

# Opinion | Why Muslim World Should Stop Holding A Grudge Against Israel And Move On

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## If the Muslim world could get over its grudge against Israel and move on, the world would be a better place

Israel is not perfect. But its enemies are far worse than Israel in almost every way, in terms of civil liberties, freedom of expression, scientific inquiry, minority rights and democracy. (Image: Reuters)

Have you ever heard of the biggest ship disaster of all time? Six or seven times worse than the Titanic. On January 30, 1945, the Wilhelm Gustloff left the Baltic Sea port of Gotenhafen in northern Europe, now in Poland. They were carrying a number of German military officers. But ninety per cent of those on board were German refugees, fleeing the horrors of World War 2. The Soviets spotted the ship, fired three torpedoes, and all of them struck. That night, 10,000 people drowned in the icy waters of the Baltic Sea. For comparison, 1,500 people died when the Titanic sank.

This is what happens when someone like the Nazis or Hamas mixes the military with the civilians. It is sad. But such is the harsh reality of war. So why the outcry against Israel over the high civilian death toll in the war in Gaza?

As the war in Gaza makes headlines in India, several commentators have been feeding us with a simple explanation for what is happening. They say that Israel is occupying Palestinian land. The Jews are oppressors, the Arabs are victims. Therefore, we must side with the Arabs.

But the history is a lot more complex. The Arabs started the war in 1948-49, which Israel won. After that, Israel took 78 per cent of the land, as opposed to the 55 per cent given to them by the UN partition plan. But what happened to the rest of the land? Egypt occupied Gaza and Jordan occupied the West Bank in the exact same war! So the Arabs snatched land from their fellow Arabs in Palestine. Do the Arabs ever talk about that? No, because it does not fit their narrative.

So when Israel was again forced to fight the Arab countries in 1967, there was no Palestinian state anywhere. In the 1967 war, Israel overcame the combined forces of five countries: Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon. They attacked Israel from all sides, but Israel still won. In that war, Israel captured large amounts of territory. But almost all of it was given back to these countries in return for them giving diplomatic recognition to Israel. The enemies of Israel could hardly have asked for a more fair deal.

But what about the 700,000 Palestinian refugees? Yes, they had to leave their homes. And it was very unfortunate. But that is what happens when you lose a war of annihilation. The Germans launched a war of annihilation against the Soviets in 1941. So when the Germans were defeated in World War 2, the Germans lost a lot of land. As many as 12 million Germans had to flee their homes in Eastern Europe, from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary and Yugoslavia. At least 1 million of them died. Do the Germans also get to call this a "*nakbah*," or whatever is the German word for "catastrophe"?

The Arabs launched three wars of annihilation against the Jews (in 1948, 1967 and 1973) and lost them all! This means that the Arabs must come to terms with losing some territory. Unfortunately, that is what happens in war. For instance, the city of Königsberg, the capital of East Prussia, had been a German city for 800 years. Today, it is part of the Russian oblast of Kaliningrad. At the end of the Second World War, the Russians expelled the Germans from Königsberg and took the city. Why should it be any different if Israel wishes to annex the West Bank or Gaza tomorrow?

In fact, those who single out the plight of Palestinian Arab refugees do not seem to know how the borders of countries everywhere were redrawn after World War 2. At the time, the universal formula for peace seemed to be that of forming ethnically homogeneous states. For example, Ukraine was given territory from Poland, and the Polish minorities were expelled from Ukraine. In turn, Ukrainian minorities were expelled from Poland. While the Polish had to leave Lithuania and Belarus, the Lithuanians and Belorussians had to leave Poland. Also, Poland was given land from Germany, and the Germans were expelled from Poland. Many Hungarians had to leave from the Transylvania region of Romania. The Italians were expelled from what is Croatia today. In May 1945, the President of Czechoslovakia called on his people to "eliminate the German problem." Nearly 2 million Germans were expelled from the country, and thousands of Germans died in the process.

When seen in this light, the victimhood of the Palestinian Arabs is real, but hardly exceptional. In fact, they seem to be the most privileged of all 'victims' in the world, perhaps the only refugees that the world still cares about. Has anyone ever asked about the Italians' right to return to Croatia? Or a right of the Poles to return to Ukraine? So what makes the Palestinian Arabs special?

We all know the answer to that last question. The Palestinian Arabs are Muslims. And we have all become used to treating Muslims as special. But there is no logical reason for this.

The Jews themselves were the worst victims of World War 2. If anyone deserves a state, it has to be them. So they were given a state in their most ancient homeland, where the Jews had lived long before anyone else. How could anyone have a problem with that?

And for what it's worth, let us not forget that the Arabs have done a "*nakbah*" on the Jews several times over. Once upon a time, Egypt had 80,000 Jews. Today there are less than 10. What happened to the Jews of Algeria or Libya? In the 1950s and 1960s, the Jews were forced to leave all the Arab lands. In any case, where is "Arab land"? The original inhabitants of Algeria or Libya are the Tuaregs, the Kabyles, the Chaoui peoples and others that the Arabs classify as Berbers (barbarians). They were all colonized by the Arabs long ago. So everyone can find a grudge against everyone else if they go back far enough. That is what history is.

For the Palestinian Arab refugees, the best thing to do is forget and move on. The Germans moved on. Their country is flourishing today. Their economy is the biggest in Europe, indeed the third largest in the world. A million French were expelled from Algeria in 1962. They started new lives in France and flourished. The Arabs have everything. They have land and a young population. And so much of the world's oil. They could achieve so much if they got over their obsession with fighting Israel.

For the rest of the world, here is a reality check. You may not like to be called "anti-Semitic" simply for criticising Israel. But what else is it when you obsess over finding fault with one tiny Jewish state, and ignore everything else? At least 500,000 people have died in the Syrian civil war since 2011. Since 2020, Azerbaijan has forced 100,000 ethnic Armenians to flee the Artsakh region, but how much world attention did that get? Perhaps because there was no way to blame the Jews for it?

Yes, there are a number of Jews (including numerous Israelis) who disagree with the policies of the State of Israel. But that is to be expected in a democracy. The correct question to ask is not why so many Israelis disagree with what their government is doing. Instead, one should ask why Muslim societies everywhere seem so united on the issue of Israel. Why the uniform show of hostility towards Israel by one community from the streets of Lucknow to the streets of London and Michigan?

Israel is not perfect. But its enemies are far worse than Israel in almost every way, in terms of civil liberties, freedom of expression, scientific inquiry, minority rights and democracy. If the Muslim world could get over its grudge against Israel and move on, the world would be a better place. And the "liberal" intellectuals who back them could think of more worthy causes that might need their attention.

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