

Commentary



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The Israel-Hamas war is not the simple morality play the identity politics left claims

Kaveh Shahrooz

What would the international reaction be if a country is attacked, hundreds of its citizens are subjected to sexual assault and murdered, over 200 of its people are taken hostage, all while the attackers livestream their atrocities? For all countries but one, it is reasonable to expect international outrage at the gruesome crimes and severe condemnation of the criminals.

Not so when the country being attacked is Israel, thanks to the spread of a reductive identity politics that flattens all difficult geopolitical conflicts to two-dimensional battles between colonialist oppressors and the colonized oppressed, and a social media environment that facilitates the rapid spread of disinformation. When Hamas terrorists launched “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood” against Israel on October 7, 2023, their campaign of murder, sexual assault, and kidnapping triggered violent protests in foreign capitals and roiled elite universities all over North America, not against the massacre perpetrators but its victims.

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Shortly after that attack, and before Israel had even begun its [military campaign](#) in Gaza to destroy Hamas, anti-Israel protests began at Canadian institutions where the views lean heavily towards the newfangled identity politics left.¹ For example, Fred Hahn, the vice president of Canada’s largest labour union, tweeted a celebration of “[the power of resistance](#)” the day after the gruesome attack.

At Canada’s York University, three student unions [released a statement](#) to “reaffirm [their] solidarity with the Palestinian people, within Palestine and the global diaspora, and their ongoing fight against settler-colonialism, apartheid, and genocide.” Their statement went on to characterize the October 7 attack – Hamas massacred hundreds of civilians, including 36 children, took 251 hostages, and raped women and then paraded their lifeless bodies in celebration as crowds of Palestinians cheered – as “a strong act of resistance” against the “settler-colonial apartheid state of so-called Israel.”

Not to be outdone, at Toronto Metropolitan University’s Lincoln Alexander School of Law, many students signed an [open letter](#) that reiterated the themes of the York statement: “Israel’ is not a country,” the students wrote, “it is the brand of a settler colony... We, the undersigned, recognize that the apartheid state referred to as ‘Israel’ is a product of settler colonialism.”

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These statements, made in the wake of a horrific attack against ordinary Israelis, shock the conscience. But they came as no surprise to those that have observed the cultural shift in the West towards identity politics, a political lens both reductionist and illiberal. Within Canada’s identity-politics left, like in that of much of the Western world, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is now often framed in terms of a simple dichotomy: Israel, the powerful, occupying force, versus the helpless and oppressed Palestinians.

Yet, regardless of how entrenched it has become in the public discourse, this simple morality play, which casts Israel as the villain and the Palestinians as the innocent victims, is misleading. To understand the nature of this conflict,

it is essential to move beyond the simplistic binary framework of “Israel vs. Palestinians” and recognize the broader axis of hostility arrayed against Israel, including the role of state sponsors of terror and their proxy groups. As demonstrated by their actions and statements, the protection and liberation of Palestinians is, in fact, not a primary goal of such actors. These groups manipulate sympathy for the Palestinian cause to bolster support for their wider goals of destroying Israel, establishing theocratic governments, and establishing regional hegemony.

The question is, how have we in Canada and the West allowed this insidious anti-Israel narrative to take root?

The war in Gaza: the “Israel vs. Palestinians” mirage

The human suffering in Gaza is undeniable and deeply tragic. However, it is not the result of a “genocidal” war being waged by a “colonialist oppressor,” Israel. In fact, Palestinian suffering is the result of decades of attempts to eradicate Israel and deny its right to exist. Israel faces an array of Islamist enemies, including terror groups Hamas, Hezbollah, and their patron state, Iran, as well as a host of other hostile Arab nations. This anti-Israel axis has not only prolonged the conflict but has also harmed the Palestinian people by undermining their safety, economic prospects, and political autonomy.

Since its establishment in 1948, Israel has faced existential threats from its neighbours. The Arab League rejected the UN Partition Plan of 1947 that would have created both a Jewish and an Arab state – a decision that Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas [admits was a mistake](#) – and launched a war to destroy the nascent Jewish state. This pattern continued with subsequent wars in 1967 and 1973. Despite peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, many regional actors, such as Iran and various Islamist groups, have refused to recognize Israel’s right to exist.

Hamas, which has governed the Gaza Strip with [an iron fist](#) since winning an election in 2006, explicitly states in its charter that it [seeks the destruction of Israel](#) and the establishment of an Islamic state in its place. Similarly, Hezbollah, a proxy of Iran based in Lebanon, has waged repeated wars against Israel while promoting Iran’s revolutionary ideology. Iran itself has been a major destabilizing force, providing funding and weaponry to these groups and exploiting the conflict to assert regional dominance. While some of Israel’s

actions – namely, the creation of illegal settlements on Palestinian lands – have exacerbated the conflict, the rejectionist stance adopted by groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, and ultimately by the Islamist regime in Iran, has fuelled violence and perpetuated the conflict, leaving little room for dialogue or compromise.

Regrettably, Western far left activists – in their zeal to “decolonize” Israel and “liberate” the Palestinians – ignore the extremist theocratic doctrines of Islamist terror groups that view non-Muslims (namely, the Jews) [as enemies to be subjugated](#). While secular Arab states have engaged in conflict with Israel for decades, increasingly the ideological opposition to Israel finds expression in theocratic beliefs. Groups like Hamas and Hezbollah envision an Islamic caliphate in which there is no place for a Jewish state. These groups frame their struggle not just as a territorial dispute but as a religious war, which complicates the prospects for negotiation. Hamas, for instance, opposes secular nationalism and has sought to impose [strict Islamic law](#) in Gaza.

Iran’s involvement adds another layer of complexity. The Iranian regime, driven by a vision of Shiite supremacy and regional hegemony, uses the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a tool to expand its influence. By providing [hundreds of millions of dollars](#) to groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, Iran positions itself as the defender of the Palestinian cause while simultaneously pursuing its own [geopolitical ambitions](#).

Ironically, the actions of anti-Israel forces have often inflicted significant harm on the Palestinian people. For all their bluster about “defending the rights of Palestinians,” neighbouring Arab states have often imposed [tremendous hardships](#) on Palestinian refugees, including systematic discrimination and denial of basic rights. Many countries, like Lebanon and Syria, have [refused to grant them citizenship](#), leaving Palestinians stateless and unable to access education, employment, or health care on equal terms. In some cases, their plight has been met with brutal violence; for example, in 1970’s “Black September,” Jordanian forces [killed thousands of Palestinians](#) during clashes with the PLO. Similarly, Palestinian refugees in Syria have also faced [neglect and violence](#) during the past decade’s civil war. These actions expose the contradictions in some Arab states’ professed support for the Palestinian cause.

The theocratic groups, too, have prioritized the religious goal of destroying Israel over the well-being of Palestinians. As is now well-known, Hamas has used civilian areas as [launching sites for rockets and stockpiled weapons](#) in

schools, hospitals, and residential buildings. This deliberate tactic of embedding military assets among civilian places Palestinian lives at risk during Israeli retaliations and hampers efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to Gazans.

In addition to jeopardizing civilian safety, Hamas's governance stifled economic growth in Gaza. The group's refusal to recognize Israel and its repeated aggressions – Hamas fired more than [13,000 rockets at Israel](#) in 2023 alone – have led to blockades and restrictions, isolating Gaza from regional trade and investment. Instead of focusing on economic development, Hamas has [diverted hundreds of millions of dollars](#) to building tunnels and manufacturing rockets, perpetuating poverty and unemployment among Palestinians. Back in 2014, the *Wall Street Journal* estimated, based on Israeli military statements, that “the average tunnel requires 350 truckloads of construction supplies – enough to build 86 homes, seven mosques, six schools, or 19 medical clinics.” The newspaper also noted that “Some tunnel-building materials... came from aid earmarked for development projects by international aid agencies in Gaza.”

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Hamas's October 7 attack – seemingly launched simply to provoke a strong reaction from Israel – severely exacerbated economic problems not just in Gaza, but also in the West Bank. According to the [World Bank](#), “in Gaza, an almost complete halt to economic activity is reflected in a staggering 86 per cent GDP drop in Q1 2024. Consequently, the share of the Strip's economy in the Palestinian economy has fallen from 17 per cent (prior to the conflict) to less than 5 per cent currently. In parallel, the shock in the West Bank was largely triggered by tighter restrictions on movement within cities and denied access for Palestinian commuters to the Israeli labour market and more recently an Israeli military operation in the North of the West Bank. This, coupled with increased withholdings by Israel on clearance revenues payable to the [Palestinian Authority], escalated an already dire fiscal crisis, and contributed to causing a 25 per cent GDP contraction in the West Bank in Q1 2024.”

The simple “Israel is the villain, Palestinians are victims” narrative that has taken festered and spread in Canada and the wider West thus fails to recognize the existential threat posed to Israel by many state and non-state actors, the broader strategic aims of these organizations, and the role that the same actors have had in destroying Palestinian lives and economic fortunes.

Weaponizing “critical studies”

What, then, explains the shift in public opinion across the West? What has prompted so many to lose sight of the complexity of the conflict and the existential threat to Israel, and to parrot so many of the same (incorrect) talking points?

Perhaps the most important ideological catalyst for this shift has been the growing strength of the “critical” studies (e.g. critical race theory, critical legal studies, critical gender studies) within various disciplines of the Western academy and their capture of influential cultural institutions. Rooted in theories emerging from the Frankfurt School of social thought in the early 20th Century, “critical” studies refer to interdisciplinary academic fields that focus on examining and questioning structures of power, oppression, and inequality in society. This analytical lens, now prevalent in many universities, newsrooms, and human resources departments, often frames global conflicts through the lens of power dynamics, with an emphasis on the oppression of marginalized groups. With reference to European colonization of third world nations and the massive resulting resource extraction, and the eventual anticolonial movements of 1970s and the lingering resentment in formerly colonized countries, the “critical” fields view all contemporary political disputes as a binary battle between White “oppressors” and non-White “oppressed.”

Whatever the merits of its historical analysis, this approach provides no space to criticize malign actors like Hamas or the Iranian regime (who are categorized as “oppressed” despite their brutality not only to Israelis, but to other Muslims and Arabs), or to recognize that approximately [half of Israel’s population](#) is not of European (White) ancestry, but is instead comprised of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews whose families were [expelled by Arab and Muslim governments](#) during the 20th century.

This binary approach erases nuance in another crucial way: it superficially connects the conflict in the Middle East to disparate global conflicts (they,

too, stripped of nuance) whose differences are greater than their similarities, to foster alliances of “solidarity” between purportedly oppressed communities. So, it has become standard to link Palestine to [Black Lives Matters protests](#) against police brutality in the United States, to claim that “the struggles for [Palestinian liberation and climate justice](#) [are] one and the same,” or to [write such things](#) as “Palestine’s and Turtle Island’s liberation are entwined,” linking a complicated conflict in the Middle East where the indigeneity of various populations is in dispute to the challenges of Indigenous communities in North America.

Viewing the Middle East through a critical studies lens offers only a distorted view of the Israel-Gaza conflict – one that overlooks the broader religious and ideological dynamics at play.



The anti-Israel agenda has been dangerously amplified by social media.

False narratives are nothing new. But the anti-Israel agenda has been dangerously amplified by social media. There is very little room for nuance in a Tik Tok video or X post – especially when social media algorithms artificially boost the most sensational and often misleading information. AI “deepfake” video and audio technology is making it increasingly difficult to believe what we see and hear online. Malign actors – often funded by authoritarian regimes – craft social media messages designed to inflict the most damage on Israel. Each post or photo that goes viral is another information missile strike against the “oppressor regime” in Tel Aviv.

Consider the now-debunked story of Israeli bombs “killing hundreds of civilians” at the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in October 2023. As [Wired magazine](#) noted: “Moments after the explosion was reported, Gaza’s health ministry claimed the blast was caused by an Israeli rocket attack and that hundreds of people had died, marking what would be among the deadliest attacks of the current conflict between Israel and Hamas, which controls the Palestinian territory of Gaza. News organizations such as the *New York Times* and Reuters ran with the claim, pushing notification alerts to people’s phones with the news that Israeli rockets had killed Palestinians sheltering in a

hospital in Gaza. ‘Breaking news: Israeli strike on hospitals kill hundreds, Palestinian officials say,’ the *Times* alert read.”

US and Israeli intelligence quickly debunked the story, noting that the explosion was likely caused by a failed rocket launch from Gaza by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The *New York Times* and other major media were eventually forced to essentially [admit the error of their original reporting](#). However, by that time, the collateral damage was done. The original story had spread far beyond what any additional nuance could correct, bringing to mind the old adage that “a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes.” Unfortunately, Israel is swimming against a tide of rhetoric that has entrenched a biased understanding of the realities on the ground in the Middle East.

The need for a more nuanced understanding

A just solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict will remain a pipe dream until Palestinians and their supporters adopt a more nuanced, informed, and rational perspective. While the plight of Palestinians is a real and tragic issue, the answer most certainly is not to support or justify the horrific actions of terror groups like Hamas, whose driving goal is the destruction of Israel. Israel has a right not only to exist but also to defend itself from the threats it faces from state and non-state actors, including Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran.

The framing of the conflict as a simple struggle between Israel and helpless Palestinians fails to capture the complexity of the situation and obscures the larger regional dynamics at play. Canadians, and Westerners in general, must recognize the role that social media and ideological frameworks like critical studies have played in shaping the narrative, and work to develop a more balanced and historically informed understanding of the conflict.

A more informed citizenry would more likely understand the battle between Israel and its Islamist enemies as part of a broader ideological battle between liberal democracies and the network of dictatorial regimes that journalist Anne Applebaum calls “[Autocracy Inc.](#)” This framework posits that regimes like Russia, China, Iran, and their allies support and embolden movements that challenge the values of democratic governance, including individual freedoms, human rights, and the rule of law. In this view, Hamas and Hezbollah’s actions can be seen not just as a regional insurgency but as

part of a wider assault on the principles of liberal democracy, supported by regimes with autocratic inclinations, such as Iran, which backs both groups with financial and military resources.

Similar dynamics play out in the Russia-Ukraine war, where Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a direct challenge to the democratic aspirations of its neighbour. Ukraine's fight is emblematic of the struggle to maintain sovereignty, democracy, and alignment with liberal Western ideals in the face of an autocratic aggressor. Russia has consistently sought to [destabilize democracies](#) through cyber warfare, disinformation, and support for anti-democratic movements, a pattern that mirrors its broader geopolitical goals to undermine liberal democratic institutions globally.

In East Asia, China's suppression of democratic movements in Hong Kong and [threats against Taiwan](#) further exemplify the ideological struggle. These actions seek to suppress democratic ideals within and near its borders, reflecting its broader ambition to project an alternative model of governance – one that prioritizes state control over individual freedoms. Together, these conflicts underscore a shared ideological battleground: liberal democratic states striving to preserve a rules-based international order versus autocratic regimes seeking to reshape global norms in their favour. Understanding the Israel-Hamas conflict in this context reveals its deeper significance in the global struggle between these two ideological camps.

Ultimately, peace in the Middle East will not come from the delegitimization of Israel or the demonization of one side over the other. It will require a recognition of the legitimate rights of both Israelis and Palestinians, as well as a willingness to confront the broader forces of extremism and violence that drive the conflict. Until then, the simplistic framing of Israel versus helpless Palestinians will continue to do a disservice to all those who seek a just and lasting peace. [MLI](#)

About the author



Kaveh Shahrooz, a lawyer and human rights activist, is a senior fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute and a former senior policy advisor on human rights to Global Affairs Canada. A graduate of Harvard Law School and the University of Toronto, he has written widely on human rights issues and international affairs. [MLI](#)

Endnote

- 1 I use the term ‘identity politics left’ to distinguish between different left-wing traditions. In the early 20th century, for example, labour movements internationally had ideological affinities with Labour Zionism, a socialist-oriented branch of the Zionist movement. Organizations like the Histadrut (General Organization of Workers in Israel) promoted the establishment of a Jewish state with socialist principles. Such Labour Zionists often found allies among international socialist and labor organizations, which supported the idea of building a Jewish homeland with progressive ideals. Labour organizations such as the American AFL-CIO, the UK’s TUC, and the Canadian Labour Congress have, in the past, supported Israel. In more recent years, with the advent of identity politics, many traditionally left parties and organizations have focused more on cultural issues and less on standard workers’ rights concerns. This ideological shift has also entailed a move towards anti-Zionist politics.

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M A C D O N A L D - L A U R I E R I N S T I T U T E



323 Chapel Street, Suite 300,
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7Z2
613-482-8327
info@macdonaldlaurier.ca

macdonaldlaurier.ca

