

Why We Cannot Criticize Israel That Way
A Response to Alfred Grosser
By Matthias Küntzel

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“I was despised as a Jew by the Germans.” This sentence begins the French political scientist Alfred Grosser’s essay, “Why I Criticize Israel.” He is not the only one to emphasize Jewish identity when criticizing Israel. A German-Jewish group is calling for an end to the Hamas boycott; Jewish-American authors like Tony Judt have argued for the dissolution of Israel as a Jewish state; and 350 Jews in Britain (Independent Jewish Voices) have distanced themselves from their umbrella organization’s pro-Israeli position.

Some, such as the historian Eric Hobsbawm and the playwright Harold Pinter, seem to have discovered their Jewishness upon becoming critics of Israeli policy, which has garnered them greater attention in the media. The contention that Jews cannot be suspected of anti-Semitism and that they are therefore especially convincing critics, one assumes, is common sense. This, however, contradicts a study published by the American Jewish Committee, which documents anti-Semitism among Jewish writers and concludes that Jews contesting and challenging Israel play a decisive role. This phenomenon represents a “staggering characteristic of new anti-Semitism.”¹ How do we view Alfred Grosser’s criticism of Israel? Are his arguments “especially convincing” or “staggeringly anti-Semitic”?

Grosser calls our attention to “the terrible lot of the inhabitants of Gaza, the West Bank, or East Jerusalem” and attributes their circumstances to the “terrible position of present-day Israeli policy.” He writes: “I do not understand the fact that Jews today despise others and claim the right to

¹ Alvin H. Rosenfeld, “Progressive“ Jewish Thought and the New Anti-Semitism, American Jewish Committee, December 2006.

pursue policy mercilessly in the name of self-defense.” Israel’s violence, he continues, is “luring ... so many desperate young people into suicide attacks.” Moreover, the “old, fundamental” Arab question has to be taken seriously: “Why should we bear the onerous consequences of Auschwitz?” Here, Grosser touches upon a sore spot, crucial to the guilty conscience of many Europeans who hold themselves indirectly responsible for the plight of the Palestinians. This, however, is based on a false assumption: No Arab has had to suffer onerous consequences for Auschwitz. It is true, the experience of the Holocaust in 1947 prompted the United Nations to vote in favor of the foundation of a Jewish state in Palestine. The fact that this resolution at the same time created an Arab Palestinian state, however, has fallen into oblivion.

Eternal Oppressor?

The majority of Arab Palestinians wanted to accept the United Nation’s two state solution in 1947. After all, at this time around 10, 000 Palestinians were working in predominantly Jewish-led industries such as citrus farming. But the Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin el-Husseini, rejected the two state solution without consulting his fellow Palestinians and persuaded the leaders of the five neighboring Arab nations to prevent the establishment of a Jewish state by all means. The war of 1947-48, just as disastrous as it was avoidable, resulted in the “onerous consequences” Grosser alludes to: 6,000 Israelis and countless Arab Palestinians dead, and innumerable Arab Palestinians and Jews within the rest of the Arab world displaced.

To this day, PLO historiography suppresses Arab voices that supported Zionism or had come to terms with the Zionist movement. It was in this spirit that numerous Arabs welcomed European Jewish immigrants in the 1920s as investors who would help lessen the material and cultural gap between the East and West with new technologies and new enthusiasm. Hillel Cohen’s pioneering study, *Palestinian Collaboration With Zionism 1917-1948*, enumerates the motives for Arabs to cooperate with Zionists. Some promised themselves personal gain (supplementary income or employment), others co-operated in what they considered to be the best interest of their

tribes, villages, or nation, while the motivations of a third group “were ethical and humanist: They had Jews as friends and neighbors and were disgusted by the violence of the Palestinian national movement.”²

These acts of violence were perpetrated by Arabs whose hatred of Zionists was rooted in the new immigrants’ modern way of live – a way of life that severely challenged traditional customs. While, as a rule, the branch of Palestinians in favor of modernization sought to cooperate with Zionists, Islamist forerunners under the leadership of the Mufti Amin el-Husseini battled against every attempted agreement as a betrayal and thus enabled the overthrow of the first two state proposal in 1937.³

This Mufti’s legacy continues to have an effect. Those who seek a settlement with Israel still risk their lives: A total of 942 Palestinians were murdered by fellow Palestinians between 1987 and 1993 due to alleged “collaboration,” whereby 130 of these allegations involved “moral misconduct” (drug use, “prostitution”, video trafficking).⁴ Is Grosser interested in these deaths as well?

The Abstract Evil

Sari Nusseibeh, the former PLO representative for Jerusalem and director of the Al-Quds University, refers to the second Intifada as “a ruinous and sanguinary fit of madness” in his recently published autobiography. He accurately criticizes the Hamas charter as a document that “sounds as if it came straight from the pages of *Der Stürmer*.”⁵ Dissidents such as Nusseibeh are not mentioned in Grosser’s essay. He views the Palestinians as the collective victim and Israel as the aggressor that commits crimes “in the name of self-defense.” Obviously, Grosser is little interested in the real policy options for Israel. When asked in an April 2007 interview in the German

² Hillel Cohen, *Army of Shadows. Palestinian Collaboration With Zionism 1917-1948*, (University of California Press, 2007).

³ On Amin el-Husseini’s role see, <http://www.matthiaskuentzel.de/contents/national-socialism-and-anti-semitism-in-the-arab-world>

⁴ Abdul Jawahd Saleh and Yizahr Be’er “Collaborators in the Occupied Territories: Human Rights Abuses and Violations” (February 1995), www.birzeit.edu/crdps.

⁵ Leon Wieseltier, “Sympathy for the Other”, *New York Times Book Review*, April 1, 2007.

daily *Die Tageszeitung*, “Isn’t it true that Israel faces a special threat?”

Grosser replied: “In my opinion: No. Israel exists.”⁶

When Iranian president Ahmadinejad refers to Israel’s obliteration as a contribution to the “liberation of humanity,” Grosser does not listen. He also turns a blind eye to Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, who calls Israel a “cancer” that “must be eliminated,” and to the Hamas charter, which considers the destruction of Israel to be a vow, a promise to God. Whether Israel continues to occupy the Gaza Strip or vacates the territory in spite of rancorous domestic opposition seems to be irrelevant to Grosser. If the Gaza Strip develops into a flourishing Palestinian model region after the withdrawal, whose inhabitants focus on peace and prosperity (as was hoped in summer 2005), or if this swathe of land turns into a militarized frontline of the war against Israel does not really matter to him either.

Essentially, the familiar black and white paradigm must remain intact. Grosser portrays Israel as the abstract evil, irrespective of what policies the Israeli government does or does not carry out—while the Palestinians stand for the abstract good, regardless of what their representatives permit or accomplish.

The Beginning of Complicity

Thus, Grosser shows understanding even for suicide terror and attributes the “willingness to commit suicide attacks” to Israeli “oppression, disrespect, and dispossession.”⁷ From the offender’s perspective, Grosser’s attempt to rehabilitate the suicide bomber’s honor represents an affront. Sheik Qaradawi, the most prominent representative of the Muslim Brotherhood, to which Hamas is a member organization, reminds us: These “are not suicide operations. These are heroic martyrdom operations and the heroes who carry them out don’t embark on this action out of hopelessness or despair.”⁸ Pride and enthusiasm are central to the suicide murderers

⁶ Interview with Alfred Grosser, “Ich muss als Jude nicht für Israel sein”, *Die Tageszeitung*, April 4, 2007.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Anti-Defamation League, Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi: Theologian of Terror, August 1, 2005, see: www.adl.org.

testamentary videos, which confirm Qaradawi's claim that they are fulfilling a religious mission.

Grosser ignores the fact that the character of the Middle East conflict has fundamentally changed in the last 20 years. A war of *Weltanschauung* and religion has emerged from a minor conflict between Palestinians and Zionists, which later escalated into a larger conflict between the Israelis and the Arabs. Today, Iranian-led Islamism is waging war against the Western model of liberalism and democracy, a war that aims to destroy Israel in its first stage.

Grosser's claim to act out of "genuine sympathy for the suffering in Gaza and in the 'territories,'" degenerates into a sentimental gesture; he does not care about analysis, which - in its literal translation - means the dissolution of a complex problem in its individual parts. The absence of clarity, however, is the beginning of complicity. Those like Grosser who turn a blind eye to Islamist ideology—its cult of death, its anti-Semitism, its hatred of self-determination—stab every Muslim in the back who wants to prevent the Talibanization of his life. Second, they make Israel into a scapegoat for Islamist violence according to the motto: The more barbaric anti-Jewish terrorism becomes, the more outrageous Israeli guilt must be. The ancient "the Jew is guilty" stereotype is thus supplemented with a modern variant.

This type of circular argument, based on ignorance, is *en vogue*. A 2007 survey sponsored by the BBC shows that 77 percent of Germans negatively view Israel's world influence. The only country in the world whose elimination is being propagated and prepared for by Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas, is thus regarded as scapegoat No. 1. It is comprehensible that against this background a growing number of Jews prefer to belong to the "good Jews," who attack Israel instead of defending it against Islamists. Why should Jews be more courageous or more prudent than non-Jews? Is, however, everyone who radically criticizes Israel at the same time an anti-Semite?

Israel is not a haven of virtue as is generally known. On one hand, Israel's government deserves to be criticized just like every other

democratically elected government in the world. On the other hand, European thinking has been influenced by anti-Semitic patterns for centuries—in this regard, no criticism of Jews or Israel is *a priori* immune of anti-Semitic stereotypes. At least, a European Union working definition has helped us establish a framework to evaluate when legitimate criticism stops and anti-Semitism begins: 1. When Israeli policy is equated with Nazi practices or when symbols and images of long-established anti-Semitism are assigned to Israel; 2. When Israel's right to existence is denied; and 3. When a double standard applies and demands are made of Israel that would never be expected or demanded of another democratic state.

Those who breach this code are not necessarily supporters of Nazi anti-Semitism. They nevertheless pave the way for those who are prepared to wage a nuclear war against Israel. Hostilities against Israel appear today in the form of a pincer movement: On one side, we have anti-Semites such as Ahmadinejad or Hamas who draw their “knowledge” about Jews from the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion.” On the other side we have non-Jewish and Jewish “fellow travellers of anti-Semitism” in progressive Western movements and governments who take up and proliferate, albeit in muted form, Iran's attempts to delegimize Israel.

Can Alfred Grosser be located in the second camp? I will leave the answer to the discretion of the readers.