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Editorial Article

The Israeli Academy and the Gaza War

Seth J. Frantzman
Jerusalem, Israel March, 2009

On December 27th, 2008 Israel embarked upon Operation Cast Lead, a campaign designed to punish Hamas for its ongoing rocket and mortar attacks on Israel. Between 2005 and December 2008 some 8,000 rockets and mortars had been fired from the Gaza Strip into Israel, principally at border communities such as Sderot. With the end of a six month ceasefire in November of 2008 hundreds of more rockets and mortars had been launched by Hamas.

From December 27th until January 3rd, 2008 Israel conducted an extensive air campaign against Hamas, killing its members, bombing its smuggling tunnels, attacking its rocket launching sites and destroying its administrative buildings and police posts. On January 3rd, 2009 Israeli ground forces entered the Gaza strip and until the 17th of January, when Israel announced a unilateral ceasefire, they attempted to find and defeat Hamas forces and prevent further rocket fire on Israel.

From the second day of the operations protests were unleashed throughout the world, from the Middle East to Europe and South America. Protests in the UK were some of the most extreme, with some 3,000 protestors gathering outside the Israeli embassy on December 28th in what would become a daily protest. The use of 'Israel is like the Nazis' imagery was common, with signs declaring "Stop the Holocaust in Gaza" being but one example. Israel itself also witnessed local protests against the war from its first few days, with hundreds marching in Tel Aviv. The outcry against Israel in late 2008 and 2009 was a replay of the voices that had been raised during the Second Lebanon War in 2006 and the Second Intifada between 2000 and 2001 and has been typical of the discourse against Israel since her foundation in 1948.

The English Club of 'Israeli' Professors against Israel

Prominent among the voices was that of Avi Shlaim who is described often as an "Israeli scholar." Shlaim is an Iraqi-born Jew who immigrated to Israel and served in the IDF in the 1960s, before moving to the U.K to pursue his academic studies. His total time living in Israel was between the ages of five and sixteen and then from 18 to 23. Meron Rapaport wrote in August of 2005 in Haaretz (Avi Shlaim: No Peaceful Solution) that he is the "third and least familiar of the New Historians." In one transcription of a speech he gave in February of 2005 Shlaim claimed "Zionism today is the real enemy of the Jews," he insinuated that Israeli actions are responsible for the rise in Anti-Semitism ("Israel's policies are the cause, hatred of Israel and anti-Semitism are the consequences") and that Israel is the greatest threat to world peace (citing a 2003 Eurobarometer poll).

In January of 2009 Shlaim published an article in the Guardian entitled, 'How Israel brought Gaza to the brink of humanitarian catastrophe.' He described himself as an Oxford Professor who "served loyally in the Israeli army" and who "utterly rejects the Zionist colonial project beyond the Green Line." The article was subsequently republished in the Tehran Times.

In the article he claimed that the 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza strip was "staged" and that "Hamas, the Islamic Resistance movement" had created a "humiliation" for Israel. He claimed that "withdrawal from Gaza was thus not a prelude to a peace deal with the Palestinian Authority but a prelude to further Zionist expansion in the West Bank." He accused Israel of "never in its entire history [having] done anything to promote democracy on the Arab side...collaboration with reactionary Arab regimes." He described Hamas' rocket attacks as "primitive...pinpricks."

Shlaim defended Hamas and described how they "kept up their resistance and kept firing their rockets," adding his assertion that Israel practiced "terrorism." He also claimed that the "Palestinian people succeeded in building the only genuine democracy in the Arab world with the possible exception of Lebanon." Shlaim's rhetoric, which, when published in the Tehran Times, no doubt speaks to the regime of Mahmud Ahmadinejad and feeds his own hatred of Israel and the Jews, is a fascinating blend of extremist excuses for Palestinians, on the one hand, and condemnations for Israel on the other. Israeli democracy is faulty but Palestinian democracy is genuine. Hamas and its rockets are pinpricks but Israel targets civilians in a terrorist manner. Shlaim, author of Lion of Jordan, has often lionized Arab dictators while belittling and condemning Israel's leaders. Arab suppression of Palestinian nationalism, such as by

Jordan, is not condemned unless it is in the context of claiming that Israel collaborated and encouraged it.

When Israel basher Norman Finkelstein, who has called the Holocaust an 'industry' used and manipulated by Jews, was up for tenure at DePaul University, two academics were recruited by Finkelstein promoters to assist. [Shlaim was one of them](#), turning out a sycophantic letter praising Finkelstein's "scholarship." DePaul University faculty and officers saw through Shlaim's ploy and fired Finkelstein. Shlaim has called Finkelstein a "very impressive, learned and careful scholar" and said he thinks "highly" [of him](#).

But while Shlaim's ideas and extremism are disturbing and full of hypocrisy and double standards, he is hardly the "Israeli academic" he likes to claim. Like with other 'Israelis' living in England, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict serves as bread and butter for people who use their Israeli citizenship as a currency to bash Israel. They get published as 'Israeli academics who condemn Israel,' but rarely, if ever, live in Israel. They do not have contact with it nor wish to return to it.

This is the case with Haim Beresheet (also Chaim Bresheeth), an academic at the University of East London (since 2002), who signed a letter, along with 300 others and published it in the Guardian in mid January of 2009 declaring that "Israel must lose" in the war with Hamas. For Beresheet it was all a "criminal use of force" by Israel, which was committing "massacres" in Gaza in a war "waged against the people of Palestine." The [letter went on to note](#) that because "we affirm the right to resist military aggression and colonial occupation, then we are obliged to take sides... against Israel, and with the people of Gaza and the West Bank." It was also signed by Ilan Pappé, a professor at the University of Exeter. Pappé, unlike Beresheet and Shlaim, is a recent addition to the anti-Israel ex-Israeli academic establishment in the U.K. He only left the University of Haifa in 2007 after having supported several academic boycotts against his own university. The boycotts would not, apparently, have applied to him, because they included a way for academics in Israel to sign documents affirming their opposition to Israel and thus be "cleared" and allowed to publish again by those boycotting Israeli academia.

Yosefa Loshitzky, from the University of East London, also stresses her Israeliness in an article for the anti-Semitic pro-jihad web magazine Counterpunch on January 5th, 2009. She describes the Palestinians as the "poorest people in the world," and described Israel's foreign minister as a "peroxide blond" who uses "sex" as part of Israel's "oiled propaganda machine."

The extremism of the anti-Israel 'Israelis' in the UK is not new. Together with local anti-Semitic British Jews, they include Gilad Atzmon, Ben Birnberg, Prof Haim Bresheeth, Paul Eisen, Mark Elf, Deborah Fink, Bella Freud, Tony Greenstein, Abe Hayeem, Prof Adah Kay, Yehudit Keshet, Dr Les Levidow, Prof Yosefa Loshitzky, Prof Moshe Machover, Miriam Margolyes, Roland Rance, Prof Jonathan Rosenhead. All have been involved in anti-Israel rhetoric and even calls for boycotts for some years. Most have declared that as people of "Jewish origin," the siege of Gaza is one in which they are "reminded of the siege of the Warsaw ghetto" and so must be stopped through "boycott, divestment and sanctions" of Israel. Being Israeli and having "Jewish origin" helps get them attention. They have nothing but contempt for Israel. They know that as "Israelis," their voice is more interesting than those of ordinary academics in the UK, especially when they join the extremist comparisons of Israel to the Nazis, crusaders and apartheid practitioners. As members of UK academia, their calls for boycott no longer affect themselves personally. Hence, while they claim Israeli origin when they sign petitions, they do not claim to be 'Israeli' academics when they submit things for publication to the very journals they think should be boycotting Israeli academics. That could harm themselves.

Israeli Academia at Israeli Universities react to the Gaza War

If the reactions of the Israeli members of UK academia were as expected, it may be more surprising to note that some Israeli academics inside Israel took a firm stand against their country's defensive actions in the Gaza war of 2008-2009. During the 2000-2004 Intifada it sometimes happened that Israeli University students were murdered in bus bombings while on the way to listen to their Israeli university professor lecture about the justice of the Palestinian cause and the legitimate "resistance" of bombing Israeli civilians on buses. Israeli students whose grandparents had died in the gas chambers could listen to lectures by people like Hebrew University professor Baruch Kimmerling declaring that "if the Nazi program for the final solution of the Jewish problem had been complete, for sure there would be peace today in Palestine" (letter to the Guardian, October 2002).

With the end of the Intifada in 2004 and the death of Kimmerling, these ironies seemed to have been halted. But with the increasing range of Hamas rocket fired from Gaza, the specter raises its head again. Kassams have landed on or near Sapir Academic College in Sderot and Ben Gurion University in Beersheba. Once again, students studying at a university or college in Israel could well die from the very rocket being fired by someone whom their professor or lecturer describes as a 'freedom fighter' or 'militant' with a 'right to resist.'

Nurit Peled-Elhanan EU Sakharov Prize winner of 2001 teaches at the Hebrew University. On December 18th, she noted in a letter to the President of the European Parliament that she was supporting the "heroes of Gaza... who are proving every day and every hour that no fortified wall can imprison the free spirit of humanity and no form of violence can subdue life." She wrote of the "pogrom being carried out by the thugs of the Occupation army." She spoke of Israel's "refusal to release freedom fighters, children and peace leaders from the worst of prisons, while immersing all of us in the blood of innocent babes up to our necks."

On December 30th, 2008 Dr. Ran HaCohen of Tel Aviv University published an article entitled, "Pacifying Gaza," at the anti-Israel antiwar.com web site. (The same site has published several pieces

claiming that Israel and the Jews were really behind the 911 attacks on the United States.) There he wrote, "It will take [the] Labor [party] just about two thousand additional corpses to go from rags to riches, from a dead political party to an absolute majority in parliament like in the good old days."

HaCohen concluded his article with the cry, "Do not to look for consistency, integrity, or intelligence where war criminals are involved." Neve Gordon, chair of the department of politics and government at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and author of *Israel's Occupation* (University of California Press, 2008), echoed similar sentiments, claiming that the war was a cynical attempt to gain votes. He published these claims in an article on December 29th for the *Guardian* ('The Dire Cost of Domestic rivalries').

On December 31st Julia Chaitin, a senior lecturer at Sapir Academic College, published an article entitled, 'Darkness in the Land,' in the *Washington Post*. There she wrote that the Gaza campaign is "wrong" and "cruel." She claimed, "(It) has been almost impossible to speak openly against the war", a frequent statement used by those who wish to pretend martyrdom as the 'lone voice' speaking up against something. She claimed to "know the fast beating of your heart and the awful pit in your stomach (referring to Jewish victims of Hamas rocket attacks) that comes when a tzav adom -- red alert -- is sounded, heralding a rocket attack. I know what it is like to comfort students and colleagues when the rockets strike very, very close."

Neve Gordon appeared on December 31st, 2008 writing in the same pro-terror *Counterpunch*, in an article about the Israeli bombing of the Islamic University in Gaza. He condemned the attack, writing, "By launching an attack on Gaza, the Israeli government has once again chosen to adopt strategies of violence that are tragically akin to the ones deployed by Hamas - only the Israeli tactics are much more lethal." On January 5th, 2009 Gordon again wrote of 'Israel's New War Ethic' in *The Nation*, sister publication of *Counterpunch*. He claimed, "After being stuck for seventy-two hours with our two young children inside a Beer-Sheva apartment, the spouse and I decided to visit my mother, who lives up north, so that our children could play outside far away from the rockets." He spoke of Israel pretending to be "the perpetual victim," something that brings to mind Loshitzky's idea of Jews who "replay the eternal Jewish victim (*Electronic Intifada*, January 5th, 2009)." Gordon writes, "Not unlike raising animals for slaughter on a farm, the Israeli government maintains that it is providing Palestinians with assistance so that it can have a free hand in attacking them."

On January 7th Hannah Safran, a founder of 'Women in Black' and currently on the faculty of the Galilee Academic College, published in *Counterpunch*, 'No more recycled military solutions.' She seems to imply in her article that a new intifada is brewing: "The Palestinians are fed up with this approach and they are not likely to sit and wait peacefully until Israel realizes that there is no military solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict."

On January 8th Dr. Shmuel Amir of Hebrew University published 'The Gaza war' at both the alternativenews.org and kibosh.co.il web sites. Therein he claimed that Gaza was experiencing a "slaughter from the sky." This was all in the context of the "colonial relations between Jews and Palestinians." He compared Israel in Gaza to the battle of Omdurman in 1898, "the English colonialist campaign of that time resembles the air campaign against Gaza in another important respect as well: the Israeli admiration for the 'extraordinary achievement' of the slaughter in Gaza." He speaks of a "continuing Zionist colonial war that has been going on for over a hundred years." He compares casualty figures and states, "Those facts should be taken into account when we grapple with the question of who are the terrorists here or what is the extent of ' Hamas terror' compared to the 'state terror' of Israel." He concludes that the relations are those between colonialist and "native."

On January 10th, 2009 Oren Yiftachel of Ben Gurion University in Beersheba wrote an oped at *Yediot Achronot* entitled 'Gaza's Lost Time, in which he claimed that Israel's occupation had a "cruel and persistent aim - the silencing of Palestinian epoch, that is, the erasure of this country's complete history." Like others, he noted that the Gazans were firing rockets into Israeli areas from which they supposedly came as refugees, such as Beersheba and Sderot (Loshitzky insisted that Gazans were "originating from the area currently being rocketed from Gaza"). For Yiftachel, " Hamas rejected the illusion of 'two states for two people', which itself became an empty mantra, one that enables the interminable continuation of the colonial occupation." He described Israeli "state terror" and the need for a "termination of Israeli colonial rule."

In a different article, 'The Jailer State,' published by Yiftachel on January 12th, he claimed that Gaza was a "massive prison" and compared it to the situation in Darfur and to South African Apartheid Bantustans. He spoke of Hamas' terror being the same as "rebelling prisoners in Gaza." He wrote, "When the conditions of imprisonment become unbearable, a rebellion erupts." He added, "Palestinian violence plays an important part in the creation of this geography, through the hostile dialectic between colonizer and colonized... But Palestinian violence, and particularly the shelling from Gaza should also be perceived as a prison uprising, currently suppressed with terror by the Israeli state, which kills many more civilians and creates infinitely more damage than the initial act of resistance." But there seems a ray of hope, "constant rebellions are likely to undermine the incarcerating regime itself."

Dr. Haim Yaakoby of Ben Gurion University's Department of Political Science and a member of the radical Bimkom (Planners for Planning Rights), together with colleague Prof. Zvi Bentwich (Physicians for Human Rights), published on January 14th, 2009 an open letter to Ehud Olmert speaking of the "clear and present danger to the lives" of civilians. They spoke of a "heavy suspicion [that] has arisen of grave violations of international humanitarian law by military forces. After the end of the hostilities, the time will come for the investigation of this matter, and accountability will be demanded of those responsible." The harm caused to civilians was "unprecedented." It concluded that "this kind of fighting constitutes a blatant violation of the laws of warfare and raises the suspicion, which we ask be investigated, of the commission of war crimes."

On January 14th, Ramzi Suleiman of the Department of Psychology of Haifa University posted on Haifa's Segel-Plus chat list the claim, "At the end of 2008, Israel has launched a wide genocide war against the Palestinian Gazans." The same day Neve Gordon wrote, "I agree with the idea of a basic right to self-defense (for Palestinian Hamas terrorists). And the right to self-defense is a right to self-defense from violence. We have to understand that the occupation itself is violence. It's an act of violence. Putting people in a prison, in a prison of one million and a half million people and keeping them there." It appeared on Amy Goodman's anti-Israel 'Democracy Today' program.

On January 16th, 2009 the same Neve Gordon wrote in his usual forum, Counterpunch, an article entitled, 'How to sell Ethical warfare.' It concerned how the Israeli government was "claiming that Israel is carrying out a moral military campaign against Hamas." According to Gordon, "They [the Israeli government's actions] actually reveal Israel's unwillingness to confront the original source of the current violence, which is not Hamas, but rather the occupation of the Gaza Strip."

On January 18th, 2009 University of Haifa sociologist Yuval Yonay, writing on the Segel-Plus chat list, endorsed comparisons of the actions of Israel to those of the Nazis in the Warsaw ghetto: "He [Sir Gerald Kaufman, UK MP] also mentioned that an Israeli spokesman [sic] replied that many of the Palestinian victims (800 at the time, climbing to 1245 as of this morning) were militants "was the reply of the Nazi" and added: "I suppose the Jews fighting for their lives in the Warsaw ghetto could have been dismissed as militants." If someone can find a logical flaw here, I am interested in seeing it." Yonay also spoke of war criminals; "I was careful about using the term 'war criminal,' but the disrespect [sic] of Palestinian [sic] lives seems to leave us with no other possibility."

Lev Grinberg, a "political sociologist" at Ben Gurion University, wrote on January 21st at the online Islamic forum Aminnetwork.org an article entitled, 'Black January,' where he claimed that the war in Gaza was a "black flag of illegality." He compared Israel to Nazi Germany, "It is as if the minister of history wished to show the Jews that the moral deterioration of Germany in the 1930s could afflict any people, if the historical circumstances, their political leadership and the mass media led them there." He described the Hamas terrorists as the modern moral equivalent to the Maccabees, reminiscent of Shlaim's discussion of David and Goliath reversed. Grinberg wrote, "If indeed there is a struggle here of the weak against an occupying empire, it is the struggle of Hamas against Israel, not the other way around."

Academics against the War in Gaza: Themes and Banality

Many of the Israeli scholars who opposed the war in Gaza did so under the increasingly fashionable guise of being 'lone voices,' standing up the oppression of their own country. In the English language environment (including the internet) in which many of them published, this claim was used as an all-purpose calling card and publicity gimmick. The most common themes in their writing are that of Gaza being a 'prison' and the need to compare Israel's actions to some other ultra-evil regime. The favorite regimes for comparison have been the Nazis, but sometimes apartheid south Africa, Russian pogromists, or European colonizers can be recruited. The theme of Gaza being a colonized 'prison' is used in order to justify the 'resistance' of Hamas, meaning its terror and rockets. This recycles the dialectic of Albert Memmi's Colonizer and Colonized or Fanon's Wretched of the Earth. Under the logic of "post-colonialism," the colonized is always allowed any extreme so long as he is opposing what can be dismissed as colonialism.

The idea of Israel being a 'colonizer' is used obsessively, yet all the anti-Israel authors know perfectly well that Israel left Gaza and has no 'settlements' there. Therefore there is the need to deconstruct and re-define what 'colonialism' entails. Such people argue that, since Israel controls the 'borders' of Gaza, it is a colony. Of course the northern border of the United States is controlled by Canada. No one thinks that gives Americans the right to bomb Vancouver. Gaza also has a border with Egypt.

The idea of Gaza being a 'prison' is recruited as a justification for Gaza terror: Gazans supposedly have a 'right' to 'rebel' violently, the same way prisoners supposedly have a right to 'resist' their jailers. As it turns out prisoners do not have a 'right' to rebel, especially when they themselves are guilty, but the prison analogy is repeated ad nauseum.

Gaza's prison-like state is predicated on the idea that its people cannot leave and on their supposedly being poor. But they were made poorer recently because they chose Hamas to control the place and then launched a war of terror and aggression against Israel. As a point of comparison it is worth recalling that from 1948 to the 1980s Israelis could not travel to any neighboring Arab state and yet Israel was not considered a 'giant prison' whose population had an automatic right to murder as many people in neighboring countries as they desired. Other landlocked poor states whose borders are closed and controlled by others, such as Lesotho, are not considered prisons either.

A repeated theme is the idea of Gaza being one of the "most" impoverished places on Earth. No statistics are ever presented to back this up and it is a patently absurd claim. The poor in Gaza are richer per capita than are the middle classes in much of Africa and in parts of the Middle East, Asia and South America. The poor of Gaza are beneficiaries of huge amounts of international aid, per capita the greatest recipients in the world. One indicator of how phony the claim of poverty is can be seen in the fact that many hundreds of Ukrainian women have married Gazan men. It appears life in Gaza is better than life in Ukraine. (Some of these women were allowed to exit Gaza in 2006 due to the election of Hamas, and again in 2009 due to the outbreak of fighting).

Israel-hating "academic" publicists frequently try to turn the idea of terrorism on its head and describe a system of "Israeli terror". The claim of "disproportionate" Palestinian casualties is often raised, with the

insinuation that not enough Israelis are dying. If only hundreds more Israeli civilians had died, the war would be 'proportionate.' If Israel had only used 'primitive' rockets rather than guided missiles, there might be more 'proportion.' Internationally celebrated Israeli author A.B. Yehoshua described this problem with the call for 'proportionality' in an open letter to extreme Israel critic and columnist Gideon Levy of Haaretz in the midst of the Gaza war; "There is something absurd in the comparison you draw about the number of those killed. When you ask how it can be that they killed three of our children and we cause the killing of a hundred and fifty, the inference one can draw is that if they were to kill a hundred of our children (for example, by the Qassam rockets that struck schools and kindergartens in Israel that happened to be empty), we would be justified in also killing a hundred of their children. (Haaretz 'An Open letter to Gideon Levy', January 16 2009.)"

Another gimmick noted in the outbursts by academics during the war is the use of Jewish history and use of Hebrew words to make their articles seem more "genuine." The propagandists commonly adopt Israeli terms such as 'crying and shooting' or bokhim ve-yorim. They employ the imagery of Jewish history, such as David and Goliath or the Maccabees, with the insistence that the Jews have reversed roles. The Jews are now Goliath or the Greeks fighting the Maccabees, while the Palestinians are a sort of 'new Jews', a David or Judah Maccabee. The Arabs are fighting in the 'Warsaw ghetto' of Gaza against the 'holocaust' being carried out by Israel. From the streets of Europe to Indonesia and among some Israeli academics, this idea is now quite common.

What is most common is the lack of depth and the easy and predictable criticism thrown at Israel. It is most obscenely seen in the knee-jerk comparisons of Israeli actions to those of the Nazis. Gaza becomes a concentration camp or a ghetto, and Israelis become German Nazis.

There is a sort of group-think among those who condemn Israel. Every day one finds masses of Israeli writers complaining of being the 'only one' speaking out against Israeli 'crimes.' The Israeli academics whose articles were surveyed here write about rockets falling on their communities and campuses and the need to move their children to escape the fire, but they don't mention who is actually firing the rockets: Hamas and friends.

Ben-Gurion University was closed for weeks as Hamas rockets landed in and near Beersheba. [According to Prof. Steven Plaut](#), "Several rockets landed close to the campus. Public-school buildings in Beersheba were destroyed by rockets." Never has the cost of an education been so high. Here we have Israeli students being targeted by terrorists and risking death, while in some cases that very same terror is being celebrated and supported by extremists employed as faculty members in the same institutions.

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