Israel’s 60-Year Test

Sixty years after its birth, Israel continues to test the proposition that reality counts for more than perception.

The Web site eyeontheun.org keeps a running tally of all United Nations resolutions, decisions and reports condemning this or that country for this or that human-rights violation (real or alleged). Between January 2003 and March 2008, tiny Israel - its population not half that of metropolitan Cairo's - was condemned no fewer than 635 times. The runners-up were Sudan at 280, the Democratic Republic of the Congo at 209 and Burma at 183. North Korea was cited a mere 60 times, a third as many as the United States.

Is Israel the world’s foremost abuser of human rights? A considerable segment of world opinion thinks that it is, while an equally considerable segment of elite opinion thinks that, even if it isn’t, its behavior is nonetheless reprehensible by civilized standards.

I would argue the opposite: that no other country has been so circumspect in using force against the provocations of its enemies, nor has any so consistently preserved the civil liberties of its own citizens. That goes double in a country so constantly beset by so many threats to its existence that its government would long ago have been justified in imposing a perpetual state of emergency.

For reasons both telling and mysterious, Israel has become unpopular among that segment of public opinion that calls itself progressive. This is the same progressive segment that believes in women’s rights, gay rights, the rights to a fair trial and to appeal, freedom of speech and conscience, judicial checks on parliamentary authority. These are rights that exist in Israel and nowhere else in the Middle East. So why is it that the country that is most sympathetic to progressive values gets the least of progressive sympathies?
The answer, it is said, is that as democratic as Israel may be in its domestic politics, it is nothing but bloody-minded as far as its foes are concerned. In May 2002, at the height of the so-called al-Aqsa intifada, I reviewed Israeli and Palestinian casualty figures, sticking to Palestinian sources for Palestinian numbers and Israeli sources for Israeli ones. Much was then being made in the Western media of the fact that three times as many Palestinians as Israelis had been killed in the conflict—evidence, supposedly, that despite the suicide bombings, lynchings and roadside ambushes perpetrated daily against Israelis, Palestinians were the ones who really were getting it in the neck.

But drilling down into the data, something interesting turned up. At the time, 1,296 Palestinians had been killed by Israelis—of whom a grand total of 37, or 2.8 percent, were female. By contrast, of the 496 Israelis killed by Palestinians (including 138 soldiers and policemen), there were 126 female fatalities, or 25 percent.

To be female is a fairly reliable indicator of being a noncombatant. Females are also half the population. If Israel had been guilty of indiscriminate violence against Palestinians, the ratio of male-to-female fatalities would not have been 35-1.

These are not complicated facts. Yet the effort to think them through is rarely made. Is it laziness? I think not, because the image of demonic Israel, presented in copiously footnoted and ingeniously mendacious books like “The Israel Lobby,” is the product of a great deal of effort.

Is it anti-Semitism? One dare not suggest it, since the standard by which anti-Jewish bigotry is judged today is considerably stricter than what is usually used in the face of allegations of racism, sexism or homophobia.

But whatever it is, the constant assault on Israel’s morality has had its effect. Beyond Hamas, beyond Hezbollah, beyond the competition between Jewish and Arab numbers west of the Jordan River and the ever-growing number of Iranian centrifuges spinning a nuclear future for Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad, Israel is beset by the fear that, being unloved, it is unworthy. “The anti-Semite makes the Jew,” said Jean-Paul Sartre, as if Jewishness was something conferred rather than practiced.

A sibling notion, seemingly benign but insidious, is that Israel’s right to exist rests ultimately with the acquiescence of others, which in turn is a function of their perceptions. This is also known as “legitimacy.”

Perhaps not surprisingly for a state that was born of a U.N. resolution (which the U.N. has never since ceased trying to disavow), Israel has been uniquely mindful of how it is perceived. Yet a nation that constantly feels the need to demonstrate its right to exist, rather than simply assert it, puts itself to an endless test, which it may someday fail.

For 60 years, Israel has survived mainly through courageous and improbable acts of assertion, yielding an unfolding set of realities that defied perception. It’s the only formula by which Israel’s next 60 years may be assured.
Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life supported the creation of the State of Israel and has been an unwavering friend ever since, often in the face of Israel’s detractors. In addition to its pro-Israel education efforts on college campuses and in communities across North America and around the globe, Hillel has nine centers in Israel, providing meaningful Jewish experiences for Israelis and study-abroad students alike.
As I prepared to depart for New York just over five years ago, friends and family asked why I accepted the seemingly impossible task of being Israel’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations. “No one will talk to you over there,” they would say. “Everyone knows the U.N. hates Israel.” Others would cry, “Oom Shmum!” citing Ben-Gurion’s famous quip that the U.N. (“Oom” in Hebrew) is meaningless (“shmum,” a Hebrew dismissive).

Five years later, I can say that these fears proved largely unfounded. Israel is not boycotted at the United Nations, and our Mission has very good relations with most delegations. Personally, I even developed relationships with ambassadors of countries that have yet to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. We enter the United Nations building each and every day with our heads held high, knowing that we represent a wonderful country, built by a special people, who are committed to democracy and human rights, and have made significant contributions in the arts, sciences, technology, and culture for the greater benefit of all mankind.

Yet, surely, this internal pride does not mean that the Israel-UN relationship is entirely rosy. To a certain extent, my friends were right. Though Israel has been a member of the United Nations for nearly 60 years, it is still subject to differential treatment. Over the years, a systematic discrimination campaign gradually emerged where forums for discussion on global issues deteriorated into platforms for maligning Israel. Although the United Nations operates under the basic principle of equal rights “of nations large and small,” it has consistently failed to apply those standards to its treatment of Israel.

Nowhere has the hypocrisy and cynicism been more pronounced than in the manner that the United Nations approaches the Middle East. Of the roughly 80 resolutions voted upon at the General Assembly each year – the majority of its 250 annual resolutions are adopted by consensus – a quarter of them unfairly criticize Israel. Despite progress in the region, such as the Annapolis process that reinvigorated talks between Israel and the moderate Palestinian Authority leadership, these resolutions, regurgitated each and every year, ignore the reality on the ground. Worse, they serve as theatrical rhetoric to feed the insatiable addiction of some for blaming Israel.

The annual resolutions also perpetuate a one-sided narrative of the conflict. They propagate a discourse where Israel is saddled with responsibilities vis-à-vis the Palestinians without any rights to defend itself, while the Palestinians are wholly entitled to the rights of self-determination with no responsibility to curb terrorism and violence. The litany of resolutions – and from them the ensuing perceived international support for the Palestinians, mere lip service to the alleged cause of “justice” – offer the Palestinians no incentive to comply with their own obligations.

Yet what makes condemnation of Israel so confounding is not so much the message but the messenger. An automatic majority of Member States, which at the core is comprised of countries whose political orientation precludes their acceptance of the State of Israel, strong-arms the rest of

WEB RESOURCES:
Israel Mission to the U.N.: israel-un.mfa.gov.il
U.N. Watch: www.unwatch.org
Eye on the U.N.: www.eyeontheun.org

ABOVE: The plenary meeting of the General Assembly during the election of the President of its sixty-third session in New York.
the membership into blaming the Jewish state for all the region’s problems. Though Israel has healthy bilateral and diplomatic relations with 162 nations, in the multilateral theatre of the United Nations, those commitments fall by the wayside. Instead, scoring political points becomes more important than good faith, and the interests of a select few are imposed on everyone else.

Strategically, the General Assembly’s automatic majority presents a challenge for Israel at the United Nations. For starters, Israel’s political engagement with the international community is potentially conditioned on the stamp of the automatic majority. In turn, so long as the General Assembly is controlled by this immoral majority, the United Nations will be unable to play an honest and meaningful role in the Middle East. Hence, rather than give up on the possibility for cooperation with the wider United Nations system, Israel has creatively sought ways to position itself on issues “beyond the conflict,” and particularly those within its own competence.

Recently, two major initiatives demonstrate the potential to break the automatic majority. In 2005, 60 years after the end of the Holocaust, the General Assembly adopted by consensus an Israeli sponsored resolution preserving the eternal memory of the Holocaust and establishing an international day in honor of its victims. Ultimately, the desire to learn from history and ensure that such atrocities never again occur transcended the knee-jerk opposition of the automatic majority on all things Israel, in spite of efforts by some to politicize and deny the Holocaust.

Similarly, during the recent session of the General Assembly, in December 2007, Israel introduced its first resolution on a socio-economic issue. The resolution encouraged agricultural technology transfer and sharing, where appropriate, to developing nations, and thereby facilitates alleviating extreme poverty and hunger, as envisioned in the Millennium Development Goals. While space does not permit a detailed history of the process, the resolution was eventually adopted with an overwhelming 147 votes in favor and none against (the Arab states abstained entirely). Among the countries that voted for the resolution were many who normally would throw their weight to the whims and will of the automatic majority.

The United Nations is clearly the sum of its parts. Nothing happens here without the will of Member States. To put it bluntly, the cards are stacked against Israel, which gives it two choices: Israel can cower in retreat from the pressures of the automatic majority, or Israel can march toward a position of strength and become a leader on key issues like economic and social development, the real burning issues of people around the world. True, the political challenges are not minor, and the daily repetitive politics of the United Nations can make us dizzy with déjà vu. But Israel has never backed away from adversity, and it’s not about to start now.

AMBASSADOR DAN GILLERMAN

Ambassador Dan Gillerman was appointed Israel’s 13th representative to the United Nations in July 2002 and assumed his post on January 1, 2003. Prior to his appointment, Ambassador Gillerman had been the CEO of Nagum Ltd. and Agrotechnology Ltd. Since 1985, he has served as Chairman of the Federation of Israeli Chambers of Commerce. He has also served as a member of the board of the First International Bank of Israel, a Director of Bank Leumi and the Central Bank of Israel, as well as numerous other boards of private and public entities.

Ambassador Gillerman has also served on the Prime Minister’s National Economic and Social Council, the President’s Committee of the Coordinating Council of Israel’s Economic Organizations, and Chairman of the Israel-British Business Council, as well as being a member of the executive board of the ICC (The International Chamber of Commerce – The World Business Organization).

Ambassador Gillerman has played a prominent role in helping to steer Israel towards economic liberalization and a free market economy. He has also been deeply involved in the economic aspects of the peace process and has been intensively engaged in talks with Palestinian and Arab leaders trying to further economic cooperation within the region.
Israel and the NGOs

Preparing for Durban II

Written by Gerald M. Steinberg

The 2001 United Nations World Conference on Racism (generally known as the Durban Conference) was a declaration of war against Israel and the Jewish people. This was the political accompaniment to the Palestinian terror campaign and was designed to exploit the language of human rights as a weapon in preventing Israelis from defending themselves against terrorism. The Diplomatic Forum of the Durban Conference, from which the Israeli and U.S. delegations walked out when they realized that the vicious anti-Israel theme would remain dominant, was accompanied by a non-governmental organization (NGO) Forum, which was even worse, and created the framework for demonization and boycotts.

Over six difficult years have passed since Durban, and Israel and its supporters have gradually woken up to the dangers of this strategy, and been able to fight back and limit some of the damage. But now, the promoters of this demonization are preparing a Durban Review Conference to be held sometime in 2009, where the goal is to reinforce the themes of the 2001 catastrophe, and take the process further.

While the first round of the Durban process came as a surprise (although the warning signs should have been clear), there is time to prepare for 2009 and to end the exploitation of human rights as a weapon. In January, the Canadian government became the first to denounce Durban as anti-Semitic and to announce a boycott of the 2009 meeting, unless the direction is reversed. In the United States, Israel, France and elsewhere, political leaders have announced similar intentions, although none have been as clear as Canada.

The most important aspect of the 2009 conference will be the behavior of the powerful NGOs. In 2001, many of the 4,000 delegates from 1,500 organizations claiming to promote universal human rights hijacked the NGO Forum for use as a platform for anti-Semitism. Powerful groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International went along with – and in some cases played an active role in – this travesty, which was orchestrated by Palestinian and other Arab NGOs (many of which were funded by the Ford Foundation and by European governments, as detailed in reports by NGO Monitor).

These NGOs, often accompanied by the discredited but still active United Nations Human Rights Council, moved to implement this strategy during and after the meeting. A few months later, after a series of horrible suicide bombings led Israel to take military action in Jenin and elsewhere, Kenneth Roth (head of HRW) and Irene Khan (from Amnesty) led the chorus with false claims of “war crimes” directed at Israel. These organizations published false reports – using claims from “eyewitnesses” – to condemn Israel for trying to prevent rocket attacks from Gaza, and then joined in the demonstrations promoting boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israel. These and other NGOs were at the forefront of the campaign to have the Israeli security barrier, which has saved hundreds and perhaps thousands of lives, denounced as illegal under international law so that the sanctions could be increased under the façade of the United Nations. And they used the same strategy in condemning Israel obsessively and without justification during the 2006 Lebanon War, and more recently, over responses to Hamas attacks from Gaza.

As a result, in looking toward the 2009 Durban Review Conference (whose location has yet to be determined), the major question is whether the NGO attacks can be prevented or defeated. Some donors to HRW have realized that their money is being used to undermine human rights (and unfairly condemn Israel) and have attempted to change the direction of this powerful NGO. And a few American officials of Amnesty International (which is based in London) have expressed
some discomfort with the role of their organization in 2001 and in the Durban strategy. But the leaders of both groups have refused to sign the NGO statement denouncing the anti-Semitism of the Durban process and pledging to prevent its recurrence in 2009.

Many of the other NGOs based in Europe and the Middle East have every intention of continuing the anti-Israel demonization in 2009, but this will be harder if the funders cut off support. Following the 2001 Durban NGO Forum, the Ford Foundation (under threat of congressional investigation) accepted responsibility for funding some of the most virulent participants and published guidelines that are designed to prevent a repetition. If Ford leaders act consistently to prevent their funds from being used in 2009, as they have pledged, this will have a major impact. European governments, which provide the bulk of the funding for dozens of radical NGOs under the false banner of “Partnerships for Peace” and “human rights initiatives,” must also be pressed to end such destructive policies.

Durban 2009 will provide a rare opportunity for the governments that actually care about human rights, as well as the NGO community, to reverse course and demonstrate that the lessons have been learned. If they succeed, this will mark an important step in the restoration of the values embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But if they fail, they will have lost any remaining moral credibility.

Criticism of Israel

Is it Legitimate or is it Anti-Semitism?

Written by Abraham H. Foxman

When the General Assembly of the United Nations convenes every fall, it is an occasion for meetings between representatives of American Jewish organizations and leaders of the governments around the world who come to New York for the session.

In recent years, particularly when the meetings are with European Prime Ministers or Foreign Ministers, the subject of anti-Semitism and its connection to attitudes toward the State of Israel is high on the agenda.

A certain ritual seems to take place in which our side raises concerns about the level of perceived anti-Israel activity in the particular country and its impact on attitudes toward Jews.

At some point, almost inevitably, the European official will then ask us: Are you suggesting that any criticism of Israel is anti-Semitism?

While the question is usually intended as a challenge, I’m always delighted it comes out, because I believe that many officials in Europe and elsewhere are privately saying to each other that the Jews are making accusations of anti-Semitism as a way to stifle legitimate criticism of Israel. In other words, better get it out in the open and not allow such thinking to continue without clarification.

The response to the question, in my view, requires three elements. First, Israel is a country like any other country and is therefore not beyond criticism for its policies. Israel has policies that fair-minded people could consider good and others
that may not be so good. Its own internal political and media life is replete with criticism all the time.

Any suggestion that we raise questions about anti-Semitism in order prevent legitimate criticism of Israel is a gross distortion of our perspective. We know the difference.

Rather, what disturbs us are the kinds of critiques that either inject classic anti-Semitic themes into criticism of Israel or treat Israel in such a biased way that there is reason to believe that it is motivated by anti-Semitism or, at the least, creates an environment in which anti-Semitism is more likely to occur and become acceptable.

There are several themes revealing anti-Semitic intent that should be clear to anyone. The comparison of Israeli treatment of the Palestinians to the historic accusation of Jews being responsible for the death of Jesus, which appeared in an Italian newspaper cartoon at the height of the Intifada, is one such example.

Similarly, when images appeared, as they did in the Arab press, of Ariel Sharon drinking the blood of Palestinians, it takes no imagination to link this to the ancient “blood libel” charge against the Jews.

There have also been repeated accusations comparing Israeli behavior to that of the Nazis, such as Portuguese writer Jose Saramago saying that Israeli behavior in Ramallah was worse than Auschwitz. This seems obviously motivated by an animus against the Jews.

Second, there is the demonizing of Israel, when all the problems of the region are attributed solely to Israeli behavior. This is a mark of something more than mere criticism. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, in their paper and book on the Israel lobby, take every major event in the Arab-Israeli conflict, even the most complex, and boil responsibility down to one guilty party: Israel. It is hardly surprising that once they do that, it is not a large leap to blame American Jews for controlling and distorting American Middle East policy to serve the interests of this “bad country” Israel against the interests of the United States.

The third element gets a little more complicated in the matter of divestment efforts against Israel, whether by religious, university, or community groups. Clearly, by its one-sided moral outrage against Israel -- when far greater human rights offenders exist around the world in clear view -- the divestment argument is not simply legitimate criticism of Israel.

On the other hand, as Larry Summers said a few years ago, when as President of Harvard he faced a divestment
initiative on his campus, surely not everyone who calls for divestment against Israel is an anti-Semite -- though undoubtedly a good many are.

But, he said, even those who are not, by singling Israel out in this prejudicial way, make anti-Semitism more likely and more legitimate by far.

It is this last category that is most prevalent and most difficult to confront and handle. When the combination of the European media and left-wing intellectuals portray the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in such a way that people in Europe judge Israel as the greatest threat to peace in the world, ahead of Iran, North Korea, etc., then it is not surprising to find renewed anti-Semitism flourishing in Europe. After all, Jews are associated with Israel, and in many people's minds, Jews then become fair game.

We have made some progress in the last few years. Many European governments have stated that there is never an excuse for anti-Semitism and have acknowledged a connection between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitic attitudes and behavior.

On the other hand, anti-Semitic expressions related to the conflict with Israel are now far greater in the Arab and Islamic worlds.

On the occasion of Israel's 60th anniversary, there is much to celebrate. However, the underlying goal that anti-Semitism would be eliminated once the Jews had their own state has proven to be far more complicated than was ever imagined.

Israel remains, both practically and psychologically, a bastion of Jewish safety and security in the world. At the same time, Israel has often become the new focus (not the new cause) of anti-Semitism in the world. This highlights the fact that anti-Semitism is so deeply rooted in the world psyche that not even Jewish independence can eradicate it. What can happen, however, is that Israel and world Jewry can work together to combat this virus and to make sure that the Jewish people can defend themselves against it.

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