

Israel's Losing Narrative

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Global Research, July 29, 2014

[Consortium News](#) 28 July 2014

Region: [Asia, Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

For reasons unknown I have ended up on the list-serve of the American Jewish Congress. This means I receive messages sent out by its executive director, David Harris. Sometimes I even read them.

On July 18, I got just such a missive explaining that “too many in the international community fail to grasp the stark realities” Israel faces and its “severely limited policy options.” To set everyone straight [Harris wrote](#) an op-ed in the *Boston Globe* (also dated July 18), a copy of which came along with his mailing.

Since the horror in Gaza continues unabated and Harris’s letter can be taken as representative of the American Zionist point of view, I decided that it was appropriate for me to deconstruct his op-ed for my own blog and list-serve. One should note that a similar contesting of Israeli rationalizations, dealing with somewhat different points, appears in a July 25 [online article](#), entitled “Five Israeli Talking Points on Gaza - Debunked,” from the *Nation* magazine.

Before looking at the op-ed we should note that Mr. Harris lives in a very tightly defined world. It is a world defined by a set of unquestioned assumptions that are prescribed by a thoroughly assimilated ideology. That ideology is, of course, Zionism, the a priori assumption of which is the right of Israel to exist as a Zionist state, that is an exclusively Jewish state.



Image: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu presses his case for the military offensive against Gaza in a meeting with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. (Israeli government photo)

Unfortunately, there are many negative consequences coming from this assumption and one major one is this: you cannot create a state for one group alone in the midst of a large population of other, non-group people, without creating a discriminatory environment. Statehood requires the institutionalizing of that environment through laws that create superior and inferior populations based on who is or is not in the favored group that the

state is designed to serve. This will almost inevitably lead to segregation, extreme economic disparities and, quite possibly, ethnic cleansing.

This is exactly the result of putting the claim of Israel's right to exist as a Zionist state into practice. The flip-side of this process is a piece of reality (not another assumption) that is nonetheless not allowed for in Mr. Harris's world, and that is the discriminated population's legitimate right to resist.

David Harris's Op-Ed

Here are the main points put forth the *Boston Globe* Op-ed:

-Harris starts by laying all blame for the ongoing death and destruction in Gaza on Hamas. He calls the present round of fighting, "the latest Hamas-triggered war." Is this accurate?

Actually the accusation is based on the unsubstantiated assertion of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's that Hamas ordered the kidnapping and murder of three teenagers from an illegal settlement in June. This event was the trigger - the foreground context - for the present confrontation. No independent credible evidence has been offered for Netanyahu's accusation. Nonetheless, what followed was widespread arrests on the West Bank by Israel, carried out in a near-random fashion, as well as increased pressure on Gaza. Hamas responded to both these actions with renewed rocket attacks. The confrontation escalated from there.

The background to all of this is also worth noting. It was put best by the astute and honest Jewish critic, M. J. Rosenberg. While condemning the rocket attacks from Gaza, he notes that

["It is Israel](#) which has kept Gaza under blockade since 2006 when it decided it would not accept the result of a free and fair election that put Hamas in power. A blockade is an act of war and Israel has, by that definition, been at war with Gaza for almost a decade, a war it waged through its incessant punishment of innocent civilians. Did Netanyahu think Hamas would simply accept that forever?"

None of these facts are mentioned in Mr. Harris's op-ed.

-Harris goes on to lament that "the hope for an early end [to the present fighting] was dashed when an Egyptian-brokered cease-fire proposal was accepted by Israel, but was met by Hamas by a barrage of rockets aimed at the Jewish state." How accurate is this? It certainly is not the whole story.

The military dictatorship that now passes for a government in Egypt is an ally of Israel. What was put forth as a ceasefire offer was a plan conjured up by Egypt in consultation with Israel, and possibly the U.S., and then presented to Hamas as a take-it-or-leave-it affair.

Hamas was never consulted, nor were there any benefits for Hamas and the people of Gaza in the offer other than a temporary halt in the slaughter being carried out by Israel.

Here is what the renowned Amira Hass, one of the few objective Israeli reporters, put it: the offer "is not meant to bring progress and change to the people of Gaza, but to marginalize them [Hamas] as a political movement."

Hamas itself had offered a ceasefire plan on July 14. It offered a ten-year truce in exchange for the lifting of the eight-year-old blockade – the one that constitutes an Israeli act of war and has turned Gaza into a huge open-air prison.

This ceasefire offer was not mentioned by Mr. Harris in his op-ed even though he must certainly be aware of it. Nor did the Western media that covered the one-sided Egyptian ceasefire offer pay much attention to the Hamas proposal, even though it would have given Israel a long-term respite from rocket attacks. Nor did anyone seem to remember that Hamas had made a similar offer back in 2008. Both then and now the Hamas offers were, to borrow words from Mr. Harris, “met by a barrage of rockets,” albeit ones fired from Israeli jets and tanks.

–Harris asserts that the present “reality” causes Israeli leaders to conclude that what they face in Gaza is “an adversary determined to at all costs to wage war, won’t change its outlook, [and] seeks to maximize murder and mayhem, and that this adversary must therefore be answered with a strong, unambiguous response.”

This is a rather bizarre assertion. From the Palestinian perspective (to which Mr. Harris will give no credence), this is an exact description of Israeli attitudes and policies. Could Mr. Harris be projecting the behavior of those he champions onto those he despises?

–Mr. Harris goes on: “It is important to remember that it [the present ‘murder and mayhem’] did not have to be this way.” What does he mean? He proceeds to lay out a “what might have been” story that goes as follows:

“In 2005 Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon unilaterally withdrew all settlers and soldiers from Gaza, giving this narrow strip of land its first chance in history ... to exercise sovereignty. That could have become the springboard for a new start, perhaps the beginning of a Singapore on the Mediterranean. But within two years Hamas ... seized power. Rather than Gaza’s construction the goal became Israel’s destruction.”

Does Harris really believe this? It certainly has no relation to how [Palestinians experienced](#) the event. From their perspective his story is at best a decontextualized invention. What he does not tell us is that Ariel Sharon was ([according to David Ben-Gurion](#)) a consistent liar and ([according to major human rights organizations](#)) a serial war criminal. His motives for pulling out the settlers out of Gaza had nothing to do with the future prosperity of the Palestinians, whom he despised and wished ultimately to be killed or expelled, and it certainly did not offer Gaza “sovereignty.”

The withdrawal of the settlers signaled two strategies on Sharon’s part: a concentration of Israeli settlement efforts on the West Bank, and creating the conditions for the blockade that now makes Gaza nothing short of a ghetto-like prison camp. It should be kept in mind – if possible even in Mr. Harris’s mind – that the strangulation of Gaza [began before](#) the election of Hamas to power in 2008.

–Finally, David Harris concludes his op-ed by insisting that Israel is a democratic society that plays by civilized rules while its adversaries are uncivilized, undemocratic and play by no such rules. He tells us that “this can be difficult for some outside the region to grasp. It runs so contrary to how we live our daily lives, much less how, when necessary, we wage war as democratic nations.”

Again, Harris has slipped into invention and fantasy. Israel is a full democratic society only for its Jewish citizens. For non-Jews it is not a democracy, but rather akin to an apartheid society. And, as to the waging of war, democratic nations wage war in barbaric fashion and do not hesitate to act as terrorists, too.

Hamas and the other Palestinian fighting groups, even at their most bloody, are pale reflections of the armies that have slaughtered millions of Vietnamese, Iraqis and Afghans – and those that destroyed the peaceful society that once lived in Palestine.

David Harris's Shrinking World

In truth, David Harris lives in a peculiarly narrow world. And, it is significant that Israeli behavior is causing the number of people who share that world to decline. Unfortunately, their number still includes some very powerful people, as witnessed by the U.S. Senate's most recent [unanimous vote](#) to support Israel's barbarism in Gaza.

Then again, most of these senators only precariously held to the Zionist cause through a process of political bribery. The truth is that outside Israel, Washington, D.C., and various other Zionist strongholds, David Harris's worldview is crumbling.

And, as the numbers of those who share his viewpoint shrinks, other counter-groups, such as the boycott Israel movement, grow in number. Sooner or later a tipping point will be reached and then things will change and probably do so rapidly. On that day what will David Harris do? Blame it all on anti-Semitism? Take residence at the top of Masada? Or grudgingly seek to make his peace with the Palestinians?

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