

Bearing witness to multiple stories

Israelis and Palestinians alike are traumatized people who love the land and deserve to live there in peace.

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Left: Damage in the Rimal area of Gaza (Palestinian News & Information Agency / APAimages / Creative Commons). Right: Damage in Sderot, Israel (???? ??? / Yoav Keren / Creative Commons)

In Israel and the Palestinian territories, there are many stories—many lived experiences, cultures, religions, and political perspectives. There are also two overarching stories, each the story of a people.

Here's one story: On October 7, terrorists from Gaza entered Israel, brutally massacred more than 1,300 people—most of them civilians—and abducted 200 more. The attacker was Hamas, an explicitly anti-Jewish organization that was founded to fight Israel's existence and has frequently employed violence to that end. Since the initial attack, Hamas—joined by Islamic Jihad in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon—has fired thousands of rockets into Israel.

The Jewish people's connection to the land goes back to antiquity. In diaspora, again and again Jews were expelled from their homes, prohibited from worshipping, accused of imaginary crimes, mocked, tortured, and killed. It seemed as if the world, and especially Christian Europe, wanted to wipe them from the face of the earth. Israel was created—with the UN's blessing—to give Jews a homeland in a world that so often has turned them away or worse. But that homeland is surrounded by hostile neighbors, and its people are scarred by generational trauma.

If Israeli leaders wanted to resume negotiations with the Palestinians, it's not clear who they would negotiate with. Hamas is no partner for peace—it's more interested in the propaganda value of Gazans' suffering—while in the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority is weak and ineffectual. So Israelis, for all their prosperity and military might, continue to live in fear of being attacked by their neighbors.

Here's another story: The day of the attacks by Hamas—a group most Palestinians have opposed for years—the Israeli Defense Forces began bombing Gaza, blocking critical supplies from going in, and planning a ground assault. Civilian casualties quickly reached the thousands, as Gaza's density and closed borders leave nowhere to hide or to run. Israel has blockaded Gaza for 16 years and occupied the West Bank—where illegal Israeli settlements keep expanding—for 56 years. Palestinians in both places have slim economic prospects and few legal rights. Their homes are bulldozed, their movements restricted, their children imprisoned for throwing rocks.

Arab inhabitants' connection to the land goes back at least to the seventh century. The creation of Israel displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, who fled or were expelled during the 1948 war. Many kept the keys to their ancestral homes—keys their descendants still have, though they don't have much else. Most remain stateless, including those who live a narrowly circumscribed life in the Palestinian territories, surrounded by hostile neighbors and scarred by generational trauma.

When Palestinians have tried to resist the Israeli occupation by nonviolent means, their efforts have been undermined by the US and other allies of Israel. The current Israeli government is no partner for peace—it is committed to preventing a Palestinian state, not working toward one. So Palestinians, for all their international support, continue to live under oppression and deprivation.

Every conflict involves competing stories, but often one story clearly embodies far more truth than the other. Not in this case. Each of the two stories sketched out here is factually sound, historically informed, and morally compelling. Both stories are true.

And they are heartbreaking and tragic. Both are stories of people who love the land and deserve to live there in peace. Peace has long been stymied by political missteps, cycles of violence, and interventions by those who can only see one story's truth. For US Christians, bearing witness to this conflict begins with recognizing that it contains more than one true story.