*Intervention*

# States of Uncaring, Abandoned Lives

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A word came into sudden prominence in Israel on October 7, 2023: *hafkara*, Hebrew for "abandonment". It began circulating in frenzied text messages sent by Israelis in communities captured by Hamas fighters that Saturday morning. In social media posts and in live television and radio interviews they did while hiding, the word was repeated time and again. In many testimonies collected since, abandonment is articulated to convey an overwhelming sense of despair and complete helplessness. It is life adrift. Yet abandonment is also stated as an indictment of a political logic that has turned uncaring into a system of rule. This intervention traces what I call "the state of uncaring", a political order in which abandonment is no longer a failure or aberration of governance, but a sovereign logic that reconstitutes the relation between the sovereign and those subjected to it.

In the first two sections, I trace how the state weaponizes the abdication of sovereign care. I follow how an instrument that was initially intended to legitimate Israeli political violence and repression of Palestinians, spirals well beyond the spaces and populations it was designed to govern. The events of recent months reveal how uncaring turns inward, perforating the cohesive façade of a settler society and unleashing violence toward those who saw themselves as integral to its social and political fabric. In this state of uncaring, they, like many others, have become disposable. I conclude by asking whether this murderous uncaring also requires us to rethink political abandonment and its long relation to sovereign care.

## Left to Die

In its most rudimentary sense, public outcry over the *hafkara* (abandonment) of October 7, is articulated as a condemnation of a state that fails to uphold the basic tenant of the social

contract—the protection of life. One testimony, given by a man who hid with his family in a safe room for 11 hours, reveals abandonment through its minute, tactile materiality, while still retaining its systemic political articulations:

> The safe room's door was locked with a small metal bar … A simple metal bar. Not the Israeli military. Not the police, the air force wasn't around. No helicopters, no drones. Those, by the way, can be sent in less than an hour. They left us to die. Me, and the people closest to me. They abandoned us. They abandoned us. They abandoned us. That is the truth. As far as this government is concerned our lives are worthless. (Elad P. 2023)

Abandonment did not begin nor end on October 7 or the days following it. If anything, it was a prevailing political logic that, to intensified degrees, governed the lives of Palestinians for decades. Over time, what was assumed to be a confined technology of rule, metastasized across the territory under the settler-colonial regime of the Israeli state. Abandonment was normalized, but simultaneously crept far beyond the bounded spaces of military occupation where it was designed, tested, and perfected. Thousands of Israelis who woke up on October 7 to realize that the state was nowhere to be found, also had to shake off the fantasy that their lives were somehow shielded from the callousness, indifference, and brutality that governs the lives of Palestinians. As Gil Hochberg (2015) documented, concealment plays a critical role in producing violent visual regimes that enabled most Israeli Jews to separate themselves, mentally and politically, from the fate of Palestinians. She specifically notes erasure, denial, and obstruction of sight as powerful mechanisms that enable and sustain the willful obliviousness to the lives and suffering of Palestinians under occupation. It was not only that Israelis were confronted with what they hoped not to see. Instead, they had to confront the fact that the entire political edifice that sustained their cocooned existence decided to withdraw and leave them exposed.[1]

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[1] Although the Israeli military diverted large forces from the Gaza perimeter to secure settlers in the Occupied West Bank days before October 7, such tactical reconfigurations often obscure deeper currents. The abandonment of the Israeli southern peripheries goes well beyond securitization and dates back to the early days of the state when Jews of Arab descent were sent to buttress the borderlands. Since then, peripheral communities have been culturally marginalized and socioeconomically under-resourced (see, for example,

For its part, the Israeli state was all too eager to cultivate this fantasy, to reassure Israeli-Jews that the social contract was still intact. In the immediate aftermath, officials insisted that this was an unforeseen error, a tragic aberration of the political order. "This is our 9/11", the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations said only hours after the barriers were breached (Vacchiano 2023). Resurrecting an external threat has always served an effective distraction from the state's own failures and a powerful trope in reinforcing racism. By the time the ambassador was making his appearance on American TV, the Israeli war machine was already unleashing death and destruction in Gaza. Israel's violence since was partly an attempt to cover up its own actions, the fact that when the barriers were breached, the state was nowhere to be found.

## The Killable Self

In 2016, Elor Azaria, an Israeli soldier, shot and killed a Palestinian man, Abd al-Fatah a-Sharif, while the latter was lying wounded on the road in the West Bank city of Hebron. Azaria, who would be convicted of manslaughter less than a year later, with military judges citing a motive of vengeance, had in the meantime become a hero for the far-right. He was released just nine months after his initial 18-month sentence, which was later reduced to 14 months for "compassion and consideration for his combat service". Azaria's case marked a watershed moment. It illuminated a widespread Israeli embrace of public execution of Palestinians, removing the thin veneer of due process and accountability that underpinned Israel's liberal self-perception. The floodgates opened: a year later, Yacoub Abu al-Qi'an was executed at short range in the Bedouin village of Umm al-Hiran when he drove past police officers overseeing home demolitions.[2] Iyad al-Hallaq was shot dead in Jerusalem's Old City in 2020 after being chased by Israeli officers while on his way to a school for Palestinian neurodivergent children. In 2022, renowned Palestinian journalist Shirin Abu Akleh was killed by an Israeli sniper while reporting in the city Jenin (I draw on the excellent reporting

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Tzfadia 2006; Yiftachel 2001).

[2] Bedouins are itinerant Palestinian-Arab communities concentrated primarily in the Naqab desert region, who came under Israeli control in 1948. Though many are eligible for Israeli citizenship and a minority even serves in the Israeli armed forces, the state has systemically sought to restrict their itinerant traditions through land confiscations, forced settlements, and criminalization. In this regard, Bedouins inhabit an unique strata in the racialized political order of the Israeli regime (see Kedar et al. 2018).

of Sebastian Ben Daniel [John Brown] [2024]). Few Israeli-Jews remember these killings or hundreds like them that have taken place in recent years. Even fewer care. The dominant political calculus has relegated Palestinian life beyond the realm of care.



**Figure 1:** Mural of Iyad al-Hallaq, who was shot on his way to school
(source: Seka Hamed, 2020, https://www.flickr.com/photos/161316741@N04/50025343731/in/photostream/;
CC BY-SA https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/)

It proved impossible to contain this systemic abandonment of life in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The exponential rise in murders of Palestinian citizens of Israel was one of the early indicators that the state of uncaring was gaining a foothold within Israel. 2023 was the deadliest year on record, with 244 killings, more than double the previous year. Under the leadership of an extreme Jewish-supremacist national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, killers of Arabs in Israel could act with almost complete impunity—only 10% of police

investigations of these murders resulted in indictments (Jabarin 2024).

The abandonment of southern Israeli communities on October 7 was a prelude to events that unfolded in the following weeks. In early December, Yuval Castleman, a former policeman, intervened to stop a shooting attack in Jerusalem. After the gunmen were killed, Castleman threw his gun to the ground, raised his hands in the air, removed his jacket to show he had no explosive belt and pleaded in Hebrew to be spared. It was in vain. A reserve soldier who lives in a violent West Bank outpost shot Castleman multiple times in the abdomen in front of cameras and then turned away. He was left on the ground bleeding, before succumbing to his injuries later that night, on his birthday. Meanwhile, the settler who murdered him gave interviews, boasted about his act, and received congratulations from far-right media and political personalities. The killing of Castleman highlighted a critical transition: those who were the supposed beneficiaries of the uncaring state, were now being consumed by its violence. Abandonment was turning violently against the abdicators themselves.

No event signals the self-destructive force of the uncaring state more than the execution of three Israeli men in Gaza on December 15. The three—Yotam Haim, Samer Talalka, and Alon Shamriz—were captured by Hamas on October 7. After they managed to escape their captors, they tried to approach an Israeli military unit that was operating nearby. A military sniper first shot toward them as they emerged—shirtless and waving a white flag—from a building more than 100 yards away, killing Talalka and Shamriz. Haim managed to escape, wounded, to a building nearby, and the soldiers pursued him. After 15 minutes, they convinced Haim to exit the building, promising that nothing will happen to him. When Haim finally came toward the soldiers, one of them executed him.

When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was asked about Castleman's killing, he responded by saying, "that's life" (TOI Staff 2023). Indeed, that's life in the state of uncaring.

## The State of Uncaring

Abandonment—as a governing logic and experiential condition—is hardly new to the political lexicon. Yet tracing the state of uncaring, the state that unleashes death and destruction with abandon, remains both intellectually significant and politically urgent.

First, it prompts us to ask, to what end does the state abandon? When the Israeli state

left tens of thousands of its citizens to fend for themselves, it did so not to punish or to harm. The state did so because it deemed some as unworthy of care, further extending its use of abandonment as a system of rule. This began with indifference to Palestinian lives, toward asylum seekers left to die on the southern border (Lijnders 2012), and the state's repeated refusal to prevent criminal acts that are killing Arab citizens of Israel. In the past months of intensified violence, uncaring came to haunt the lives of Israeli Jews, those who still believed the state cared for them—even if this care was irregular, unequal, racialized, and constantly eroding. On October 7, the Israeli state severed even those last threads of sovereign care. Care itself was abandoned.

Uncaring, as I develop it in a forthcoming book, *Edges of Care*, constitutes a different relation between the sovereign and those subjected to it (Leshem 2024). It designates extreme conditions under which any pretense of sovereign care is severed. To fully grasp the political logics that unleashed the atrocities of recent months, we must question the way political thought continues to see abandonment as a form of care, even if this care is merely a form of control. In the most obvious spaces of abandonment—the camp or the plantation—all aspects of life are measured against their ability to maximize value: labour outputs, caloric intakes, susceptibility to disease, and efficiency of movement are all constantly monitored, analyzed, and adjusted. Death itself is the subject of meticulous calculative efforts that are intended either to prevent it, or, as in the case of Nazi death camps, in the perfection of killing as a rational, sanitized, industrial process (Traverso 2003). The history of biopolitical governance has shown that even medical care has been weaponized to probe, injure, and degrade life (*bios*) to its pure biological components (*zoe*).[3] These are often, as Nasser Abourahme (2020: 38) precisely puts it, spaces "of life and nothing but life". Biopolitical abandonment is constituted by care and is governed by it, even when care takes on an intrusive, violent, and even genocidal form.

In a similar way, neoliberal restructuring of state functions and provisions does not abandon care, but instead re-designates the responsibility for its delivery to the market or

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[3] Agamben (2000) famously makes this distinction to understand the structure of exception that constitutes contemporary biopower. Medical violence is a relatively neglected topic in the scholarship on repression, mass violence, and genocide, in spite of its commonality and profound impact on societies. Most research has focused on Nazi doctors and medical scientists, but more recent work has extended, for example, to the role that Syrian doctors have played in that country's violent conflict (Lifton 2017; Shahhoud 2023).

assigns individuals to care for themselves. This reassignment of care is driven by a calculation of value and potential returns, what Elizabeth Povinelli (2011: 167) calls the "modalities of expenditure and abandonment". Deciding whether this or that sacrifice is worth it relies on different calculations in "various domains of social life—politics, market and civil society" (ibid.). Yet fundamentally, these economic valuations and political calculations are deeply steeped in care, even though care is always conditional: "In neoliberalism", she concludes, "to care for others is to refuse to preserve life if it lies outside market value" (Povinelli 2011: 159). The calculations that lead the state to abandon life because it is not *worth* sustaining may be cynical and cruel: it is care for profit, care of the self, yet care remains a pivotal component of the sovereign neoliberal condition.

What emerges from the cataclysm unleashed by the Israeli state is importantly distinct from previous political orders that mobilize abandonment to punish or profit. This isn't a recurrence of Mbembe's (2019) "necropolitics", Puar's (2017) "maimed life", or Gregory's (2004) "colonial present". The violent practices and modalities of abandonment they and many others have documented in Palestine-Israel are still part of an invasive, controlling, and punitive system. By its very nature, it maintains a relation of care to its subjects, care-as-control, caring to death. In a way that expands this analytical prism, I want to highlight the potential of abandonment-without-care, instances in which the sovereign relinquishes any pastoral pretense, utilitarian investment, or psychic interest. Uncaring constitutes a qualitatively different relation between the sovereign and those subjected to it. It designates extreme conditions under which any pretense of sovereign care is severed, where care itself is abandoned (see also Leshem 2017).

Second, abandonment erodes one of the core foundations of the settler-colonial state, namely, its effort to be the rightful representative of a cohesive collective. This is, in fact, merely a colonial fantasy that the settler state seeks to perpetuate (Leshem and Bagelman 2023). Constructing a stable and seamless appearance serves to solidify the settler state's effort to inculcate a diverse collective into a single mission of dispossession and establish a binary logic that sets settlers and Indigenous peoples as diametric oppositions. The systemic abandonment that was revealed on October 7 exposes the urgent need to dispel this logic, to insist on the fallacy of a state operating on behalf of a cohesive collective. Part of the challenge of anticolonial critique at this moment is to use the violence of the uncaring state to further expose and exploit the deep fissures that tear settler societies along racial, ethnic, and

socioeconomic lines.

It is nearly impossible to resurrect a political horizon while the ruins continue to pile and the loss seems unbearable to comprehend. Abandonment is a rather grim starting point for recuperative politics, for a struggle toward dignity, equity, and liberty. Yet there is power in realizing that abandonment cannot be neatly contained, that it breaks out of its confines and comes back to haunt those it was supposed to serve. It is an invitation to see the failures of a political logic premised on settler-supremacy and violent subjugation. It opens the possibility of resurrecting histories of radical action and solidarity that emerge out of extreme disenfranchisement, marginalization, and subjugation to violence. I am thinking, for example, of meetings between the Israeli Black Panthers and the Palestinian Liberation Organization that started in 1972 and made explicit the intertwined realities of violence that Arab-Jews and Palestinians faced (Leshem and Pinkerton 2016). Following these meetings, Kochavi Shemesh, one of the Panthers' founders, insisted that, "There will be no equality and no chance for … [Arab-Jews] as long as there's an occupation and a national struggle, and on the other hand, the national struggle will not be over so long as … [Arab-Jews] are at the bottom of the ladder, and are practically [used as] an anti-Arab lever" (quoted in Chetrit 2009: 121). The Panthers were violently crushed by the Israeli state, partly because of radical efforts of this kind. But such fleeting chapters chart the possibility of resuscitating political imagination and action out of abandonment.

The creation of coalitions by those who find themselves at the receiving end of the state of uncaring seems, at present, naive at best. Death and destruction must first stop. Perpetrators must be held accountable. But the uncaring state has shown immense resilience and its logics of abdication will not change when hostilities subside. The challenge of imagining alternatives and striving toward their realization remains, therefore, more urgent than ever. A reminder, if one was needed, that the future itself should not be abandoned.

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