

The Thin Line Between Legitimate Criticism of Israel and Anti-Semitism

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ABSTRACT

Legally and factually inaccurate catchphrases and buzzwords used by the media and far-left politicians and activists in the West taint the public discourse.

Most phrases and slurs routinely used against Israel have no factual or legal basis, yet they are accepted without reservation by the media, which has shirked its journalistic responsibility to analyze the truth and accuracy of what they report.

This rhetoric has seeped into the mainstream discourse and works against the objectives of cooperation and coexistence among Palestinians and Israelis.

Any perception of illegitimacy, criminality, illegality, or violation of humanitarian norms may easily straddle a thin line between genuine, substantive criticism of a specific action, and, on the other hand, generalized vilification of a person, group, country, or movement.

The tendency to transpose specific, pragmatic, and practical criticism into blatant generalization and racial and national stereotyping easily crosses the line and becomes demagoguery.

The distance between demagoguery and age-old anti-Semitism is virtually non-existent.

In the political context in which we live, and especially in the relationship between Israel, the Palestinian leadership, elements in Europe, the United States, and international organizations, the use of negative stereotyping and legally-related generalizations serves another central purpose. The aim is to generate public and international support for censuring, singling out, and condemning Israel using legal phraseology that is accepted in the international community as negative buzzwords for all the ills facing humanity and civilization.

The distance between such anti-Israel stereotyping and vilification on the one hand and anti-Semitism on the other is constantly narrowing.

Examples include ongoing and daily Twitter proclamations by Palestinian chief negotiator and PLO secretary-general Saeb Erekat and senior PLO propagandist Hanan Ashrawi.

Erekat, since the early days of the peace process, was considered a serious negotiator, fully conversant with Israel, its history, governance, culture, and social frameworks.

Nevertheless, on a daily basis, Erekat's speeches, interviews, social media, and meetings with delegations, contain generalized and false accusations against Israel and its leadership, of "*colonialism, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, illegal occupation, illegitimate settlements policy,*" and even a consistent demand that Israel withdraw to "*1967 borders*" (despite the fact that he knows full well that no such borders ever existed and no such requirement was agreed to in the Oslo Accords, negotiated by Erekat). In a similar vein, Ashrawi regularly repeats the empty but obnoxious stereotype-phrase "settler-colonialism."



A demonstrator in Toulouse, France, 2018. Photo: Alain Pitton/Nur Photo

They, as well as others in the international community, do this despite their full awareness that such generalizations are devoid of any factual and legal basis. Such vicious and willful allegations principally serve to manipulate internationally recognized phraseology to advance a political agenda geared to undermining the legitimacy of Israel, but with a clear ulterior subtext that may only be seen to have an anti-Semitic purpose.

The extent of negative generalization and vilification through the use of internationally recognized buzz words, consistently targeting only Israel, the Jewish state, to the exclusion of any other state or people, very easily transposes itself into delegitimizing propaganda against the Jewish people. The distance between this and anti-Semitism is non-existent. The line has been crossed.

Thus, the deliberate and easy use of empty or inaccurate expressions, lacking legal or factual basis, serves as a popular engine to influence the public, the media, international fora, and non-governmental and international organizations.

Regrettably, when used within an ambiance of Western liberal democracies, such usage is also intended to influence the traditional supporters of Israel including Jewish communities and citizens, all of whom, in facing ongoing domestic challenges to their loyalties, find themselves constantly in need of ingratiating themselves within their respective societies, with the aim of preventing anti-Semitism within their own communities. To do so, they are often influenced by the hostile and extreme criticism of Israel and join such criticism.

Examples of such catch-phrases and buzzwords include:

APARTHEID

A willful and drastic accusation against Israel, ignorant of its history and that of the Jewish People and lacking any comprehension of what indeed constituted apartheid.

Israel's system of government and its social and demographic makeup identify it as a liberal democracy, totally without the

characteristics of an *apartheid* state. However, the easy usage of the *apartheid* accusation – whether by Jimmy Carter, Mahmoud Abbas at the UN, Saeb Erekat on Twitter, the U.S. Green Party, or hundreds of politically-generated UN General Assembly resolutions without really understanding what *apartheid* was, or is, are all aimed at establishing in the eyes of the international public the parallel between Israel and former *apartheid* South Africa.

The aim is to delegitimize Israel as a state member of the international community and to achieve its dissolution and replacement, as was done with the South African apartheid regime.

Regrettably, even elements within diaspora Jewish communities and in Israeli media and politics, buy into this empty, anti-Semitic, and malevolent equation.

COLONIALIZATION

It is clear that Israel is not a colonial power, has not colonized, nor has it any intention to colonize the territories. Israel's acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 242 of November 1967, its commitments to the Middle East peace process in general, and specifically in the Oslo Accords, are indicative of Israel's commitment to settle the issue of the status of the territories through negotiation, and not through unilateral colonization.

However, since *colonization* is a universally condemned international phenomenon, accusing Israel, even when there are no grounds for this, identifies and vilifies Israel in an extreme negative context as a regime that needs to be outlawed, thereby generating an additional level of international and public hostility and delegitimization.

ETHNIC CLEANSING

This expression was associated originally with the systematic and officially sponsored practices of the government of Yugoslavia *vis-à-vis* its Muslim population. It has now since extended to refer to situations in Africa. It has become another negative buzz-word thrown out against Israel to imply violation of basic humanitarian norms.

Israel clearly has no such policy, official or otherwise, and the very idea of ethnic cleansing is anathema to Jewish concepts of morality and to Israel's very character.

“ILLEGAL ISRAELI OCCUPATION”

This is another expression that is widely used negatively to describe Israel's status in the territories as illegal and illegitimate. But the expression is devoid of any legal basis.

“Occupation” is an accepted legal term in the international law of armed conflict. It is an accepted legal situation to which International Humanitarian Law devotes a series of international conventions and customary norms setting out accepted modes of behavior of both an occupying power as well as an occupied population.

Occupations exist and have existed throughout history, but its condemnatory usage singling out Israel as if it is the only occupying power in the world, is a negative and illegitimate concept, flawed and without legal basis, as well as blatantly transparent and false.

“OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES (OPT)”

This expression has become accepted UN terminology since the early 1970s, appearing in hundreds of UN resolutions and reports and used by leading politicians, especially in Europe. As such, it has become *lingua franca* in the international community, implying that Israel illegitimately stole and occupied territory that belongs to a Palestinian state.

The expression lacks any legal, historical, or factual basis.

There exist no binding UN resolutions nor any agreement or arrangement between or connected to the parties in the context of the peace negotiation process that determine that the territories are Palestinian, belong to the Palestinians, or that they have ever been part of any Palestinian sovereign entity, that has never existed.

The expression OPT, inserted into UN resolutions by the Palestinian leadership and supported by Arab, European and other states in the UN General Assembly, is nothing more than a political expression of “wishful thinking” by an automatic UN majority.

The aim of the agreed-upon Oslo Accords was and remains to reach agreement determining the permanent status of the territories. Whether they will be part of a Palestinian state or any other political entity can only be the outcome of negotiations.

Hence, the expression OPT is nothing more than a prejudgment of the outcome of negotiations that have yet to take place, and incompatible with the Oslo Accords.

“ILLEGAL” ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS

This expression has been given the political connotation implying that Israel’s settlement policy is illegitimate since it violates international law, rendering Israel as an outlaw and those Israelis residing in settlements as criminals.

This is a false and flawed connotation rooted in a slanted misinterpretation of the relevant norms of international law, purveyed by international humanitarian organizations, especially the International Red Cross, and the UN.

Following the mass, forced transfer of populations in Nazi Europe during the Second World War, international humanitarian norms and conventions detail the circumstances in which an occupying power is prohibited from transferring its citizens into the occupied territory.

Israel’s settlements policy bears no relation to prohibited forced and mass population transfers. Israel strictly abides by the international norms, enabling voluntary, temporary settlement on public land only, while ensuring total respect for private land ownership, pending the outcome of the permanent status negotiations with the Palestinians. In such negotiations, as agreed-upon by the Palestinians and endorsed by the international community, the issue of settlements and borders are to be negotiated in the final stages.

Determinations that Israel’s settlements policy violates international law and agreements with the Palestinians are thus not merely false, but also constitute a prejudgment of the outcome of the agreed-upon permanent status negotiations.

“ILLEGAL” GAZA BLOCKADE

This expression frequently used in UN reports and resolutions and by Palestinian propagandists is completely false and is intended to deepen the perception that Israel is a serial violator of international maritime law.

Following the May 2010 Turkish Flotilla incident, Israel’s maritime blockade of the Gaza Strip was examined by a UN panel of inquiry headed by Sir Geoffrey Palmer, former Prime Minister of New Zealand. The panel concluded that Israel’s maritime blockade is a legitimate security measure, fully justified in light of the terrorist nature of the Hamas administration of the Gaza Strip.

“DISPROPORTIONATE VIOLENCE” IN DEALING WITH TERROR

Israel is regularly accused of “disproportionate violence” in virtually every instance in which it has been obliged to defend itself against mass rocket attacks, terror tunneling into its territory, attempts to illegally violate the border fence and to infiltrate into Israel, explosive and incendiary balloons and kites sent as part of a concerted policy of agricultural and environmental terror.

Such manipulative accusations, including such absurd tropes as “child-killing,” inevitably generate support among large segments of the international community, media, and general public, by the UN, the UN Human Rights Council, as well as numerous governmental and non-governmental organizations ostensibly involved in human rights. They seek to hold Israel to standards that are not acceptable *vis-à-vis* any other country faced with such aggression.

In effect, they single-out Israel and deny its internationally acknowledged right to defend its borders, towns, villages, and citizens from such aggression. The implication of such singling out and denial of Israel's inherent right to self-defense is to deepen the negative connotation and delegitimizing of Israel in international circles.

The sum total of this sad phenomenon of buzzwords generated and intended to single out Israel only as the ultimate and consistent violator of international norms, has the ultimate aim of "piratizing" and outlawing Israel and removing it outside the pale of civilized states of the international community, as was done with the former South African apartheid regime.

The extension of such generalizations and vilifications to Israel as the Jewish state and the use of the above-noted stereotypic expressions generates and fuels anti-Semitism.

Such generalized criticism singling-out only Israel may be a sad attempt to be politically correct, but is clearly a barely visible veil for anti-Semitism.