

Ronald Aronson, Jonathan Judaken

Right Then, Right Now: Ronald Aronson and Jonathan Judaken in conversation about Sartre, anti-Semitism, and Israel/Palestine

ABSTRACT: This conversation between Ronald Aronson and Jonathan Judaken explores Sartre's evolving views on anti-Semitism, Israel, racism, and the Palestinian struggle. Sartre first became a significant cultural-political force as a critic of anti-Semitism and as a supporter of the national liberation struggle of Israeli Jews. Then, faced with the Israeli-Arab and then Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he refused to abandon his support for Israeli Jews even while embracing the validity of the Palestinian cause, including at times the use of "terrorism as a weapon of the weak". His nuanced, situated, and insightful views prove valuable to revisit in light of October 7 and the ensuing war.

KEYWORDS: Zionism; Israel; Palestinians; Anti-Semitism; Jews; Arabs; Terrorism

Ronald Aronson (RA): We come back to Sartre on anti-Semitism and Israel today at two auspicious moments: upon the publication of Jonathan Judaken's *Critical Theories of Anti-Semitism*¹ (which is led off and concluded by new reflections on Sartre by the author of *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question*²), and at a time of a widespread public rethinking of the relationship between Zionism and the Palestinians generated by the massacre of October 7, followed by the catastrophic war in Gaza.

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¹ J. JUDAKEN, *Critical Theories of Anti-Semitism*, Columbia University Press, New York 2024. See especially pp. 21-44, and pp. 237-241. In this work, Judaken argues that to *consciously hyphenate* "anti-Semitism" today draws attention to this grammatical mark as signifying the entangled history of Jews and Muslims while also highlighting the myth of "the Semite" that underpins the origins of the term "anti-Semitism" (see pp. 4-6). Consequently, Judaken and Aronson have hyphenated the term throughout, except where it has appeared in prior published works as unhyphenated.

² ID., *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question: Anti-antisemitism and the Politics of the French Intellectual*, Nebraska University Press, Lincoln 2006.

Jonathan, this question, as your earlier book demonstrates, occupied Sartre a good deal during the course of his life.

Sartre's concerns began with two noteworthy pieces of writing: one major and one scarcely noticed. The first, of course, is *Réflexions sur la question juive*, written in the fall of 1944, an important post-Holocaust reflection on the "Jewish question", specifically on the nature and sources of anti-Semitism. Then, in April 1948, Sartre called for a "free Palestine": that is, he demanded military support for the newly created Zionist state of Israel. His brief article in *Caliban* follows from Sartre's deep personal connection with Jews in his milieu and demonstrates his long-standing support for the Jewish state. It is the first of a lifelong series of direct interventions on behalf of "Others" – the wretched of the earth – that became Sartre's hallmark.

From the 1940s to the end of his life the impulses behind Sartre's involvement in the "Jewish question" led him to become a "tribune of the oppressed" who encouraged struggles and movements of the oppressed, including French workers, native Algerians, Francophone and American Blacks, Congolese natives, Cubans, French students, and immigrants in France. Sartre was the philosopher of the Third World. His ideas, and his political interventions, became a source of support for the marginalized everywhere. In 1948 this included Israeli Jews and then also Arab intellectuals and activists in the 1950s, and by the 1960s included Palestinians struggling against the Israeli state that had displaced them. The obvious contradiction between these forms of support grew to be noticed and became especially sharp during Sartre's trip to Egypt, Gaza, and Israel in 1967 and in the preparation of the special issue of *Les Temps modernes* that year that was strikingly timed with the Six-Day War in which Israel defeated five Arab armies and completed its conquest of Mandate Palestine.

After 1967, the public image of a small Israel defending itself against the entire Arab world – as Sartre says, the two million Jews opposed by eighty million Arabs³ – yielded, especially on the Left and in the postcolonial world, to a new image: Israel as a regional power finally in possession of the remaining 22% of Palestine that had eluded it in 1949. Yet Sartre did

³ J.-P. SARTRE, "Israel and the Arab World", in R. ARONSON, A. VAN DEN HOVEN (eds.), *We Have Only This Life to Live: The Selected Essays of Jean-Paul Sartre 1939-1975*, New York Review Books, New York 2013, p. 441.

not join the rest of the Left and the Arab intellectuals in aligning wholly with the Palestinian cause, but rather worked to understand and support both sides. Among many of his supporters he was seen as betraying the oppressed Palestinians. On the one hand, Sartre would eventually die with that reputation of betrayal. On the other, he would spend much of his final years thinking and speaking on behalf of Palestinians – without ever abandoning his deep support for Israel. It is this itinerary we seek to understand.

RA: Jonathan, why don't you start us off by returning us to Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive*, offering a very brief summary of the key points of Sartre's text, focusing on what's important and especially Sartrean about it?

Jonathan Judaken (JJ): Sartre's book was written hastily between October and December 1944, in the immediate aftermath of the liberation of the French from the Nazi occupation, but before the horrors of Auschwitz were revealed to the world in January 1945. It was published in 1946 and thus emerged at a moment when a number of other theorists had just begun wrestling with how to explain the underlying causes of anti-Semitism, and specifically the totalizing version of it advanced by the Nazis. This included important sociological theorists at the time like Talcott Parsons, the groundbreaking hybrid works of members of the Frankfurt School who brought together Freudian psychoanalysis with experimental social psychology and combined this with sociology and Marxist theory, and the beginnings of Hannah Arendt's important reflections⁴.

All of these works, Sartre's included, would reflect on the role of religion in Judeophobia, specifically Christianity; the economic and political factors; the role of minorities in a majority culture; the logic of scapegoating, among other considerations. What was different and specifically Sartrean would be nicely underlined in Emmanuel Levinas' introduction to Sartre's lecture about his *Réflexions* at the Alliance Israélite Universelle⁵. Levinas said that what was unique and novel was that Sartre analyzes anti-Semitism with existentialist arguments. Sartre applies the concepts he developed in *L'Être et le néant* to scrutinize anti-Semitism, specifically how

⁴ For a discussion of these works, see JUDAKEN, *Critical Theories of Anti-Semitism*, cit., chapters 2, 3, and 4.

⁵ E. LEVINAS, *Existentialisme et antisémitisme*, in ID., *Les imprévus de l'histoire*, Fata Morgana, Paris 1994, pp. 103-106.

we choose ourselves or define our identities in response to the gaze of the Other, and specifically via his analysis of bad faith.

Ultimately, Sartre argues that anti-Semitism is a “fear of the human condition”. This fear, or anxiety, is generated by the unease that results from change and the difficulties of life. Rather than face the ontological freedom at the heart of the human condition, the anti-Semite flees the necessity of defining himself through his choices; instead he/she defines themselves through denigrating “the Jew” as the embodiment of evil, as the opposite of whatever anti-Semites stand for: whether rootedness (“the land and the dead” for Barrès or “blood and soil” for the Nazis), or tradition for Maurras. The anti-Semite was thus the paragon of “bad faith” as Sartre applied that concept to the politics of his day⁶.

JJ: Ron, to dig deeper into Sartre’s evolving position in the postwar years, can you walk us through his wider political shifts in the period from 1948-1967. I choose these dates to align with two key moments in the history of the State of Israel from its founding to the Six Day War. Doing so will be helpful to understanding how these shifts were reflected in Sartre’s thinking about Israel/Palestine more specifically?

RA: By the Liberation of Paris in 1944, Sartre was determined to be politically *engagée* – committed – a word he made famous in postwar France in his editor’s introduction to «Les Temps modernes» and in the series of articles entitled *What Is Literature?* This is reflected in his astounding energy over the next few years and indeed for the next quarter century: essays on all manner of topics, travels, and political activism. His U.S. trip in 1945, at the behest of his good friend Albert Camus, the editor of *Combat*, reflects a new Marxism-influenced emphasis on social class and politics. His essay *Materialism and Revolution* in 1946 presents a major critique of orthodox Marxism and offers existentialism as a more appropriate revolutionary outlook.

In these years Sartre made major contributions to theatre, philosophy, aesthetics, understandings of race, literary criticism, and biography. And after the intensifying Cold War led to the collapse of his activist project to create a non-Communist left movement (the *Rassemblement Démocratique et Révolutionnaire*), Sartre drew closer to the Communist

⁶ J.-P. SARTRE, *Réflexions sur la question juive*, Gallimard, Paris 1954 (1946).

Party. His friendship with Albert Camus came under strain and then broke apart after Camus published *The Rebel*, widely understood not only as an all-out attack on Communism but on intellectuals sympathetic to Communism, including Sartre. Sartre's fellow traveling lasted only to 1956 and the Soviet invasion of Hungary, when Sartre became an eloquent voice for the workers of Budapest in the Hungarian special issue of «Les Temps modernes». Sartre then became an independent Marxist, beginning a major rethinking of historical materialism in *Search for a Method*, which would become the preface to his second *magnum opus*, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Alongside his theoretical work during the 1960s, Sartre gave direct support to the rebels in Algeria, to the new Cuban Revolution, the Vietnamese struggle against American intervention, and in general to Third-World struggles against colonialism. In these activities, including many visits, Sartre became a tribune of the global south's struggles against the colonial powers. If anything, his activity became more celebrated when Sartre rejected the Nobel prize for literature in 1964⁷.

And so *engagée*, radical, and a writer and thinker of enormous renown, Sartre enjoyed an unparalleled reputation around the world. And this was so among Arab intellectuals, often headquartered in Paris, but also in Beirut, Bagdad, Cairo, and other Arab capitals. Sartre's demand for commitment, and his own evident commitments, predisposed Arab intellectuals to see him as a major ally of the non-white and non-European world struggling for liberation. So as the Palestinian resistance to Israel began to sharpen, and as Israel become more and more widely seen not as a tiny, besieged country birthed in the aftermath of the Holocaust needing allies, but as powerful, and guilty of what became known as the *Nakba*, it was expected that Sartre would naturally side against Israel and with Arabs and specifically Palestinians. He did so, but without ever renouncing his commitments to Jews and to Israel, which you have shown in *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question* to be a lifelong concern.

RA: Jonathan, before we dig more deeply into Sartre's views on Israel/Palestine, you followed up your analysis of Sartre's thinking about Jews and anti-Semitism and Israel with an exploration of how *Anti-Semite and Jew* led to Sartre's wider thinking about racial subordination in the context of his anti-colonial critique: how did Sartre's thinking evolve on racism?

⁷ R. ARONSON, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Philosophy in the World*, Verso, London 1980.

JJ: In accord with the broader theoretical and political shifts you discussed, Sartre began to rethink racism beyond the categories of his earlier existentialist analysis in *Réflexions sur la question juive*. In his trip to the U.S., for example, he began to reflect on the institutionalized subordination of Blacks under Jim Crow segregation. This new lens continued to widen in his support for anti-colonial intellectuals like the negritude writers affiliated with *Présence Africaine* like Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor. A key turning point was underlined in his critique of Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* where Sartre accused him of only seeing a situation⁸, whereas Sartre now understood colonialism as a system. This was as much a self-critique as it was a reprimand to Memmi's analysis. Sartre now understood that ultimately racism was the sum and substance of colonialism, the glue that tied the whole system of exploitation and subordination together. It was structural: economic, institutional, and evident in everyday acts and practices that subtended the inequalities of colonial life. By the late 1950s, it was thus clear that he had absorbed the critique leveled at him by anti-colonial intellectuals like Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, which accounted for his brazen defense of Fanon in his preface to the *Wretched of the Earth*. As you note, by the late 1950s, Sartre was indeed a tribune to the "wretched of the earth" and his Marxist-infused existentialism led him to rework his earlier reflections on racism in the case of anti-Semitism.

JJ: Ron, now that we have discussed Sartre's views on anti-Semitism and racism and how they changed in the postwar period, let's start digging more deeply into his views on Israel/Palestine and how they evolved. As mentioned above, you recently looked again at Sartre's article published in *Caliban* arguing for support for Israel in its armed struggle in 1948. What does Sartre argue in that piece in 1948?

RA: Sartre worries that the British are about to leave the Jewish state at the mercy of well-armed "Arab mercenaries" besieging them in overwhelming numbers. Guerilla bands "infest the countryside", and Jews traveling in convoys are ambushed without being able to defend themselves. Thousands of Jewish men and women are at risk of being butchered by Arabs in such places as Jaffa, Hebron, and Nablus. By simply doing

⁸ J.-P. SARTRE, *Albert Memmi's The Colonizer and the Colonized*, in ID., *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, trans. by A. Haddour, S. Brewer and T. McWilliams, Routledge, London 2001 (1964).

nothing, by not intervening as the British troops depart on May 15, those in Europe who refuse to give them arms are risking becoming complicit in a new massacre, this time of Jewish survivors, in the only territory that anti-Semitism has left them. Anti-Semites hoping for new pogroms and massacres to destroy the Jewish people can do so now by inaction, with a clear conscience and the appearance of clean hands. Sartre pleads that this not be allowed to happen⁹.

While he is aware that the United Nations partition plan of the previous November had left unresolved a “Palestinian problem”, Sartre seems totally unaware of the Palestinian Arabs as a people and betrays no sense of the realities of the Jewish relationship to them over a half century of Zionist settlement. His only concern was to urgently plead for help for the besieged Jews. He did not suspect that the well-organized Israeli military had easily handled the uncoordinated Palestinian irregular bands attacking in a number of places after the UN resolution in November and that from the Declaration of Independence and departure of the British on May 15 the Jews would immediately receive a shipment of Czech arms, and would be very much on the offensive against the overmatched and mostly hesitant Arab armies; that even before more Czech and other foreign arms would arrive that summer, they would have held off the invaders; or that the one well-trained and well-armed Arab army, the Jordanians, were commanded by the British (notably John Glubb Pasha) and were carrying out the agreement between Ben-Gurion and King Abdallah to take over the West Bank and deny any possibility of an independent Palestinian state.

In other words, as in 1967 and again and again in Israeli history, widespread fears for the Jewish state’s survival encouraged the myth described by Simha Flapan in *The Birth of Israel*: “The tiny, newborn state of Israel faced the onslaught of the Arab armies and David faced Goliath: a numerically inferior, poorly armed people in danger of being overrun by a military giant”¹⁰. Debunking this and other founding myths about Israel was the project undertaken much later by Flapan, the Israeli historian, editor, political figure, and peace activist, who coincidentally helped arrange Sartre and Beauvoir’s 1967 visit to Israel.

⁹ J.-P. SARTRE, *C’est pour nous tous que sonne le glas*, in «Caliban», n. 16, 1948, pp. 13-16.

¹⁰ S. FLAPAN, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities*, Pantheon, New York 1987, p. 187.

RA: That was Sartre's position in 1948 legitimating the establishment of the State of Israel. Jonathan, by 1967, how had Sartre's position on Israel/Palestine shifted?

JJ: The shifts in Sartre's position were evident in an interview he did with Flapan in *Al-Hamishmar*, the Israeli newspaper of the socialist party Mapan, in the beginning of 1966¹¹. Sartre was by then torn between his affinity for Jews and Israelis and his new understanding of Arab struggles that accrued because of his involvement in the French-Algerian conflict.

“The situation of my Jewish friends during the Occupation” – Sartre said – “revealed the problem of the Jews in Europe to me at the same time that our common resistance to Nazism created deep-seated bonds between us.... But in a similar fashion, the struggle against colonialism led us during the Algerian war to take our stand with the FLN and to cement many friendships in the Arab nations”¹².

By 1967, in coordination with a huge special issue of «Les Temps modernes» on the Arab-Israeli conflict, Sartre and Beauvoir visited both Egypt and Israel. Throughout the visit where Sartre was tracked by reporters, he insisted that he had come to listen to the perspectives of each side, not to offer his own solutions to a conflict he maintained was complex and ambiguous. When he was pushed by students at the University of Alexandria on the Palestinian question specifically, he demurred, indicating that he was studying the problem and learning from both sides.

In the «Les Temps modernes» special issue, he called the conflict a “différend judéo-arabe”, indicating that both Israeli and Palestinian perspectives were legitimate. Their stances were built upon preconditions on each side that were totally irreconcilable, and he maintained that there could not be peace until each side recognized the axioms of the other: “Precondition on the side of the Israelis: recognition of the sovereignty of Israel... Precondition for the Arabs: the right of the Palestinian refugees to return to Israel”¹³.

¹¹ Interview given to *Al-Hamishmar*, 1966; entry in M. CONTACT, M. RYBALKA, *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre*, vol. I, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1974, p. 498.

¹² “Jean-Paul Sartre et les problèmes de notre temps: Interview recueillie par Simha Flapan”, in «Cahiers Bernard Lazare», n. 4, April 1966, pp. 4-9, citation 4.

¹³ “Jean-Paul Sartre et Simone de Beauvoir en Israël”, in «Cahiers Bernard Lazare», n. 10,

On the eve of the Six-Day War, Sartre signed a manifesto intended to counter growing French opinion that Israel was the aggressor and an agent of imperialism and that the Arabs were the beacon of socialism and peace. Instead, the signers of the manifesto insisted that Israel was the only state to have the right of its existence questioned and that it did want peace with its neighbors. This manifesto so angered Josie Fanon, the widow of Frantz, that she asked the French publisher of *Les damnés de la terre* to retract Sartre's renowned Preface and accused Sartre of joining the "camp of the assassins"¹⁴.

JJ: On that note, Ron, we have both read the important book by Yoav Di-Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre and Decolonization* that tracks the story of existentialism and the Arab world via the growth of Sartre's enormous influence, leading to the belief that Sartre, the tribune to the Third World, would naturally support the Arabs, and especially the Palestinians, against Israel. But given what we have already outlined about Sartre's views in 1948 and around 1967, his position, as Josie Fanon's response indicates, was viewed as a betrayal – why was this the case?

RA: The heart of Di-Capua's story is that philosophically there was an explosion of Arab interest in existentialism and Sartre in the 1950s and 1960s. Young thinkers, many of whom encountered his ideas in Paris, were also taken by his call for *engagement*. And given his writings on race and oppression, and his support of revolutionary and anti-colonial movements everywhere and specifically in Algeria, Cuba, and the Congo, Sartre was regarded around the world as the voice of those struggling for liberation, above all in the Third World. Accordingly, it was widely expected that Sartre would naturally support the Arabs, and especially the Palestinians, against Israel as war was being prepared. While understandable in light of what we have already outlined about Sartre's views in 1948 and around 1967, his refusal to side against Israel was viewed as a betrayal throughout the Arab world¹⁵.

1967, pp. 4-20, citation 11.

¹⁴ See N. LAMOUCHE, *Jean-Paul Sartre et le tiers monde*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1996, pp. 157-158.

¹⁵ In his review of Di-Capua, Adam Schatz is skeptical about the actual philosophical content of Arab existentialism as well as Sartre's effort to think both sides together. A. SCHATZ, [ital] *Writers and Missionaries*, [end ital] Verso, New York 2023, pp. 337-353. Y. DI-CAPUA, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre & Decolonization*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2018.

Uncharacteristically, in his remaining years, this man of prodigious energy for tackling dozens of contemporary issues in extended essays (a sampling of which is gathered in *We Have Only This Life to Live: The Selected Essays of Jean-Paul Sartre 1939-1975*) never took the time to write an Israel-Palestine essay that at the very least would have justified himself to the world. Typically, when an important issue or cause was at stake Sartre would master several writings on the particular issue and write a thorough, well-informed and penetrating essay. At the end, when the issue was grasped and deciphered, Sartre would take his moral and political stand, no matter how shocking. But in this one case, Israel and the Palestinians, we find no essay and only two published interviews, one of which appears in the selected essays, with Claudine Chonez in February, 1969. There the great radical displeased everyone by spelling out his core position on Israel-Palestine.

Sartre begins by repeating an earlier stress on the sheer population difference between Israel and the surrounding Arab states, as we have quoted him worrying about abandoning these two million people to those eighty million people. Thus, he rejects any thought of a general disarmament: a peace treaty somehow accompanied by disarmament would in fact deliver the state of Israel into the hands of the Arabs. His major point, however, is the moral one, on both sides:

For me, Israel's sovereignty consists in this: among those who are over forty years old, most Israeli Jews who settled in Israel since the beginning of the century or later have not exploited these territories *in a colonial manner* because one cannot speak of a colonial exploitation of the Arabs. To the extent that it exists, it is a capitalist exploitation, if you like, just as there are exploited Israeli Jews – and we are not speaking of an excessive kind of exploitation. These people who settled there have had children and there are even those who are grandchildren of pioneers. Those who are born in the country and don't have a place elsewhere have acquired a trade: they work. They have the right to sovereignty over that country. As far as the Palestinians are concerned, I don't know how long they were there. But I have seen them, I went to see them in Gaza: for a fairly large part they are still relatively young and hence they have really been expelled from their country and they are living in a large slum. Simply because they have been expelled they have the right to return¹⁶.

¹⁶ "Israel and the Arab World", cit., pp. 443- 444.

This interview took place when the dominant Israeli narrative was that the Palestinians left voluntarily, at the behest of their leaders – and thus had somehow forfeited their right to return. Indeed, in Israel this narrative was only contested twenty years later by the “new historians”, one of whom was Flapan. But at this moment, in 1969, Sartre was well aware of this as dubious terrain, and dealt with it directly:

You'll tell me: 'they weren't expelled, it was at the behest of the mufti's appeals that they left, etc.' All this is quite complicated: it is certain that there were at that moment mixed responsibilities. Nevertheless, they became afraid and left their country and because they were terrified they left in great numbers and in a perfectly unjust manner. If I recognize that the child or a grandchild of a Jew who settled in Israel has the right to remain in his country because he lives there and shouldn't be expelled, I recognize that the Palestinians, in virtue of the same principle, have the right to return to it¹⁷.

RA: In light of this sense of betrayal, Sartre's position on the Munich Massacre at the Olympics in 1972 was surprising – Jonathan, what did Sartre argue and why?

JJ: We have seen that Sartre swam against the current of the Left in the period immediately before and after 1967. While many on the Left came to view Israel as Goliath and the Palestinians as David, Israel as the aggressor and Palestinians as the victims, Sartre never fell into this binary thinking, which he always termed “Manichean” in denouncing it. Sartre always insisted upon the legitimacy of the State of Israel and its right to achieve the baseline of Zionism: not only the right to existence, but sovereignty.

Nonetheless, Sartre's commitment on Israel/Palestine was rigorously ambivalent. He supported both sides. This is evident when it came to his support of the Black September faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1972 when they kidnapped 9 Israeli athletes, killing two others in the process, and murdering all of them in a firefight that ensued with the German police.

Sartre argued that the Munich massacre “perfectly succeeded” because it firmly put the eyes of the world onto the Palestinian struggle. In that struggle, he maintained that “terrorism is the weapon of the weak” and

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 444.

that he could not support the right of the FLN in Algeria to use such methods and then deny it to the Palestinians¹⁸.

In taking this stance, he was once again at odds even with the extreme Left, since his position was more radical than the Trotskyists or Maoists in endorsing this terrorist violence.

JJ: Ron, this begs the question that if this was Sartre's stance on the terrorist violence by Palestinians, how did this comport with his views on violence and revolutionary violence more generally?

RA: Before his comments on Munich, Sartre was, of course, notorious for his endorsement of anti-colonial violence as a kind of therapy. But, as Ronald Santoni points out, in the words of his book title, Sartre's considered view of violence is "curiously ambivalent"¹⁹. Sartre understood, as few other serious thinkers have, that in class society and colonial societies, violence is structured into daily experience. It is at the core of racism and of all unequal relations. Therefore, it can only be removed by sustained struggle against those structures and relations. The people who are its victims have far fewer means at their disposal, and to condemn them for employing violence is to deprive them of the few tools they have at their disposal for righting the wrongs built into their situation. Thus, Sartre endorses terrorism, based on the understanding that it is the recourse of those who have no other means available to them. Here, of course, is the core of Sartre's disagreement with Camus, who stressed that violence invariably perpetuated itself.

RA: In the 1970s, Sartre continued to be at odds with the Left, sometimes more radical and at other times more moderate – Jonathan, what were Sartre's views on Israel/Palestine in the years when we know he was physically declining, but still thinking against the current on these issues?

¹⁸ J.-P. SARTRE, "À-propos de Munich", in «La Cause du Peuple – J'Accuse», October 15, 1972, reprinted in Y. AURON, *Les juifs d'extrême gauche en Mai 68: Une génération révolutionnaire marquée par la Shoah*, trans. K. Werchowski, Albin Michel, Paris 1998, pp. 236-238.

¹⁹ R. SANTONI, *Sartre on Violence: Curiously Ambivalent*, Penn State University Press, University Park (PA) 2003.

By 1973 Sartre was in a frail state physically. He was effectively blind, and he could no longer write, but he continued to remain active politically and in dialogue with others, like his “secretary” Benny Lévy and Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre and with his older comrades like Beauvoir, who were sometimes quite at odds with one another, not least on Jewish questions.

Anwar Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem on November 19, 1977 was heralded by Sartre and many Jewish leftists, like the philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch, as a beacon of hope. Sartre spoke about it as a moment of radical possibility, since it rested upon a genuine recognition of the Israeli people. In an article penned with Benny Lévy, they suggested that now it was up to the Israelis to equally recognize the Palestinians, which meant recognizing their right to the occupied territories and to a state of their own²⁰.

This was a euphoric moment in Israel as well with huge rallies demanding “Peace Now”! Ely Ben-Gal invited Sartre’s young, Jewish entourage to visit Israel to appreciate what was happening up close, which they did in February 1978. In a co-authored article with Lévy, Sartre now stated, “The Israeli-Jew-in-the-Arab-world cannot not choose anymore after November 19: to be open to the Arab world or to close in on [itself]”²¹.

In March 1979, Benny Lévy was assigned the task of convening a colloquium held at Michel Foucault’s home called “Peace Today” that brought together Israelis and Palestinians for dialogue to further this possibility, including Edward Said, who would later condemn it as a “disaster”²².

A year later Sartre died. His controversial dialogues with Lévy about Jews and messianism were published on the eve of his burial. As Annie Cohen-Solal opens her biography of Sartre, his funeral was a huge national and global celebration. Sartre was laid to rest as the tribune of the marginalized, the oppressed, except by the Arab world who mourned that Sartre had never wholly embraced their viewpoint on Israel/Palestine.

²⁰ J.-P. SARTRE, B. LÉVY, “Déclaration commune Jean-Paul Sartre-Benny Lévy refuse par *Le Nouvel Observateur* mars 1978”, in E. BEN-GAL, *Mardi chez Sartre*, Flammarion, Paris 1992, pp. 322-327.

²¹ Ivi, p. 325.

²² A. COHEN-SOLAL, *Sartre: A Life*, Heinemann, London 1988, pp. 512-513.

JJ: Now that we have revisited Sartre's positions on Israel/Palestine over time, Ron, what is your sense of the importance of Sartre's stance for what is unfolding today among a global left that sometimes comes across as reflexively anti-Zionist and wholly critical of the "settler colonialism" of the State of Israel?

Sartre's stress on the legitimacy of both sides was not just the response of a moment. With one exception – his denunciation of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and final break with Communism - he would write no more major political essays. Even if he didn't sit down to create another Sartrean preface or essay climaxing in a stunning moral and political stand, his position on Israel-Palestine goes all the way back to his reflections on anti-Semitism and the Jewish question, and his involvement in these issues would continue to his last days. No longer able to write, toward the end he actively intervened in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, refusing to offer a recipe for solving the conflict, believing that the key was for the two sides to meet and negotiate. As you note, he sponsored what became the pathetic and fruitless discussion between Israelis and Palestinians in the apartment of Michel Foucault famously lamented by Said.

Since those days conditions have gotten much worse in many ways, highlighted by the equally unspeakable October 7 massacre and Israel laying waste to Gaza. Israel, for all its power, experienced the most traumatic event of its history; the Palestinians, despite their history of remarkable development against great odds, have been undergoing a genocidal assault.

I have written about social madness in the twentieth and twenty-first century, and it is not hyperbolic to say that this has been happening on both sides today²³. At the same time, since October 7, Israel's erasure of the Palestinians has been upended, and we have entered what Peter Beinart calls "the age of Palestine"²⁴. But while the Palestinians are no longer invisible to the world, even if Palestine does not yet exist, at the same time, on the left at least, "anti-Zionism" is now the order of the day. How would Sartre negotiate this difficult moral-political universe?

²³ R. ARONSON, *The Dialectics of Disaster: A Preface to Hope*, Verso, London 1983; Id., *Social Madness in «Radical Philosophy»*, n. 40, 1985.

²⁴ P. BEINART, "American Jews and the Age of Palestine", in «The New York Times», March 25, 2024.

To return to his key sentence: “If I recognize that the child or a grandchild of a Jew who settled in Israel has the right to remain in his country because he lives there and shouldn’t be expelled, I recognize that the Palestinians, in virtue of the same principle, have the right to return to it.”

Sartre was certainly aware that Zionism accomplished something of unparalleled audacity: moving masses of new residents into an already settled country, with and for them, building an entire infrastructure, winning political and military dominance and their own country, and in the decisive moment expelling most of the original inhabitants. Thus, with the support of the nations that mattered, Israel created a Jewish nation from a region of a once-enormous empire, and ever since has successfully justified this. But Sartre knew that the Palestinians would continue to struggle against Israel on behalf of their no less fundamental rights, and rightly so. He would no doubt have recognized that the October massacre was rooted in a legitimate struggle that became unhinged, just as since that day a legitimate Israeli response of self-defense is unhinged.

And further, in each case, why the stunning irrationality? In his profound attention to human behavior Sartre provides tools that can help us here. His basic philosophical point from the beginning to the end of his career was that people choose their course no matter what. But as Sartre also said, some situations are impossible. In other words, it may be that no course of action can possibly solve the problems people confront, or that they lack the wherewithal to deal effectively with the situation, or that the paths to doing so might be blocked. When effective action is difficult or impossible, individuals nevertheless remain self-determining. They might respond by changing their perception of the situation, or by changing themselves. Sartre gives us a sense of this kind of dynamic by noting that, in the case of an individual, a neurosis may be invented by the person “in order to be able to live an unlivable situation²⁵”. Indeed, in conditions of severe stress and with few other available options, an individual may well choose a deranged and self-diminishing stance toward reality.

I have written elsewhere that such collective choices help explain some of the disastrous social explosions of the last two centuries. What I have called the unhinged October 7th massacre by Islamist fundamental-

²⁵ J.-P. SARTRE, Foreword to R.D. LAING, D.G. COOPER, *Reason and Violence: A Decade of Sartre's Philosophy 1950-1960*, Law Book Co of Australasia, London 1964, p. 7.

ist resistance groups is rooted in the impossibility of effective Palestinian action for their liberation. Israel has successfully blocked them at every turn. Similarly, the no less unhinged assault on the people, homes, and infrastructure of Gaza, is rooted in Israelis' inability, for all they have done and built, and all of the structures and acts of erasure of the Palestinian people, to genuinely pacify them. Israel, locking Palestinians into "the world's largest open-air prison", has been unable to escape from their wrath. Two impossible situations, two refusals to accept the other side's vital demands as legitimate, two demented responses.

And since October 7, "anti-Semitism", and "settler-colonialism" justify genocide and terrorism, in place of genuine moral-political grounding and critical analysis. We definitely need Sartre to help us think through this situation.

RA: what about you, Jonathan, what lessons can we draw from Sartre's positions that are useful for understanding Israel/Palestine and Gaza?

I really appreciate your analysis based on the idea that Israel/Palestine today is an impossible situation, an unlivable situation if both sides are to maintain their humanity. October 7 and its aftermath was an unhinged response to Palestinian reality in Gaza.

In *Critical Theories of Anti-Semitism* my last chapter was framed by Jacques Derrida's response to 9/11, calling the "war on terror" at "auto-immunatory process". By this, Derrida meant that the war on terror creates the very conditions that it aims to end. For example, the war on terror justified the war in Iraq, which in turn generated ISIS from the ashes of al-Qaeda.

What Hamas did on October 7 was torn from the pages of ISIS: terrorism as a weapon of war involving mass rape, caging of children, and taking hundreds of hostages into underground tunnels. This ostensible effort at liberation for Palestinians could not but result in massive harm to the Palestinian people. This is the auto-immunary process in effect²⁶.

²⁶ G. BORRADORI, *Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida*, in Ed., *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2003, pp. 85-136.

The response of Israel razing much of Gaza and killing tens of thousands, destroying most of the infrastructure in Gaza, including schools and hospitals, the forcible and ongoing evacuations of millions, the systemic efforts to squelch humanitarian assistance all resulting in the mass death of innocent civilians, mostly women and children, is likewise evidence of an autoimmunity process. This response can only generate further militant jihadis to replace the ranks of those killed.

In his response to Sadat's gesture as a symbolic recognition of the State of Israel, which was an ethical stance that ultimately resulted in Sadat's assassination, Sartre called for the corresponding recognition of the Palestinian people by Israelis. To repeat what Sartre said, "The Israeli-Jew-in-the-Arab-world cannot not choose anymore after November 19: to be open to the Arab world or to close in on [itself]". He insisted that this should not be based on realpolitik of the kind we find in the Oslo accords, but should rather be based on the ethical recognition of the Other.

This mutual recognition is today anathema on the part of the non-Israeli Left who call for the dismantling of the State of Israel, which is not only unrealistic, but a recipe to stir Israeli Right-wing intransigence and the further closing in on itself that reinforces Palestinian oppression and suffering.

The hope that Sartre saw from 1967 onwards was that leftists on each side would recognize the legitimacy of the Other, even as their narratives were in direct opposition and wholly irreconcilable to one another. He hoped that leftists on both sides would then negotiate grounded in the moral axiom of mutual recognition. This glint of hope feels faint today. But it is the only hope that I see to ending the cycle of violence perpetuated by the unhinged neuroses on both sides. It is the only hope of moving from an impossible situation to a livable reality. As such, Sartre was right then and we need Sartre's vision right now.

