

# Why we must 'contextualize' hate



Protesters march in downtown Ottawa on Feb. 17, calling for an end to the bombing of Gaza. Too often, pleas for understanding have been equated with defences of Hamas terrorism, writes Phil Ryan. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

If we fail to understand acts of hatred and their context, even greater suffering and evil may be unleashed.

Phil Ryan

Opinion



Since the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas terrorist carnage, many observers have insisted that we must understand the background to the attacks. Ian S. Lustick wrote of “the gut punch of seeing or hearing people of all ages—including children, teenagers, the elderly, and the disabled—being brutalized, riddled with bullets, or dragged into captivity.” But he insisted that a response to the terrorism could not be based on strong emotional revulsion or a thirst for vengeance. Lustick, the—Jewish—founder of the Association for Israel Studies, noted that Gaza has long been a “resource-starved and overpopulated open-air prison, forced to rely on Israel for food, wa-

ter, electricity, trade, mail delivery, access to fishing, medical care, or contact with the outside world.”

Too often, these pleas for understanding have been equated with defences of Hamas terrorism. A recent letter to *The Hill Times* is a case in point: the author laments the fact that some people urge us to “contextualize” the Oct. 7 terrorism, likening this to an attempt to “justify” the attack.

But to understand is not to justify. And however painful it may be, understanding acts of hatred and their context is precisely what we *must* do. If we fail to do this, even greater suffering and evil may be unleashed.

After 9/11, the most influential “explanations” of the atrocity were of the quality of then-United States president George W. Bush’s claim that America was attacked because it is “the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world.” A few brave voices pushed back: “Let’s by all means grieve together. But let’s not be stupid together. A few shreds of historical awareness might help us understand what has just happened, and what may continue to happen.” For that common-sense observation, Susan Sontag was subject to vicious attacks.

The reluctance of Americans and their allies to understand the history that paved the road to 9/11 gave political cover

to catastrophic military adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq. We all know the results: hundreds of thousands of civilians dead, trillions of dollars wasted, the lives of many young soldiers—including hundreds of Canadians—ended or blighted.

And today? If there is no context, no history that might shed light on the Hamas attacks, it is all too easy to conclude that the crimes were the work of “human animals,” as Israel’s defence minister put it. His full quote shows where that type of rhetoric leads: “No electricity, no food, no water, no gas—it’s all closed ... We are fighting human animals, and we act accordingly.” Sadly, this frank declaration of an intent to commit war crimes was applauded by many in Israel and elsewhere.

The defence minister’s statement, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s ominous reference to the Biblical Amalekites (whose extermination was supposedly commanded by God), calls in the Knesset for a second Nakba—all these make current news feel like a chronicle of a genocide foretold.

Former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak warned in 2017 that his country

was on a “slippery slope toward apartheid.” Inconceivable as it may seem, Israel today may be on a slippery slope to something even worse. It may get away with this, for a while. Egypt, which has resisted pressure to accept a mass transfer of Palestinians into the Sinai, may relent, in return for some relief of its crushing foreign debt. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates may resume the development of relations with Israel, believing this gives them a free pass for their own authoritarianism.

But in the long run? Will Israelis be more secure when—one by one—governments around the world end their long-standing support for Israel? Or when a new generation of Palestinians grows up dreaming of avenging the post-Oct. 7 crimes? Will Israel flourish when the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement goes mainstream, becoming as taken-for-granted as it was in the case of South Africa? Another past Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert, warned in 2007 that, once the equivalence between his country and apartheid-era South Africa is widely accepted, “the state of Israel is finished.”

Taking history and context into account—rather than behaving as if the history of Palestine began on Oct. 7—may lead us to conclude that those who today view themselves as the firmest supporters of Israel, who refuse to protest its most extreme actions, could turn out in the long run to have simply enabled its long painful suicide.

Phil Ryan is an associate professor in the school of public policy and administration at Carleton University. His most recent book is *On the other hand: Canadian multiculturalism and its progressive critics.*  
*The Hill Times*



From summer camps to swimming lessons and festivals, nonprofits are present in your community, helping you and your neighbours thrive this summer.

**TO MAINTAIN THE QUALITY OF LIFE CANADA IS KNOWN FOR, WE NEED A STRONG NONPROFIT SECTOR. LET'S WORK TOGETHER.**

IMAGINE  
CANADA