

NY Times Opinion - An Evolving Moral High Ground in the Israel-Gaza War

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The terrorist attack by Hamas against Israelis — the worst massacre of Jewish people since the Holocaust — was horrid, barbaric and inexcusable. Israel has a right to defend itself and pursue the perpetrators.

What is happening to innocent citizens of Gaza, and what is likely to happen to them as the war between Israel and Hamas continues — evacuation orders are imposed, electricity and basic supplies are cut off — is also horrid and not a justifiable response to the terrorist attacks.

The developing status of this war illustrates just how quickly perceptions about who has the moral high ground can evolve in conflicts like this.

Innocent people, particularly children, are caught in a political and military clash in which they have played no part. They cannot and should not be targeted in any way. Nor should they be written off as collateral damage in a “righteous” war.

When our empathies have boundaries — when they stop at borders, races, ethnicities — when one group is freely granted them while another is wholly deprived, then our empathies are false. They have been weaponized. They are instruments in an argument.

Last week, Israel called for the evacuation of more than a million citizens from the northern Gaza Strip, a monumental undertaking at any time, let alone in the middle of a conflict.

The World Health Organization [said](#) on Friday that a such an evacuation would be “disastrous,” following up the next day by saying that the evacuation could “further worsen the current humanitarian and public health catastrophe.”

This all came as Palestinian deaths in Gaza continued to mount.

As Sari Bashi, the program director at Human Rights Watch, [wrote](#) on Sunday about the potential harms of the evacuation order, “war crimes by one party don’t justify war crimes by the other.” She correctly noted that under the laws of war, “The fact that Hamas-led fighters targeted civilians doesn’t allow the Israeli military to target civilians or flout its obligations to protect them.”

In other words, a gloves-are-off, by-any-means-necessary retaliation is wholly unacceptable, regardless of who is engaged in it.

Yet there’s been an acute debate around this very question here in America in recent days.

Most Americans assess this conflict the way they do many others: at arm’s-length and an ocean away. And they do so through the prism of their own sense of fairness and justice.

In this case, there is something of a partisan and generational schism, with some progressive Democrats and younger Americans more likely to express a greater degree of sympathy for the Palestinian people or at least less reflexive support for Israel, according to polls.

Many of those who share this view are part of what Elizabeth Alexander, the writer, poet, scholar and president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, has called [the Trayvon Generation](#) — a generation of young people who have come of age in the decade since the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012. It's a generation that has become highly attuned to [intersectionality](#), the history and current expressions of various forms of oppression, and the ways in which colonialism, imperialism and capitalism undermine the concepts of equality and justice.

And just because the country as a whole seems to have turned the page on its fleeting interest, circa 2020, in the movement born of this generation of Americans, that doesn't mean the impulses and understandings of members of this generation simply evaporate. Social and racial justice is still their compass. It is a part of who they are and how they think. And it is with that compass that many of them evaluate the broader dispute over Israel's control of the Palestinian territories and the immediate conflict between Israel and Hamas.

I think it would be a great mistake to bemoan the position taken by many of these young people — the seekers of context, not the defenders of terror, of course — rather than seeking to understand it.

In politics, you convert people by convincing them, not condemning them.

Is there antisemitism coming from some in the debate over this conflict? Yes — and that must be called out. But you can be opposed to Israeli government policies without being antisemitic, so we should take care not to conflate all opposition to Israeli government policies with hatred of Jewish people. Lumping together any kind of support for Palestinians in this moment as inherently hostile to Israel's Jewish citizens and to Jewish people around the world is also problematic — and intellectually dishonest.

And we should similarly take care not to equate the views of all Palestinians with the views or actions of Hamas. A July [poll](#) by commissioned by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and conducted by Palestinian Center for Public Opinion found that 62 percent of Gazans supported Hamas maintaining a cease-fire with Israel, and half agreed with this proposition: "Hamas should stop calling for Israel's destruction, and instead accept a permanent two-state solution based on the 1967 borders."

In our country, many people are simply trying their best to make sense of a complex situation and coming to a conclusion that the context of the conflict, both historical and present, muddies the moral waters.

All infliction of human suffering is wrong, and we should all be willing and able to object to and resist it whenever we see it, no matter who imposes it or who endures it.