

# The Context of Hamas Apologists' Call for Context

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## COMMENTARY

Strategists close to the front seek to understand the constellation of circumstances and ideas that give rise to war. So too must responsible commentators far from danger assess the adversaries' rival claims. The need to grasp a war's wider frame goes for Hamas' 10/7 massacres and Israel's exercise of its right of self-defense.

No shortage of Hamas apologists insist that the jihadists' mass atrocities perpetrated against civilians in southern Israel and their indiscriminate rocket attacks extending to much of central Israel must be placed in context. But the apologists don't provide a reliable account of Hamas' motives, ideas, goals, and conduct; a reasonable summary of Israel's response; or a scrupulous overview of the Israeli-Arab conflict, not least Islamist enmity toward the Jewish state. Instead, Hamas apologists suppress facts, invent narratives, and repackage outlandish neo-Marxist talking points.

On Oct. 9, two days after the Hamas massacres, Rashid Khalidi, Edward Said professor of modern Arab studies at Columbia University, declared that the Israel-Hamas war must "be put within the context. And the context is not just occupation. The context is settler colonialism and apartheid."

On Oct. 19, in an "Open letter from the art community to cultural organizations," more than 500 "artists, writers, curators, filmmakers, publishers and workers who produce work, collaborate and communicate" opined about the Israel-Hamas war. The letter's signatories prominently included photographer and activist Nan Goldin, who focuses on the LGBT world; UC Berkeley professor Judith Butler, who specializes in comparative literature and critical theory; and Columbia University professor Saidiya Hartman, whose research interests include African American and American literature and cultural history as well as gender, sexuality, queer theory, and feminism. The art community denizens – who did not claim knowledge of military operations or international law, first-hand acquaintance with unfolding events, regional expertise, or understanding of Islam – accused Israel of perpetrating "escalating genocide" and declared that the war's "root cause" is "oppression" and "occupation."

In another Oct. 19 letter, this one addressed to President Biden and again signed by Goldin and Butler, "a group of Jewish American writers, artists and academics" invoked their Judaism to pronounce authoritatively on the Israel-Hamas war. But they omitted any mention of their competence to discuss jihad, Middle East politics, or national security.

“We believe it is possible and in fact necessary to condemn Hamas’ actions and acknowledge the historical and ongoing oppression of the Palestinians,” the Jewish artists and intellectuals wrote. “We believe it is possible and necessary to condemn Hamas’ attack and take a stand against the collective punishment of Gazans that is unfolding and accelerating as we write.”

The Jewish artists did not acknowledge, much less take a stand against, Hamas’ determination to wipe out the Jewish state. Nor did they provide evidence that Israel’s siege, which in principle is legal under the laws of war, constituted unlawful collective punishment.

On Oct. 22, 69 professors and 595 students and alumni published in The Daily Princetonian an open letter “in solidarity with Gaza” addressed to university president Christopher Eisgruber. The professors, students, and alumni wrote “to express our unequivocal outrage over the tragic loss of Israeli and Palestinian lives during the past week” but suggested that Israel acting in self-defense was worse than Hamas jihadists butchering civilians.

While declining to describe Hamas’ documented atrocities, they accused Israel of engaging in “the targeting of civilians by the relentless bombing of hospitals, homes, roads, schools, universities, and infrastructures of survival in the Gaza Strip” while imposing “unchecked collective punishment.”

One of the links provided by the Princetonians falsely accuses Israel of bombing Al Ahli Arab Hospital. None of the links provides evidence that Israel targets civilians, as opposed to striking legitimate military targets that Hamas has placed in densely populated civilian areas, thereby converting them into battlefields.

On Oct. 24, at a UN Security Council meeting, UN Secretary-General António Guterres supplied more supposed context. “It is important to also recognize the attacks by Hamas did not happen in a vacuum,” Guterres said. “The Palestinian people have been subjected to 56 years of suffocating occupation. They have seen their land steadily devoured by settlements and plagued by violence; their economy stifled; their people displaced and their homes demolished. Their hopes for a political solution to their plight have been vanishing.”

Like the context-obscuring assertions by artists, professors, and students, the UN secretary-general’s statement rests on falsehoods, dogma, and ideology.

Consider just a few crucial components of context obscured, suppressed, or denied by the Hamas apologists.

First, Gaza Palestinians have not been subject to 56 years of occupation (since the 1967 war). In September 2005, Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip, removing every Israeli soldier and civilian and offering the Palestinian Authority a comprehensive plan for joining forces to reconstruct Gaza. Four months later, in January 2006, Hamas won Gaza’s local legislative elections.

In June 2007, Hamas violently seized control of the entire strip, expelled the Palestinian Authority, and turned Gaza into an armed camp for launching war against the Jewish state. The source of Hamas' hostility is not Israel's security barrier. It's Israel's very existence. And it was Hamas' plans to annihilate the Jewish state – funded by the Islamic Republic of Iran, which shares Hamas' goal – that compelled Israel to fortify its Gaza border (Egypt maintains strict control over its Gaza border) and impose a blockade. If Gaza is, as the apologists like to declare, “an open-air prison,” Hamas, not Israel, is the prison warden. In the process, its jihadist rulers have impoverished Gaza by diverting massive resources from the people to produce rockets and missiles and to construct hundreds of miles of terror tunnels.

Second, Israel is not guilty of “colonialism.” As columnist Chaim Levinson observed in the Israeli daily Haaretz, whereas colonialism involves a great power imposing its institutions on, and transporting its people to live in, foreign lands, the Jews of pre-1948 Palestine rebelled against the internationally authorized British rule over the territory. Professor Khalidi's appeal to the fashionable doctrine of “settler colonialism” – the intruder's displacement of an indigenous population – to describe Israel only magnifies the absurdity. If indigenism is the standard, it's the jihadists who have committed settler colonialism: Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel preceded the arrival of Muslim Arab tribes by more than 1,500 years.

Third, Israel is not an apartheid state. Apartheid was a legal system designed in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century by South Africa's white minority that established racial segregation and institutionalized political and economic discrimination against the majority black population. It is slanderous to apply the label “apartheid” to either the situation of Israel's Arab citizens or that of Gaza or West Bank Palestinians.

Arab citizens, about 21% of Israel's population, enjoy full civil and political rights, though, like ethnic minorities in other liberal democracies, they confront social barriers and government neglect that hamper full participation in national life. Since Gazan and West Bank Palestinians have never been Israeli citizens, apartheid also does not apply. Having ended its rule over Gaza in 2005, Israel maintains effective military control over Judea and Samaria even as West Bank Palestinians exercise self-government to a considerable extent. But West Bank Palestinians' complex legal and political circumstances stem from a protracted dispute between the two peoples and not the subjugation of one group of citizens by other citizens.

Fourth, while Israel strives to operate within the parameters of the international laws of war, Hamas flagrantly violates them. Hamas has committed crimes against humanity both by intentionally slaughtering Israeli civilians and by deliberately conducting military operations from within civilian areas, which unlawfully transforms Palestinians into human shields. Whereas Hamas deliberately kills, maims, rapes, and kidnaps civilians, Israel tries to minimize harm to civilians – not least by dropping leaflets in Gaza that direct the civilian population to evacuate areas from which Hamas operates – as it pursues the military objective of destroying Hamas' ability to wage war against it.

Fifth, Hamas apologists must be motivated by something other than human decency and concern for the loss of life in the Middle East. Compare, for example their vehement response to the Israel-Hamas war and their non-response to the Syrian civil war. In the approximately 100-year conflict between Jews and Arabs over the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, approximately 100,000 Arabs have perished while the Israeli War of Independence created approximately 650,000 Palestinian refugees (and more than 800,000 Jewish refugees from Arab countries).

The still-raging Syrian civil war, which broke out in 2011, has produced death and displacement on a vastly greater scale: It has taken between 350,000 and 614,000 lives, left 6.8 million people internally displaced, and produced 5.4 million Syrian refugees abroad. Yet how many of the students, professors, artists, and UN officials who have been quick to denounce Israel's exercise of its right to self-defense have, over the last 12 years, decried, demonstrated against, and demanded an end to the carnage in Syria?

Responsible consideration of context indicates that those sincerely concerned for Gaza Palestinians should hope and pray that Israel achieves the declared aim of its just war of self-defense: Hamas' destruction.

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