

Statement from the Leadership of Religion and Public Life on the Current Spate of Violence in Palestine/Israel

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This statement was authored by leaders of Harvard Divinity School's Religion and Public Life program.

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"The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, 'secondly.' Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story." -Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "Danger of a Single Story" TEDGlobal, July 2009

Start with the rockets fired into Israel by Hamas on October 7, 2023 and not with the illegal occupation of Palestinian land by Israel and the blockade of Gaza since 2007, and you have an entirely different story.

We are horrified by what is unfolding in Palestine/Israel. We recognize the pain, loss, and humanity of Palestinians and Israelis and are in touch with family, friends, and colleagues in the region as we are able. There is still so much that is unknown and unfolding.

What we do know is that single story narratives are dangerous. To acknowledge the context out of which this latest spate of violence arises is not to diminish the pain and suffering of Israeli and Palestinian victims. We agree with UN special rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories Francesca Albanese who is "shocked and appalled" by the violence unfolding in the region *and* "horrified by the narrative, by the discourse, because it is possible, and necessary, to stand both with the Palestinians and the Israelis without resorting to ethical relativism, to selective outrage or worse, calls for violence." Albanese calls for the international community to be "wise and even-

handed” when confronting the result of “decades of oppression imposed on the Palestinians...”

When these “decades of oppression” are left out of the story about Hamas’ horrendous attack on Israeli civilians, a narrative about an “innocent” state of Israel’s right to “defend” itself against supposedly “unprovoked” aggression is legitimized. The reality is much more complex, and that complexity must be confronted if there is any chance to avoid endless cycles of dehumanization, destruction, and death.

In this time of sorrow and pain, may we all challenge single story narratives that justify vengeance and retaliation. Pathways out of the catastrophic events in Palestine/Israel and regionally cannot be military ones but must involve diplomacy, historical accountability, dismantling the structures of violence, and retraining the political imagination to disrupt exclusionary and ethnocentric conceptions of belonging.

May we be mindful of each other at this moment. May we put into practice all we have learned and the values we hold dear as we continue to pursue a just world at peace.

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The views expressed here represent those of the signatories.