

OPINION

Israelis and Palestinians are both trapped by the dangerous fantasies of history

The illusions, projections and selective histories of both sides have brought us to the current moment. These narratives compete with one another, but in another way are complementary versions of the same story

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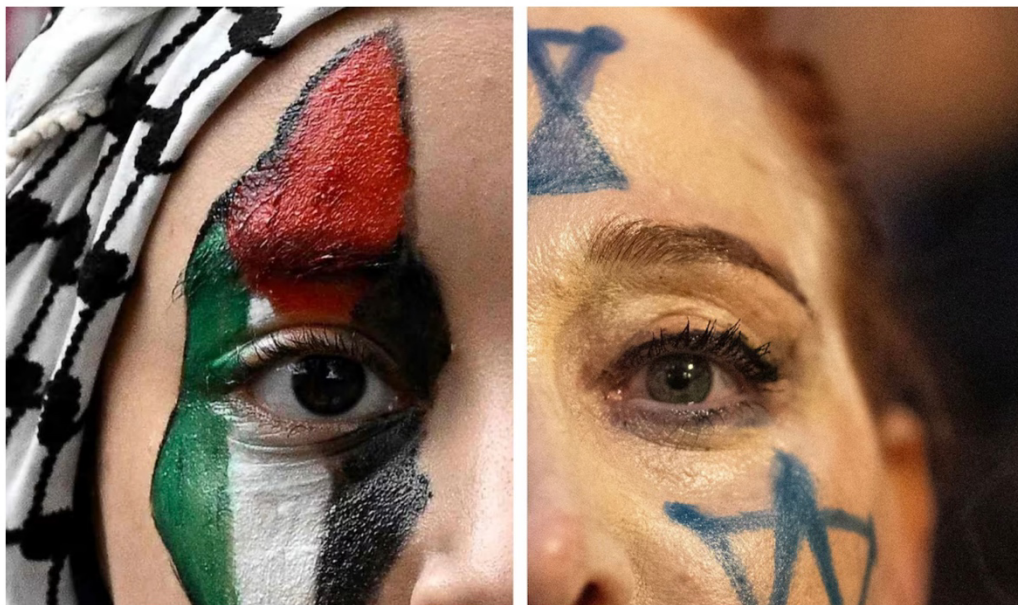


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Just over 30 years ago, I was travelling between Israel, Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Egypt, filming a documentary, *Through The Eyes of Enemies*, which charted the reactions to the signing of the initial Oslo peace accord between Israel and the Palestinians.

It was a high-water mark, the cresting of hope, and everywhere I went in the region you could feel its rise. It's not that the tensions had evaporated; they most certainly had not. But there was a shimmer of possibility and people throughout the region – not all people of course, but sizable majorities – were almost giddy with the incipient change.



At the White House in 1993, Israeli and Palestinian leaders Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat shake hands in front of U.S. president Bill Clinton after signing peace accords. RON EDMONDS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Thirty years later, at this most terrible and devastating moment in the Middle East, so far from that one of hope, it's important to understand both sides' illusions, projections and selective histories that have brought us to this point. These narratives compete with one another, but in another way are complementary versions of the same story.

The ironies abound. The Jewish people have been placed in the position of "colonialists" when they themselves were desperately searching for an escape from the horrific antisemitism in Europe that had wiped out the vast majority

of them. The Palestinians have been cast as the fierce and implacable foe the Jews have always feared when they were the ones being dispossessed and impoverished.

Duelling fantasies of history as well: the original Zionist myth of a land without people for a people without land, entirely ignoring the people that were already on the land. The Palestinian denial of the ancient and deep connection of Jews to the same land, claiming there had never been a temple in Jerusalem, that Jews had not been the original refugees, expelled from the same land many centuries earlier, and that they did not carry it with them wherever they had wandered.

And more: Israelis claiming Palestinians all left voluntarily in 1948, rather than the many chased out by the Israeli army; and Palestinians, willfully ignoring the many Jewish refugees chased from their own homes in Arab lands. Throughout, the twinned wounds of homelessness and national yearning mirror one another.

The past decades have been a tragedy of lost opportunities. But it helps not at all to point fingers of blame. This has been a blood sport in the region for nearly a century already, each side prepared with the recitation of a sad litany of atrocities (Deir Yassin, Hebron in 1929, Hebron again in 1994, bombings in Netanya, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and on and on) to justify their actions.

The past decades have also brought less and less contact between the populations. Since the early 2000s, the Separation Wall (or Security Fence, or what have you) has not only hemmed [West Bank](#) Palestinians in; it has also severed much of the opportunity to encounter one another in daily life.

And that lack of human contact is an essential part of the problem. The rise of maximalist voices – the Jewish settler and Greater Israel movement on one side, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad, with their mirroring claims to all the land, on the other – amplify disinformation and make other voices faint and hard to hear.



CAPTION ▾

Bullet holes show through the window of a kindergarten in Kibbutz Be'eri, one of the communities attacked by Hamas.

CHRISTOPHER FURLONG/GETTY IMAGES

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It should not need to be stated: The brutality of Oct. 7 was not justified in any way by political or historical injustice. The acts of cruel and gratuitous violence were simply crimes against humanity, committed by a group, Hamas, that is dedicated to wiping out both the state of [Israel](#) and all Jews living within it. To not unequivocally denounce them, to see them as part of a legitimate fight for freedom for Palestinians, is an act of moral confusion.

The last time I saw such horrific images of dead bodies was in 1994 when I was working for CNN as a freelance film editor in Jerusalem and was called in early one morning for duty. For the next 24 hours, I edited story after story about an extremist Jewish religious settler, Baruch Goldstein, massacring 29 Muslims and injuring more than 100 at prayer in a mosque in the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. Those images haunted me for months after. They too depicted an act against humanity, to be condemned absolutely, without equivocation.

In each the role of religion, the way in which images of the enemy are embedded in the holy narratives of each people, cannot be ignored.

Religious right-wing settlers will whisper to you that Palestinians are Amalek, the hated Biblical enemy, and thus there is a special sacred injunction to wipe them out. “Do not spare them,” the Bible says, “kill every man and women and child.” Recently, Israeli Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), too, made reference to wiping Hamas out like Amalek. This denigration of the humanity of Palestinians contributes to the acceptance by many Israelis of the massive and [criminally indiscriminate bombing campaign in Gaza](#), which too must be condemned, and halted.

Islamic texts, meanwhile, have numerous hateful references to Jews. One hadith that notably says “if the Jew will hide behind a tree even the tree will say come and kill him” – is echoed in official pronouncements from Hamas. No one can doubt that the fundamentalist Islamic credo they follow had a large part in the celebratory attitude of the attackers; one telephoned to excitedly tell his mother that he had “slain 10 Jews” with his own hands.

Baruch Goldstein carried out his slaughter one week after the biblical tale of Amalek was read in synagogue. On Oct. 7, 2023, when more than 1,200 dead and mutilated bodies were strewn across the killing fields near Gaza, with the details of gruesome barbarity filmed in real time by the murderers, you could hear over and over again the triumphant shouts: “God is Great.”



Portraits of captured Israelis cover a wall in Tel Aviv on Dec. 28, more than 11 weeks after militants took scores of people into Gaza from surrounding communities. AHMAD GHARABLI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



Israeli tanks sit near the southern Gaza border, while smoke rises from air strikes over central Gaza. As the new year began, Israel said it would scale back troop numbers but continue the offensive for months more. VIOLETA SANTOS MOURA/REUTERS, MENAHEM KAHANA/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



Wounded Palestinians get care at a Khan Younis hospital on New Year's Eve, when Gaza's health ministry raised the region's death toll to more than 21,800 people and rising. The Hamas-run ministry's tally does not distinguish between civilians and combatants. MOHAMMED DAHMAN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Israelis were deeply shocked by the insensitivity of much of the world to the deliberate and cruel slaughter of their friends and families on Oct. 7, and by how rapidly they were painted as aggressors, as somehow deserving to be massacred in their homes and beds or while out in a field listening to music.

Meanwhile Palestinians, witnessing the continuing obliteration of entire extended families, wonder in fury and anguish if the deaths of their many thousands of civilians actually count.

The pain among families on both sides is raw and utterly shattering. But images of the dead and wounded also quickly became instrumentalized as fodder in a global propaganda war, with supporters of each side blinding themselves to the essential humanity of the other.

In late October, I listened to a “Teach-in for Palestine” at the university at which I teach. Sponsored in part by the faculty association, I had expected, or

at least hoped, that the teach-in would be an opportunity to learn about the complexity of the [Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#), to engage in critical thinking and listen to opposing viewpoints. Where else if not universities should such discussions take place? But that is not what I experienced.

I was surprised that not once was the name of Hamas mentioned, nor any sympathy evinced for the Israeli victims of the massacre.

Had people attending not seen the almost unbearable pain in the face of the Israeli mother whose two daughters, aged 8 and 15, were kidnapped and taken to Gaza? The grandmother whose school-age grandchildren were shot and killed? Was there no room for empathy, or any distinction between just cause and heinous crime?



A protest banner in Montreal decries the events in Gaza as a genocide. GRAHAM HUGHES/THE CANADIAN PRESS

It became clear that the lives of slaughtered Israeli civilians, many of them peace activists, were not thought to be worth mentioning, though the words “genocide” and “massacre” were used often to describe the policies of Israel.

Genocidal. Neo-Nazi. These are terms that freeze thought. Even setting aside for a moment any inaccuracy or barbed callousness, they simply allow no space for discussion. The term “colonizers” was used frequently, and I wondered how the Jewish family from Yemen that had travelled by donkey and foot to escape persecution in that country, or the 85-year-old man born in Iraq and now a hostage of Hamas, were colonizers, let alone “white” and “European” (the most common modifiers added to “colonizer”).

This was sloppy and simplistic thinking, affixing labels to a morally complex problem. A world of binaries, of cartoon heroes and villains, has infected discourse in almost every public forum. As someone who has tried to make sense of this conflict through a series of films over the course of nearly 30 years, and who has vehemently disagreed with the injustice of many Israeli policies, the inability of students, and more than a few professors, to deal with this complexity was heartbreaking.

I should say that I attended the event over Zoom, as I’d had to go to the dentist an hour or so before to treat a broken filling, and my mouth was still numbed. My dentist seemed shaken by something and I assumed it was the events in the Middle East. But actually it was something closer to home.

His friend, a Jewish doctor, had received a message on his office answering machine that morning. He asked me if I’d like to hear it, as his friend had shared the recording with him.

This is what it said: “Dr. –, you fucking Jew, Hitler killed six million of your people then you came to our land and now you are killing our children. We will come for you and kill you and kill your whole family, we will kill your wife, kill all your children, you motherfucking Jew.”

That was the end of the message.

I have filmed in the middle of a demonstration on the streets south of Damascus, amid thousands shouting “Death to Israel, Death to America, Death to the Jews.” I have seen the scrawled graffiti on Israeli walls saying “Death to Arabs,” and in the West Bank saying “Kill the Jews.” I have seen the rictus of hate distorting faces on both sides of the conflict.

But somehow none felt as chilling as listening to that recorded message in a dentist’s chair in Toronto. Perhaps because while this was an almost expected part of the landscape there, here, in multicultural, liberal Toronto, it felt like

the upswell of hatred was now overflowing all boundaries, and seemingly reaching, well, everywhere.

Meanwhile, at my university's law faculty (dedicated to social justice and equity), 74 students – nearly one-quarter of the student body – released a statement saying that “all forms of Palestinian resistance” are justified. This statement came out within two weeks of the [Hamas massacre](#).

Slogans have replaced thought. And slogans are not adequate to what is a moment of real existential fear on both sides.



'Make hummus, not walls,' reads graffiti in Bethlehem on a barrier between the occupied West Bank, on this side, and Israel on the other. MAJA HITIJ/GETTY IMAGES

More than 20 years ago I made a film (Not On Any Map) highlighting “unrecognized” Arab villages within Israel. These villages were created by state policies (similar to the policies in areas of the West Bank that Israel still controls) that prevent Israeli Arabs from getting building permits, running water, electricity, schools or medical clinics in the makeshift villages where they’ve been living since being evicted from their original villages soon after

1948. For making such a film, I was swung at by a right-wing settler and called an antisemite. (When I told him I was Jewish, he sputtered, in mimicry of an old Borscht Belt comic, "That's the worst kind.")

The most acute current existential fear felt by Palestinians, as a nation, is around the forced movement of the population away from their homes in Gaza. In it, they detect clear echoes of the Nakba of 1948, when they were never allowed to return once the fighting had ceased. Such existential fears were amplified when Israeli Knesset member Ariel Kallner, among others, declared a "Nakba that will overshadow the Nakba of '48." And they were further intensified when extremist religious settlers in the West Bank distributed pamphlets saying "You have one last opportunity to escape to Jordan. Afterward we'll drive you away by force from our holy land."

Existential fear in Israel is equally deep.

Israelis see the 150,000 Hezbollah missiles aimed at the north, along with those in Gaza. They see surrounding countries with largely Muslim populations that have, for most of Israel's history, been hostile or at least deeply antagonistic to it. They see forces backed by Iran in Syria and in Yemen, and the Iranian regime itself, all committed to the death and destruction of the only Jewish state, created as a safe haven in a world that has shown time and again its violence and hostility. The latest wave of antisemitism throughout the world – including the shockingly rapid return of the most hateful caricatures of Jews – has paradoxically, and sadly, provided concrete reminder of the need for such a haven.

For Palestinians, decades of dallying by Israel paired with the unchecked rise of settlements and worsening brutal repression in the West Bank contribute to their conviction that they are being played – that Israel has no intention of allowing a viable state of Palestine to exist, ever. Meanwhile, Hamas spokesman Ghazi Hamad proclaimed on Lebanese television that Hamas will repeat Oct. 7-like attacks again and again and again until Israel is completely annihilated. "We will," he says, "remove that country."

The return of the most elemental existential fears of both sides is what makes this current round of fighting so fierce and unrelenting. And that very fierceness paired with the continuing brutality only fuels ever-greater extremism, hatred and rejection on both sides.



CAPTION

Israelis take shooting lessons in the West Bank settlement of Migdal Oz.

APRIL 10, 2017 VIA GETTY IMAGES

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There has now been a decade or more of agreed-upon “wisdom” within Israel that a two-state solution is no longer possible, that there are too many settlements, that there is no functioning Palestinian governmental entity, that there will never be agreement on Jerusalem or the right of return, that there is no plan for all of this. Such wisdom has led to the Netanyahu conception (which Israelis call the conceptzia): The idea that the conflict can be “managed,” that the Palestinian people will accept their oppression and the control of the Israeli state over their lives, that Hamas can be a tool in keeping the Palestinians divided. This has manifested in the odious term “mowing the grass” to indicate a periodic incursion of forces or of bombing to keep resistance in check.

After Oct. 7, does anyone think this is truly sustainable?

There is only one way out of this morass. It has been the only way since the UN partitioned the land into what was supposed to have become two states, but because of the rejection of both Palestinians and the surrounding Arab states, never did. The tragedy is that one state, Israel, eventually thrived, and the other, the stillborn Palestine, and its people, remained in a state of perpetual impoverishment. And the suffocating and humiliating occupation that has gotten only worse these past 30 years plays directly into the hands of extremists such as Hamas.

So yes, Palestine – and Palestinians – must be free, for their sake, and for the sake of the Israeli people as well. But not, as the slogan goes, from the river to the sea. And Israel must be safe and secure, its people free from the fear of attack. But also not in some mythical “Greater Israel” – from river to sea – and not at the cost of the endless domination of another people.



The view from Jabel Mukaber, a Palestinian neighbourhood in Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem, includes the golden Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque compound around it. Access to the mosque, built on the site of ancient Jewish temples, is a contentious issue for Israelis and Palestinians.

AHMAD GHARABLI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



Tent camps of displaced Palestinians stretch into the distance in Rafah, on the Gaza Strip's border with Egypt. Refugees from the north fled in droves to this southern city before Israel's ground offensive began.

MAHMUD HAMS/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Out near the edge of Jerusalem, in Kiryat HaYovel, there's a park that contains a large playground sculpture by Niki de Saint Phalle. It is known locally as HaMifletzet, the monster. Neighbourhood children play there, gleefully sliding out of the monster's mouth. The artist intended it as a kind of lesson in resilience, but it's hard not to read it as some great and insatiable Moloch. The danger of both sides being swallowed by such a malignant Moloch, the Canaanite god who jubilantly welcomed the sacrifice of children, is enormous.

Israel must take extreme care. No one who has seen the horrific acts of brutality and murder in the Hamas videos can deny Israel's right to pursue the perpetrators and do what it must to prevent their recurrence. But does anyone believe that the children and women killed by the massive aerial bombing in Gaza deserve such a fate? Or that their surviving relatives will not be filled with even more hate and desire for vengeance? Hamas, in its deliberate and cynical embedding within the civilian population, both invites and celebrates every Israeli bomb that kills the innocent, knowing it will only further inflame hatred in the region. And the anger, the hatred, the violence and the desire for vengeance from both sides threaten to overwhelm all else.

But vengeance too is a kind of fantasy.

For nothing – not the sorrow, not the anger, no hatred and no act of vengeance – can bring back the dead. And nothing will bring back the world as it was before Oct. 7.

What is needed now is what is nearly impossible to achieve when the bullets and missiles and bombs are flying, when the wounds of grief are so recent, when blood is still in the air: a recognition of the depth of each other's traumas.

The terrifying cruelty of the brutal massacre and the hostage situation; the terrifying cruelty of the bombs that cannot distinguish between a child and an armed fighter; the horror of helplessness; the unrelenting wave of anger and heartbreak. All can be felt with the simplest of thought experiments:

Your small child.

Your son.

Your daughter.

Your mother.

Your father.

Your brother.

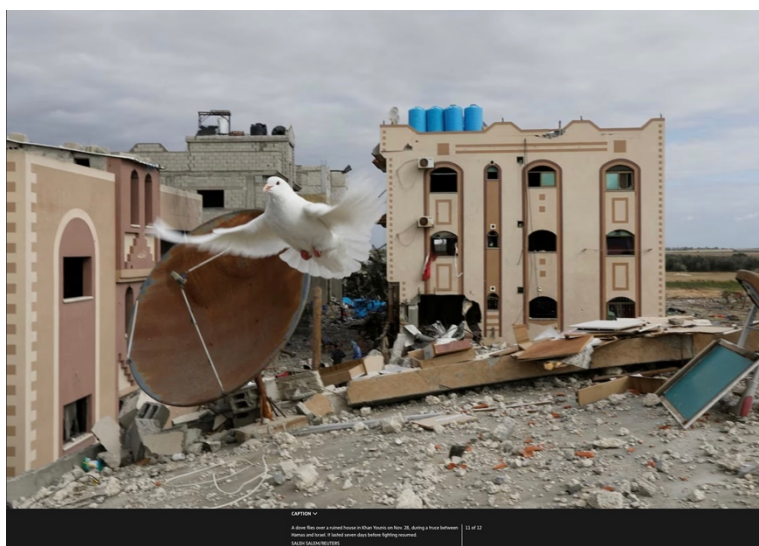
Your sister.

Events of the past few months are building a mountain of hate that will remain long after the dead are counted. And yet the future is still ahead. And to have a livable future requires a radical rethinking. If the loudest and angriest voices are allowed to dominate, in the region and outside of it, there is no hope whatsoever, and without hope the cruel calculus of fear, intimidation and violence is sure to reign.

When I spoke to Palestinian philosopher and educator Sari Nusseibeh at a similar moment of strife, he said that though a change of conception might appear inconceivable in such a moment, “the distance from the present to the future is like a pane of glass. Just the thickness of a pane of glass.”

What is required of us – and what the acts of continuing violence make so difficult to attain – is to hold the image of the other as a human being, as a mother, a child, as a wise old man or woman (or foolish young one), and, against all the urging toward hatred and vengeance, to make that, and that alone, the priority.

Amos Oz once wrote that the imagining of the other is a moral imperative. It is, he said, “the most powerful antidote to fanaticism.”



For years, the right-wing in Israel – and Hamas in their way – have promulgated the notion that the peace process was an illusion, a mirage. But what events have shown is that the delusion, the Fata Morgana, was that there could ever be normality without finding a peaceful, negotiated settlement to the issue. Polls back in 1993 – before a cruel wave of Hamas suicide bombings and the assassination of Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin undermined belief in the possibility – had support for a peace treaty among both Palestinians and Israelis running above 65 per cent.

Since then, the far right in Israel and Hamas have shared the same goal: to put a halt to any possibility of the peaceful division of the land into mutually recognized stable states of Israel and Palestine. Even in the past few weeks, Mr. Netanyahu has boasted how he has stopped a Palestinian state from coming into existence in the past and how he will also in the future, arguing that the Hamas attack shows why he is right to do so.

It is exactly this thinking which has brought us to where we are now.

The sole way to escape the cycle of violence is to clearheadedly renounce all the maximalist and eliminationist fantasies and the dehumanizing caricatures that have led, and will continue to lead, to the horrifying shedding of the blood of thousands of men, women and children.

In an interview I filmed before he passed away, the Israeli writer A.B. Yehoshua said that the weight of history and mythology was killing the people of the region, dominating and crushing them. “We have finally to ask ourselves,” he said, “are such things worth more than the small joys and pleasures of life itself?”



If there is any meaning to be gained from all these lost lives, it can only be this: to acknowledge that there will be no final victory, that five million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza will not be wiped from the map, and that neither will seven million Jewish Israelis. And to begin, yet again, the slow and painful work of accepting that no one's victimhood eclipses the requirement to acknowledge the other's, and to begin rebuilding the foundation – already begun these 30 wasted and blood-filled years ago – of two states, with security and freedom and sovereignty for each.

Otherwise all that will come of the latest bitter brutal episode in this shared tragedy is children and their children and their children's children doomed to repeat the cycle, to live their lives in fear and hatred. And on and on.

A friend, usually vociferous, with whom I have often argued about the conflation of Zionism and colonialism along with the interpretation of various details of history, seemed subdued when I last saw him, his mood pained in much the same way as my own. The past no longer matters, he said. We should only talk about the future.

In many ways this seemed the wisest thing I had heard these past months.

Precisely in the depth of horror and revulsion at the current violence, in the anger and bereavement at the immense and devastating loss of innocent lives, perhaps there is paradoxically a glimmer of hope, of clarity, that the current state of things is both unsustainable and unbearable.

As former Palestinian minister Ziad Abu Zayyad, now 83, said in an interview I filmed with him more than 15 years ago: "How long can this continue? Will we go on killing one another forever?"

When Yitzhak Rabin agreed to sign the accord with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat just over 30 years ago, he sounded a simple clarion call in his speech: Enough of blood and tears. Enough!

He did not say enough of Jewish blood and tears, but the blood and tears of both sides.

Do we have the ears to hear those words now?

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-israelis-and-palestinians-are-both-trapped-by-the-dangerous-fantasies/>