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Suffering and scholarly response - how to discuss the Israel-Hamas violence.

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I was invited to briefly comment on the remarks by Professor Amidu O. Sanni in his *The Israeli-Gaza (mis)Adventure: African Response to the Day Before and After October 7*. I gladly do so, although I of course wished it was on a less depressing subject. I here neither comment *in detail* nor debate all issues on the basis of research or data or facts, and only express a few basic thoughts. My main point is that we have to try to contain the emotions and anger on this terrible conflict in our scholarly discourse and not deny the existence of the other but work towards some kind of discourse of *rapprochement* between Israel and the Palestinians. While the basis for their coexistence is politically and juridically there, the conflict is seemingly unsolvable in the practical sense. But mutual recognition and political rights must be achieved. Some people on both sides have trouble with that, despite this being to only way forward.

The call for *rapprochement* also applies to scholars who take opposite or dissenting views. To be avoided are expressions of hatred, bigotry, Left-wing idiocy and ignorance, and Right-wing obstinacy and lack of empathy, reflecting what we see in street protests of the past months – the latest even in NYC, supporting the [Houthis](#).... This is surely not going to help but will poison public debate and university life. If, as we have seen in these often bizarre and malicious [demonstrations](#) across the Western world – even *more* so than in the Arab/Muslim world – the demonization of the State of Israel and the Jewish people continue, nothing will be achieved. When people start using expressions like ‘Israeli genocidal onslaught’, or of ‘complicit Western and lackeys states’ or of ‘Zionist illegal occupation’ or of ‘fascist Zionist concoction’, then we are removing ourselves from reasonable discussion. I think it is incorrect and emotional language. Up to a point that emotion is understandable. For instance, while the Israeli campaign in Gaza is problematic, the label of ‘genocide’ label is doubtful. It is a clearly [defined](#) term in international law, and its application is not convincing. And the same people never talk about the nature of the Hamas 7 October attacks. I labelled Hamas ‘fascist’ in an earlier post, [based](#) on their [own words](#) and their 1988 [charter](#), and due to their constant [endangering](#) of Gazans due to their ‘human [shield](#)’ tactics. It is imperative to support the real cause of the Palestinians for the right to life and dignity and freedom from violence, and these aims are not furthered by Hamas-like regimes. And Hamas c.s. are certainly not

an ‘anti-colonial movement’. African governments’ positions, apart from South Africa’s extreme response in running to the ICJ - have been [mixed](#) and rightly one of caution, although in majority they are sympathetic to the Palestinians and officially [object](#) to Israel’s campaign in Gaza. Israel’s clout in Africa (economically and academically) is very limited.

There is justified worry about the ongoing impact that all this is having on scholarly exchanges, as is evident in various contributions to this network on African Studies, a field which, I maintain, has no direct bearing on the Israel-Palestinian conflict. And an ‘academic boycott’ of Israel will not help. Apart from the fact that most Israeli academics were Leftist and always in favour of the two-state solution (I am not sure how it is now, after October 7, when most of the victims burned, raped and hacked to death were Leftist kibbutzniks), boycotts produce nothing except more hardened positions, dishonesty, and negative labelling instead of debate.

If we as scholars in African Studies want to contribute, we need to turn to the facts and sort out things in a non-ideological manner. As I said before, I don’t have all of them nicely lined up. Many people these days (even scholars) also say: ‘Facts don’t exist’. But that is nonsense. Yes, facts are contested and have to be defined, examined, compared, tested, etc., but only a broad and contextual discussion of facts brings us ahead in understanding and positioning ourselves in this tragic conflict.

The painful images and events of the violence perpetrated on innocents on both sides burdens us. It is easy to say from the sidelines, but as scholars we should be careful with words, so as not to make it all worse. Finally, I fully agree with Professor Sanni’s remark that: “There is a need to articulate a robust programme of informed analyses, proposals, and studies that would get to the “roots” of the crises and proffer realistic, workable, and genuine solutions...”.

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