

Why I like the phrase “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free”

and whether you should be worried

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Now is a time of one-liners. I am not on X, but via the news cannot escape what politicians and other well-known figures write there. There is a certain poetic art in packing as much impact, emotion, and potential meaning in a few words as possible. Another good source of one-liners are demonstrations, of which we have seen fair numbers recently and which are of course allowed, within certain limits. A phrase that I like is “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free”. I am aware that people may find this offensive. If you want to find out if they should, you should read the text below.

It seems to me that Western civilization is going through a crisis, which is ultimately a crisis of identity. As human beings, we all have the need for a group that we feel we belong to and can trust. Knowing that the people around us share our values, view of the world, and way of life gives us a sense of safety. To achieve this blissful state, from a young age we spend considerable time and energy in coordinating our views with those around us, as well as in activities that identify us as members of a group, for example by keeping the memory of a common past alive or by doing simple things like placing a Christmas tree in our house.

Over the last fifty years, there have been huge demographic changes in Western societies. As a result, a significant part of the population now feels that because of their different history or religion, or something as basic as the color of their skin, they cannot fully identify with or be accepted as members of the majority group. In addition, individuals that never felt comfortable with the role they previously had to play to fit in, have now come out in

the open. As a consequence, many of those who felt comfortable in the old system no longer feel sure they can identify with the people around them and trust them.

In reaction to this, over many years, Western society has been investing considerable efforts in trying to relax its own unwritten rules and create a “multicultural” identity that encompasses all. But one can’t dilute identity endlessly and still have the same feeling of belonging, so at the same time society has fragmented into a plethora of subcultures. Such a fragmented society is nothing new and not something one should a priori worry about. In a not so distant past, Dutch society, where I come from, was split into various groups like protestants, catholics, and socialists that, while deeply disagreeing with each other, still felt their own way of life was not threatened by the sheer existence of a group of people, nearby, who had a very different view of life. Essential for this is some basic mutual respect and rules that allow you to know what to expect from each other. Problems arise, as we can witness around us, when people who are desperately trying to find an identity for themselves become afraid that the others, by not accepting this identity, are threatening their very existence.

My own story fits in this as follows. I grew up in a rural part of the Netherlands. Because of properties of my character, that are nowadays called an autism spectrum disorder but were not given a name in those days, I had from my early youth problems fitting in. I said the wrong things and made numerous social blunders. As a result, except in the circle of my closest family members, I did not feel I belonged anywhere. I did not feel safe at grammar school and indeed was bullied from time to time. Things improved at high school but I kept having trouble building relations and felt very lonely well into my time as a university student. In early adulthood, my social clumsiness decreased, I found a partner, learned Czech, married, and moved to the Czech republic where I have found a new home and live with my family.

Even though I noticed differences with the Dutch mentality, I quickly felt at home. When I moved here, Václav Havel had just ended his presidency and liberal values with a focus on human rights were popular. In Czechia, I live in Buštěhrad, which neighbors Lidice. In 1942, before the full horrors of the concentration camps became widely known, people around the world reacted with horror to the erasure of this whole Czech village by the nazis. Streets, townships and even people in many countries were named after Lidice. The village was rebuilt near its original location after the war and a memorial

site was erected at its original site. Since the year 2000, a statue of 82 murdered children of Lidice there honours all child victims of the war. My own children several times visited the place with their school classes. I felt a deep connection to the Czech people and their history.

Differences in history between the Netherlands and Czechia explain some differences in mentality. The Netherlands have a history as a sea faring colonial power. Up to the time of my grandparents, the Dutch had created in what is now Indonesia a society with a clear distinction of classes, where a small white elite ruled, and economically exploited, a non-white local population. The Dutch claimed, and maybe even believed, that they were working to improve the lives of the local people. But the unspoken truth, rarely challenged, was that Dutch interests always had preference over local interests. Only once the white people were secured in every way, there was room to tend to the needs of the locals in some ways. After the Japanese occupation, it all came crashing down. An orgy of murder, rape and torture against the Dutch (as well as Chinese and Indonesians perceived as being close to the Dutch) was followed by asymmetric warfare which left approximately 5000 Dutch soldiers dead as well as approximately 100,000 Indonesians. The latter figure includes both civilians and freedom fighters, that would probably be called terrorists in modern terminology. The war ended when the UN and the USA chose the side of Indonesia and the Dutch were forced to leave. After that, the Dutch developed into a multicultural society that slowly came to terms with its past.

The Czechs, on the other hand, have arguably become less multicultural after the Second World War than they had been for centuries. Long part of the Austrian empire, Czechoslovakia was created after the First World War. During the Second World War, a large part of the Jewish and Sinti population were murdered by the Germans, while after the war some 2 million ethnic Germans were expelled from what is now Czechia. The result was that in 1950 this part of Europe was more ethnically homogeneous than it had been for almost a millennium. This was partially offset by the arrival of Roma from further east and a greater integration of Slovaks, but overall Czechia was ethnically and linguistically remarkably homogeneous during the first decades after the Second World War. Many Czechs initially enthusiastically embraced communism but after the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968 the mood changed and after the split-up of Czechoslovakia in 1992 many Czechs were happy to finally be on their own.

Professionally, I found my home in the academic world. Scientists are

a diverse group of people from many nationalities who hold a wide variety of political convictions. They are joined, however, not only by polite and respectful rules of conduct but mainly by a shared belief in truth. Not the sort of truth, or truths, that people usually subscribe to as part of their identity, but an abstract, absolute truth that exists independently of its discoverer and simply *is*, regardless of whether anyone on earth believes it. This sort of truth, scientists believe, can never fully be accessed by anyone, but by careful investigations can be approximated by everyone. This makes science a very democratic undertaking: a single person can have it right, no matter how many others have it wrong. The true hallmark of a totalitarian regime is not how it treats people but how it treats truth. A free society may make many dubious decisions, but will leave the question of what is right to be determined by everyone, while in a totalitarian regime truth is determined top down. When facts are made subservient to controlling a group, science suffers, freedom suffers, and eventually people suffer too.

For me personally, this sort of academic freedom was a relief. One thing that has stayed with me from my childhood is an aversion against group thinking and social conventions. Too often as a child I have had the experience of not being listened to not because of the content of my words, but because I did not strike the right tone or simply was not cool enough. In academia, I have found an international community that while not perfect, comes closer than anything else I have seen to the ideal of listening to someone without regard for background, identity or status. Of course, the academic world is not detached from the rest of the world and even something as abstract as mathematics is never fully separated from politics. Efforts to promote women, for example by organising workshops where only women can speak, mean that a woman mathematician now more than twenty years ago is forced to some degree to represent “her” group, rather than representing truth without regard to the person. More worrying, in my opinion, are efforts to influence fact finding, for example on global warming, and push truths not based on scientific evidence but on group thinking, ideology, and political considerations.

In recent years, increasingly often, there have been moments when political developments have shaken my feeling of security and belonging, as a Dutch scientist living in the Czech republic. None more so than the present war in Gaza. Born in 1970, I have seen the world change during my life. When I was a child, the Second World War was still fresh in the memory of my parents and the older generations while the civil rights movement and the

sexual revolution were new things. When I was a teenager and young adult, the world went through a time of intense belief in democracy and liberal values, culminating in the 1990-ies in the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the end of Apartheid in South Africa, the Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO, and the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland. The mood started to change after the year 2000 with the September 11 attacks, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Russia's slow slide from a more pluralistic society back into totalitarian rule. In recent years, in North America and Western Europe, society has become ever more divided and at times seems to be at war with itself, while internationally global cooperation, for example on the fight against global warming and the fight against disease, poverty, and destruction of nature, is making place for isolationism and competition. As I am writing this, there are wars in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Birma, the Ukraine, and Gaza.

Of these, the war in Gaza has been affecting my mental health most. Already in 1995, when I was 25 years old, I remember being deeply disappointed in seeing that the murder of Yitzhak Rabin achieved its aim of stalling the peace process. Opposition to it came both from within Israel and from the Palestinian side, with Hamas carrying out a string of suicide attacks trying to stop the process. This helped convince the public in Israel that the peace process should be slowed down, which gave right-wing governments the chance to extend settlements to make any future agreement harder. After Ehud Olmert was forced from office in 2009, the peace process finally died and the gradual decline in living conditions for Palestinians accelerated. With my Dutch background, I cannot not fail to see the colonial attitude that lies behind the state of Israel from its very foundations. The steady expansion of settlements on the West Bank and the restriction on movement for the Palestinian population bears a striking resemblance to the Apartheid system. The Hamas-led October 7 attack is not very different from the Bersiap violence that started the Indonesian War of Independence, while the following asymmetric warfare, that is still continuing, is typical of a colonial war, including reports of atrocities and the heated discussion whether these represent rare and isolated incidents or are symptomatic of something much more systematic and widespread.

All this would be enough to make anyone feel gloomy. What really got at me, however, is not the situation itself which is bad, but not worse than, for example, the wars in Sudan and the Ukraine. What really hit me is the abysmal difference in my own perception of the situation and that of the vast

majority of the society around me. I feel like I have been thrown back to my younger unhappier years when I was unable to adapt to social conventions, unable to use the right words, unable to hold the right views. Now just like then, I stubbornly stick to my own logic, to what look like irrefutable facts to me, while I seem unable to adapt to the right tone, the right group thinking.

This has been going on for over a year now and it is seriously affecting my mental health. I am biting my hands while reading the news, have scars all over them. I have fantasies of having at my disposal a huge arsenal of bombs that in my thoughts I am using to restore what I see as justice. In my mind, I am applying to Israel the same standards it applies to its enemies: I am bombing away their leaders, laughing like a mad villain from a bad movie, while doing my very best, of course, to restrict civilian deaths of each strike to a few dozens at most. In my dreams, I am flying war planes over the Israeli settlements on the West Bank, throwing leaflets directing their inhabitants to “safe zones”.

I used to look forward to meeting my colleagues and friends at conferences and workshops. Now, before each meeting, I am gripped with fear. I visited a workshop in the spring of 2024 in the Netherlands, when someone fondly, and proudly mentioned their long-time cooperation with Israel. Since then, I have fantasies of standing up at such a moment, loudly calling “shame” through the whole room. I have fantasies of getting into terrible fights with the people I love most, saying terrible things, destroying relations built over many years. Biting my hands all the time, angry at my own incapability to contain the anger that is boiling inside of me.

Ultimately, it seems I have fallen to the illness of our times: I am unsure of my identity. My illusion of being part of a group that I belong to, of people whose values I share, whose reactions I can predict, that I can feel safe with - this illusion is completely shattered. I met a colleague recently, who I like a lot, and as we talked only briefly she said: “You know, some of this criticism of Israel is exaggerated.” I know she was always close to people with very left-wing ideas and I am sure she was right, and told her so. But now I am alone at home, this sentence keeps playing over and over again in my mind. What is eating me is that I just *don't know* what exactly she meant. I have lost this feeling of safety, that I know what I can expect from the people around me, and it is driving me mad.

I would like to end this story on a positive note. Tell you how I regained my mental health and stability, restored the relation with the people around me and the society I live in and “How I learned to stop worrying and love

the bomb”. But it is not going to happen. Because ultimately, I am still the same person I was as a child. I stubbornly believe in my own perception of things no matter what everyone around me says. So instead of ending this text with a few measured wise words I am going to conclude by making a couple of very unpleasant remarks that I suspect may cross several red lines. How many, I don’t know, because all my life I have lacked the gift of seeing them. In the end, I will also get to the phrase about a free Palestine that I started this text with and give you my take on it.

Before I do so, however, I need to say something about one unspeakable shadow that looms largely over all of this. I have been complaining that I feel I have lost my feeling of security with respect to the people around me. This is nothing, of course, compared to what Jews in Europe have gone through. The nineteenth century saw a gradual spread of liberal ideas which made it easier for Jewish citizens to participate in mainstream society. They started to identify with the countries they lived in, taking jobs in the army, becoming popular artists. Events like the Dreyfus affair exposed not only continuing antisemitism but also the condemnation of the latter by a sizable part of the public. Any feeling of belonging and security that Jews may have felt came crashing down, however, in the most cruel way imaginable, first in Germany with the rise of nazism and then during the Second World War all over Europe where the nazis found in almost every country willing helpers for the worst genocide in human history. If there is any nation in which one can understand a deep distrust of anyone not belonging to their group, that must be the Jews. If there is any group where one can understand that they place their own feeling of safety before everything and everyone else, it is them. It is natural that these feelings remain raw even after 80 years. Whether it is always wise to give in to them is another matter.

For one thing, the perpetrators of the Holocaust were not the Arabs. After the Second World War, it was clear that hundreds of thousands of traumatised people desperately needed a place to feel safe. What was less clear, however, is why the Arabs in Palestine would have to pay the price for that. The origins of the modern state of Israel date back to the end of the nineteenth century. Starting with the Balfour declaration, the formation of Israel is steeped in the spirit of colonialism. After the British took over Palestine from the Ottoman Empire, they apparently felt they did not need the consent of the locals when allowing the formation of a “national home for the Jewish people”. In the conflicts that followed, at no point did the invading Jews accept a solution that would treat Arabs as equals. The Nakba

of 1948, that displaced approximately half of Palestine's predominantly Arab population, or around 750,000 people, who to the present day with their descendants are not allowed to return to their native lands, was a crime against humanity. From this point of view, countries like Tunisia, Indonesia, and Malaysia that have never recognized Israel and even organizations like Hamas that call for its destruction have, in a crude way, a point. Any attempt to portray Israel as a country that just tries to live peacefully within its borders is a lie: it arguably never was their land in the first place.

Which is not to say the destruction of Israel is a good idea. "Jede Konsequenz führt zum Teufel" is a German quote of unknown origin that, strangely, seems to be known only in the Netherlands. What it is supposed to mean is that anyone who is prepared to accept the ultimate consequences of his convictions will end up serving the devil. This applies equally well, however, to the idea of destroying Hamas and in effect all of Gaza that Israel is pursuing so vigorously at the moment. I recently read an article about how the USA in Afghanistan *snatched defeat from the jaws of victory* by insisting on the total elimination of the Taliban, regardless of the human cost. Indeed, the approach to the war taken by the present Israeli government is very similar to the war on terror initiated under Bush jr. after the September 11th attacks, applying the same principles with even greater rigor.

Which brings me to the following point: I believe the habit of declaring organisations like Hamas, the Taliban, or Boko Haram terrorist organisations is contraproductive. Terrorism has more and more become a code word that gives governments a free hand in dealing with certain opponents, without having to weigh off the costs and benefits of certain military measures in a rational way. Apart from leading to unreasonable and in the end often contraproductive side damage, this false use of the word also deflects from the true meaning of terror, which is to instill fear in a population by attacks on soft targets, which is a technique these governments themselves more and more resort to.

Don't expect me to sing the praise of Hamas, however. But just as the heavy handed approach of the Americans in Afghanistan in the end made the Taliban seem the only viable alternative to a large portion of the local population, Israel has been working hard to in effect convince all its opponents that Hamas is their only alternative. Around the beginning of 2025, the Palestinian Authority carried out a weeks-long military operation against armed groups, including Hamas, in a refugee camp in Jenin, trying to reassert control. No doubt, this unpopular move against their own people

was motivated not only by the wish to prevent attacks on Israel but also by the hope it would stop Israel from invading. This hope turned idle when the IDF invaded regardless, expulsing all inhabitants of the camp and beginning its systematic destruction.

I could sing a long story about all the things I believe are wrong with the way Israel conducts the war in Gaza and the way it treats the Palestinians in the West Bank. Right at the beginning of the war, I believe the decision not to re-occupy the Gaza strip, in line with the explicit advice of president Biden, has been disastrous. Destruction of Gaza, and the percentage of the population killed, are now comparable to Germany at the end of the Second World War. But while the allied forces installed military rule after the defeat of Germany, which brought some law and order, the Israeli government keeps intent on destroying Hamas, now focusing mostly on its political leadership with the military leadership already more or less completely destroyed, without any plan for an alternative form of government, a fact that has rightly been criticized by the Israeli opposition.

Ultimately, however, I can have some understanding for Israel's conduct. Even though I believe that war crimes and crimes against humanity have been committed and fully support the arrest warrants against Netanyahu and Gallant by the International Criminal Court, I do have some understanding on how they got their with a view to the past. What ultimately gets me is the way society around me, in Czechia, in the Netherlands, and elsewhere in Europe, translates this understanding into action, or rather a lack of it. Because ultimately someone pays the price. And it is not us.

Some years ago, when Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion were buzz words, a friend of mine in the Netherlands encouraged me to do a test to reveal my secret racist and sexist tendencies. She told me how she had been shocked to find out how she herself, who thought that she had no prejudices, turned out to have hidden assumptions that made her value the work of non-white people and of women less, make less eye contact with certain people, and all that sort of stuff. I remember tacitly shaking my head in wonder how someone could put so much stock in what I felt must be a sham. Nowadays, I am again shaking my head in wonder, but not about people seeing what I doubt is really present, but about people not seeing what seems so glaringly obvious.

We have all seen the victims of the October 7 attack. We have read their biographies. Many had family abroad, in Europe, in the USA, some spent part of their lives there. They were nice people, *our* kind of people. People

we can relate to. People to whom such things should never happen. We have also all read the numbers. In the October 7 attack, 1,139 people were killed of which 695 civilians and 38 children. By comparison, the Israeli army has now killed over 50,000 people in Gaza of which some 15,000 children, if not more. When the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants against Netanyahu, Gallant, and Deif, president Biden reacted by saying there was no comparison at all between Israel and a terrorist organisation. Excuse me? And who was the lesser evil, in his point of view? In Czechia, the reaction has been largely the same. In the UN, Czechia aligned its vote on ceasefire proposals on every occasion with the USA, even when the vast majority of European states abstained or voted differently. Czech newspapers ignored reports of atrocities by the IDF and copied information spread by the Israeli government without critical investigation.

When I was standing in front of the memorial for the 82 children of Lidice, what were my Czech friends really thinking? Were they thinking that the whole world felt sympathy for them, because these were *good* children? Were they thinking that in the world, there also exists a *different* sort of children, whose well-being is of secondary importance? A type of children, for which one can only care once the *good* children have everything they need? Is the safety of some people, yes, their very right to live, secondary to the *good* people, *our kind* of people, the ones we can identify with, first having everything they need? Are we back in the colonial world? Has it never been away?

After the Karine A affair, in 2002, Israeli forces attacked the Palestinian Naval Police facilities in the port of Gaza. In 2007, following Hamas' takeover of Gaza, Israel imposed a blockade of the Gaza Strip, including a naval blockade. These were natural reactions to the situation and I can't blame Israel. I just can't help to notice that in the years that followed, when the area where Palestinian fishermen were allowed to fish became smaller and smaller, and fishing boats were sometimes rounded up even if they stayed in the small strip where they were still allowed, nobody cared. But when Ben & Jerry's announced they would end the sales of Our Ice Cream in the Occupied Palestinian Territory it caused an outcry. When Israel got the atomic bomb, initially the USA was angry, but eventually they forgave them. They never forgave the Palestinians for wanting Katyusha rockets.

Mind you, the rest of the world does not share our view on Israel. Look at recent votes in the UN and you will find that South America, Africa, and Asia do not think like us. Outside of Europe, North America or Australia,

only a few countries support Israel's continued war in Gaza. One of the few that do is right-wing Argentina, that two generations ago took in so many nazis who, after all, had "done so much to fight communism", and that now unconditionally supports Israel that has "done so much to fight terrorism".

Since the 1990-ies, the strategy of the Western powers has been to support Israel unconditionally from the military side, to make sure Israel feels absolutely safe, hoping and believing that in this way the ghosts of the past can be contained and a fair peace can be negotiated. Already back then, I remember thinking that it is naive to expect that a fair peace can be negotiated by two actors, of whom one puts a gun on the other's head. During the past thirty years, the furthest the USA has gone at times is to say the building of settlements on the West Bank is an "obstacle to peace". I see the failure to outright condemn these settlements as a moral failure. Same for the annexation of East Jerusalem.

What is happening in Gaza and beginning to happen in the West Bank can with good right be called genocide. It is still nothing compared to that worst genocide at all, the Holocaust. But it is utterly similar to that multitude of small, light-weight genocides that white men have committed all over the world. In the end, they are just as effective. Take a look at the maps of languages spoken in the Americas in 1500 and now and you will see what I mean. As a mathematician working in probability theory, I know that even a small bias, repeated often enough, has big consequences.

All through the Western world, people have come to roughly the same conclusions as I. Sometimes because they have family in Gaza. Sometimes because they took the talk about equality of people they learned in school too literary. All through the Western world, governments have struggled to contain the protests. Drawing red lines. On 30 October 2023, British Member of Parliament Andy McDonald was suspended from the Labour Party after stating in a pro-Palestine rally speech: "We won't rest until we have justice, until all people, Israelis and Palestinians, between the river and the sea can live in peaceful liberty". In my own country, the Netherlands, parliament has voted to make the phrase "From the river to the sea" illegal. Similar steps have been taken in Germany. Because protesting against killing is fine, but we should not make those who support the murders feel uncomfortable.

Increasingly, ruling classes agree that truth has to be decided top down, by force if necessary. Because if truth is decided by the masses, there is no telling were things will stop. We in Europe want to keep living in our comfortable world. We keep ourselves to the highest moral standards. If

Israel would have re-occupied Gaza, put the leaders of the military wing of Hamas on trial, and handed out a couple of death penalties, there would have been an outcry. Because we all condemn the death penalty. But when the same people are bombed away without any legal process, sometimes killing dozens of innocent bystanders in the process, we all turn a blind eye.

No, I am not calling for the destruction of Israel. But I am calling for the destruction of an idea. A colonial doctrine. The idea that only once the good people, the people we can identify with, are fully satisfied, only when they have nothing to fear, can move where they want, can live, eat, drink, get medical care and get old, only then can one think about giving second class people rights, like the right to live. And I am thinking of those Israeli activists who continue to accompany Palestinian villagers to their olive groves, hoping to deter the threat of settlers and the IDF. Ostracised by much their own community, deserted by most of the Western world, these people show that in beating fear, there is an alternative to violence: courage.

I am not a political person. I have never been good at aligning myself with any group. I have found solace in trying to treat every person as a unique individual, but lately have trouble understanding the people around me and feeling quite safe with them. I feel a bit like the little boy in the fairy tale *The Emperor's New Clothes* who at the end calls out the obvious: "The emperor is naked!". Except we all know the end of the story is a lie. In real life, they executed the boy.

Buštěhrad, April 22, 2025.