

PANEL ON THE RESPONSES TO THE RECENT TERRORIST ATTACKS ON THE U.S.

*Anne F. Bayefsky**

The war on terrorism has a fundamental flaw, which puts its success directly at risk. It is the unwillingness to espouse publicly, a definition of terrorism, and hence to separate morally, politically and legally, terrorists from non-terrorists. It is not possible to win this war unless we recognize the enemy, are prepared to define a terrorist, and follow that lead wherever it goes, without discrimination.

Over the past two months the path has been impeded by smokescreens and subterfuge. Two months—because the current rhetorical battle took off from Durban, South Africa at the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, which ended just three days before the bombing of the World Trade Center. Durban was a conference in which Syrian and Pakistani diplomats took a leading role, with the vocal support in particular of the Palestinian delegation, Iran, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. They hijacked the agenda, isolated Israel, and forced the United States delegation to walk out. But in so doing, they also clarified their intentions.

In Durban, delegates remaining after the US and Israeli departure, discussed in public sessions whether the Holocaust had a capital “H” or an “s” on the end. Iran objected to the imbalance and favoritism which would result from adding a reference to Holocaust. The United Arab Emirates thought references to the Holocaust detracted from the accurate representation of historical events. In the end the global declaration against racism deleted all references to the Holocaust but one, which reminded us of its occurrence.

Durban delegates discussed the meaning of anti-Semitism and whether it was appropriate to include it in a final anti-racism agenda. Syria called it a “curious and bizarre concept.” Pakistan called it “a difficult area.” All references to anti-Semitism in paragraphs relating to political parties, legal and judicial cooperation, education and training, were eventually removed. Only two references were ultimately permitted, as equivalent to “Anti-Arabism” or “Islamophobia.”

* Visiting Professor, Columbia University School of Law. These remarks were presented at the International Law Association ILA Weekend, October 2001, New York, New York, United States.

The political assault on Israel in Durban began with "Zionism is racism," and metastasized into Israel as an apartheid state. Both were specifically approved by the NGO Forum, in which the words of Palestinian Hanan Ashrawi drew parallels between Israelis and Nazis. In the government conference, Egypt complained that occupation "implants people who are of a different religion and that breeds racism," "Judaization" in United Nations Human Rights Commission lingo. Since separation from Palestinians was "apartheid," intermingling of Moslem and Jew was evidently acceptable as long as it was not on Arab soil. In the end, the Durban Declaration declared a new "right to return to their homes" designed to terminate the Jewishness of Israel, and placed the "plight of the Palestinian people under foreign occupation" into a global commitment to fight racism.

On September the 8th, therefore, the political strategy was clear. One and the same states sought to minimise or exclude references to the Holocaust, and redefine or ignore anti-Semitism, as sought to isolate the state of Israel from the global community as a racist practitioner of apartheid and crimes against humanity. The vestiges of Jewish victimhood were to be systematically removed by deleting the references to anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. They were to be displaced by the Palestinian victim living under racist, Nazi-like, oppression. Success on the political battlefield was to be accomplished by utilizing the language of human rights to demonize, and then dismember, the opponent. In sum, every "anti-Semitism" was matched with "anti-Arabism." Every objection to singling out Israel was met with cries of "Islamophobia." Every Jewish tragedy was met with Palestinian grievance.

Post September 11th, the strategy of Arab states and many Moslems in and outside the United States, is exactly the same. From Jordan's King, Egypt's President, Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei, and Saudi Arabia's Prince Bandar, comes: combating terrorism means looking for root causes. American support for Israel is at fault. Dozens of Islamic leaders in the Arab world tell us that a war against terrorism is a racist response against Islam. From the purveyors of hate on the Internet, the Jews in the World Trade Center all escaped, and Palestinian celebrations were media concoctions. According to demonstrators in many Arab states, the true victim is the Palestinian, not the dead beneath the rubble. From France's Ambassador to Israel and Palestinians themselves, Jewish children in pizza parlours or teenagers in Tel Aviv discotheques are different. In sum, the goal is to eclipse the dead in New York, Pennsylvania and Washington by the victims of anti-Arabism in the United States and elsewhere. A war against terrorism is Islamophobia. The root causes of terrorism reveal the true victim to be the Palestinian.

The United Nations continues to serve as a staging ground for this inversion of terrorist and victim. In the recent General Assembly debate on terrorism, Libya, on behalf of the Arab Group, said: “[R]esistance to occupation is one of the most important obligations, not only legitimate rights, for people whose lands are occupied by the foreigners. ... Occupation must be on the top of the terrorists acts that the world should decide to confront and eliminate.” Many Arab delegations, including the Iranian and Saudis, denounced an alleged new wave of Islamophobia and bigotry against Muslims and Arabs, called for the international community to “address terrorism at its roots,” and objected to criticism of “resistance to foreign occupation and state terrorism.”

The insistence by Arab states on differentiating between violence directed at Israelis and all other forms of terrorism, and exempting violence in the name of self-determination or against foreign occupation, is also scheduled to come to a head shortly in the General Assembly’s Sixth Committee. The definition of terrorism will be a determinative factor in the adoption of a comprehensive convention on international terrorism. At the same time, the election of Syria to the Security Council means a state sponsor of terrorism will now be a major player in the operation of the Committee of the Whole charged with implementing Security Council directives to combat terrorism.

In this environment, refusing to define a terrorist is no longer an option for the Administration. The failure to clearly state that Israelis are the victims of terrorism, and vocally support their entitlement to self-defence, will blow apart the existing coalition just as surely as the deafening silence.

Some thought the President could have it both ways. Moslem participation in the fight against terrorism on the one hand, and rewards for Arafat in the form of promises of statehood and pressure on Israel to negotiate in the face of violence, on the other. To many, the two tracks seemed eminently complimentary. Keep Moslem states inside by keeping Israel on the outside.

The plan, as could have been anticipated, is disintegrating as we speak. Moslem states will not be satisfied with what has been offered so far, since what they seek is the total isolation of Israel. Israel cannot afford to be marginalized in a war against the very terrorism that threatens to destroy it. The rest of us risk losing our way in the absence of a coherent purpose. State sponsors of terrorism or foreign terrorist organizations are not reliable allies in a fight against terrorism, whatever their religion. The victims of terrorism will not be silenced, just as they are also not defined by race, religion or nationality.

At bottom, Americans continue to underestimate the sense of vulnerability in Israel and the gravity of the threat. It is a threat felt by five million Jews in a region of over 100 million people in surrounding hostile states, living in 28,000 square kilometers or 0.2% of the land occupied by the Arab world. At the same time, the assassination of a cabinet Minister in any democracy is impossible to ignore. Such facts make an Israeli Prime Minister, regardless of political party, unable to stand by.

The essential rules which govern a war on terrorism are those of proportionality. Those who would instead define ally or foe alike by religion—be they Moslem or Jew—will doom the current campaign to failure and ultimately irrelevance, as the passions of racism triumphant in Durban will take over.