

Books and bombs: An Indian student's experience of conflict in Israel

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I arrived at the Ben Gurion Airport at 11:00 pm on a Monday night, carrying with me a bundle of expectations born out of my extensive study and reading about Israel, the conflict and the Middle East. I stood there, in front of these towering skyscrapers, bustling traffic and footsteps rushing in all directions. Before this Israel was a far-off perception in books, movies and academic debates; being in the very country was a surreal experience for me, the case study had come to life. I came to study at Tel Aviv University for a semester exchange program.

Before coming here, Israel for me was defined largely by two overshadowing dynamics. The first being its living, breathing representation of the fight against the long-standing history of Anti-Semitism. Israel came after a scarring historical collective memory that defined the Jews as a people who were in need of a safe home and had a longing for a country they could call their own. This is a constructive understanding of what lays beneath the self-perception of the state and its people and the historical reason for its existence.

Second, was its identity as a prime actor in the intractable Israel-Palestine conflict. This understanding of the country came from its realist aspect of how power, realpolitik and strategy defined security concerns of nations in a militaristic and conflict-prone setting. The two dynamics of the state of Israel were in contradiction, the first was a rather victimized dynamics of a group of people who still carry the scars of the past and bring it into their present and the second one was a perception of a strong state armed with perpetrations against another group of victims, defined as its enemy; the Palestinians. It is a complex viewing of the victim-perpetrator dynamic situated in the midst of other evolving issues like immigration, global trade, technology and development, each of which defined the fragmentation of imagination that existed in my head about this country from far.

Just when I was beginning to think how different this is from the conflict-induced place I had imagined it to be with its beaches, bustling nightlife and diverse markets, my thoughts were cut short by a brief but impactful conflict between Hamas and the state of Israel in May.

On the morning of 11 May, my friends and I received red alerts to be around safe spaces at night as the conflict had heightened. I was scared yet curious to see what will follow. Later at night, I was having dinner at a restaurant with my friends when we heard loud sirens and before I could make sense of anything my friends pushed me under the tables. I heard loud screaming which was suddenly overshadowed by the sound of booms in the sky. The glass walls of the restaurant were shaking and people were screaming frantically.

"Is this a safe place to be in right now?" my friend asked another Israeli student.

"No," she replied very curtly.

There was no attempt or time to console us or make us feel safe, the reality was the city of Tel Aviv was being bombed and while the state was effective in protecting its citizens through a number of measures, I was in an unprotected glass building surrounded by loud booms of rockets being shot down right above my head.

The bombs and the sirens continued for the next six days.

During the six days, my friends and I had constant sirens and notifications about the possibility of bombings which urged us to stay near safe spaces at all times. During the war, I still had zoom classes. All Professors did their best to comfort the students and discussed the relevance and scope of this conflict. I sat at the edge of my seat for days, unable to sleep or shower without thinking about the possibility of the sirens going off any moment. The atmosphere in the bomb shelters was tense to the point of explosion, wherein I felt the fear for life mixed with anger at Hamas. I was with a group of American Jewish students who were scared and angry at Hamas but at the same time expressed relief about being in Israel, a country who they supported and trusted to protect them and all its citizens.

Batya Goldberg, an American Jewish student at TAU, whom I spoke to about the situation said *'It was not easy. I still sometimes get nightmares about being bombed and whenever I hear the motorcycles on the road wheeze past me I get alerted because they sound so similar to sirens. However, despite the fearful past weeks, I do not regret coming here and I think it was important*

for me to experience the conflict as it is, before I made comments about the situation and the way the state of Israel experiences it.'

In the shelters, I met other Arab students who had homes and families in the North who were relatively safer from the bombing. I could see the drudgery and exhaustion in their eyes from making the routinely night runs to the shelters in the middle of their sleep. They seemed tired and afraid but I couldn't find the same sense of anger in their eyes as I saw in the eyes of the other American Jews or international students, who saw this as an attack on themselves and their existence. It was intriguing to see how the same threatening bombs under the roof of the same shelter could evoke different feelings in different people. For me, it was fearful while the bombs boomed above my head, it was exhausting to live with the sirens as an alarming reality but I was different from the other students, many of whom worried more about the aftermath of these bombs than about the current situation. I could just see humans in danger and the immediate threat to my life. But the other students saw an attack on their identity, history and the long-term repercussions of how this conflict was going to define their place in the world. It was more than the bombs. Batya reiterated her fear about the repercussion of this conflict in her home country. *"You can see the rising anti-Semitism in the States. It always existed under the surface but now they will use these actions of self-defense by the state of Israel as an excuse to spread hate and anti-Semitism."*

I believe, this is a reiteration of the two conflicting dynamics I mentioned about the state of Israel before coming here. One which many of the Jews see as their and Israel's self-image, a state emerging out of the ashes of the holocaust and persistent hatred, discrimination and extermination around the world giving rise to an existential need to protect itself. Whereas the other image, which the international community and the Palestinian National Movement views Israel from, is about a strong, armed and militaristic state which uses disproportional retaliation against the Palestinians.

After the bombs had stopped and the ceasefire agreed, I felt safe. As an outsider, the danger was only physical and it was over for me. But that was not the story of everyone else here. There was fear amongst the students. A student group I was a part of on social media talked about the fear in the environment and the attacks being faced by Palestinian Arabs[\[1\]](#) and Jews alike. Doors with Mezuzahs[\[2\]](#) being vandalized or students wearing Hijabs being attacked outside cafes.

It was an overwhelming journey and something that made my family in India worried, but at the same time I felt like Israel, and in particular, Tel Aviv, was one of the safest places I could be while experiencing a conflict.

The simplistic understanding of Israel with which I came to this country stands revised and altered to allow me to see deeper domestic tensions within this country and its identity for me is more than the one as defined by its participation as a major actor in the Israel-Palestine conflict. On another front, having studied it from the angle of an international conflict, I was able to see it as a 'normal state, like any other in the world which is part of militaristic conflicts but still existing alongside that as a nation with tourism, institutions, businesses and technology.

Conflicts are multi-faceted and waged on so many fronts. It made me question the concept of peace and identity altogether. Can we ever be at peace in this world of extensively polarized and politicized identity-wars which wage not just without but even within ourselves?

References

[1] Shezaf, Hagar, and Yanal Jbareen. "Facing Attacks and Incitement, Arab Students Flee Israeli Campuses." *Haaretz.com*, Haaretz, 20 May 2021, www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-facing-attacks-and-incitement-arab-students-flee-israeli-campuses-1.9823987.

[2] Reich, Aaron. "TAU Dorm Vandalised with Bloody Handprints, 'Palestinian Lives Matter'." *The Jerusalem Post* / *JPost.com*, 19 May 2021, www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/tau-dorm-vandalized-with-bloody-handprints-palestinian-lives-matter-668538.

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