

THE SITUATION IN ISRAEL AND ITS IMPACT ON THE ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL

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American Jewish organizations have mobilized to address the increasingly vocal pro-Palestinian campaign against Israel. New hasbara approaches, taking into account new technologies and the sophistication of Israel's adversaries, are being implemented, as are traditional methods such as letter-writing campaigns and solidarity rallies.

"Resistance will move forward, jihad will continue, and martyrdom operations will continue until the full liberation of Palestine. The Zionist entity will fall within the first quarter of this century."

Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, spiritual leader of Hamas, at a rally marking the group's 15th anniversary, Gaza City, December 29, 2002

The roller coaster known as the Oslo Peace Process has seen its highs and lows in the nearly ten years since the handshake on the White House lawn in September 1993. Then, even hard-nosed skeptics saw some prospects for peace. But since July 2000, when the Palestinians rejected an American attempt at brokering a resolution of the conflict, the process has steadily unraveled, pushed over the edge by a series of suicide bombings and drive-by shootings of Israelis that have caused even ardent optimists to rethink the entire exercise.

Since 1993, the American Jewish community has been divided into several camps over exactly how to achieve peace. Some groups advocated proactive concessions by Israel, including a dismantling of the settlements; some stressed "reciprocity" measures on both sides; and others expressed disbelief in Palestinian intentions and suggested a continuation of the status quo. The decades-old consensus on Israel that had bound most American Jewish organizations was replaced by a mixture of stop, go, and caution lights

representing various points of view across a new peace process spectrum.

The Al-Aqsa Intifada, the Palestinian response to the breakdown at Camp David, began a process that affected the thinking of many in our community. Frustration and disillusionment set in over the fact that major Israeli concessions (including negotiations over the status of the Temple Mount) at Camp David (and later, in January 2001 at Taba) were met by a riptide of violence against Israelis. Added to the violence was the anti-Israel/anti-Semitic campaign unleashed by the Palestinians and their allies at the United Nations Conference on Racism in Durban, South Africa in August, 2001. Television footage of Palestinians celebrating in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon only added to the feelings that the years since Oslo had brought us full circle to the Arab-Israeli conflict that existed pre-Oslo.

The proliferation of cable television and the growth of pan-Arab television networks most notably the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera, compounded Israel's image problem. Cable networks often buy footage and reportage from other networks and news organizations. Suddenly, the Palestinian perspective—mostly biased from the point of view of many in our community—was popping up on TV screens everywhere, from the Middle East, to Europe, to our own screens here at home. Adding to the challenge has been the sophistication of pro-Palestinian spokesmen from the Arab-American community and the inclination of TV networks

to be "even-handed" in their coverage of the conflict.

Beyond the media, new problems were developing. On university campuses across the country, pro-Palestinian groups, often joined by sympathetic opponents of globalization, began to organize anti-Israel and anti-Semitic demonstrations. One of the most notorious was held at San Francisco State University in May, 2002. A pro-Israel rally on campus was met by a counter-demonstration, led by Palestinians and others, in which "Go back to Russia," "Hitler did not finish the job," and "get out of here or we will kill you" were among the epithets and threats directed at the Jewish students. The campus police claimed they were not to arrest anyone, lest "it start a riot." The campus administration's initial reaction was passive.

Since then, the anti-Israel movement on campus has taken on a life of its own. Most noteworthy is the effort at divestiture, a call on universities and colleges to divest their portfolios of stock in companies that do business with Israel, patterned after a similar campaign against the apartheid regime in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. To date, most universities have rejected the call, but the comparison of Israel to the apartheid-era regime in South Africa recalls the Zionism-Racism equation spawned by the infamous UN Resolution adopted in 1975, which was as invidious then as it is now.

Perhaps the nadir of this year of difficulty came in March, April, and May of 2002. A series of suicide bombings, including one at the Park Hotel in Netanya on the evening of the first Passover seder, led many to believe that the Palestinian strategy was to seek Israel's destruction, suicide bombing by suicide bombing. Indeed, Farouk Kaddoumi, once known as the "Foreign Minister of the Palestinians," who decided not to return from Tunis to the West Bank/Gaza after Oslo, boasted that the destruction of Israel was underway. As evidence, he claimed Israelis were leaving their country and Israel's economy was being destroyed as a result of the bombings. Diplomatic efforts to restart

the peace process were also going nowhere: visits to the region by Gen. Anthony Zinni, the special American envoy, were met with suicide bombings and other violence.

From this low point, both the American Jewish and Israel community's response moved from despair and frustration to resolve and a heightened sense of activism. In April, more than 200,000 Jews and other supporters of Israel gathered on the Mall in Washington, DC in the largest demonstration ever for Israel in the United States. Organized by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and the United Jewish Communities, together with a broad group of Jewish organizations, the rally featured speeches by Israeli leaders, top Administration officials, members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, Christian friends of Israel, and leading American Jewish spokesmen. The demonstration energized the community and brought about, if not a consensus of how to proceed in the peace process, a general agreement that the Palestinian leadership was, at best turning a blind eye to the violence and, at worst, encouraging it as a means of advancing its own objectives.

In a speech delivered on June 24, 2002, President George W. Bush provided important support to the views held by many in our community, when he called for the replacement of Yasir Arafat as head of the Palestinian Authority (PA), an end to corruption in the PA, and the democratization of the Palestinian political process. He stated "There cannot be a Palestinian state through violence." The President said that only after these changes he advocated occurred could such a state—first provisional and then permanent—come about.

From the beginning of the second Intifada, and especially over the past year, Jewish organizations have become mobilized to meet the threats posed by the actual, as well as the propaganda assaults directed at Israel and Israelis and supporters of Israel everywhere.

Here are but a few examples: Two media

watchdog groups, MEMRI (Middle East Media Research Institute) and CAMERA (Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America) work endlessly to reveal what the Arab media actually says about Israel and Jews, and to call attention to distortions and reporting imbalance on American and foreign media outlets. Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life and AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) do advocacy training on the college campus. The American Jewish Committee has run television ads highlighting Israel as a vibrant democracy in region otherwise devoid of democratic values. The Anti-Defamation League surveys public opinion on issues affecting Israel and anti-Semitism. B'nai B'rith has published studies on Palestinian and Syrian textbooks, which contain hate-filled teachings about Jews and Israel similar in style to that which appeared in Germany in the Nazi era. The Jewish Council on Public Affairs assists local Jewish community councils to interpret Israel's case to both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities.

Indeed, nearly every organization—secular, mass membership, synagogue-oriented, Zionist-affiliated—has its own programs and projects aimed at addressing the increasingly vocal pro-Palestinian campaign against Israel. The Conference of Presidents has introduced an e-mail publication, *Daily Alert*, a summary of important news from Israel and the Middle East. It also conducts an annual consultation in Israel; that gathering brings America's Jewish leadership together with top Israeli leaders from the Prime Minister to cabinet members, political leaders of all stripes, military leaders, and academics. The Conference and other organizations have also convened top public relations experts to discuss and propose new *hasbara* approaches for the community, taking into account new technologies and the sophistication of Israel's adversaries.

How is this era different from previous moments of crisis for Israel and its supporters? Did we not face similar challenges after

the Yom Kippur War? During the oil embargo of the 1970s? After the first Intifada in the late 1980s?

Indeed, each of those, and other crisis periods necessitated a community response. Creating better *hasbara* approaches—writing letters-to-the-editor, holding community rallies in support of Israel—have always been an imperative within the organized Jewish community. What is different this time is that the stakes are far higher than ever before, as are our doubts that a resolution of the conflict can be as easily effectuated as we thought less than a decade ago.

No matter where one finds oneself on the Israeli political spectrum—Labor, Likud, religious, left, right, or center—certain nagging questions remain. Can an agreement be reached when Palestinian schoolchildren are taught that martyrdom against the “Zionist enemy” is the ultimate sacrifice a Muslim can make and that it will be rewarded in the after-life? Or that Jews are “treacherous and deceitful?” Can it be reached when the logo of a host of mainstream Palestinian organizations still features the outline of the entire map of Israel? Or when Islamic extremist leaders like Hamas's Sheik Yassin foretell the destruction of Israel “within the first quarter of this century?”

Whatever one's view of who should lead Israel or how he or she might achieve peace with the Palestinians and Israel's neighbors, it is clear that on the other side there are those who reject not only the process but *Israel's existence altogether*. The expression of such sentiments used to be clouded by ambiguous language (e.g., “ending the occupation”), but has now become quite open and bald-faced.

Increasingly, even Bush Administration critics in Europe and elsewhere have come to the realization that this process can only move forward if there is a change in Palestinian leadership. Let the pragmatists come forward, they are saying—those who can strike the deal with Israel, who are willing to settle for *more* than half-a-loaf (e.g., 90%+ of the West Bank and Gaza offered to Arafat

at Camp David) in a peace settlement and who will dismantle the extremist/terrorist elements in their midst, in an overdue power struggle that will surely come. Those Palestinians who, while not necessarily embracing the Jewish State, have come to the conclusion that it will never be defeated or dismantled and that it, and its predominantly Jewish population, are here to stay.

In the meantime, the role of the Jewish professional is cast. At the end of the day, whatever our own ideas about how to craft a peace deal, our great strength lies in the creativity and effectiveness of our *hasbara* programs. Parts of the old formula never became outdated: letter-writing campaigns, dialing up the talk shows, meeting with newspaper editors, and holding solidarity rallies cross-country. The new formula demands the best our creative juices can muster: informative (and usable) material distributed via the internet, campus and community advocacy training, opposition research on what Arab-American organizations are saying about Israel (and its supporters), and, as always, participation in our own electoral process.

In addition to *hasbara*, we will need to

find ways to better connect our youth organizations with Israel at a time when security considerations have essentially ruled out many of the summer and travel programs that did so much to create lasting bonds with the Jewish state. The same goes for tourism in general. For the time being, how are we compensating for this through Israel-identity programming in JCCs and other venues? One creative project, bringing Jerusalem's Ben-Yehuda Street merchants to JCCs, in the United States has been a major success. But during this crisis period, we must do more.

Each of us has his or her own view of what kind of outcome we would like to see in the Middle East and how to get there. For a brief moment only a few short years ago, it seemed logical for us to weigh in with our views (individual or institutional) since the process was headed toward peace in any case. The terrible shocks of this past year have sobered us. It almost seems like 1975 again.

Before we can reach that moment of hope briefly enjoyed only a decade ago, we need to go back to basics, as Israel and those who support it come once again under international reproach.