

Israel's Culture of Hate

The failure to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has inevitably stoked animosities on both sides. But recent acts of violence and ugly comments inside Israel reveal that a culture of hatred and bigotry is taking root, warns ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Two incidents last week underscored how broadly and deeply in Israeli society runs a streak of hatred against Palestinian Arabs.

In one, seven Israeli teenagers, including two girls, one 13 years old, were arrested for what witnesses described as an attempted lynching in West Jerusalem of several Palestinian youths, one of whom was beaten unconscious and was still hospitalized this week. In the same hospital was one of the victims of the other incident: the Palestinian driver of a taxi that was firebombed near a West Bank settlement.

As with violent crimes elsewhere that involve hatred against particular ethnic, racial or religious groups, and for those eager to highlight commonalities between Israeli and American society, this unfortunately has to count as one of them, given the history of hate crimes in the United States, the specific manifestations of such hatred are varied. They range from full-blown terrorism to less violent actions.

The unofficial resort by Israelis to force and violence against Palestinians has in recent years been most associated with West Bank settlers. (For an excellent analysis of this particular brand of Israeli terrorism, see the recent article on the subject by Daniel Byman and Natan Sachs.) As the assault in West Jerusalem demonstrated, however, the problem is not limited to settlers or to the occupied territories.

Also as with hate crimes elsewhere, there are multiple causes and explanations. Large-scale violence earlier this year against African migrants in Tel Aviv demonstrated that Palestinians or Arabs are not the only targets of Israeli hatred. That in turn suggests that one of the roots of what we are seeing is a generalized bigotry not unlike what we unfortunately have seen in the United States.

But the very relevant and distinctively Israeli circumstance that has the most power to give rise to widely held hateful attitudes is the unresolved conflict with the Palestinians. As a conflict that dates back to before the founding of

Israel and that has accounted for so much of the violence that has been inflicted both on and by Israelis, it could not help but have that power.

It is not just a few radical settlers or violent teenagers who have gotten into a habit of regarding all Palestinians as dangerous aliens, as the enemy or as terrorists. The rightist Israeli governments of recent years, by making it quite apparent that they see no place for free Palestinians in a peaceful picture with Israel, have reinforced a nationwide tendency to view Palestinians as something less than human beings with inalienable human rights.

And that tendency leads to a legitimization of violence against them. In speaking critically about the effects of such legitimization, Professor Gavriel Salomon of Haifa University notes, "Suddenly it's not so terrible to burn Arabs inside a taxi."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has publicly condemned the latest violence, as he has earlier instances of it. But serious questions remain about the official posture toward the unofficial violence. Israeli policing of anti-Palestinian violence has been at best spotty.

Former chief of staff of the Israeli Army Dan Halutz has stated that Israeli authorities have not done enough to crack down on the anti-Palestinian terrorists and vandals among West Bank settlers. "If we wanted," said Halutz, "we could catch them and when we want to, we will."

There also is incitement through inflammatory remarks by religious leaders associated with the Israeli government or governing parties. For example, the government-paid chief rabbi of settlements in Hebron and Kiryat Arba, in speaking at a conference last year, described Arabs as "wolves" and "savages."

The chief rabbi of Safed, also paid by the Israeli government, told reporters last year that "Arab culture is very cruel," that "a Jew should chase away Arabs," and that "expelling Arabs from Jewish neighborhoods is part of the strategy."

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the spiritual leader of the Shas Party, which is part of Netanyahu's governing coalition, has said in sermons that Palestinians are "evil, bitter, enemies" whom God ought to "perish from this world," that "it is forbidden to be merciful" to Arabs, that Arabs are "evil and damnable," and that "you must send missiles to them and annihilate them."

One wonders what Israeli government officials think of such remarks when they or others attempt to call to account Arab leaders for anti-Israeli invective voiced by anyone in their constituencies.

Amid an atmosphere fed by such comments, one does not need to look, as some Israelis are in searching for explanations for the latest incidents involving perpetrators so young, at such things as deficient parenting.

Nimrod Aloni of the Institute for Educational Thought in Tel Aviv notes that a teenager acting as a member of a lynch mob “cannot just be an expression of something he has heard at home.” Aloni continues, “This is directly tied to national fundamentalism that is the same as the rhetoric of neo-Nazis, Taliban and K.K.K. This comes from an entire culture that has been escalating toward an open and blunt language based on us being the chosen people who are allowed to do whatever we like.”

Although the non-resolution of the conflict between Israelis and Arabs is the biggest single contributor to hatred on both sides of that conflict, Israel also has a built-in vulnerability to exhibiting ethnic and religious intolerance, as a state that is defined in ethnic and religious terms.

The line between zealous patriotism and ethnic or religious bias is in greater danger of becoming blurred. And so Rabbi Yosef of Shas can say, “The sole purpose of non-Jews is to serve Jews. . . . Goyim [non-Jews] were born only to serve us. Without that, they have no place in the world, only to serve the people of Israel.”

Nearly all of the rest of the world, including the assembled leaders of Arab states, has accepted Israel, and its status as the primary homeland of Jews, as legitimate. Hatred emanating from Israel will, of course, not be accepted as any more legitimate than hatred emanating from anyplace else.

As with other conflicts, the bigots, haters and terrorists on both sides will, tragically, play off of each other.

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