

OPINION

# Why do people hate Israel?

How did this tiny country go from a beacon of democracy in the Middle East to being so utterly reviled – especially by young progressives?

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THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Hundreds of people hold a pro-Palestinian rally outside the Vancouver Art Gallery on Nov. 4, roughly a month into the Israel-Hamas war. The fighting has killed more than 10,000 Palestinians, according to the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry, and 1,200 Israelis, mostly in Hamas's Oct. 7 attack.

TIJANA MARTIN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Marsha Lederman is a Globe and Mail columnist and the author of *Kiss the Red Stairs: The Holocaust, Once Removed*.

Last Saturday, I met a man named Faisal Salama at a pro-Palestinian rally in Vancouver. Mr. Salama, 30, had just moved to the city. He is Palestinian – born in Kuwait, raised in Edmonton – and still has family in Gaza, including an aunt and first cousins, now displaced from the north as Israeli bombs rain down. His family was relocated to Gaza in 1948 when they lost their home in Ashdod,

a city on the Mediterranean coast. Mr. Salama's father, who was 7 at the time, still lives in Kuwait as a stateless refugee.

My heart was breaking, listening to his story. It was also pounding.

I had been asked to answer a question: Why are so many people, chiefly among the younger generations, so anti-[Israel](#)? How did this tiny country of less than 10 million people go from darling of the left and beacon of democracy in the Middle East to being so utterly reviled – especially by progressives?

For instance, how much do you have to hate a country to actively seek out and tear down posters of its abducted children – often with glee?

I've seen the hostility myself on social media, where people argue about the details of the Oct. 7 attacks (were babies really beheaded?) and some even refuse to type "Israel" in full, replacing the middle vowels with asterisks, as if it's a swear word. But I wanted to talk to some actual people. A pro-Palestinian protest seemed like the right place to do that.

I was nervous. I had seen demonstrations in other cities turn nasty – with some people inciting hatred against Israel and Jews. But this was a peaceful gathering of a few hundred people outside the Vancouver Art Gallery. There was an Indigenous blessing and a choir performed peace songs in the rain. The prevailing message was: ceasefire now. Stop the assault on Gaza. Save the children.

Still, criticism of [Israel](#) was fierce.

"Israel is not a true country, a true state," said co-organizer Janine Solanki, who is with the group Mobilization Against War and Occupation. After the Oct. 7 attacks, MAWO put out a [statement](#) celebrating what it called "defensive military operations" by "Palestinian resistance fighters" and decrying "the Israeli Zionist propaganda machine and mainstream imperialist media" for "frantically trying to paint Israel as a victim of terrorism."

Ms. Solanki told the crowd: "We are the world, we are the majority and we will win because we are on the side of humanity; we are on the right side."





The peaceful Vancouver protest, co-organized by the anti-war group MAWO, largely focused on demands for a ceasefire, an option Israel has rejected. Canada, the United States and allies have instead called for 'humanitarian pauses' in Gaza to give aid groups brief windows to help civilians. TIJANA MARTIN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



Some Jewish Vancouverites took part in the art-gallery protest. Over all, attendees who spoke with The Globe were careful to distinguish condemnation of Israel from categorical criticism of Jewish people. TIJANA MARTIN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL.



Protester Faisal Salama has family in Gaza who fled south when Israel began bombing the north. The family has been in Gaza since they lost their home in Ashdod in 1948, the year of Israel's founding. TIJANA MARTIN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The day before the rally, I had spoken with Malka Daniels, a business student at Toronto Metropolitan University, a campus she describes as hostile these days for Jewish students like herself. Since Oct. 7, Ms. Daniels, 22, has heard other students call for an intifada and chant “by any means necessary.”

When she took part in what was supposed to be a counterdemonstration by a handful of Jewish students, she says they were told to “go back to where you came from!” (Thornhill, in her case) and, after being surrounded by what she estimates were dozens of protesters, the Jewish students had to be escorted away by TMU security. As they were leaving, a protester reportedly [yelled](#): “It’s too bad Hitler didn’t finish the job.”

I am not a person without skin in this horrible game. I grew up in a Jewish enclave of Toronto, where the slogan “Israel Is Real” was a common sight, and attended Hebrew school part-time. This is where I received my initial education about the State of Israel – a reverent narrative that, I realized much later, lacked any Palestinian perspective.

I had learned at home why Israel had been founded. My parents survived the Holocaust, and to them, Israel was a haven. Had it existed when they were young, their parents and siblings might have been able to escape Poland, might not have been murdered in gas chambers. My mother might have been in Tel Aviv at 19 instead of in Auschwitz.



Tel Aviv is where I spent my own 19th birthday, during a summer working on a kibbutz. One of the first images I saw on Oct. 7 was a giant cloud of rocket smoke rising from the city where that kibbutz is located.

This baggage brings with it a bias, many readers will point out. Fair. But I am also a human being, and a mother. And I feel sick watching the bombing of Gaza and the displacement of its people. Israel is going after Hamas, but civilians are suffering in horrific ways. It's not hard to see why people are critical of Israel.



Smoke and debris rise over northern Gaza during an air strike, as seen from across the border in the Israeli city of Sderot. JACK GUEZ/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The pro-Palestinian protest movement has been active for decades. But it has taken on new life. It had been “very much marginalized, because our society doesn’t allow for criticism of Israel and doesn’t allow for pro-Palestinian sentiments to be expressed without pretty significant consequences,” says Roberta Lexier at Mount Royal University in Calgary, whose teaching focuses on social movements, social change and leftist politics. “Something has changed for sure recently and we’re seeing it really play out on a large scale.”

Dr. Lexier makes it clear that she does not support the actions of Hamas, but explains that “people today have a better understanding of that reaction to oppression. It’s normal that people are going to fight back against their oppressors.”

There have been pro-Palestinian demonstrations all over the world in the weeks since the Oct. 7 attacks and the punishing response by the Israeli army. Protests have drawn tens of thousands of people. More are planned this weekend.

“People like me have come out of the closet,” says Osgoode Hall Law School associate professor Faisal Bhabha, who condemned York University for its response to a statement by student unions describing the Oct. 7 attacks as “a strong act of resistance” and referred to Israel as “so-called Israel.” (York insisted the statement be retracted; Mr. Bhabha disagrees.) These days more people are looking at Israel through the eyes of the Global South, he says. “So you’ve got people who were not raised in the Eurocentric post-World War II era in which the Holocaust is this dominant frame for understanding inequality.”

When Israel was established after the Second World War, there was great international sympathy for Jewish people, after the Holocaust. The Six-Day War in 1967, when Israel captured the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, may have been a turning point.

“I think there was a major shift post-1967, where prior to that, Israel was viewed as the David rather than the Goliath,” says Tilly Shemer of the Shalom Hartman Institute, a Jewish-focused think tank operating in Israel and North America. Since “a lot of people in progressive circles want to simplify this conflict into who has power and who doesn’t have power,” she says, “that leads them to always side with Palestinians, and even Hamas, as the vulnerable party, and see this as black and white. They don’t allow themselves to see this as grey or to see Israel as vulnerable.” One glaring omission in this view from

the West, she says, is the extent to which Israel feels under a constant threat of terrorism.



Mourners duck in response to a rocket siren in Holon, Israel, on Oct. 26, during the funeral of a man killed by Hamas three weeks earlier. PETROS GIANNAKOURIS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

If there was a moment of international sympathy for Israel after the Oct. 7 attacks (and that is a big if), it was almost immediately replaced by concerns about what Israel might do in retaliation.



Supporters of Israel wonder why it is so loudly vilified for its sins when other countries' evils are ignored. Where are the protests for the Uyghurs, the Rohingya, the [200,000 Afghan refugees](#) recently forced to leave Pakistan? Why, recently wondered the comedian and late-night host Bill Maher, with all the other terrible regimes around the world, is Israel singled out with so much antipathy?

“Why this one place? Why does this arouse [so much hatred], especially among young people ... who hated Trump because he wouldn't condemn the people with the tiki torches,” Mr. Maher said, citing the protesters who chanted “[Jews will not replace us](#)” at the infamous rally in Charlottesville, Va. Referring to young progressives, Mr. Maher said: “You're the ones with the tiki torches now.”

There's a meme I've seen going around social media: “No Jews, no news.” In other words: The reason Israel's actions come under such close scrutiny internationally has everything to do with it being the Jewish state; it's antisemitism. There is a feeling that people who hate Jews and/or Israel have been waiting for this moment, where they can freely express their disdain/hatred with impunity – even draw praise for it.

Hillel is an organization for Jewish postsecondary students around the world. Its largest chapter, Hillel Ontario, represents some 14,000 students at nine universities. Since Oct. 7, it has been contacted by a lot of them. “We've heard from students who say, ‘I used to be friends with this person; this person is now calling me a murderer, a baby killer; someone who supports genocide,’ ” says Hillel Ontario's Jay Solomon. “These accusations are not simply levelled at people who are pro-Israel. It's people who are Jews.”

I did not witness such conflation at the Vancouver event. Those I spoke to who were critical of Israel (i.e. everyone) were careful to clearly separate their condemnation of Israel from criticism of Jewish people.

“I feel that Jewish people around the world all deserve safety and deserve protection,” Mahsa Shobbar, 31, told me. “However, not at the expense of another group.”



TIJANA MARTIN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

'Stand against genocide, free Palestine,' reads one of the placards at the Nov. 4 protest in Vancouver. TIJANA MARTIN/ THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The word “genocide” was used frequently, though – in speeches, on signs, and in conversations I had with attendees. It is also ubiquitous on social media when referring to Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians, its current assault against Gaza in particular.

The term was coined by Jewish lawyer and activist Raphael Lemkin during the Holocaust to describe a conspiracy to exterminate a national, racial or religious group. “No genocide has taken place or been intended” in Gaza, historian Simon Sebag Montefiore recently [wrote](#) in The Atlantic. “This is a tragedy – but this is not a genocide, a word that has now been so devalued by its metaphorical abuse that it has become meaningless.”

The term being used indiscriminately is particularly triggering for supporters of Israel, a state formed as the result of genocide.

Critics of Israel also speak about white supremacy, settler-colonialism, and call for land back to its indigenous inhabitants. These protests have also been empowered with the rise of decolonization movements.

Even Mr. Salama, with his own Palestinian story, told me his views on Israel are heavily informed by his life in Canada as a settler on Indigenous land.

You will often hear Israel described as a colonial or imperialist entity, and Israelis as settler-colonialists. And in this current environment where colonialism is reviled – for good reason – Israel is seen as one opportunity for a colonial construct to be dismantled. In this narrative, Israelis/Jews are seen as the colonizers and their power judged as white supremacy – even if Jews have existed there for thousands of years and many are not white. Israel's demise could be a triumph for decolonization efforts.

These are all alluring catchphrases that are easy to take to heart, digest and spit out in solidarity. In this age of social media, they are highly effective. Even if they don't tell the whole story.



A woman from Nir Oz, a kibbutz in southern Israel, breaks down in tears at the ruined home of



her late mother on Oct. 30. Three weeks earlier, Hamas fighters from nearby Gaza stormed Nir Oz, took the woman's children hostage and killed her mother and niece. DAN KITWOOD/GETTY IMAGES



A Palestinian cries out in Khan Younis on Nov. 6 during a search through rubble after an air strike. Conditions have grown dire in this southern Gaza city as new refugees from the north strain limited supplies of medicine, food and water. MAHMUD HAMS/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



The mother of a Reuters videographer mourns at his Oct. 14 funeral in Al Khiyam, Lebanon, after he died reporting at the border. Dangerous conditions for journalists have made it harder to get verifiable facts about what is happening in the war. ZOHRA BENSEMRA/REUTERS

This war – and the protest against it – is not just taking place in the streets. From almost the moment Hamas launched its attacks, we’ve all been able to follow along.

But social media is also rife with misinformation, and users don’t always have the skills to spot a Photoshop, misleading propaganda or outright lies.

Ruby Dagher, an expert on the Middle East and conflict in general who currently teaches at the University of Ottawa, has seen incendiary and inaccurate social-media posts. One said Israelis believe in the extermination of Arabs. “All of the discourses that are happening right now are approached in a way where it’s either hatred or victimization, or just suffering.”

The stories of suffering are ubiquitous. And now the world is watching this in real time.

“The Hamas attack was horrific. It was unjustifiable. It was all of those things. But [Israel’s] response has been particularly disproportionate,” Dr. Lexier says. “It’s kind of collective punishment against a group of people.” She says part of the prevailing anti-Israel sentiment comes from that. “We’re bombing refugee camps because there’s one guy we think is a terrorist in there and who cares about all the civilians?”

Depending on where you stand, you could simply say: Israel is reviled because it does terrible things (particularly under the leadership of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu).

Or, on the other side of this ever-widening divide: People hate Israel because of antisemitism.

But nothing about this is simple – no matter what young progressives are being told by some activists.

“We have been lied to for years and years that the Israel-Palestine conflict is complicated,” Ms. Solanki said at Saturday’s rally, before referencing the “criminal Zionist project.”



A sign at the Vancouver protest calls Israel 'colonial apartheid' and a 'military occupation'.  
TIJANA MARTIN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

In fact, the issue is complex and far more nuanced than much of the current discourse would suggest. It is being simplified for all sorts of reasons – because of the limitations of social media; for ease; to make powerful points; because the people uttering these simplifications have an agenda themselves, or don't really understand. Perhaps because they are so justifiably upset that they aren't motivated to do a deep historical dive. Because this is urgent. There are innocent children dying every day in Gaza.

And isn't that reason enough to hate Israel?



I should state that there are people who love Israel very much. They are being drowned out by an anti-Israel sentiment that is raging not just in the Palestinian territories – where that hatred is understandably entrenched – or the hostile Arab lands that surround it, but here, in the West. And in circles where many Jews, until just over a month ago, would have felt very much at home.

Jess Burke, who works for the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA), says there is strong anti-Israel sentiment among young people and especially in progressive spaces, where she says there is an expectation that people identify as anti-Zionist. She describes it as an “if you’re not for us, you’re against us” kind of attitude.

Ms. Burke says the trope of Jewish people being powerful and in control – of media, government, the economy – is a factor. “People feel like they’re punching up; it’s virtuous. If you can dismantle the person who is the proverbial oppressor, you are on the side of goodness, you are on the side of virtue, you are on the side of what is right.”

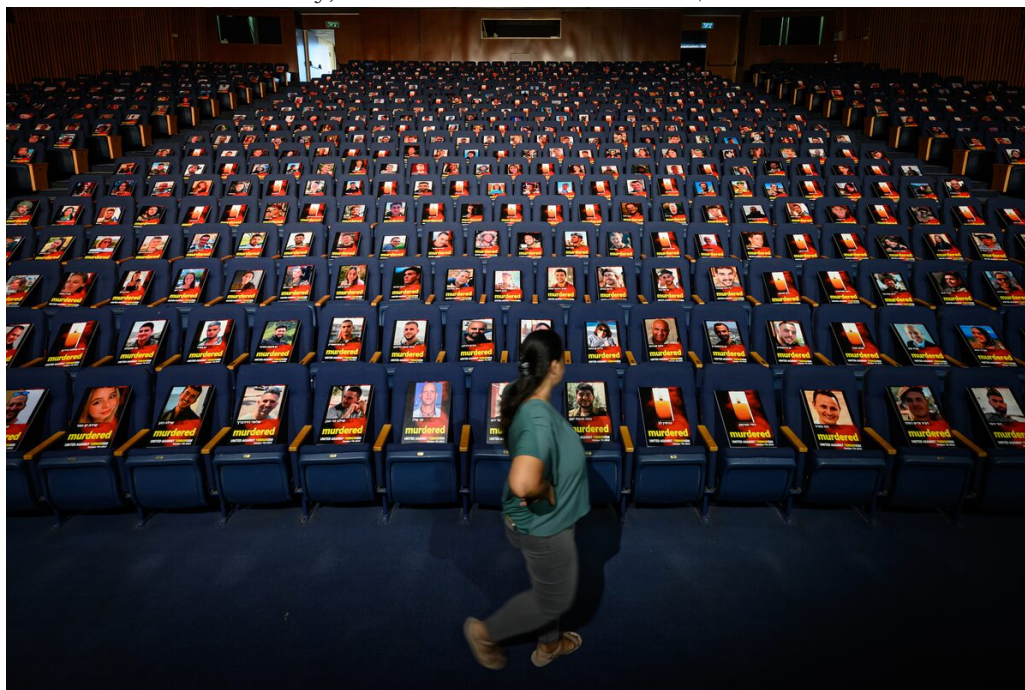
What’s been particularly galling for Ms. Burke is where much of this criticism is coming from: “women’s spaces, reproductive-justice spaces, queer spaces, and from university campuses, spaces of higher learning, of enlightenment.”



A pro-Israel demonstrator shouts at Palestinian supporters at Columbia University on Oct. 12. Conflicting statements and rallies have created an acrimonious climate at the New York school, where students on all sides have reported increasing harassment. DAN KITWOOD/GETTY IMAGES



Students at Humboldt University in Berlin hold a silent vigil on Nov. 7 demanding empathy for civilians in Gaza. A spokesperson for the group said it was partly a response to the school's social-media posts supporting Israeli students and faculty, but not Palestinians. SEAN GALLUP/ GETTY IMAGES



Pictures of more than 1,000 missing, dead or abducted people sit on empty seats at a Tel Aviv University auditorium, part of a collaboration called United Against Terrorism that includes many campuses worldwide. LEON NEAL/GETTY IMAGES

At Yale University this week, Jewish student Sahar Tartak sat outside what she described as an anti-Israel event that drew hundreds of students and faculty.

She was outside, she says, because she was barred from attending. What she heard through the door, according to her post on X (formerly Twitter): “Israel cannot remain the state of the Jewish people.” That it “is trying to inflict as much harm, damage and death as possible.” She heard Hamas described as “a resistance group.”

At a Vancouver rally last month, a Langara College English department instructor, Natalie Knight, [praised](#) the Hamas attacks, calling them “amazing, brilliant.” She is now on leave.

A disturbing video circulated this week of [hostilities](#) being spewed at Jewish students at Montreal’s Concordia University.

It all makes one wonder just what young people are learning these days.

Today’s students are generations removed from Holocaust survivors and veterans who fought in the Second World War. They did not grow up on the war stories recounted to baby boomers and Gen Xers, even millennials – or the lessons that came with those stories.

“I think the average kid sees it as old European history,” says Dara Solomon, executive director of the Toronto Holocaust Museum. “So if that’s the case, they probably do not understand that the formation of the State of Israel was because we needed a homeland because our people had been decimated. I don’t think they make the connection.”



'Never again is now,' reads a projection on Berlin's Brandenburg Gate on Nov. 9, the anniversary of the Kristallnacht pogroms of 1938. JOERG CARSTENSEN/DPA VIA AP



If the Holocaust has made criticizing Israel challenging – or even unseemly – in the past, it's becoming less of a factor as those events move further into history.

Ms. Burke at CIJA was conducting a training session for a city council group, including mayoral staff, in Ontario (she would not disclose the municipality) on Oct. 27 about antisemitism – not Israel. While discussing the Holocaust, Ms. Burke says, she was told by an attendee: “I cannot sit here and listen to the story that Jews are innocent and that Jews are oppressed.” That person left the meeting.

“I do believe that there is a before and an after that Oct. 7 marks that we didn't necessarily sign up for – but that will be a part of our reality for many, many generations to come,” Ms. Burke says.

Both Ontario and British Columbia have announced changes around Holocaust education – in B.C., making it mandatory for all high-school students, and in Ontario, expanding the already mandatory Holocaust curriculum. At both announcements, the rise in antisemitism after the Hamas attacks was mentioned.

These efforts are welcome, but may be too late for this moment.

“I think people have really taken their stances and I don't think people's unconscious bias will allow them to productively see another side to an issue,” says Ms. Daniels, the TMU student. “It seems as though education might be a little too late to catch up to the backlash.”

The acrimony and violence seem to be escalating, including overnight [shootings](#) of two Montreal Jewish schools this week.

The Vancouver rally was peaceful. There were no placards suggesting Zionists belong in garbage cans, like I've seen at other pro-Palestinian marches. I saw no one shouting at the guy quietly holding his “God=Love/Hamas=Hate” sign.

But there is so much hate right now, everywhere. And I don't know how we come back from this. Or where we go.



TIJANA MARTIN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-why-do-people-hate-israel/>

What can you say?



Sounds comforting, but think about it. Not all “simplicities” are equal; indeed, many are not good at all. Maybe we should beware all simplicities, but they inevitably will be made. In a “complexity” like the Middle East, there is so much to simplify and all attempts prove to be simplistic. But the less so, the better.

I’m not sure of Mr. Churchill’s standing in critical circles now—his track record is “a little” checkered—but he was an intuitive given to bouts of genius (not Gallipoli) who knew something about “complexities” (Europe between the wars) and ugly simplicities (the Third Reich, the Soviet Union).

TJB