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Opinion

Hatred of Israel and the Degradation of the West

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There are powerful reasons to dislike, even despise, Israel's current leadership: the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who repeatedly puts his political interests [ahead of the national one](#); the national security minister, [Itamar Ben-Gvir](#), who hung a portrait in his living room of the Jewish mass murderer Baruch Goldstein; [radical settlers](#) who, to little apparent pushback from this government, abuse, terrorize and sometimes kill their Palestinian neighbors in the West Bank.

There are also reasons (less persuasive to me, but subject to opinion) to object to the way Israel went to war in Gaza, with its heavy toll in civilian lives and a result that left Hamas in

power. The same goes for Israel's strategy toward Iran, which so far has gotten rid of neither the regime nor its nuclear program. Not least, there's Israel's overall approach to the Palestinians, which has resigned itself to a bleak and interminable status quo.

Valid or not, these sorts of objections to Israel are criticism, not hate. It is not a country of saints. As is true of every other country, the United States not least, plenty of sins past and present can be laid at Israel's door. They include allegations, [by Israelis](#) and others, regarding cases of abuse of prisoners in Israeli jails. Those cases should be thoroughly investigated, just as in the United States the [8,628 allegations of staff-committed sexual misconduct](#) victimizing adult inmates tallied in 2020 alone by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics need to be deeply investigated.

Yet this kind of good-faith criticism of Israeli leaders and policy has for years been giving way to something darker. It's a hyperbolic and often conspiratorial hatred of the country. It's a belief that Israelis are perpetually out for the blood of their enemies, even when it comes at the cost of the blood of their friends. It's the sense that it's socially acceptable to boycott, assail and sometimes assault Israelis for the supposed sins of their government. It's a conviction that Israel, alone among the nations, was a mistake to begin with and has no right to exist now.

None of these impulses are justified indictments of Israel. They are indictments of the indicters. More broadly, the fashionable frenzy that is today's loathing of Israel, coming from the [far right](#) but especially from the [far](#) and [not-so-far left](#), is a sign of the degradation of the West. Societies that value critical thinking and reasoned moral judgment do not make a fetish of demonizing one small country and its people while imagining that peace, justice and freedom would somehow be achieved if only the country and its people were made to disappear.

I've been closely covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict [for over 25 years](#). It's given me something of a front-row seat to this degradation.

I remember the story of Muhammad al-Durrah, the Palestinian boy who in 2000 became a global icon of Palestinian martyrdom and Israeli perfidy after allegedly being shot dead by Israeli troops — and then James Fallows presented [a detailed and dispositive case in The Atlantic](#) that the fatal bullet could not have been Israeli.

I remember the [so-called Jenin Massacre](#) in 2002, in which Palestinians alleged the killing of 500 people — and then United Nations [fact-finders concluded](#) that what had taken place was a battle in which at least 52 Palestinians were killed along with 23 Israelis.

I remember the 2009 Goldstone Report, a United Nations “fact-finding” mission, widely trumpeted in the press, that claimed that Israel had intentionally targeted Palestinian

civilians as a matter of policy — and then, two years later, when the mission’s chairman [publicly retracted](#) its most sensational claims against Israel.

I remember the stories, shortly after Oct. 7, 2023, that Israel had fired a missile on a hospital in Gaza, killing some 500 people inside — and then virtually every element of the fable [collapsed on investigation](#).

I remember the Washington Post story [from later that year](#), claiming that Israel was forcibly separating Palestinian mothers from their babies — and then the paper had to issue a lengthy editor’s note revealing that the factual basis of the story was weak and that the paper hadn’t even bothered to seek comment from Israeli officials.

The common thread in these and many other stories is that they all involve strenuous, if ultimately embarrassed, efforts to prove that Israelis deliberately seek to kill the innocent and maim the vulnerable, apparently for no other reason than gratuitous cruelty. This isn’t a matter of reporters’ impartially trying to expose wrongdoing wherever they find it — if that were the case, the errors wouldn’t invariably lean in the same ideological direction. It isn’t speaking truth to power. It’s feeding narratives to the credulous.

Over time this does at least three kinds of damage.

The least of it is damage to Israel, which has been living under the endless drizzle of [orchestrated propaganda](#) and [media hostility](#) over the course of its 78 years while still managing to transform itself into a military, technological and economic powerhouse — as well as [one of the happiest countries in the world](#).

A more serious form of damage, paradoxically, is to Palestinians. Israelis have become so inured to the tide of tendentious allegations about their supposed perfidy that they can too easily shrug off real scandals, as it is with [West Bank settler violence](#). And the endless parade of anti-Israel stories too often means the Western media pays too little attention to the domestic tyrannies that are [Hamas’s rule in Gaza](#) and the [Palestinian Authority’s rule in the West Bank](#).

But the gravest damage is to Western institutions, particularly those entrusted with the dissemination of hard truths.

That goes not only for journalism, but also once-admired organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which in recent decades have turned themselves into factories of anti-Israel invective. “Major human-rights groups’ shift toward overt opposition to Israel has had the unusual effect of sidelining many of Israel’s own activists, who historically are among the sharpest critics of the Israeli government’s behavior in Gaza and the West Bank,” [noted Michael Powell](#) last year in The Atlantic.

It's a similar story with much of academia, in which the anti-Israel furies stirred by the attacks of Oct. 7 were both a symptom of the [broader intellectual rot within them](#) and an invitation to the [political and legal blowback](#) from which they are still suffering.

How is it that hatred of one country can wind up doing more damage to the haters than the hated?

All prejudice, mindless or deliberate, is mind-warping; obsessive prejudice, of the kind Israel disproportionately attracts, is even more so. There are today millions of people around the world who, with considerable media and academic assistance, have convinced themselves that the major, if not sole, cause of injustice in the Middle East and even the world is Israel's occupation of parts of the West Bank and Gaza.

As a result, this obsession has contributed to the relative neglect of the region's other fundamental problems, above all the abiding grip of authoritarian politics in places like Cairo and Ankara and totalitarian religious fundamentalism in Gaza and Tehran. When was the last time you heard of an American campus protest against the treatment of Kurds by Turkey (a NATO ally and longtime beneficiary of U.S. security guarantees), or the genocide in Sudan? Why is this year's arts biennale in Venice being roiled by the inclusion of Israel, but not of China? Why has the recent report detailing [the extensive documentation](#) of systematic use of rape and sexual torture by Hamas and its collaborators received little attention?