

# Opinion // Obama's Distorted Views on Israel

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*by Peter Berkowitz*

## **The president's quest for even-handedness is misguided and dangerous.**

Speaking at Harvard University in October, Secretary of State John Kerry asserted that “a massive increase in settlements over the course of the last years” has triggered “an increase in the violence because there’s this frustration that’s growing.” In the effort to clarify Kerry’s remarks—since, in fact, the rate of construction has declined—State Department spokesman John Kirby advanced the old moral equivalence argument. “Frustration on both sides,” he said, has led to the current violence. To clarify his clarification, he added that “individuals on both sides” are “guilty of acts of terror.”

The Obama administration’s formulaic reactions to the recent outbreak of terror in Israel disguise the deeper causes of Palestinian attacks while obscuring the crucial long-term steps needed to build decent relations between Israel and the Palestinians. And they reflect the

administration's tendency to exaggerate Israel's responsibility while underestimating that of the Arab world and Iran for the turmoil that has swept the region—a tendency that has helped worsen things all over the Middle East.

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To be sure, a few Israelis have perpetrated violence, but Israeli society has roundly denounced them; the army and the police have launched investigations; and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued a stern warning against citizens taking the law into their own hands.

Meanwhile, between October 1 and October 20, Palestinians committed 40 stabbings, four shootings and five car rammings against Israeli Jews. And Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas encouraged them. In mid-September, he said Palestinians “won’t allow” Israelis to “desecrate” the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre “with their filthy feet.” Soon after, from the podium of the UN General Assembly, Abbas falsely charged that Israel was imposing a new scheme to govern access to the Al-Aqsa Mosque “in direct violation of the status quo since before 1967 and thereafter.”

Following Abbas’s inflammatory statements in September, the outbreak of violence in early October, and the obfuscatory even-handedness of the State Department response, President Obama weighed in at a White House press conference. While condemning “violence directed against innocent people” and upholding Israel’s right to defend itself, he effectively doubled down on the moral equivalence argument. He called on “both Prime Minister Netanyahu and Israeli elected officials and President Abbas and other people in positions of power to try to tamp down rhetoric that may feed violence or anger or misunderstanding, and try to get all people in Israel and in the West Bank to recognize that this kind of random violence isn’t going to result in anything other than more hardship and more insecurity.”

An air of unreality hung over the president’s admonition, since Palestinian violence is not random—it is directed at Israeli Jews and is intended to spread terror. Netanyahu, moreover, has sought to restrict the Israeli use of force to lawful self-defense, while Abbas initially refused to condemn this latest surge of Palestinian terror and has shown little ability to contain it.

President Obama’s restraint in response to Abbas’s incitement stands in stark contrast to his apparent determination last March to interpret statements by Netanyahu in the worst possible light. A few days before the March 17 parliamentary elections, Netanyahu affirmed that a Palestinian state would not be established while he served as prime minister. On election day, he warned constituents that “Arab voters are coming out in droves to the polls.”

These coarse statements, uttered in the heat of a closely contested election, are defensible. Without abandoning the creation of a Palestinian state as the ultimate goal, Netanyahu had concluded that the spread of Islamic extremism throughout the region had rendered, in the near term, the creation of a Palestinian state inconsistent with Israeli security. And on election day, he wanted to communicate to his constituents that for him to prevail they would have to turn out in high numbers because Arab citizens, who tend to vote for the left, were doing likewise. Still, even after Netanyahu sought to walk back his comments after the election, Obama accused him of repudiating his commitment to a two-state solution and of calling into question the right of Arab citizens of Israel to vote.

Discounting or ignoring Palestinian incitement, while depicting crude characterizations of local political realities as Israeli assaults on democracy, may be motivated by a misguided quest for even-handedness. But such responses ill-serve the cause of peace.

Instead, the Obama administration should forcefully condemn PA incitement and the terrorism it helped launch. While insisting that the Israelis use proportionate force in self-defense, the administration should recognize the many steps the Israeli government has taken to fight Palestinian terror lawfully.

More important, the Obama administration should grasp the larger picture. It is true that Israel must restrict settlement building and do more to help Palestinians create the physical and political infrastructure of a state. The crucial factor in the making of Palestinian terrorists, however, is a system of Palestinian education—including schools, the media and the mosques—that sows hatred by demonizing Jews and denying Israel's legitimacy. President Obama should demand that the Palestinian Authority remove incendiary textbooks and activists masquerading as teachers, rein in PA-controlled media and crack down on mosques that educate for terror. The United States should condition a portion of foreign aid on PA progress in implementing these vital measures.

Such educational reform could save coming generations of Palestinian children from growing up to be haters, and Israeli children from living with the violence that is hatred's inevitable accompaniment. The Obama administration's recourse to moral equivalence language encourages the opposite.

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