

## Don't Accept the Preventable as Inevitable

Whether it is rampant ahistorical anti-Zionism or unjustified Israeli actions, we are too willing to abet things that should be unacceptable to us. Letting them slide does the American Jewish community no favors.

**By Michael J. Koplow**

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Two-state supporters are well accustomed to the criticism that separation between Israelis and Palestinians is an idea whose time has passed. That criticism often centers on feasibility, and frequently comes from people who support two states conceptually, but point to Israeli settlement activity being so extensive that it can no longer be rolled back. Yet there is another type of criticism of two states that is gaining ground, and disturbingly so since October 7, encapsulated by Tareq Baconi's guest essay in the *New York Times* this week. This type of denunciation of two states isn't actually about two states, but is instead an effort to cloak anti-Zionism in a layer of rhetoric about current policies and events. The argument is not that the time for two states is over, but that it never should have existed in the first place because Israel is and always has been illegitimate.

Arguments like this are not new, but they have a new veneer of legitimacy. It doesn't seem to matter that Israel's basic existence is being questioned more forcefully than ever following the worst attack on Israelis in their history, coming from a terrorist organization that is open and transparent in its objection to Israel itself and not to any specific Israeli policies or actions. It doesn't seem to matter that arguments like Baconi's are glaringly ahistorical, from his treatment of the 1947 partition plan—which is strangely lumped in with other examples of colonial powers attempting to control their colonies rather than acknowledged as the effort to end Britain's colonial rule—to his deliberate exclusion of any measure of Palestinian agency as he yada-yadas over a nearly five-decade period. It doesn't seem to matter that he studiously avoids ever identifying the territory that he describes as occupied—hint: it's not just the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem—or that he purports to be concerned about righting historical wrongs but not about creating new ones, or that he rails against injustice but has no concern for what that should look like for both sides rather than only one.

The impulse for many when confronted by a screed that denies Israel's legitimacy in 2024 by referring to events eight decades ago is to argue with it by referencing different events or different interpretations. Balfour is confronted with San Remo, Nakba is countered by the Holocaust, allegations of European settler colonialism are batted down by the fact that a majority of Israeli Jews are from the Middle East. But the impulse should be a different one, one that is far angrier and that changes the playing field. The camp that does not believe that Israel alone should have to justify its existence should ask why it's acceptable for anyone to make appeals to history when Israel is an entity that actually exists in the world. It shouldn't allow Baconi to end his piece with the cliffhanger of positing a current one-state reality and asking how it can be made just, but to make him answer his own question. It should refuse to accept that the way to correct injustice for Palestinians—which absolutely must be corrected—is to create injustice for Israelis. The problem with arguments like Baconi's, which are not only common on campuses but on the *New York Times* editorial page, is not that they are antisemitic but that they assume a set of circumstances that does not exist and never will. Trying to argue with this type of anti-Zionism on its own terms does us no good, and rather than bemoaning its spread, we need to stop accepting that spread as somehow inevitable and hang its absurdity around its own neck.

Refusing to accept that something is inevitable when it isn't actually inevitable applies as well to the more immediate events taking place on the ground. The Israeli drone strikes that killed seven World Central Kitchen aid workers on Monday have quickly become the most serious diplomatic challenge that Israel has encountered since October 7, with clear condemnation coming from the U.S., intense anger from European countries, and the UAE ceasing its cooperation with Israel on the maritime humanitarian corridor from Cyprus. The Israeli government and the IDF apologized for the strike and deemed it a mistake under a complex set of wartime conditions, and the predictable defenses and justifications have already started flowing, from the difficulty of making snap decisions under pressure on the battlefield to the comparisons to past U.S. strikes that killed civilians in Afghanistan or Mosul.

The aid workers were killed in three separate, sequential strikes on three separate cars that were traveling in a deconfliction zone that had been coordinated ahead of time with the IDF. Mistakes absolutely happen in wartime, and people can judge for themselves whether this tragedy is aptly dubbed as a mistake or as a deliberate bad decision. But whether or not this tragedy was a mistake or something else, the focus on the incident itself obscures the real story. Mistakes are inevitable, but the layers of decisions that precede mistakes are not, and too many have been too willing to accept for months a narrative in which Israel has no choices but only inevitable pathways that it must take.

Even before Monday, over 200 aid workers in Gaza had been killed in IDF strikes since October 7. Only after the World Central Kitchen deaths is the IDF now creating a new coordination mechanism between Southern Command, which is in charge of the war, and COGAT, which oversees humanitarian assistance, despite the fact that people have urged this for months and it was so obviously and desperately needed. The Israeli government made a deliberate decision months ago not to figure out who would provide security for humanitarian convoys because it didn't want to contemplate making hard choices. So now the answer is that security is not controlled either directly by Israel or in close coordination with anyone else, and thus spotting a single armed person going into a warehouse puts a target on unarmed aid workers leaving that warehouse. Israel decided that once humanitarian assistance crosses into Gaza, it is no longer an Israeli problem, and thereby created the conditions in which outside aid groups that have no ulterior motive other than helping cook food for millions of Palestinian civilians can no longer operate in Gaza out of fear of Israel rather than fear of Hamas.

We want to believe that Monday's strike was an inevitable fog of war mistake. When three Israeli hostages in Gaza were shot and killed in December by IDF soldiers—also not simultaneously, but in an ongoing episode that unfolded in succession—after they had taken off their clothes, put their hands up, waved a white flag, and shouted in Hebrew not to shoot, we wanted to believe that this was an inevitable fog of war mistake. Sometimes things are inevitable mistakes in real time, and sometimes things are deliberate in real time and turn into inevitable mistakes once the consequences are revealed. Mistakes can be prevented by actions that are taken outside the fog of war, and if we speak up for Israel and for the justness of its response to October 7, we have a moral obligation to have our eyes wide open to what we are defending.

The Baconi op-ed and the WCK deaths are both important vectors for the American Jewish relationship with Israel. There are practical reasons to have a more forceful communal conversation about Zionism in practice, and a more honest and more difficult communal conversation about how the war is conducted, both of which relate to where the American Jewish community's relationship with Israel is going. There is a generation of American Jews who have grown up thinking that having a Jewish state is a luxury, and that any current injustice to Palestinians overrides any historical injustice or potential future injustice to Jews. We have also relatedly come to the collective understanding that providing our kids with a sanitized and fairytale version of Israel and Israeli history—one that pretends Israel was actually a land without people, that Palestinians in 1948 all left voluntarily, that there is no ugly side to Israel's occupation of the West Bank even if that occupation was not one that Israel was seeking—backfires. Israel education writ large has to make a forceful case for Zionism in practice, but also

has to embrace complexity and nuance if we want future generations to have more than a passing attachment to Israel.

In the post-October 7 world, we seem to have forgotten the second half of this lesson. There was no room for complexity and nuance while Hamas terrorists were slaughtering Israelis and carting them into the bowels of Gaza, nor should there have been. Israel's response was necessary and deserved whole-hearted American Jewish support, and until the hostages are returned, anyone who advocates a permanent ceasefire should think long and hard about what that means, not only for the Israelis living through hell but for the incentives it creates in the future. But many of us will watch the argument continue to be lost with our kids and with younger American Jews if we believe that the path to a future relationship with Israel lies in not acknowledging the ways in which Israel's campaign has been destructive, and in some ways that were preventable rather than inevitable. We are not serving ourselves well if we don't question Israeli actions and decisions before they lead to tragedies that aren't actually inevitable, and if we insist that what is gray is actually black and white. There is only so much we can do to impact what Israel does, but if we don't do a better job for ourselves, we only make Tareq Baconi's job easier.

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