Fellow Harvard students who are terrorism-deniers: It’s time to reconsider

Last Saturday, three of my friends attended a music festival in South Israel. As they danced, armed Hamas terrorists attacked the party with automatic weapons, killing 260 innocent civilians. One of my friends, Yiftah, was found dead. Two others, Ben and Dor, are still missing. I am a former officer in the Israeli Defense Forces and a Harvard student, but as a human being, I am shocked that my fellow students on Harvard’s campus not only refuse to acknowledge my friends’ murderers as a terror organization, but also place the blame for the largest mass murder of Jews since the Holocaust “entirely” on the Jewish state. To be clear - my fellow students at Harvard have absolved Hamas of any responsibility for their cold-blooded murder.

As I grieve, I choose to focus not on outrage at the defense of terrorism, but instead on the strength of character displayed by those brave enough to change their minds. The statement released on October 9th by the Palestine Solidarity Committee, which was co-signed by 33 other Harvard student organizations, claimed that Israel is “entirely responsible for all unfolding violence.” Since then, however, 10 of these groups have retracted their statements. My message to the remaining 23 is simple: you can support Palestine’s right for self-determination and condemn human rights abuses in Gaza while also showing outrage at Islamist terrorism and compassion for Jewish victims. In short, it’s time to change your mind about Hamas.

Last week, I met the leaders of one group that signed the October 9th statement. Throughout our conversation, it was apparent that the leaders, like many other students, signed the statement out of a simple and justifiable rationale: empathy with the Palestinian cause. This rationale, however, has nothing to do with Hamas’s attack. For many of these students, signing the statement was almost an automatic response that was done without consulting all club members. After processing that the brutal murder of over 1,400 Israelis will lead neither to justice nor peace, for Israelis or Palestinians, the group realized it had made a mistake and released a statement that retracted its signature from the statement.

While talking to students who ultimately decided to change their minds, I noticed that the hesitancy to condemn Hamas and recognize the attack as terrorism stems from three misunderstandings. The first is the distinction between terrorism and warfare. The inadvertent loss of innocent civilians is warfare. Deliberately targeting innocent civilians is terrorism. The harrowing images from the massacre leave no question about Hamas’ intention to murder civilians, to rape women, and kidnap Israeli children, women and the elderly. Recognizing these acts as terrorism isn’t a matter of politics but of morality.

The second misunderstanding is that Hamas’ actions are in the best interests of Gaza’s residents. This assessment is highly improbable and basically absurd. How does investing foreign aid in ammunition, rather than building Gaza, benefit Gazans? Does converting water pipes into rockets serve the interests of the Gazans? Does Hamas’ leader choosing to live in Qatar and enjoy the wealth and privileges benefit Gazans? Hamas is a terror organization recognized by the U.S. that gained power in a military coup in Gaza in 2007, and its covenant states that it aims to destroy Israel and kill the Jewish people. It is also clear that Hamas’ most recent terror attack provoked a war that will impair, not improve, the lives of those living in Gaza.
Finally, students can stand against some of Israel’s more hawkish policies and mourn the loss of Palestinian lives while simultaneously acknowledging Hamas for what it is: a terrorist organization committed to the murder of Jews as well as the institution of an Islamic state that destroys any hope for a democratic Palestinian state. Unfortunately, the psychological human tendency toward a binary narrative landscape can blur this reality.

To my fellow Harvard students, and to those at Stanford, NYU, and beyond, it’s not too late to condemn Hamas. After all, that is the greatest lesson one can learn in college – it’s okay to change your mind.

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