

After the fog of war: An early assessment of the Israel-Gaza conflict

Written by Dr. Michael Berenbaum
Thursday, 14 August 2014 14:05

It is far too early to assess the impact of the latest war in Gaza, but still some preliminary thoughts are in order:

Anti-Semitism panic

Judging by what I have been reading in the press blogs and emails, it seems as if many Jews are in a panic about the rise in anti-Semitism. Once again, people are asking: Is this 1939? 1933? Even as distinguished a student of anti-Semitism as my revered colleague professor Deborah Lipstadt is quoted as saying that this may be 1934.

Permit me to dissent.

Nothing fundamental has changed — nothing.

In the United States, Judaism remains the most admired of America's religions, and Jews are accepted, respected and empowered. The war in Gaza did not cause a spike in energy prices, as we experienced during the Yom Kippur War of 1973 or the oil crisis of 1979, or a drop in the stock market. It did not threaten global conflict, as in 1973. So no instability was introduced into the American economy or society. Political support for Israel has been strong, and while there are generational divides in such support, none of it translates into a reason to fear a dramatic rise in anti-Semitism. Support for Israel will be an issue on campuses this fall, and the divide between the human-rights community and the supporters of Israel will endure.

In Europe, the problem remains threefold:

There is anti-Semitism "in Europe" but not necessarily "of Europe," meaning that if the people living in Europe adopt European values, including pluralism and tolerance, then whatever their opinion about Israel's practices in Gaza, they have no particular problems with their Jewish neighbors.

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However, a significant segment of Muslim populations living in European countries dwell in these countries — some for generations — without acculturating to European values. They live “in Europe,” but they are not “of Europe.” These non-European Muslim minorities respond to events in the Middle East — as they did at the beginning of the Second Intifada, the Passover attacks and the second Lebanon War — with an outbreak of violence against Jews.

Two factors are different this time: The governments of Europe have condemned, often in very strong terms, anti-Semitism within their own countries, and they have generally been far more supportive of Israel than in previous conflicts, thus depriving their local residents of the oxygen required to move opposition to Israel into license to attack local Jews.

What has not changed is that opposition to Israel on the left has given an intellectual “moral” veneer to primitive hatred. These Muslim inhabitants of European countries are not being assimilated into the lands in which they dwell; thus, their presence and their responsiveness to events elsewhere will persist. The problem will not go away, yet it is much larger than the Jewish question alone.

Fortunately, Muslim immigrants cannot find common cause with the other anti-Semitic elements in Europe — the far right — because the far right is deeply anti-immigrant. In France, for example, Marine Le Pen has muted her father’s anti-Semitism in order to strengthen her position with the voters. (Some might see this as analogous to the moves of Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), though one must not equate former Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas) with Jean-Marie Le Pen.)

Parenthetically, this European problem should serve to warn against American proposals for a guest worker program or permanent residence permits for immigrants to America without a path to citizenship that would retain an ongoing non-Americanizing immigrant presence in the United States.

Such a policy is bad for America and even worse for the Jewish community.

Assessing the current situation is neither an excuse for complacency nor a reason not to

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condemn the expressions of anti-Semitism vehemently. One of the most significant dangers we face is the routinization of such anti-Semitism and the failure to disqualify the anti-Semites and their supporters from participating in the mainstream of European — or American — culture. Politicians must have the integrity to condemn anti-Semitism despite the growing presence of its supporters.

Problem for the right wing, the left wing, no return to status quo ante

The war has created a problem for Israel's right wing as it demonstrated what security leaders of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the Mossad and the Shin Bet — past and present — have long argued: There is no military solution to the conflict, at least not one that is compatible with Israeli values or with Israel's willingness to sacrifice its young to reoccupy Gaza and thus more completely dismantle the infrastructure of Hamas.

This summer, Israel faced almost optimal conditions for a maximalist solution, if it was willing to pay the price. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Authority would not have been unhappy to see Hamas thoroughly defeated. The United States and the European countries recognized Israel's right to self-defense, and world attention was focused on the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 over Ukraine, the rapid gains of ISIS and President Barack Obama's decision to defend the Kurds. Gaza was a second-tier story for much of the past month, and Hamas was as isolated as it has ever been, as it is discovering in cease-fire negotiations. Even then, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his even more hawkish Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon refused to move the IDF back into Gaza, unwilling to sacrifice IDF soldiers.

The war also demonstrated that the status quo, even the status quo ante, is untenable and thus may call into question some of the political judgments preceding the war, including the severity of Israel's reaction to the unity government of Fatah and Hamas, its judgment of Mahmoud Abbas, and its lack of imagination and boldness in pursuing negotiations with him.

The confluence of interests among Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel should be tested as to whether it can yield political results.

The left wing also should take no solace from recent events as the furies of hatred against

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Israel and the Jews are intense, persistent and unyielding.

The perceived rise in anti-Semitism comes as a shock to Zionists who believed that the foundation of an independent Jewish state would extinguish the flames of Jew hatred. For more than 40 years, we have seen that Israel can also fuel the flames of anti-Semitism.

Ironically, some French Jews are fleeing violence at home to face enemy rockets in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Perhaps Diaspora Jews need another type of Iron Dome.

Genocide

I have joined with other scholars of Holocaust and genocide studies to condemn the statements equating Israel's actions in Gaza with genocide. On July 9, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, in a speech in Ramallah, accused Israel of "committing genocide." On Aug. 1, on Al Jazeera's English-language TV broadcast, Fatah foreign affairs spokesman Nabil Sha'ath described the situation in Gaza as "a Holocaust." Also on Aug. 1, Turkey's prime minister— now president-elect — Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused Israel of "Hitler-like fascism."

These comparisons are odious, especially so since Israel has the power to commit genocide and even the provocation to do so, but however overwhelming the destruction in Gaza, Israel's response has been measured. Its use of power has been both restrained and horrendous.

Erdogan, who has amassed significant power within Turkey and who aspires to play a larger role on the world stage, must be led to understand that such outrageous thinking will marginalize him and the country he leads. His isolation from the cease-fire talks was not only warranted but required as a result of his utterances.

One may not condemn others without challenging our own.

I must also condemn not only the blog post offering a justification for genocide and the rabbi

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willing to justify the annihilation of Palestinians in Gaza, but also the proposals of the deputy speaker of the Knesset for advocating ethnic cleansing in Gaza.

We Jews have been victims of ethnic cleansing many times in our history. We have been instrumental in outlawing ethnic cleansing in the aftermath of the Shoah, and we must retain our opposition, especially when we have the power to impose such a solution.

*A version of this article appeared in print.
Originally published in [The Jewish Journal](#).*