

# Israel's New Nationalism

Words can act as cluster bombs. When the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution in 1975 declaring that Zionism was a form of racism, there was a spontaneous barrage of outrage, hate and violence on both sides of the divide. Initially perceived as a rare propaganda success for Arab countries, the resolution proved little more than a Pyrrhic victory – the elements of fear and mistrust in the collective psyche of both sides intensified and fed into no fewer than four Arab-Israeli wars and two Palestinian uprisings during the intervening three decades.

Take, for example, Avigdor Lieberman, the founder of the ultra-right Yisrael Beiteinu – “our home” in Hebrew – and Israel's new foreign minister, who is known for many things not least his virulent utterances. In 2005, when then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon proposed releasing 350 Palestinian prisoners, Lieberman infamously pronounced: “It would be better to drown these prisoners in the Dead Sea.”

If Lieberman had his way, Iran would by now have been obliterated, the West Bank settlements would already be formally part of Israel, and Arab Israelis would long have been “reassigned” to a rump Palestinian territory.

On more than one occasion, Lieberman branded Arab members of the Israeli Knesset with ties to Hezbollah or Hamas as “Nazi collaborators”. Even centrist Israelis are appalled by his avowed racism; an Israeli satirical puppet show named a doll after him, Vladimir the Thug, after his Moldovan roots. The name fits. Lieberman wants to turn all of Israel into a virtually exclusive club for Jews. He sees minorities as a threat, and in last month's election campaign he proposed that Arab citizens of Israel needed to take a loyalty test to ensure their patriotism. He bluntly expresses ideas many Israelis may think but do not venture to say out loud.

There is a depressing familiarity in all this. The world has had more than its fair share of uncritical, uninformed sociopathic crackpots. Adolph Hitler, for instance, was as brilliantly eloquent and charismatic as he was thoroughly ignorant and detestable. In part, he gained the ascendancy over Germans because Germans can be as offensive and as blinkered as even the most backward of peoples.

Hitler's anti-Jewish mania had its base on the concept of race and it is in his racism that his lack of education showed most flagrantly. It is often taken as a matter of course that Hitler believed in a pure Aryan race, which was discredited by anthropologists even during his time as pure hogwash. The Nazi thesis of a German race was as riddled with factual errors as the current claims by many on the right of Israeli politics that Jews constitute a separate race.

That is not to say that racist demagoguery — wherever it happens to rear its ugly head — should prompt facile allusions to Fascist Germany. Besides, a lot of brutal killing by conquerors over the conquered was not exclusive to Nazis; it is a theme that has been repeated interminably since well before Genghis Khan in the 13th century.

However, the era that has just dawned with Yisrael Beiteinu's rise signals a dangerous precedence for the region. For the first time since the Naqba – the creation of a Jewish state in the Middle East – Israeli policymakers may not even bother with the cloak of fair play. Such words as compromise and consideration used to be inserted in the vocabulary of Israeli statesmen if only to appeal to a western audience; under Lieberman's watch, these words will be omitted altogether.

Ever since the 1967 war, there has been a struggle in Israel, even within individual Israelis. One side aspires to peace and normal human relations with Arab neighbours as the ultimate goal. It is the other side – ever the prevailing majority in Israeli politics – that regards territory as more important than the hope of peace. The growth of religious and nationalist parties has greatly encouraged the course of destruction and the rise of hateful dogma.

At the Beirut Declaration of 2002, the Arab League agreed to recognise Israel as a legitimate country if it withdrew to its pre-1967 borders. In Doha last month, the Arab League hinted that its offer to Israel was not open-ended and that it would be withdrawn if the level of suffering of Arabs in Israel and the occupied territories increased under the new Likud coalition.

Western observers have been arguing that the one positive result of Israel's recent wars – the Gaza conflict this year and the war with Hezbollah in 2006 – could be a new momentum towards a wider Middle East peace. The idea was that a new awareness of the limits of Israeli military power and growing Arab fears of Shiite radicalism would push both sides towards the necessary compromises. With the rise of the ultra-right in Israel, this now seems less likely than ever.

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## **Holocaust Denial**

More than six decades have passed since the end of World War II, but the debate over the Holocaust continues to rear up on its hind legs.

Last week, the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, used the annual rally for Quds Day (Jerusalem Day) to deliver his most fiery anti-Israeli speech yet in which he again called the Holocaust a myth and an improvable lie that was used as a pretext for the creation of Israel in 1948. Ahmadinejad may be every Arab's favourite bete noire, but in that sense at least, his rhetoric strikes a deeply resonant chord in the Arab street.

Holocaust denial is still common across the Arab region. Palestinians in particular fear – with a degree of justice borne from decades of occupation – that acknowledging the genocide would diminish the recognition of their suffering or their claims to an independent state. To be sure, the Holocaust debate touches on one of the largest psychological barriers that divide Arabs and Jews: Arabs see the Holocaust as an excuse for Israel's creation, and Jews see Holocaust denial by Arabs as a rejection of Israel's right to exist.

But at the heart of the debate is the issue of whether the Jewish Holocaust constitutes genocide. And if not what was it?

Genocide comes from the Greek for race (genos) and for to kill, as in homicide. But there have been so many mass killings in the twentieth century that genocide, which gained currency in the aftermath of World War II, has come to mean any deliberate and systematic extermination of a national, racial, political or cultural group.

In historical terms, this definition presents difficulties. The large categories used in the definition can apply to almost anything. For instance, the Khmer Rouge mainly tried to exterminate other Cambodians, so the term genocide would seem to relate here only in the sense of collective suicide – a case that has its parallel in other killing fields, such as in Rwanda, Lebanon or Bosnia.

But there is one historical instance in which two parties were in complete agreement on the etymological sense of genocide. If on nothing else, Nazis and Jews agreed on two points, namely: that Germans and Jews constituted separate races – “Aryan” versus “Hebrew” – and that the Germans were trying to exterminate the Jews. Clearly, then, this was genocide. The Holocaust, or the killing of Jews by Germans, was the ultimate historical manifestation of genocide. There was no such total convergence in the case of the Armenian holocaust of 1915, for example, given that the Turks deny that it even happened. The Nazis never denied that they wanted to exterminate Jews.

When Germany started World War II, the Jewish genocide literally got its engines running (on account of the trains that ferried the victims to the gas chambers). By June 1941, when the Soviet Union was invaded, the Holocaust was already in high gear. It was undoubtedly the killing of Jews by Germans – among other Nazi collective atrocities – but was it genocide?

Ironically enough, Aryan is the root word of Iran, which was adopted as a term to denote the Indo-European group of languages. In other words, it was devised to mark out a linguistic category; it was later annexed by the bogus scientists – Aryanists and their Nazi successors – who tried (and failed) to demarcate an actual racial border with such racial connotations as “purity” and “superiority”.

Similarly, Jews claim that they descend from the Hebrews, but the ethnic designation Hebrew itself became obsolete and irrelevant well before the Diaspora and the ensuing intermarriages over the centuries. Hebrew certainly remained the liturgical language of Jews – and resurfaced as the official language of Israel. But to construe a separate race from that is to believe that all Roman Catholics in the world belong to a Latin race.

In fact, neither Jews nor Germans have ever constituted a race. The brutal reality is that the Jewish Holocaust was the killing by Nazi and Nazi-led Germans of a people, largely poor and rural, who practised the religion called Judaism. And in the final analysis, the so-called genocidal Jewish Holocaust was collective murder by invaders who wanted to take over huge tracts of eastern European territories. There was in fact no genocide at all; just a lot of brutal killing by conquerors of the conquered. In that sense, this is not much different qualitatively from what Genghis Khan and Tamerlane had done in the 13th and 14th centuries, or what the Israelis continue to do in the Palestinian territories.

Ahmadinejad is right, albeit for all the wrong reasons. The Holocaust certainly did occur and it indisputably led to the extermination of far too many innocent people – Jews as well as Gypsies, Communists, Poles and Russians – but it was by no means genocide.

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## Terrorism

Referring to his Roman subjects, the emperor Caligula famously quipped, “Let them hate so long as they fear” – *oderint dum metuant*. Indeed, from a historical perspective, that phrase could almost have been the imperial slogan of all Caesars; an honest if brutal appraisal of how the empire could remain great and powerful.

To be sure, Rome – as so many other empires before it and since – would probably never have grown much beyond its seven hills without state-instilled fear as its *modus operandi*. For example, Alexander the Great could never have conquered Asia if he had not first terrorized the Greeks into peaceful coexistence and submission under his authority. And the later Carolingian empire would arguably have remained a minor footnote in history were it not for the pogroms and excesses of Charlemagne and his successors.

World history can be told in terms of terrorism. That is not to say that terrorism determines the course of world history, but rather that terrorism is ubiquitous in history and that it has on many occasions meant the difference between political success and failure.

As far back as antiquity, there have always been two types of terrorism: the state-sponsored variety and the less efficient, underdog kind as applied usually by a desperate minority and appearing often as a reaction to the former.

Despite the current emphasis on terrorism against the established order by the likes of al-Qaeda and Hamas, it is state-sponsored terrorism rather than the underdog type that actually drives history. Even the United States, for instance, which prides itself on being a bastion of enlightened society, has often resorted to terror tactics inside and outside its borders whenever it was deemed necessary to maintain order, to preserve a status quo or to survive or win in times of war. While America has certainly not engaged in the sort of massive terrorism campaigns that characterized such totalitarian states as Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia, this is of little comfort to the masses of dispossessed Native Americans or to the multitude of victims of racial oppression over the centuries. And it cannot begin to make amends for the hundreds of thousands of deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Some have argued that America is entitled and even duty bound to act as the global policeman and speak softly while carrying a big stick, to paraphrase Theodore Roosevelt. But it is worth remembering that *pax Americana* is fundamentally not very different from the Roman brand after which it was modelled.

Romans presented themselves as bringers of law and order, not as bringers of terror. Of course, the historical record begs to differ. In truth, the Romans were far greater terrorists than even the

Assyrians before them, who were the first to elevate wanton terrorism to a sinister art form. For example, Christianity was first the victim of sporadic campaigns of Roman state-sponsored terrorism and later – as the state religion – the wielder of terror for the submission of unruly pagans.

The Crusades were another example of states bringing terrorism out of a misguided view of saving mankind. In a sense, the Crusaders represented underdog terrorism, even though they created fleeting states of their own – the principal Crusader kingdom, Jerusalem, lasted less than a century – which subsisted mostly through terrorist means.

Terrorism knows no historical, cultural or ideological boundaries. It was the same in Assyria as it is in the occupied Palestinian territories. It was as useful to the Mongol khans as to Iranian apparatchiks. Ultimately, the ongoing conflicts in the region – from Palestine to Iraq and Afghanistan via the tinderbox that is Lebanon – are part of one continuous historical process.

The West can wage its war on terror for as long as it wants with all the means that technology puts at its disposal, but the war on terror can never be won, just as so-called closure can never be achieved. This is because the eye-for-an-eye, tit-for-tat application of capital punishment only serves to fan the flames of terrorism.

In other words, terror engenders terror and drives back any gains made in terms of democracy and economic development. At best, history can be construed as a process for fulfilling the fundamental aspirations of mankind, such as the rights to life, education, work and access to political and judicial processes. History tells us that there is invariably more terror – both the state-sponsored and underdog varieties – when these basic rights are absent or crushed; and, conversely, less terror when human rights are upheld equally for all.

This is therefore the time for the West to recognize that its war on terror can never be won and that respect for human life, whether in the remote Helmand Province or the shantytowns of Gaza, must always come first, even above national security concerns. Only with the deepest regard for what it means to be human can the vicious cycle of terror ever be broken.

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