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The Israel-Hamas drama and the dilemmas of scholarly response

Written by: Jon Abbink, African Studies Centre, Leiden University.

The current Israel-Hamas war is an abject tragedy because of the suffering of innocents on both sides. Although a direct link of this Middle East conflict with Africa and African Studies is not very clear, people feel inclined to protest and call for a ‘ceasefire’ and more. Understandable: the suffering has to stop, and – next to elementary civic concern - scholars with the appropriate research experience and knowledge should contribute to comment.

As an African Studies scholar and non-Jewish, I have lived in and done research in both Israel and African countries (mainly the Horn of Africa/Ethiopia). As is well-known, a large population of black Africans lives in Israel: the Ethiopian Jews (more than 110,000) - committed citizens, serving in all walks of life, including the army. I studied them after the first groups had settled in the late 1970s and early 1980s and I was surprised by the commitment and costs that Israel’s government made to bring these people, victims of the turmoil in Ethiopia, to Israel. The Ethiopian Jews struggled in Israel, but few of them have returned to live in Ethiopia.

As for this Israel-Gaza (Palestinian) conflict, it is difficult and painful to navigate the rights and wrongs of the warring sides. It is set in the wider context of political tensions and Arab-Muslim refusal to recognize existence and rights of the Jewish people in what is their ancient homeland and in the state they built up since the late 19th century – a state fully certified in international law since at least the [San Remo conference](#) of 1920. The same goes for the new Arab states that emerged the wake of World War I. The promise of Jewish-Arab cooperation (as evident in the [agreement](#) between *Emir Feisal* ibn Hussein, the Arab leader in the post-WW I years, with Jewish leaders like Ch. Weizmann) was not realized, as the Arab cause was then hijacked by extremists like the Islamist *Hajj Amin al Husseini*, the *mufti* of Jerusalem in the British Mandate period and a [friend](#) of Hitler. He [injected](#) a program of religious hatred into the emerging Jewish-Arab conflict. The rest is history, and the efforts to create a Palestinian-Arab state next to Israel since 1947 led to nothing, unfortunately mainly due to Arab [refusal](#) to all plans to that effect until today – the last one in 2008.

The Israel-Hamas conflict which initiated on 7 October has shown [unimaginable](#) violence, starting with the mass slaughter and torture of Israelis and others. That campaign can hardly be called ‘resistance’; it was aimed at maximum

damage, destruction of communities and mass killing of civilians in Israel – and [broadcasting](#) this. Jews, Israeli Arabs, Thai workers and [African](#) students were killed, [beheaded](#), tortured, [abused](#) and/or abducted: no discrimination. I refrain from giving the [details](#). We have seen massive demonstrations [supporting](#) Hamas also in Western capitals and I am surprised about the hatred and violence displayed during these manifestations: vilifying the Israeli and other hostages kidnapped by Hamas (i.e., the ones still alive), no calls for moderation or compromise or dialogue: only harsh insults, [support](#) for Hamas, demonization of Israel/Jews, harassing people on the streets, and dumb slogans like ‘From the river to the sea’, etc. Even Christmas shopping malls, religious institutions and businesses were targeted in ugly rioting.

Of course, there is an urge to call for a ceasefire to spare innocent or uninvolved civilians in Gaza and one day it will come. But for a ceasefire two parties are needed, and under some conditions. There was one brief ceasefire, mediated by, of all countries, Qatar, but it was broken by Hamas after one week (on December 1), after some hostages were released and Israel freed convicted Palestinians. To my knowledge, Hamas has since then not been interested in a ceasefire, or they only want a unilateral one: Israel should stop its campaign without any conditions. That will not work in a war that Hamas started and that has taken the worst death toll and abuse on Jews since WW II. One can deeply regret the massive scale of the Israeli campaign, which is indeed devastating because of the difficulty of rooting out the vast tunnel system of Hamas and its entrenchment in civilian areas and the perfidious human shield tactics. We feel that civilian deaths of Gazans are unnecessary and mortifying, judging from the pictures of the victims. At the same time we see a point in recognizing that Israel has the right and duty to defend itself and neutralize the opponent. Hamas has rejected any constructive openings since 2007, when they violently took over the Gaza Strip (from the PLO), since 2005 *unoccupied* due to Israel’s total withdrawal. Remember, as part of the international Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas is not interested in a ‘Palestinian’ state, let alone in one next to Israel; it has a pan-Islamist agenda. Reading its charter is enough to see that all they did on and since October 7 is part of their Islamist ideology. It is deeply regrettable that Hamas has effectively hijacked the justified cause of Palestinians for autonomy and state formation. Several Arab countries, including Egypt, are no friend of Hamas and do not want to work with them. There is an Arab fatigue with the ‘Palestinian cause’ – as was already evident from the ‘Abraham Accords.’ And while in public they ‘support the Palestinian cause’, the attitude of several Arab regimes behind the scenes is [ambivalent](#). This is partly because Hamas is seen as a tool of Iran – which via this movement torpedoed the imminent signing of a treaty between Israel and Saudi-Arabia.

What struck me in following the news and analyses on this conflict daily is the enormous fixation of people – academics, media pundits, activists, certain politicians, the ever-failing UN, ‘progressive’ demonstrators, etc- on Israel and

'the Jews'. It is puzzling that other major human rights crises concerning Muslim societies are just not in the public eye: no protests or mass campaigns in Western capitals or elsewhere on behalf of the Uyghurs in China, the approximately one million Afghans who fled the Taliban forcibly expelled from Pakistan back to Afghanistan, or the Rohingya in Myanmar. No mass protests against the slaughter of civilians in Darfur (Sudan), nothing ever on the almost 500,000 Syrians killed in a never-ending civil [war](#) by Bashar al-Assad's terror regime in Syria (with Iranian help), no protests against the continuing beheadings, killings and repression of civilians (notably women) in Iran, no demonstrations against the mass slaughter by Houthis and others in Yemen. Or in memory of the over 150 Christians [massacred](#) in [Nigeria](#), reportedly by Islamist Fulani [radicals](#). No demonstrations or statements of protest were heard from people either in the West or in Africa on these well-timed attacks. Why? Perhaps because no Jews are involved there? Indeed, we do not need to be 'proportionate' in whom to support in public protests, but the bias is very evident to see. The sole priority seemed to be holding marches against Israel and its campaign in Gaza against Hamas.

African [responses](#) to the current Israel-Hamas fighting [have](#) been [mixed](#). Few comments were made on the initial violence that sparked the war. While many Africans withhold judgment on the issue, others, notably political elites, join the chorus of condemnation of Israel – often with no word on the October 7 Hamas horrors. The clearest example is the response some days ago of the [South African Ministry](#) of Foreign Affairs to try to [indict](#) Israel for 'genocide' at the International Court of Justice – a case that will have no traction and is primarily ideological. I fear the South African indictment has little idea of what 'genocide' means in international law terms.

In some African Studies circles the perception and condemnation discourse on Israel are conditioned by a (contested) [perception](#) that the state is a 'settler-colonial' enterprise or whatever (parroted by [Al Jazeera](#)) and can be ranged among the anti-colonial paradigm, derived from the independence struggle era in Africa in the 1950-60s. But that is an ideological misconception based on not knowing - or not *wanting* to know - relevant facts. Israel was built as a result of a national self-determination movement of persecuted Jews - in Europe and Arab countries, where they were discriminated against, humiliated, denigrated and the victims of pogroms and killings (also in the Arab world). Yes, tensions with the Arabs arose, but the original situation in Ottoman Palestine was not one of ideological and political antagonism with them - that happened primarily in the post-WW I period. The historical details are too much to go into. I always found it difficult to see why a people battered by history like the Jews - and to be battered even more in the WW II Holocaust - would not have the right to a national existence when any other people, including the Arabs after WW I, would have that right. Negotiations and compromise politics were in the offing but alas, Arab refusal, stoked partly by outside forces and dumb British policies, prevented decisive progress. And

from its inception the State of Israel tried to build constructive relations with African countries in the 1960-70s and majorly invested in development cooperation and business ventures – they saw many similarities in their respective challenges of nation-building.

How can scholars of African Studies respond to this terrible crisis? That is of course up to anyone to decide, but I would encourage some cognizance of the history, the political facts, and relevant [international law](#), and trying to come to a comprehensive, non-ideological view of the problems. Yes, yes, the sight of innocents killed on both sides is tough and unsettling, and makes us emotional and angry. But this is a war started by Hamas - in an appalling manner. They seem to be *hostis humani generis* ('enemies of humanity' in the juridical sense). And that has consequences. In war bad things happen. The calls we make for a halt to the fighting and bloodshed are done on personal conviction but can hardly be made on the basis of our scholarship as Africanists. If we claim to do so, we are obliged to look at and weigh all the facts and contain our prejudice. I find this often sorely lacking. I do not claim that I 'master all the facts', but I am disturbed by the dishonest bias and negative labelling evident in many academic circles on the basis of cheap ideological tropes that will help no one and prevent work on constructive solutions. A ceasefire can and must be supported, but not when it is a biased one that only calls upon Israel. The Palestinian cause is *not* Hamas: this death cult has done innumerable damage to ways forward and will not be missed in post-conflict negotiations on the future of Israel and the Palestinian people. What we should plead for is a balanced, fact-based approach that avoids ideological labelling and demonization (as evident in the massive anti-Semitism seen on the side of the Israel bashers) and shows more understanding and compassion for all sides in this conflict.

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