



## ISRAEL NEWS

*A collection of the week's news from Israel  
From the Bet El Twinning / Israel Action Committee of  
Beth Avraham Yoseph of Toronto Congregation*

### Commentary...

#### Visiting Israel Is Best Support By Deena Levenstein

During my annual visits to Israel, I am always amazed to see how much has changed since the previous year in Jerusalem, the city where I lived for 16 years. It continues to be built up, beautified and I always notice many new businesses around the city.

It is a wonder that Israel flourishes as it does, even while so much of her resources are directed towards security. To be a bustling country – as opposed to a sulking one – through all the difficulties is no easy task. And Israel needs all the support she can get. That is where we, Diaspora Jews, come in.

At the pro-Israel rally at Schara Tzedek Synagogue in Vancouver, an emphasis was put on ways Diaspora Jews could support Israel during the mission in Gaza by the Israeli army. The two main ways mentioned were sending funds and fighting the "virtual war" of Israel's public relations with the world. But I think there was not enough focus put on what may be the ultimate support for Israel – going to visit. Or, as Miriam Schwab, a 32-year-old Jerusalemite, mother of five and founder of Illuminea, an Internet marketing firm, put it, "Voting with your feet."

Schwab said that, "All the PR in the world won't make a difference if we are not 100 per cent sure of what we're doing here, if we're not 100 per cent sure of our right to be here and the justice of what we do." Schwab said she thinks that visiting Israel helps strengthen people's understanding of "the justice of our actions and our defence of ourselves." Probably most people who visit Israel are afterwards better equipped to join the "PR war." Visiting also gives much needed emotional and financial support to Israelis.

When a person is going through a difficult time in their life, "It makes it worse when you feel lonely," Schwab said. "But if people are actually showing up and being part of it with you, you feel like people haven't forgotten about you and that they're willing to share in your good times and your bad times." This is why in Judaism we have the *shivah* call – visiting people in mourning – and *bikkur cholim* (visiting the sick).

Gadi Selig, 24, said that when there are fewer tourists, Israelis feel more down and don't get out as much. "When you see tourists, it means Israel is alive," he said.

Selig started a fast-food meat restaurant, Gepeto, with a partner, in Jerusalem's downtown area two years ago. He explained that Israelis get out less when there are fewer tourists because many feel down. So, though he estimates that 30 per cent of his business comes from tourists, fewer tourists means fewer Israeli customers as well.

When we go to Israel, the visit is no less for the tourist than it is for the Israelis.

Devora Mason, a mother of four living with her family in Efrat, in Gush Etzion, said that she found that even though she had lived in Israel for seven years before her move to Toronto, "When I couldn't come visit for a long time, I lost my desire that I'd always had to come back as soon as I could. And when I finally came, my love and desire of being here was refreshed."

Mason, who made aliyah with her family two and a half years ago, said that when someone comes to visit, if they have a personal connection with Israel, they don't need a pat on the back for coming. This is important because, though it is wonderful to visit (many people could choose to go elsewhere on vacation), it is so important that the Canadian Jew visiting Israel doesn't get caught up with thoughts about how wonderful it is that they've decided to make the effort to visit the Holy Land. Not everyone is

going to get a big thank you from an Israel representative.

Israel needs as much support as she can get. It is so important that we don't get desensitized to Israel's struggles. We almost get used to the idea, along with most of the world,

that Israel living under such constant threat is "normal." We are just happy that not too many Israelis have been injured or killed from the rockets or other forms of terrorist attack. Many of us never even hear about so much of the struggle that takes place behind the scenes.

Visiting Israel is the ultimate support, always, but especially during tumultuous times. It helps contribute to positive public relations. It strengthens the tourist. It also strengthens Israelis, both emotionally and economically. And it is the ultimate kind of economic boost since it focuses on giving *parnasa* (livelihood), not just funds.

If I were to try to define Israel in two words, I might say it is a struggling-flourishing country (or maybe a flourishing-struggling country). As Diaspora Jews, we must support the struggle and support the flourishing so that Israelis know we care, we believe in the cause and we are there for them, while they continue to make the ultimate sacrifices. (Jewish Independent (BC) Jan 23)

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#### Defending Freedom's Defenders By Caroline Glick

Last week, the IDF issued an unprecedented directive. All Israeli media outlets must obscure the faces of soldiers and commanders who fought in Operation Cast Lead. Henceforth, the identities of all IDF soldiers and officers who participated in the operation against the Hamas terror regime in Gaza are classified information.

The IDF acted as it did in an effort to protect Israeli soldiers and officers from possible prosecutions for alleged war crimes in Europe. The army's chief concern is England. In England, private citizens are allowed to file complaints against foreigners whom they claim committed war crimes. Based on these complaints, British courts can issue arrest warrants against such foreigners if they are found on British territory and force them to stand trial. Over the past few years, a number of active duty and retired IDF senior officers were forced to cancel visits to Britain after such complaints were filed against them in sympathetic local courts.

Following the IDF's move, on Sunday the government announced that Israel will provide legal assistance to any IDF veteran prosecuted abroad for actions he performed during his service in Gaza. The legal assistance will include representation, investigation of the allegations made against veterans, attempts to have the charges against them dismissed and defense at trials.

Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who brought the decision before the full cabinet, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and their colleagues all asserted that by committing the state to defending its warriors, they were fulfilling their sacred duty to protect Israel's protectors.

Unfortunately, both the cabinet decision itself and our leaders' statements missed the point.

Last Wednesday, an appellate court in Amsterdam ruled that the Dutch lawmaker and leader of the anti-jihadist Dutch Freedom Party Geert Wilders must stand trial for the alleged "crime" of inciting hatred against Muslims with his short film "Fitna," released last year.

In "Fitna," Wilders juxtaposes verses from the Koran with Islamic terror attacks, mosque sermons inciting believers to murder non-Muslims, and proclamations by Islamic clerics that Muslims must kill all the Jews, conquer the world and subjugate non-believers.

The second half of the 15-minute film is devoted to Holland. It highlights the massive immigration of Muslims to the country over the past 15 years, and calls by Islamic leaders in Holland to kill homosexuals, subjugate women, stone adulteresses, and take over the country. "Fitna"

ends with a call for Muslims to expunge Koranic verses commanding them to conduct jihad from their belief system, and with a call for Dutchmen to defend their country, their culture and their civilization from the rising current of Islam in Europe.

All the material presented in "Fitna" is accurate. And it is also explosive. But it is hard to see how it could be illegal. By presenting the material in the way that he does, Wilders is not demonizing Muslims, he is challenging - indeed he is practically begging - his countrymen to engage in a debate about whether or not his dim assessment of Islam is correct.

Wilders has been living under 24-hour police protection since a Dutch jihadist murdered filmmaker Theo Van Gogh in 2004. Van Gogh was murdered after he released his short film "Submission," which described the misogyny of the Islamic world and the systematic terrorization of women in Islamic societies. Since then numerous Muslim clerics have issued religious judgments, or fatwas, calling for Wilders to be murdered.

Last month Wilders visited Israel and was the keynote speaker at a counter-jihad conference at the Menachem Begin Heritage Center in Jerusalem sponsored by MK Dr. Aryeh Eldad. Speaking to a standing-room only crowd, and under heavy guard, Wilders argued that Israel is a frontline state in the global jihad. The war against Israel, he claimed has nothing to do with territory, and everything to do with ideology. Israel, as the forward outpost of Western civilization in the Islamic world, stands in the way of Islamic expansion. Consequently, he claimed, when Israel defends itself by fighting its enemies, it is also protecting Europe and the rest of the free world.

As he put it, "Thanks to Israeli parents who see their children go off to join the army and lie awake at night, parents in Europe and America can sleep well and have pleasant dreams, unaware of the dangers looming."

Unfortunately, the Dutch court's decision to prosecute Wilders for calling attention to the threat of jihad in Europe demonstrates that the Europeans aren't particularly grateful to their defenders. Indeed, they despise them. Films like "Fitna," and Israel's use of its military to defend its citizens from Islamic supremacists, serve to remind them of the growing threat they desperately seek to ignore. Consequently, Europeans embrace every opportunity to blame any messenger.

The ripple effects of Wilders' indictment were immediately evident. In England, the British Muslim community mobilized to prevent his film from being screened in public. "Fitna" was scheduled to be shown at the House of Lords on January 29. But last Friday, with the threat of mass Muslim riots hanging thickly in the air, the House of Lords announced that it was cancelling the event.

British Lord Nazir Ahmed called the decision to prevent the thought-provoking, factually accurate film from being shown, "a victory for the Muslim community."

Wilders' indictment is a textbook example of blaming the victim. Wilders has been forced to live a miserable life for the past four years. He has no home. Security forces move him from place to place every single day. Since Van Gogh's murder, Wilders' entire life has become one long attempt to dodge the bullet permanently pointed at his head by radicalized Muslims in Holland and throughout the world. These would-be killers wish to see him dead not to avenge any violence Wilders committed, but rather, they believe he must die for doing nothing more than talking about Islam and how he interprets its message and meaning.

Needless to say, the Dutch Muslims Wilders caught on tape in Fitna calling for an overthrow of the Dutch constitutional order and threatening homosexuals have not been arrested for inciting hatred. Likewise, Lord Ahmed, who blocked "Fitna's" screening in the British Parliament was made a British peer after supporting the late Ayatollah Khomeini's 1989 death sentence against British novelist Salman Rushdie.

AND THAT'S the thing of it. Increasingly, throughout Europe, those who point out the dangers of radical Islam are hounded - first by Muslims - and then by legal authorities. In contrast, those who seek to intimidate and physically silence them are embraced by the states of Europe as legitimate leaders of their Muslim communities.

This dismal state of affairs, where jihadists are supported and their victims are oppressed, is true not only of people like Wilders who actively fight radical Islam's encroachment on European freedom. It is also the case for people who are victimized solely on the basis of their ethnic identity.

At the same time Wilders and people like him are forced into hiding, Jews throughout Europe find themselves assaulted and under siege not because of anything they have done, but because they are Jews.

Incidents of anti-Semitic violence in Europe reached post-Holocaust record highs over the past month. Jewish children have been violently attacked in France, barred from schools in Denmark, and harassed in England, Sweden, Switzerland, Holland and Germany just for being Jews. In Britain, Muslims have now taken to entering into Jewish-owned businesses and kosher restaurants to threaten the owners and patrons - just because they are Jewish. Synagogues have been firebombed and defaced. Calls have been issued in the US Muslim community on the Internet for Muslims in America to similarly intimidate Jews by entering into synagogues during prayer services and condemn worshippers for supporting Israel.

Jewish men have been brutalized by Muslim gangs in Britain and viciously stabbed in France, just because they are Jewish. In Sweden, pro-Israel demonstrators were attacked with stones by Muslims this week. Even in the US, anti-Semitic violence and intimidation has reached levels never seen before. And in almost all cases of anti-Semitic violence throughout what is commonly referred to as the free world, the perpetrators of the violence and intimidation are Muslims. They attack with the full backing of non-Muslim multiculturalists as well as neo-Nazis. The two groups, which are usually assumed to be at loggerheads, apparently have no problem converging on the issue of hating Jews.

And in almost all cases of anti-Semitic violence, the Islamic identity of the attackers has been de-emphasized or obscured by the media and by politicians, or used as justification for their crimes. In France, for instance, from the way government officials talk it, would be reasonable to assume that a dozen Muslim teenagers were provoked to viciously beat a ten-year-old Jewish girl by the IDF's operation against Hamas in Gaza.

Here then, we arrive at the point that the cabinet missed on Sunday when it passed its decision to commit the government to providing legal assistance to any IDF veteran who runs afoul of European legal authorities during vacations in London and Brussels and Oslo and Stockholm. The point that was missed is that in the event that IDF veterans are charged with war crimes, even the best attorneys will be of little use. These veterans will not be defendants at legitimate trials. They will be the victims of politically motivated show-trials.

In an interview with *Ha'aretz* on Friday, Wilders claimed rightly that the Dutch court's decision to prosecute him was not a legal decision but a political one. And if he is convicted, his conviction won't be based on evidence. It will be based on the desire of the Dutch multiculturalists to make an example of him to appease the radical Muslims who seek his death, and intimidate any would-be disciples into keeping their mouths shut.

So too, if IDF veterans are indicted for war crimes, they won't be prosecuted based on facts. They will be persecuted to advance the prosecutors' and judges' goal of appeasing their homegrown radical Muslims who seek the destruction of Israel and who violently attack anyone perceived as supporting Israel.

Given this bleak reality, the steps that Israel must take to defend its citizens are not legal but diplomatic. Israel should announce travel advisories against all states that enable the conduct of show trials against its citizens. And it should threaten to cut off diplomatic ties with any country that seeks to persecute Israeli soldiers. Only by recognizing and pointing out what is really going on will Israel have any chance of protecting those who defend our freedom from Europeans who have decided to surrender to Islamic intimidation rather than protect their own liberty. (Jerusalem Post Jan 26)

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#### **Obama, Oslo Reactionary** By P. David Hornik

"It will be the policy of my administration to actively and aggressively seek a lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as between Israel and its Arab neighbors," President Obama said last week. He also remarked: "Just as the terror of rocket fire aimed at innocent Israelis is intolerable, so, too, is a future without hope for the Palestinians."

A day earlier Obama had made his first phone call as president to President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority. And on Wednesday this week, his new-old Middle East envoy George Mitchell is already due here to meet with Israeli and PA leaders.

In other words, Obama means business. Yet each of his above-quoted statements has something fundamentally wrong with it.

First, by saying his administration will “actively and aggressively seek a lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as between Israel and its Arab neighbors,” Obama is saying he has an agenda for Israel. But is it Israel’s agenda?

Of course, at least out of diplomatic propriety, all of Israel’s current prime-ministerial aspirants—from Ehud Barak and Tzipi Livni on the Center-Left to Binyamin Netanyahu on the Center-Right—will say that it is. They’ll say how delighted they are that Mr. Mitchell has come for a visit and that Mr. Obama is so eager to work with Israel in solving its problems.

On February 10, though, Israel is holding elections, and all the polls say a Center-Right bloc led by Netanyahu will win. That will mean most Israelis have become skeptical enough about a “lasting peace” between Israel and its Palestinian and other Arab neighbors that they see “aggressively” pursuing such an outcome—certainly at this stage, with Hamas ruling Gaza and a weak, corrupt PA, its collapse to Hamas prevented only by the Israeli security forces, ruling the West Bank—as out-of-sync with reality.

In other words, Obama has announced an agenda for Israel even though, for one thing, he’s not Israel’s president, and for another, it’s not Israel’s agenda. In this Obama is continuing the practice of his Republican predecessor, George W. Bush, who in June 22 announced his “road map” for Israeli-Palestinian peace to which Israel later attached 14 reservations that were subsequently ignored.

What gets lost in the shuffle is that Israel is supposed to be a sovereign country with the right to set its own policy. If Obama, as many expect, ends up clashing with Netanyahu, he’ll actually be clashing with an Israeli electorate that, having experienced the results of 15 years of “Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking” up to the latest rocket bombardments, supports leaders who stand for a more cautious, security-conscious approach.

To this electorate—and to Israeli democracy itself—Obama’s promise to “actively and aggressively seek” an outcome that, if pursued rashly and heedlessly, can spell grave security consequences for Israel is, in effect if not in intent, an expression of contempt. Obama’s words connote that Israel is a mere instrumentality of U.S. policy, its elections meaningless, its people’s hard-earned experience irrelevant.

As for Obama’s statement that “Just as the terror of rocket fire aimed at innocent Israelis is intolerable, so, too, is a future without hope for the Palestinians”—the first discordant bell it rings is that of moral equivalency. This is so de rigueur that it might not seem worth mentioning. It is, however, worth noting that constantly insinuating to a people subjected to relentless terrorism that they are themselves guilty of something equivalent to terrorism is a form of psychological abuse—even if Obama’s is one voice in a very large chorus.

More specifically problematic in Obama’s assertion, though, is the word “hope.” It is, of course, a stand-in for “statehood”; Obama is saying that a future without statehood for the Palestinians is something as “intolerable” as rocket fire on innocent civilians.

Meanwhile it was reported on Friday that “during the past few days, the PA security forces arrested more than 30 Hamas supporters and figures in different parts of the West Bank...Sources close to Hamas said the majority of the detainees were being held in PA security installations where some of them had been ‘brutally tortured’ by their interrogators. The sources said that Islamboli Badir, the son of slain Islamic Jihad official Riad Islamboli, required medical treatment after being tortured with electrical shocks by members of the PA’s General Intelligence Service....”

And on Sunday it was reported that “Col. Radi Assidah, the Palestinian Authority’s security commander in the Jenin area, said over the weekend that his force is protecting and providing shelter to Islamic Jihad fugitives...Assidah said the Islamic Jihad men arrived about five months ago at the headquarters of the PA security forces in Jenin to seek sanctuary until their cases with Israel were resolved...Assidah also revealed that the

PA government of [Abbas’s Prime Minister] Salaam Fayad was paying the wanted Islamic Jihad men monthly salaries....”

Brutal torture of detainees on the one hand; sheltering and paying the salaries of terrorists on the other, and this while the PA is a largely autonomous entity but not yet a state. What’s the relevance to the future Palestinian statehood that Obama proclaims a fundamental goal and a moral imperative? It’s that such phenomena—torture of detainees, support of terrorists—are widespread in Arab states. Is there really a moral compulsion to create another one?

Indeed, if according to Obama’s diagnosis the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza are suffering from a lack of hope, should statehood be presumed to be the antidote? Are the masses of oppressed, poverty-stricken Arabs in Egypt, for instance, leading lives of fulfillment? And with Arab statehood having led, in cases like Iraq, Algeria, Sudan, and others, to nothing short of large-scale atrocities, can Obama be sure that his “hope,” isn’t a recipe for calamity, especially with horrific abuses already occurring in the ostensibly moderate Palestinian Authority?

These and other problems with Palestinian statehood have recently led figures like former Israeli National Security Council head Giora Eiland, former Israeli chief of staff and current Likud Knesset candidate Moshe Yaalon, and Senator Sam Brownback to propose alternatives to that old, hackneyed, harmful notion. Some of those alternatives, too, like bringing in Jordan and Egypt to govern the Palestinians and look out for Israel’s security, may be fanciful or premature—but are at least attempts to break the mold.

Obama, though, for all his image as a force for newness, appears not yet to have reached that stage and instead pledges to “aggressively seek”—with or without Israel’s consent—the same repeatedly, disastrously failed panaceas. If there is any doubt of it, his choice of an old, Oslo-era peace processor like Mitchell should put it to rest.

Sometimes the bringers of “change” have nothing to peddle but the pernicious illusions of the past. (FrontPageMagazine.com Jan 26)  
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#### **Why The Public Has A Right To Know** By Nadav Shragai

How many people remember why the elections were moved up? How many of us recall that after Prime Minister Ehud Olmert announced his resignation, Shas demanded that Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni pledge that Jerusalem not be a matter for negotiation, and Livni, who had already discussed the division of the capital with the Palestinians, refused, and thus failed to form a government?

No doubt about it, Operation Cast Lead completely transformed the public agenda, but the absence of Jerusalem from the public discourse just before the election is very disturbing. After all, no one really has any illusions: The day after a new government is formed in Israel, the issue of Jerusalem will come up again. The Palestinians, assisted by U.S. President Barack Obama, who has already pledged to be aggressive on the Middle East, will pressure Israel to make Olmert’s legacy and his pledges a reality, and the public has a right to know now how its elected officials will behave.

Will they go the route of former prime minister Menachem Begin, who more than 25 years ago lashed out at the U.S. ambassador to Israel, Samuel Lewis, telling him Israel was not a banana republic and that Israel would make do with bread and margarine if necessary, but would not accept dictates? Or will they act like Livni, who warned the public this week against Likud chairman Benjamin Netanyahu, arguing that his positions would lead to a clash with the United States?

There were many who were unenthusiastic about Begin’s rigid stance, but many more appreciated it. The concern Livni raises over Netanyahu may show that the times and public tastes have changed, but it also shows a transformation in the backbone of the country’s leadership.

During the era of Ariel Sharon, Olmert and Livni, coordination with the United States became sanctified to absurd levels; sometimes it was not clear whether it was a means or an end. But today as well, even though the approaches of our political leaders are so different from that of Begin, it seems that the Israeli public, with its healthy instinct, understands that coordination and consensus with the United States are not the be-all and

end-all. The issue of Jerusalem, it is to be hoped, will illustrate this. But first, the public must know how its leaders intend to act when it comes to this issue.

Yisrael Beiteinu chairman Avigdor Lieberman, the rising star of recent opinion polls, stood only a few months ago in the City of David area of Jerusalem and explained that his idea of exchanges of territory and populations also applies to Jerusalem, and that Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem like Jabal Mukkaber should be among those exchanged. Lieberman does not reveal to the wider public what Jerusalemites already know: Every neighborhood on the seam line has an adjacent or nearly adjacent Arab "outlying neighborhood." Jabal Mukkaber, for example, is a stone's throw and a gunshot away from the homes of Armon Hanatziv. The Qassam rockets fired on Sderot and Ashkelon would seem like child's play compared to what would happen here if such outlying neighborhoods are given up. It is enough to recall the firing from the Arab neighborhood of Beit Jala on the neighboring southern Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo - which went on for years, multiplying the point of friction and distributing it to hundreds of points along a dividing line dozens of kilometers long - to understand what a bizarre reality, one our politicians tend not to talk about, would be our lot.

But Lieberman is not alone among the dividers. Defense Minister Ehud Barak already gave up half of Jerusalem at Camp David in 2000, and was willing to share sovereignty on the Temple Mount as well. Livni's and Olmert's teams are ready for something similar. Even Netanyahu is not exempt from questions: What, for example, does he plan to do with the legacy left to him by Olmert, Livni and Barak, who have already agreed to divide the city? Does he intend to do what he did in 1996, when he divided Hebron, or is he prepared to pledge now unequivocally that this legacy - agreement in advance to divide Jerusalem, of which Olmert has informed the Obama administration - does not obligate him, and that talks on dividing the city are unacceptable?

Partition, beyond its significance in terms of values, history and religion, has additional practical implications: the high likelihood that tens of thousands of Palestinians will stream into the Jewish part of the city - just as those in the north have already begun moving to nearby parts of the capital within the separation fence - and the possibility that Jews will leave the city on a large scale, as occurred after partition in 1948. But these are trifles about which the parties do not really bother informing the public. (Haaretz Jan 28)

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### **The Israeli People Have Finally Had Enough** By Ian O'Doherty

So, it's genocide now, is it? Or is it actually another holocaust, something which one typically restrained Palestinian analyst described as "worse than Hitler's war against the Jews"? Are we watching the ethnic cleansing of an entire people? Are we witnessing the deliberate eradication of a race?

Well, no actually, we're not.

Yet the conventional dinner party wisdom which we've had to put up with in the media, both here in Ireland and generally across Britain, is that somehow Israel is the aggressor in the rapidly worsening situation in Gaza.

Footage of air strikes with the ensuing photogenic explosions and dramatic plumes of smoke, quickly followed by clips of collapsed buildings and enraged mourners, makes far better copy than actually looking at the reasons why Israel has done what it's done.

Anyone who devotes only a cursory glance at the news, both print and television, would be forgiven for thinking that, out of spite, might and malice, Israel has decided to destroy the Palestinian people.

The problem with that conclusion -- and it's not something you're going to learn from the BBC and most other outlets -- is that, contrary to the currently popular belief, Israel is actually acting with a ridiculous degree of restraint.

Over the last couple of years, thousands of rockets have been landing on Israeli soil and, finally, they have had enough.

But behind that statistic there is a human dimension which tends to be rather ignored.

I know many people in the southern Israeli town of Sderot and what is remarkable about their stories is not the number or make of rockets which

have fallen on them on a daily basis for years, but the psychological carnage this wreaked upon them.

One woman freely admitted to me that she hasn't had a proper night's sleep in more than two years as she and her family now basically live in their bomb shelter and it's hard to tell who she hates more -- the Muslim terrorists of Hamas or the Israeli government which she thinks has abandoned them.

It's a common feeling amongst residents of southern Israeli towns who have been the silent victims of a long campaign of violence, intimidation and murder carried out by Hamas. And now, finally, that the Israelis have said that enough is enough, they are somehow meant to be the aggressors? There are people of good conscience on both sides of this argument, but one of the main problems in this debate lies in the cowardly tendency of the Western media to apply equivalence to both sides.

Thus, Hamas is seen to be as legitimate a government as the Israelis, and its rocket attacks across the border from Gaza are seen as being part of a yet another, intractable, interminable Middle Eastern dispute.

There's just one problem with that approach -- it's completely wrong. Hamas is a fundamentalist Islamic organisation intent on the eradication of the state of Israel and all its citizens; a violent fascist regime that allows honour killings and the execution of homosexuals to continue in its sphere of influence. Bankrolled by Iran, it manages to make even Hezbollah look like a moderate organisation.

But Hamas is clever.

As a friend of mine from Sderot pointed out, one of its favourite tactics is to launch Qassams from Palestinian schoolyards -- while the schools are still in session.

Hamas does this, you see, knowing that the IDF can't immediately strike back (they can vector a rocket launch site within 90 seconds) because the last thing the Israelis need is footage of a devastated Palestinian school with dead kids.

And, over the last week, we have seen carefully manipulated footage of dead civilians, with the fact that they were effectively used as human shields conveniently ignored. When Israel pulled out of Gaza -- ironically, the last battalion of IDF troops to leave Gaza contained some people from Sderot -- they were acceding to international and internal pressure. The doves on the Left said it was to prove to Palestinians that they wanted to give Palestinians independence, the hawks on the Right -- and there are some truly scary right-wingers in Israel, even as ardent a supporter of the country as I am will freely admit that -- prophesied that it would lead to carnage.

And, lo and behold, virtually as soon as the last jeep left Gaza the rockets started. And then the blockade began, and the whole damn mess started all over again.

But there's a bigger picture here, something which Israelis have been trying to broadcast to the world, but which, thanks to their spectacular inability to accurately and sympathetically portray their point of view, has not been properly transmitted. It's this -- Israel is the front line of the war between democracy and Islamic fascism.

Would you rather live in a society with a free press, equal rights for women -- and anyone who knows an Israeli woman will know that they're not easily suppressed, anyway -- equal rights for gay people and a proud and stubborn belief in the right of the individual to lead their life in the way that they see fit or would you rather exist in a society where women who dare to speak their mind are executed, where gay people are not just shunned but murdered and where having a dissenting thought marks you out for death?

The civilian deaths in Gaza are to be mourned, and anyone who says otherwise is reprehensible. But in a sick and twisted irony, they are mourned more by Israelis than by Hamas, who know that every dead Palestinian kid is worth another piece of propaganda.

Here in the West, where we share the same values as Israel, we need to start standing shoulder with this tiny oasis of democracy in a vast desert of savagery.

To do otherwise is moral cowardice of the most repugnant kind. (Irish Independent Jan 5)

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