



Expert Commentary, the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, and the Question of Genocide: Prosemitic Bias within a Scholarly Community?

Omar Shahabudin McDoom

To cite this article: Omar Shahabudin McDoom (25 Apr 2024): Expert Commentary, the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, and the Question of Genocide: Prosemitic Bias within a Scholarly Community?, Journal of Genocide Research, DOI: [10.1080/14623528.2024.2346403](https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2024.2346403)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2024.2346403>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 25 Apr 2024.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 857



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Expert Commentary, the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, and the Question of Genocide: Prosemitic Bias within a Scholarly Community?

Omar Shahabudin McDoom

Department of Government, London School of Economics, London, UK

Few of the world's ongoing wars stir sentiments among such a wide-ranging and globally diverse set of constituencies – far beyond those of just Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs – as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹ In this piece I examine the relationship of the conflict to one highly influential constituency: the scholarly community. In keeping with the aim of this journal's forum, I turn a lens on one particular section of this community: scholars in the fields of Holocaust and Genocide Studies (HGS). Opinions from this community on cases of mass atrocity have considerable impact in the public sphere not only because these scholars have relevant expertise, but also because genocide is seen as the “crime of crimes” and the Holocaust is widely-viewed as an especially egregious case of genocide. Yet a serious question has arisen as to whether – contrary to the scholarly commitment to the impartial exercise of their expertise – the HGS community has also been affected by the political polarization and emotional bias that characterize the global public debate on the conflict.

Expert opinion from the HGS community manifested powerfully following an attack of unprecedented scale on Israel organized by the Palestinian militant group Hamas, with the participation of other groups, on 7 October 2023. Militants killed 838 civilians and 327 soldiers, and although not all were Israeli Jews, the attack represented the largest loss of Jewish life in a single day since the Holocaust. The Israeli state's response was also unprecedented. It reacted with a campaign of aerial bombardment whose scale, speed, and severity make it one of the most destructive in history,² accompanied by a ground campaign, that together have killed over 20,000 Palestinians and is ongoing as I write. While the ratio of combatants to civilians killed is intensely disputed, the Gazan Ministry of Health data point to some 70 per cent of these victims being women and children.³

CONTACT Omar Shahabudin McDoom  o.s.mcdoom@lse.ac.uk  Department of Government, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK

¹ For an enumeration of the various constituencies with whom the conflict resonates – and the reasons why, see Omar Shahabudin McDoom, “How Unique is the Israel-Palestine Conflict?” *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 8 November 2023, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2023/11/08/how-unique-is-the-israel-palestine-conflict/>.

² Robert A. Pape, Israel's Failed Bombing Campaign in Gaza: Collective Punishment Won't Defeat Hamas, *Foreign Affairs*, 6 December 2023.

³ The casualty counts are taken from the *Haaretz* newspaper for Israelis and the Gazan Health Ministry for Palestinians (accessed 27 December 2023). The latter does not distinguish between civilians and combatants.

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

In the immediate aftermath of the 7 October attack, a section of the HGS community engaged in public commentary, explicitly in their capacity as scholars, on the violence. A series of institutional statements, open letters, and individual opinions appeared that each, correctly, denounced the civilian-targeted violence committed by Hamas and other groups as an atrocity.⁴ Some also ascribed a genocidal intent to the attack and linked it to the Holocaust. However, in relation to the retaliatory violence committed by Israel, many were either silent or else much less critical, even though the loss of Palestinian life has been far greater in both absolute and relative terms.

The views of the Israel-uncritical section of the HGS community stood in marked contrast to the views of another section of the HGS community who, strikingly, felt moved instead to warn of the “danger of genocide in Israel’s attack on Gaza”.⁵ The views also stood in marked contrast to expert opinions from outside of the HGS community. Human rights organizations, UN Experts and Special Rapporteurs, and scholars in disciplines such as international law, conflict studies, and Middle East area studies all warned of the risk of atrocity crimes being committed by the Israeli government.⁶

A stark difference manifested then among experts on the violence. For the Israel-uncritical section of the HGS community, only Hamas had transgressed and should be condemned. But in the view of another section of the HGS community and other experts, *both* sides were engaged in legally and morally problematic violence. Some saw in Israel’s humanitarian restrictions and intensive aerial bombardment, when coupled with statements by its senior civilian and military leadership, the possibility of genocide.⁷

What explains this dramatically divergent characterization of the violence? Many of the HGS scholars who have commented publicly have expressed concern for a resurgence of antisemitism globally. One reason then may be antisemitic bias on the part of those critical of Israel’s conduct.⁸ This is a possibility. Yet there exists another logical possibility: bias

⁴ For example: (i) The Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at University of Minnesota, “A Statement from CHGS Regarding the Violence in Israel,” 13 October 2023. <https://cla.umn.edu/chgs/news-events/news/statement-chgs-regarding-violence-israel/>; (ii) the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Education at St. Cloud State University, “Statement on the Hamas Attack on Israel,” undated, <https://www.stcloudstate.edu/chge/>; (iii) Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Clark University, “Hamas Terror Attacks,” undated. <https://s28151.pcdn.co/centers/holocaust-and-genocide-studies/wp-content/blogs.dir/7/files/sites/180/2023/11/The-massacres-that-occurred-in-southern-Israel-on-Saturday-October-7-have-rightly-been-described-as-a-pogrom.pdf>. (iv) Open letter, “Scholars of the Holocaust condemn Hamas terror and denounce the rise of global antisemitism,” undated. https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfM8f78BT77iwUO4B-82YKWTsVOpvR_zcSIJxTILJJYP99yKw/viewform; (v) Open letter, “Statement of Scholars in Holocaust and Genocide Studies on Mass Violence in Israel and Palestine since 7 October,” 9 December 2023, <https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/global-currents/statement-of-scholars-7-october/>; (vi) Avinoam Patt and Liat Stair Livny, “Holocaust Comparisons are Overused – But in the Case of Hamas’ Oct. 7 Attack on Israel They May Reflect More than Just the Emotional Response of a Traumatized People,” *The Conversation*, 7 December 2023.

⁵ *Supra* footnote 4 (v).

⁶ (i) Amnesty International, “Damning Evidence of War Crimes as Israeli Attacks Wipe Out Entire Families in Gaza,” 20 October 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/10/damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-as-israeli-attacks-wipe-out-entire-families-in-gaza/>; (ii) Human Rights Watch, “We are Seeing Urgent Signs of More Mutual Mass Atrocities to Come in Israel and Gaza,” 20 October 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/20/we-are-seeing-urgent-signs-more-mutual-mass-atrocities-come-israel-and-gaza/>; (iii) “Public Statement: Scholars Warn of Potential Genocide in Gaza,” 17 October 2023, <https://twailor.com/public-statement-scholars-warn-of-potential-genocide-in-gaza/>; (iv) “Gaza: UN Experts Call on International Community to Prevent Genocide Against the Palestinian People,” <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/11/gaza-un-experts-call-international-community-prevent-genocide-against>, news release, 16 November 2023; (v) Middle East Studies Association, “MESA Board Statement on Israel and Palestine,” <https://mesana.org/advocacy/letters-from-the-board/2023/10/16/mesa-board-statement-on-palestine-and-israel>, 16 October 2023.

⁷ *Supra* footnote 6 (iii).

⁸ Commentary that condones Hamas’ killings of civilians (though not combatants, in my view) is also antisemitic and/or exhibits pro-Palestinian bias. However, few, if any, HGS scholars, to my knowledge, have done so.

in the opposing direction of those *unwilling* to criticize violence committed by Israel. More than any other event in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the 7 October attack has thrown into sharp relief the question of whether there exists within a certain section of the HGS community a blind-spot in relation to actions by the Israeli state. The answer to this question has profound implications for the professional credibility and scholarly reputation of the field.

In considering the allegation of bias, I begin by examining the arguments for and against one claim HGS scholars are particularly well-qualified to assess: genocide. I do so as scholars, rather than lawyers, understand the concept as the question asked here is whether bias exists within a scholarly community rather than whether there has been a violation of international law. I then analyze the largest collective statement on the 7 October attack to date issued by HGS scholars and use it to develop a set of general markers of bias in expert commentary in relation to violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Overall, I find evidence strongly suggestive of bias in favour of Israel. I conclude by considering ethical obligations and good practices for scholars engaged in public commentary, as experts, on politically sensitive topics such as Israel-Palestine.

Genocide, Mass Atrocity, or Legitimate Violence?

As noted, while there exists widespread consensus within the HGS community that Hamas' civilian-targeted violence should be condemned, this is not the case in respect of the Israeli government's violence. Many HGS scholars have remained steadfastly silent or else uncritical of the Israeli government despite the rapidly-mounting civilian death toll.

Scholarly understanding of what constitutes genocide has evolved markedly in the nearly 80 years since Raphael Lemkin first introduced the concept that would be recognized internationally in the 1948 Genocide Convention. It has also departed significantly from the original and restrictive juridical definition. Scholars have noted several problems with the legal formulation. They have critiqued the emphasis on establishing an intent to destroy; the absence of protection for groups not based on ascriptive identities; and the narrow focus on physical destruction.

While genocide is still a contested concept among scholars, there exists nonetheless some consensus on its identifiable markers. The US Holocaust Museum, for example, commissioned work that distills the cumulation of thinking and scholarship on the term and highlighted three hallmarks of genocide.⁹ First, the violence or other action taken should be deliberate, organized, sustained, and large-scale. Second, the action should be group-selective, that is the perpetrator identifies the civilians it kills as belonging to a distinguishable group. Third, the action taken should be group-destructive, that is the perpetrator takes steps to prevent the group from surviving or reproducing in a given territory.

Using these markers, the argument could be made that the Israeli government's actions are genocidal. The violence is not accidental, the aerial and ground campaigns evidently require high-level coordination, the attacks are daily and have been ongoing

⁹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *The Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention* (Washington, DC: USHMM, 2016), 32–33.

for over 80 days, over 20,000 persons or nearly 1 per cent of Gaza's population have been killed, those killed are all Palestinian Arabs, the majority of the victims are civilians and overwhelmingly women and children, and the severe siege-motivated humanitarian restrictions and targeting of hospitals threaten the group's physical survival and reproduction.

Counter-arguments have been made by defenders of Israel, however. First, Israel is engaged in a self-defensive war started by Hamas, not in offensive action against Palestinians. Second, Israel carefully chooses its targets, Hamas members, and each strike must be approved by a selection committee that includes military lawyers. It therefore discriminates between civilians and combatants and Palestinian civilian deaths, while high, are unintended and collateral effects of targeting Hamas. Third, Israel gives warnings to civilians before its ground attacks and airstrikes; has opened safe corridors to allow in the supply of humanitarian aid; and provides guidance to civilians on where to safely move and shelter. All these actions, they argue, clearly belie any intent to destroy a group.

Yet many of these counter-arguments can themselves be readily countered. Genocides frequently occur in the context of wars and these wars are frequently framed as self-defense.¹⁰ The genocides in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur all took place during internal wars in which the perpetrator governments each invoked security concerns or presented themselves as the victims. Moreover, there is a legal debate as to whether an occupying power, such as Israel, can even claim self-defense if the attack originates from within the territory it occupies. There is also the legally (and arguably morally) incontrovertible point that, even if Israel could claim self-defense, this would not permit genocide in retaliation.¹¹ One atrocity does not justify another. Second, the mounting civilian death toll, which is significantly higher than in any of the previous Gaza campaigns and whose victims are overwhelmingly women and children, strongly suggests the Israeli government's differentiation is at best very weak and its attacks, in the absence of evidence of the military advantage gained, grossly disproportionate. It also sits uncomfortably with statements from Israel's senior civilian and military leadership that imply it views all Gazans as responsible and suggest an intent to punish if not destroy them collectively.¹² Third, the Israeli government's warnings, humanitarian access, and guidance on safe zones have proved wholly inadequate. The UN, for example, described the initial warning to over one million people to evacuate northern Gaza in 24 h as impossible to fulfil. The Israeli government did ease the total siege after strong international condemnation of the deliberate deprivation of food, water, medicine, and fuel.¹³ However, the UN

¹⁰ Barbara Harff, "No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder Since 1955," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 57–73.

¹¹ Ruth Wedgwood, "The ICJ Advisory Opinion on the Israeli Security Fence and the Limits of Self-Defense," *American Journal of International Law* 99, no. 1 (2005): 52–61.

¹² It includes statements by the Israeli President, Prime Minister, and Minister of Defense. On 13 October 2023, Israeli President Isaac Herzog announced: "It is an entire nation out there that is responsible. It is not true this rhetoric about civilians not being aware, not involved. It's absolutely not true." On the same day, Israeli Defense Minister Gallant stated: "Gaza won't return to what it was before. We will eliminate everything." On 9 October he said Israel is "imposing a complete siege on Gaza. No electricity, no food, no water, no fuel. Everything is closed. We are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly." On 2 October 2023, the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, said "You must remember what Amalek has done to you, says our Holy Bible. And we do remember." The relevant section of the Bible says "Now go, attack Amalek, and proscribe all that belongs to him. Spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and asses."

¹³ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Gaza: UN Calls for Urgent Aid Scale-Up Amid New Mass Exodus to Rafah," 29 December 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/12/1145162>

reports supplies remain woefully insufficient to meet humanitarian needs raising the question of whether the Israeli government is deliberately using starvation as a weapon of war. Finally, Gazans report they do not know where to turn for safety¹⁴: the bombing is too intensive and extensive; the supposed safe corridors and safe spaces have proved unsafe¹⁵; and an online map showing these features has been inaccessible to many Gazans due to the Israeli government's deliberate denial of electricity. It is also inconsistent with the paper maps that have been air-dropped. It is worth noting the Israeli government only made these maps available after over 13,000 Palestinians had been killed.

The Israeli government would be aware of all these issues. It has choices. It could choose: to use fewer high-destruction 2000lb bombs, the largest in the US military arsenal, in such a dense urban environment; to rely more on ground troops than aerial attack; to open more crossings to expedite humanitarian supply; and to allow women and children out of Gaza to temporary camps inside Israel, among many other things. But the Israeli government does not make the choices that would lessen the civilian death toll.

In light of these choices, it is certainly not unambiguous then that a genocide as scholars (or even lawyers) understand the term is *not* taking place. Yet, surprisingly, a section of the HGS community chose not to acknowledge this possibility when voicing their views – as genocide experts – on the violence. To the contrary. Some charged Hamas with genocide against Israel.¹⁶ Some published further opinion to deny the Israeli government's actions constituted genocide.¹⁷ Their aim appeared to be to defend Israel rather than offer an impartial expert assessment of the violence.

Perhaps most troublingly though, even if these HGS scholars did not believe the government's actions constituted genocide, they did not suggest its violence could amount to anything else problematic. At the very least, even if not conclusive of genocidal intent, these choices suggest the Israeli government attaches an extremely low value to Palestinian civilian life. Scholars have long pointed out that debates over whether violence is genocidal or not distract from the reality that civilians are still being killed in large numbers.¹⁸ A new lexicon developed in response and "mass atrocity" has since become a consensus term to describe other forms of problematic large-scale violence short of genocide. Yet these scholars did not use this, or any of the other terms the field has developed to describe transgressive violence either. Even those who turned to the narrower legal definition and argued the requisite genocidal intent was absent, did not suggest the violence could alternatively represent crimes against humanity or war crimes.

The absence of any interrogation of the legitimacy or legality of the Israeli government's conduct is striking in light of the expanded conceptualization of genocide and

¹⁴ Al Jazeera, "Israel Issues 'Evacuation Map' as it Targets South Gaza," 2 December 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/newsfeed/2023/12/2/israel-issues-evacuation-map-as-it-targets-south-gaza>

¹⁵ Robin Stein et al., "A Times Investigation Tracked Israel's Use of One of its Most Destructive Bombs in South Gaza," *New York Times*, 21 December 2023.

¹⁶ For example, USC Shoah Foundation, "Israel Under Attack," <https://sfi.usc.edu/news/2023/10/35566-israel-under-attack>, 13 October 2023.

¹⁷ For example, Verena Buser, "The Abuse of the Term Genocide," *Jewish Journal*, 28 November 2023, <https://jewishjournal.com/commentary/opinion/365763/the-abuse-of-the-term-genocide/>.

¹⁸ A. Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

the sophisticated typology HGS scholars have developed to describe atrocities that fall short of genocide. The position taken by this section of the HGS community – not to publicly question the Israeli government’s violence at all – suggests potential alignment with the government’s view that, while unfortunate, the mass killing of thousands of Palestinian civilians is necessary, unavoidable, and justifiable self-defense.

Scholarly Expertise and Political Bias

An investigation into bias in scholarly opinion would do well to query the motivation to venture an opinion in the first place. A number of HGS centres issued official statements following the 7 October attack.¹⁹ The use of an institution’s name and authority carries with it the implication that there is some connection either to the Holocaust or genocide. Yet the Holocaust comparison is problematic. Not simply because it belies the claim that the Holocaust was a unique event that some of the same HGS scholars forcefully make. But because the Germans were not an occupied and oppressed people. And Gaza is not a powerful, expansionary state. To the contrary.

If the motivation to issue statements instead was because Hamas’ attack was genocidal or a mass atrocity, it then begs the question why these centres did not issue similar statements in response to recent and much larger-scale violence in the Sudan, Syria, Myanmar, and Ethiopia. Appalling atrocities have been committed against civilians in much larger numbers in these cases, but these have not motivated the need to issue statements. The inconsistency is stark and suggests bias.

This bias was powerfully exemplified in the largest collective statement so far issued by members of the HGS community in relation to the 7 October attack. Following an academic conference on the Holocaust in Prague on 6–9 November 2023, 182 self-identified “scholars of the Holocaust” issued a statement that, correctly, characterized Hamas’ violence as a mass atrocity though, more dubiously, linked it to the Holocaust.²⁰ In contrast, the statement did not characterize the Israeli government’s violence at all. It did not even attribute it to the Israeli government, but to Hamas. The statement excused the Israeli government for Palestinian civilian casualties and presented the “human shield” narrative as if it were an undisputed and indisputable position. Yet it is evidently debatable how much choice a group like Hamas has in such a small, militarily-enclosed, and heavily urbanized area to define the battlefield. In asymmetric conflict, it is not unusual for the weaker party to use the terrain available to it – be it jungle, desert, mountains or indeed subterranean passages – to its advantage. The statement in fact contained not a single word critical of the Israeli government’s conduct even though over 8,000 Palestinians – already the highest death toll since Israel’s foundation – had already been killed at the time.

The statement is revealing in another regard. The authors chose to comment on more than just the attack. For example, it states:

Today, more than ever, we need to reaffirm, without any caveats, the right of Jews to live in Israel and to defend themselves against those who deny Israel and Jews the right to exist. We deplore the humanitarian catastrophe of the Palestinian people in Gaza and note that it derives directly from the use of civilians as human shields by the Hamas.

¹⁹ *Supra* footnote 4 (i), (ii), and (iii).

²⁰ *Supra* footnote 4 (iv).

Table 1. Some general markers of bias in public commentary by scholar experts in relation to violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A. Issue from Israeli perspective	B. Issue from Palestinian perspective
Willingness to comment publicly and critically on Palestinian killings of Israeli Jewish civilians	Willingness to comment publicly and critically on Israeli killings of Palestinian civilians
Explicit assertion of Jewish right to self-determination	Explicit assertion of Palestinian right to self-determination
Explicit recognition of the legality and legitimacy of the state of Israel	Explicit recognition of the legality and legitimacy of the state of Palestine along 1967 borders
Explicit assertion of Israel's right to security	Explicit assertion of the Palestinians' right to security
Explicit recognition of Israel's right to use force in self-defense	Explicit recognition of the Palestinians' right to use force to resist occupation
Explicit recognition of role of antisemitism in relation to Palestinian violence against Israeli Jews	Explicit recognition of role of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment in relation to Israeli state violence against Palestinians
Characterization of Israel's presence in the West Bank and Gaza as necessary for security	Characterization of Israel's presence in the West Bank and Gaza as unlawful occupation and unlawful settlement
Emphasizes equally the pain and suffering of Jewish victims of Palestinian militant violence	Emphasizes equally the pain and suffering of Palestinian victims of Israeli state violence
Attribution of blame for Palestinian loss of life from Israeli state violence on Palestinian militants for using human shields	Acknowledgement of context of Israeli unlawful occupation, settlement, and discrimination against Palestinians in relation to Palestinian militant violence
Use of critical/delegitimizing language to describe all Palestinian militant violence (e.g., evil, barbaric, terrorist)	Use of critical/delegitimizing language to describe all Israeli state violence (e.g., Nazi, evil, terrorist)

*Only when an expert commentator makes one of the comments in one column **but** not the corresponding comment in the other column should an inference of bias be considered.*

Setting aside the debatable claim that those killed were targeted solely because they were Jewish (a number of non-Jews and non-Israelis were also killed), the statement here and elsewhere alludes to broader issues: racism, victimhood, historic suffering, self-defense, self-determination, and entitlement to a state. It presents each of these from an exclusively Jewish perspective. The attack could have been condemned without linking it to these bigger, highly sensitive questions. But the statement's authors chose to do so and to do so without acknowledgement of a Palestinian right to self-determination, of a Palestinian right to self-defense against ongoing occupation, of Palestinian entitlement to a state, of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment and discrimination; and of the historic suffering and victimization of Palestinians under occupation and Gazans under blockade.

The statement is palpably unbalanced. Yet it was published as "scholars of the Holocaust". The signatories did not sign in their private capacities. They emphasized their professional expertise. The statement is more political advocacy than impartial scholarly assessment. Still, the statement has instructive value. It provides some identifiable markers of bias in scholarly commentary on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I summarize these markers in [Table 1](#) to serve as a guide for assessing commentary for pro-Israel bias more generally.

Ethical Obligations and Good Practices for Publicly Engaged Scholars

Scholars have an ethical commitment to accuracy and impartial reasoning when engaged in public commentary.²¹ The commitment is critical for public trust in scholarly expertise.

²¹ See American Association of University Professors "1940 Statement on Principles of Academic Freedom and Tenure" and UNESCO "Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel," Paris, November 1997.

The bias exhibited by a section of the HGS community is not only damaging for the field's reputation, it is also self-sabotaging. Many will perceive prosemitic bias in the commentary and dismiss it as such. Yet the bias may also have nothing to do with being Jewish. Non-Jewish scholars may also hold similar views on the violence. Prosemitism, though not as commonly used a term as antisemitism, may be thought of as an example of ethnocentric bias, a well-established concept in social psychology that seeks to explain observed ingroup favouritism in interethnic relations.²² As with all biases, ethnocentric bias can be unconscious. A prosemitic individual is not necessarily advocating perspectives they know to be partial or false and this may explain why a prosemitic individual may see antisemitic bias in those who advocate an opposing perspective. The charge of antisemitism is likely to be levelled at the contributors to this forum, for example, myself included, for the positions taken that are critical of the conduct of the Israeli government. Although it has long been argued the antisemite label has been used instrumentally to silence critics of Israel, it may not always be disingenuous behaviour.²³ Ethnocentric bias also varies in intensity between individuals. Being Jewish does not make one incapable of being critical of one's own people. The work of Noam Chomsky, Norman Finkelstein, Judith Butler, Avi Shlaim, and Ilan Pappé, and indeed some contributors to this forum, all prove this basic point.

Yet when bias in scholarly commentary on Israel manifests, there is a risk it will be perceived to be prosemitic in nature if the scholar is Jewish. This assumption is not in of itself necessarily antisemitic. One reason may simply be that prosemitism has become difficult to distinguish from being pro-Israel. The difficulty directly mirrors the controversy over the meaning of antisemitism. The widely promoted International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition has been criticized because seven of the eleven examples of antisemitism it gives are defined in relation to Israel.²⁴ It is the reason why an alternative definition, set out in the Jerusalem Declaration, was created. The difficulty also reflects the debate within Israel itself over how much importance should be given to Jewish identity when defining the state. As one cannot become Jewish in the same way as one can become American, British, or French, for example – it is an ethnic and religious rather than civic identity – prosemitic bias unsurprisingly is often conflated with bias in favour of Israel.

Given the risk of perceived and actual prosemitism in expert commentary on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I conclude with a recommendation. First, as scholars are already expected to do with their research, they should disclose conflicts of interest when engaged in public commentary. A scholar paid by or otherwise affiliated with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a professional pro-Israel advocacy body, should have an ethical obligation to reveal this when commenting publicly in an expert capacity, for example. Second, while it should not be an ethical obligation, it should be good practise for scholars to reflect on and disclose relevant positionality in their public commentary as many already do in their research. In this case, as Jewish, Arab, and Muslim identities are central cleavage lines in the conflict, it would be good

²² Boris Bizumic and John Duckitt, "What is and is not Ethnocentrism? A Conceptual Analysis and Political Implications," *Political Psychology* 33, no. 6 (2012): 887–909.

²³ Norman G. Finkelstein, *Beyond Chutzpah: On the Misuse of Anti-Semitism and the Abuse of History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

²⁴ Sir Stephen Sedley, "Defining Anti-Semitism," *London Review of Books* 39, no. 9 (2017).

practise for the scholar to consider disclosing their ethnicity and religion. They should be willing to give up some privacy if they wish some public engagement. Transparency is desirable not because being Jewish, Muslim, Arab, or Palestinian means a scholar is inescapably biased, but because disclosure strengthens public trust in the ethical integrity of the expert. The scholar is demonstrating their awareness of the possible perception – and potential actuality – of bias. In the same way, a Muslim commenting publicly on Islamist terrorism should consider their positionality too.

Finally, although this brief has examined the HGS community, expert bias in public commentary on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may well exist – or be perceived to exist – in other fields. Terrorism, conflict, international law, and Middle East area scholars all have relevant expertise on the conflict. The recommendation on conflicts of interest and positionality in public commentary should apply equally to them too.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Omar Shahabudin McDoom is Associate Professor in Comparative Politics in the Department of Government at the London School of Economics. He is the author of the *Path to Genocide in Rwanda: Security, Opportunity, and Authority in an Ethnocratic State* (2021). In keeping with his own recommendation in the piece on acknowledging potential conflicts of interest and relevant positionality in public commentary, he discloses he is an editor at the *Journal of Genocide Research* and that he was born and raised in a Muslim family.