

The molten lava of outrage Jews (and, one hopes, thoughtful others) feel when there's another suicide bombing in Israel, or when Palestinian intellectuals call for an end to such bombings not because they are evil but because they are counter-productive, or when Israel is singled out for pariah status, or when Jews in Europe are assaulted, or when decent people concerned with the Middle East conflict call for sanctions against Israel – that outrage is entirely real, and very widely experienced. At the same time, it tends to deprive other concerns of the oxygen they require for their expression.

Chief among those “other concerns” is a growing disquiet regarding the wisdom of Israel's policies. As is so often the case in human affairs, the external enemy causes an internal consolidation; even a dysfunctional family unites in the face of a common threat. While the “official” line of almost all American Jewish organizations remains unrelievedly defensive, accurately reflecting the anger at what seems to nearly all of us the world's willful misunderstanding of Israel's situation – it is unbearably hard to be a vegetarian state in a carnivorous region – there is, throughout the Jewish community, much questioning and much criticism of Prime Minister Sharon's approach to peace. And these days, that means also much questioning of President Bush's approach, which seems so precisely to mimic Mr. Sharon's.

Here, for example, are some propositions that are quite broadly accepted: Israel is the most significant project of the Jewish people in our time. The validity of that project has been utterly rejected and actively opposed by its neighbors since before Israel's inception. Three times – in 1937, again in 1948, and then in 1967 – the neighboring Arab states said “no” to partitioning the land and moving to a two-state solution, a Jewish state of Israel and an Arab state of Palestine. And then in 2000, the Palestinians added a “no” of their own, to President Clinton at Camp David. The notion that Israel is the utter villain of the story and that the nay-saying Palestinians are its innocent victims is simply bizarre.

But that history of rejection, which forms the background to Israel's continuing occupation of the West Bank, is not the whole of the history that's relevant. As the violence has persisted and mounted, extremism has gained a foothold in Israel, too. It feeds on a lack of respect for a Palestinian national movement that could long since have had the state it now professes to desire, on resentment against a society that sends its young people to murder innocents on the other side – and on a growing fundamentalism that is no more appetizing an aspect of Jewish culture than it is in other cultures around the world. In the name of security and fed by distrust, growing numbers of Israelis, along with their supporters in the United States, now reject the idea that an independent Palestinian state can ever be permitted next to Israel, on Israel's side of the Jordan River.

It should not be hard to understand the combination of fear and resentment that gives rise to such hard-line attitudes. But all the blood and all the noise notwithstanding, a very substantial majority of Israel's Jews and of America's continue, so say the polls, to support a two-state solution. They understand that, quite apart from the claims of justice, Israel's future as a Jewish state is contingent on its disgorging the West Bank and Gaza. If it does not, unforgiving demographic trends will in just a few years result in an Arab majority in the land – and then, Israel would have to choose between being a democratic Jewish state and abandoning both democracy and its standing in the family of nations. They understand that sooner or later, there

will be a Palestinian state next to Israel, and that the prospect of a relatively peaceful boundary between Israel and Palestine, however dim it seems today, is not made brighter by Mr. Sharon's disposition to practice diplomacy-by-fist. They understand, finally, that Israel's continuing occupation of the West Bank causes not only insult to the Palestinians but injury to Israel itself, dividing the society, draining the economy, begetting still more violence. Some support unilateral withdrawal, some American intervention, still others are certain only that current policies are futile, even as they remain uncertain regarding what policies should replace them.

The deeply tragic consequence of these last nearly two years of violence has been to infect the conflict with hatred. We who count ourselves among Israel's ardent supporters in America are not at all immune from the resentment, the anger, the sorrow and yes, the fear. But we reject the notion that support for Israel means endorsement of its government's policies, whether that endorsement is offered by the organized Jewish community, by Christian fundamentalists in whose end-of-days theology Israel exists in order to be destroyed, by members of Congress who pander to what they suppose is Jewish sentiment, or by the president of the United States. It is simply not the case that support for Israel's bellicosity is proof of a love of Zion. Many American Jews find no contradiction at all in simultaneously loathing Yasir Arafat, reacting to the suicide bombings with disgust and pain, and thinking the policies of Prime Minister Sharon and his government profoundly mistaken.

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