

OPINION EXCHANGE

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'Unwavering support' fuels Mideast cycle of violence

The adversaries in this conflict have profoundly different underlying narratives and starting points, and until we accept that, there will be no solution.

By Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer | OCTOBER 10, 2023 — 5:37PM

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Fifty-one years ago I arrived in Israel as part of a St. Olaf College study abroad program. Security was tight because we had arrived days after what became known as the Munich Massacre.

Members of the Palestinian group Black September had kidnapped Israeli athletes and coaches at the 1972 Olympic Games. Seventeen people died as a result of subsequent events, including six Israeli coaches, five Israeli athletes, one German police officer and five members of Black September.

I knew little about Israel and less about the struggles of Palestinians, but an experience on my first day in Israel got my attention. Our tour bus guide's efforts to teach us Israeli folk songs were hampered by bombs exploding nearby as Israeli pilots pummeled refugee camps.

As a result of this experience, and others I had while working in Central America during the 1980s, I came to see how competing narratives involving three stages lie at the heart of many serious conflicts. Grievance gives rise to resistance. Resistance triggers retaliation. This violence cycle is fueled by the actions of both adversaries in a conflict because their underlying narratives and starting points are profoundly different.

According to the Israeli narrative, the grievance stage in the Munich case resulted when two Israeli athletes were killed by Palestinian terrorists during the abduction and others held hostage. Resistance took the form of a violent failed attempt by German Special Forces to rescue the athletes. This led in turn to the escalation of violence I witnessed in Israel: bombing refugee camps was seen as justified retaliation.



SAMAR ABU ELOUF, NEW YORK TIMES

A group of rockets fired by Palestinian militants from Gaza City on Oct. 8, 2023.

The Palestinian narrative included these three stages but it had a different starting point. Palestinian grievances focused on their displacement from the land and denial of their basic rights. Palestinian resistance involved taking the Israeli athletes hostage to call attention to those grievances. Members of Black September understood kidnapping or killing Israeli athletes as justifiable retaliation against oppressive Israeli policies.

The results of two groups acting in light of different narratives emerging from different starting points are predictably tragic and, as we have seen in the course of recent events, can lead to a never-ending, escalating spiral of violence.

Hamas attacks on Israel are indefensible. Terrorism always is. Terrorism distracts from legitimate grievances, alienates potential allies, and ends up hurting the people it seeks to defend. That this is true doesn't relieve us of responsibility to try to understand the despair and desperation that gives rise to terrorism.

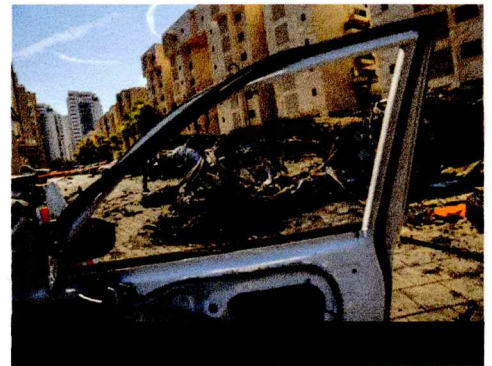
Nearly all recent U.S. coverage I've seen accepts Israel's dominant narrative that it is an innocent victim and that all violence delivered by Israel is retaliatory. I can almost guarantee, however, that in the Hamas narrative their recent attacks are seen as retaliatory because of decadeslong oppressive Israeli policies.

When I read President Joe Biden's promise that "my administration's support for Israeli's security is rock solid and unwavering," I couldn't help thinking about how planes from the United States were used in the bombing of Palestinian refugee camps more than 50 years ago.

"Unwavering support" for Israel has prevented us from thinking critically about Israel's conduct and taking seriously Palestinian rights and grievances. "Unwavering support" has helped bring about the present crisis.

It is a difficult time to make a case for taking the Palestinian narrative more seriously. However, unless we acknowledge and deal with competing Palestinian and Israeli narratives we are likely to be complicit in conflicts that escalate indefinitely and become increasingly violent.

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Netanyahu should take his own advice to avoid wider war
 The prime minister's attack on Hamas and his administration is pushing the conflict far beyond Gaza. His challenge: to act strategically while under pressure to exact maximum possible revenge.
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