افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

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Peter Beinart
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The debate on Gaza has concluded

I think that in the last two weeks, the debate about Israel's attack on Gaza in mainstream Western circles has, in a sense, come to an end. What I mean by "over" is that it's now very rare to find people with any credibility in mainstream circles arguing that Israel, by continuing its attack on Gaza, can A) destroy Hamas, B) free the hostages, and C) do so without committing massive war crimes, including perhaps genocide. I think the voices advocating those three propositions, which were quite loud in mainstream Western circles, in political circles, and in media circles, have faded away. And we've even seen some people publicly apologize and declare that they were wrong. Piers Morgan [controversial, often tabloid-driven British journalist and broadcaster], in a recording with Mehdi Hasan [progressive British-American journalist and broadcaster], basically came to say, Mehdi Hasan, you were against the war, I was against the war, but I think it's now turned out that

you were essentially right. Zadie Smith, the novelist who initially refused to oppose the war, has now signed a letter with a group of leading British literary figures denouncing it.

But unfortunately, the way the debate is concluding in mainstream Western circles is fundamentally not accompanied by actions like those of Piers Morgan or even Zadie Smith. These are mostly people who had vehemently supported the war, and who have simply stopped talking about it, diverting the conversation elsewhere. So, if you look at high-profile defenders of Israel who have credibility and a large presence in mainstream Western discourse, what you tend to find is much, much, much more discussion about antisemitism, and a lot of discussion about Iran, but actually much less defense of this war as something capable of achieving its objectives at an acceptable humanitarian cost. And I think, unfortunately, this is the way I've noticed over the years that debates generally end, at least the ones I've followed in the United States. That is, the debates don't end with one side publicly stating, "You know, we were wrong. We acknowledge that we were wrong." They end when one of the parties basically stops talking about the issue and it's like something that is granted by omission.

Let's think about the debate over gay marriage. Those of us who are old enough will remember that this debate was very intense in the 1990s, even in the early 2000s, with strong public voices against it. Again, you don't see it as much in the American media and political debate anymore, but it's not as if most of the people who were passionately against gay marriage said, "I was wrong." They basically stopped talking about it and moved on to other things. I think something similar happened with Iraq. Most of the people who supported the Iraq War basically moved on and quietly walked away from the scene of the catastrophe.

I'm talking about the West. The debate in Israel, it seems to me, is somewhat different, because the debate in Israel has this unusual characteristic, which is that the majority of Israeli Jews want to end the war because they want to free the hostages. But they also support the mass expulsion of Palestinians, that is, the Trump plan. So, in a way, the pro-war position today in Israel is not, I think, that Israel can free the hostages and destroy Hamas at an acceptable humanitarian cost. It's basically that Israel must free the hostages today, but its long-term goal must remain the mass expulsion of Palestinians, because humanitarian concern is not that great in the mainstream opinion of Israeli Jews, unfortunately. But when we talk about the West, in the United States and Europe, I think it's very, very important to encourage people to end this debate in a frank way, the kind that Piers Morgan demonstrated, declaring, "You know what? I made a claim, and it turned out I was wrong." Instead of doing it in a much more common way, which is basically walking away quietly and starting to talk

about other things, and hoping that nobody remembers basically what you said a little while ago.

I think, to be honest, one of the reasons people don't come out publicly and say they've made a mistake is because there's a tendency to get pilloried if you do, right? There's a kind of tendency to kick people when they're down. It's like, aha, we've got you now, you've acknowledged that you're an idiot, right? And one of the things I noticed in the response to Zadie Smith's public letter in *The Guardian* was that there were a lot of people saying, you know, what the hell took you so long? Look at the terrible things you said earlier. And I understand that feeling, especially when it's coming from people on the left, people on the pro-Palestinian left, who are so used to being rhetorically beaten down and marginalized, and who feel really angry at people who they've seen as not taking a brave and thoughtful stand from the start. And they wanted to take this opportunity to make clear how wrong these people were and to avoid, essentially, giving them any credit for recognizing too late something that most Palestinian rights advocates, and of course the Palestinians themselves, recognized very early.

But while that's understandable, I think it's important to resist that tendency and encourage people to publicly declare that they were wrong. Because when people publicly say they were wrong, I think they're invited, or sometimes even forced, to actually talk about what their assumptions were, what their logic was, to think publicly about why they were wrong in ways that may have implications for the positions they take in the future. That process of public reckoning is valuable, not because you can undo the damage of the position you took in the past, but because it can have a positive impact on the position you take in the future. One of the problems with the debate about US foreign policy, for example, has been that many people who supported military interventions that were disastrous, like the one in Iraq, have been able to re-emerge and support military intervention in Iran. John Bolton is a paradigmatic case of this, isn't he? And because they weren't asked to truly force themselves to publicly acknowledge why they were wrong in this first military intervention, it had no impact on how they viewed things in the future.

I think it's especially, especially important for Biden administration officials, for people like Jake Sullivan, like Tony Blinken, for other senior Biden officials to be invited and encouraged to come out publicly and say they were wrong. As opposed to what I think they're doing now, which is basically trying to avoid the topic, not doing difficult interviews, not going to speak in places where they're going to be questioned about this, because it's very uncomfortable. It's going to be uncomfortable. But I think it's much better for people to say,

we'd rather you come out publicly and acknowledge and say why you're wrong, than to pretend this didn't happen, because I think that will have an impact on the next Democratic administration. If people like Sullivan and Blinken and others come out publicly and say this, I think that will send a message to the next group of Democratic officials who are likely going to be, in many cases, their deputies. I think that's very valuable.

And I say this as someone who has spent a fair amount of time talking about how wrong he was, particularly when it comes to the Iraq War, although I've publicly admitted to being wrong about other things. And there have been times when I've been a little annoyed, to be honest, because I know there were a lot of other people who supported the Iraq War who didn't really talk much about how wrong they were, and I think I realize now that not that many people remember where they stood in the first place. People who were, you know, journalists, primarily liberal journalists.

But I think one of the things that's been really valuable for me is that it's given me an opportunity to rethink things in a way that's been very, very valuable, very necessary for me and for what I write. Overall, I've been very grateful that people, including many people who were right to oppose the Iraq War, have generally been very gracious in their acceptance of this apology. And I think that's how we need to be. Again, I understand the anger that people feel, given the genocide that's taking place in Gaza, but I think these public apologies make it more likely that this genocide will come to an end and that the structural condition of Israeli impunity that has allowed this genocide to take place will end sooner, something that desperately needs to happen.

There is in the Talmud, in the *Masechet Berachot* [a treatise dealing with the laws and philosophy of prayer and blessings], this line from Rabbi Abbahu, which says: "In the place where the penitents are, not even the most righteous are found." This is in Jewish tradition one of the reasons why human beings are considered better than angels, because angels do not sin, but human beings do, and therefore have the opportunity to do *tshuva*, to proceed to repentance. Here, once again, the Talmud speaks with many voices. I know that last week I spoke about a passage in the Talmud that stated that there is no atonement for the sin of *Chillul Hashem* ["profaning the name of God"], so I think, again, that one has to recognize that these are not rigid rules. Perhaps there are certain things for which, once again, there is no atonement. And we don't know, ultimately, if anyone can atone for them in their own relationship with God, but I think what we can say is that, in terms of public discourse, in terms of getting us to a point where this horrendous massacre ends sooner, and where Israel can never do anything like this again, we're going to be much better off if people are

encouraged to publicly say that they were wrong and to analyze why they were wrong, so that that influences their thinking going forward. Much better than if people do what many are doing today, which is basically quietly slipping away from this debate, because they realize that their position has been refuted, but they don't want to say it out loud.

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