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Response to Jon Abbink: The Israel-Hamas drama and the dilemmas of scholarly response.

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It has always been argued that war, be it “just” or “unjust” is certainly not about who is “right” but really about who is “left”; the survivors. The initial October 7 onslaught by Hamas on innocent Israeli revellers is doubtless reprehensible; but more condemnable is the disproportionate response by the Israeli government which has so far claimed close to 25000 victims, mostly Palestinians. Abbink has rightly put both actions in context as a non-Jewish Africanist. However, his sympathy seems to be more in favour of Israeli excesses which have defied all dispassionate assessments.

But the historical narrative on the emergence of the State of Israel and the initial Arab responses or lack of them from after World War I is probably irrelevant now; immediate ceasefire, humanitarian support” Marshall Plan” for the Palestinian people in terms of reconstruction and rehabilitation is what is needed now. What Abbink describes as the “fixation of people” of various callings at the expense of Israel is certainly an outpouring of emotion against the use of excessive force and palpable sufferings of the Palestinians.

African responses have indeed been mixed, as noted by Abbink, but it could not have been otherwise; Western influence on many African countries in favour of Israel is very overwhelming, and the critique of South Africa by him is probably misplaced. What Africanists need now is to generate a new discourse on a comprehensive settlement that would guarantee peace for both sides. The submission by Abbink that this is “a war started by Hamas - in an appalling manner: will be a misreading of the real history of the conflict from, at least, 1948.

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