring off and attempting to silence those who disagree with them, using threats, public shaming, blacklisting, and dismissal from jobs. By quelling dissent, they make inflammatory rhetoric more powerful, which will inspire more violence in places around the world where bloodthirsty antisemitism and Islamophobia are already flourishing.

Even empathy has become an unpardonable sin in many cases. If you voice anxiety over Israeli hostages but not dying Palestinians, you're inhuman. If you're moved by the suffering of millions of people in Gaza but you don't mention the atrocities of October 7, you're antisemitic.

Expressing anguish over killed, maimed, and bereaved people on *both* sides should be the best response, but in this war it is severely punishable, as the Israeli writer and peace activist Etgar Keret said [in a recent interview](#): "I think that the most attacked posts on the internet are those of people saying, "Oh, my god, I see people dying in Israel and I see people dying in Palestine, and it breaks my heart." If you put up a post like that, they will rip you to pieces from both sides. And I'm saying that, in this sense, I do feel some kind of deterioration, a human deterioration."

Ripping to pieces has taken many forms, including verbal attacks, physical assaults, and secret blacklisting. At more than one major U.S. university, professors have been compiling lists of colleagues they vow never again to invite to write or lecture, because they called for a cease fire in the war – or because they didn't do so. Jews, Palestinian-Americans, and supporters of each have been physically assaulted and even killed, sometimes for expressing their opinions and sometimes only for physical features that made them look to their attackers like Jews or Palestinians.

Online shaming has also flourished. Words like "I weep for the civilians in Gaza. #PrayforPalestine" might get you fired from your job, if the Israelis behind the website anti-Israel-employee.com got their way. As soon as Israel began bombing Gaza, they began collecting online posts they described as "potentially supportive sentiments for terrorism, antisemitic or anti-Israeli," and listed them

under the names of their authors' employers, including major companies like Amazon and Google. Many of the posts expressed only sorrow, not hate or support for terrorism. LinkedIn, the source of most of the comments, ordered the site's operators to cease and desist. For now, they have.

But it was only one of many recent attempts to silence critics by conflating sympathy for Palestinian civilians – or criticism of Israel – with support for Hamas and other terrorists. The U.S. Congress passed a resolution on December 5 that rightly expressed alarm about rising antisemitism, and listed many cases of it, but incorrectly asserted that anti-Zionism is antisemitism. H.Res 894 refers to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism, but Kenneth Stern, the lead author of that definition and director of the Bard Center for the Study of Hate, has [argued eloquently that it must not be used to suppress anti-Zionist speech](#), though he is himself a Zionist. Although antisemites often criticize Israel, criticism of Israel is not necessarily antisemitic, especially in the context of this war. It is vital to distinguish between them instead of painting with too broad a brush.

The suppression of speech that is critical but not dangerous is itself dangerous. It polarizes public discourse, and amplifies violent rhetoric against Jews (not only Israelis) and Muslims (not only Palestinians). Moreover, no government's policies should be beyond critique, even – especially – in wartime.

I am no stranger to rhetoric that promotes terrorism or incites other intergroup violence; on the contrary. A decade ago I founded the Dangerous Speech Project to study such rhetoric and find the best methods to prevent it from inspiring mass violence.

One of the most important methods, we have found, is to protect freedom of expression, since constraining speech can inspire more violence, by helping to shift norms in favor of violence, and by foreclosing peaceful means of resolving differences. Speech is most effectively constrained by attacking the people who speak in the way you want to suppress, since even if attacks don't silence those people, they will intimidate others.

Both inside and outside of the Middle East, academics and other thought leaders are being harassed and fired for empathizing with Gazans, and/or denouncing Israel's siege and bombing of the Gaza Strip.

For example Professor Michael Eisen was removed as editor in chief of the scientific journal eLife, for retweeting an article from The Onion that sardonically described all Palestinians as complicit with terrorism since dying Gazans had not used their last breaths to condemn Hamas. Eisen was fiercely criticized online, and some demanded that he also be kicked out of his tenured position at the University of California at Berkeley.

The day after his Onion tweet, Eisen explained that he is anything but a supporter of Hamas: "Every sane person on Earth is horrified and traumatized by what Hamas did and wants it to never happen

again. All the more so as a Jew with Israeli family. But I am also horrified by the collective punishment already being meted out on Gazans, and the worse that is about to come. ... The Onion is not making light of the situation. And nor am I. These articles are using satire to make a deadly serious point about this horrific tragedy.”

[Nearly two thousand scientists signed a letter](#) protesting Eisen’s removal as editor of the journal “or otherwise censuring him” because “The spectre of losing positions of authority for questioning government policies has no place in a democracy, let alone within academia.”

To be sure, some have indeed reacted to the Israel-Hamas war by defending Hamas and attempting to excuse it for its gruesome crimes. On October 7, just after the massacres in Israel, a group of Harvard students pre-emptively exonerated Hamas in an appalling letter that began, “We, the undersigned student organizations, hold the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence.”

The students were punished by a law firm that rescinded job offers to two who signed the letter, and by threats that other companies would refuse to hire them in future. The Harvard students were also doxxed, along with students from other campuses including a group at Columbia who signed a letter demanding that their university cut ties with “apartheid Israel.” An online “College Terror List” gave their personal information, and trucks circulated at their campuses, bearing their names and photographs with labels like “Harvard’s Leading Antisemites.” Adam Guillette, the president of Accuracy in Media, the organization behind the doxxing trucks, went on to send the trucks to students’ homes.

Doxxing exposes the students to violent attacks. And promoting the false idea that all Palestinians, or those who sympathize with them, are terrorists exposes them to new discrimination and attacks, like the stabbing of six-year-old Wadea Al-Fayoume in Illinois, by his mother’s landlord. Republicans in the House and Senate are attempting to write the collective vilification of Palestinians into law, introducing legislation that would ban any holder of a Palestinian Authority passport from entering the United States. Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis have threatened that if elected, they would cancel the visas of foreign students who support Hamas. Their other comments indicate that “support” would be very loosely defined.

Meanwhile, firings of people for expressing their views on the war continues. David Velasco was fired as editor in chief of Artforum, one of the world’s most prestigious art magazines, for publishing an open letter that calls for a ceasefire and accuses Israel of war crimes and genocide. Velasco and prominent artists were among the letter’s eight thousand signatories. The magazine’s publishers said they fired Velasco for publishing the letter without proper consultation with management, and in a way that led readers to mistakenly understand the letter as a statement from Artforum. Velasco retorted in an email to the New York Times, ‘I have no regrets. I’m

disappointed that a magazine that has always stood for freedom of speech and the voices of artists has bent to outside pressure.'

In Israel, people are also being fired, arrested, and assaulted for criticizing Israel's bombing of Gaza – and even being told that their criticism is tantamount to celebrating the October 7 massacres of their fellow Israelis. Professor Uri Horesh, a linguist, was suddenly suspended indefinitely last week from his job at Achva Academic College in Israel because he had called on social media for freeing Gaza, and accused Israel of committing genocide there. According to the president and vice president of academic affairs of his college, his opinions "could only be interpreted, with full certainty, as support for the terrorist acts perpetrated by Hamas," Horesh said, citing the email he received from them.

The email promised a hearing, Horesh said, but none has been scheduled. "I was already tried and executed in that very brief email." Horesh was on a trip abroad when he received the email, and has chosen to remain outside his country for now. Especially in wartime, it is dangerous to confuse critics with terrorists.

