

# MERIA

## FROM BLOCKADE TO BOYCOTT: THE IMPACT ON UK JEWRY OF REACTIONS TO GAZA

By Dave Rich\*

*UK reactions to the Gaza War have left many mainstream Jews in Britain feeling isolated and demonized, while the hardening of attitudes toward Israel allows antisemitic language to seep into anti-Israel discourse. Israel faces a long-term strategic threat from political campaigns to undermine its legitimacy, which are moving from the margins to the mainstream in Britain.*

Britain is a country that favors the underdog and likes to see itself as the custodian of the basic principles of fair play. As such, the Gaza War of December 2008-January 2009 and the ongoing blockade, as viewed through media coverage in Britain, has damaged Israel's image for many British people.

There are many reasons for this: the disparity in firepower, higher Gazan casualties; the daily news pictures during the Gaza War of Israeli planes being able to overfly the area and drop bombs without being subject to attack; the allegations of war crimes, actively pursued and promoted by parts of the British media; and the economic blockade on a Gaza Strip considered to be an impoverished, desperate place. In the framework of British thinking, this does not appear to be the kind of fight it favors.

The purpose of this article is to explain the impact that the campaign to delegitimize and isolate (and, for some, to ultimately destroy) Israel has on Diaspora Jewry. Looking from Britain, it seems obvious that this campaign is gathering momentum and poses a strategic threat to Israel.

The *Mavi Marmara* episode of May 31, 2010, showed the legacy of the Gaza War on public impressions of Israel. In general, people in Britain are less willing to listen to Israel's reasons for action or give the Israeli government the benefit of the doubt when things go wrong. Where this has always been the case with Israel's hardened opponents, it

has become an increasingly unchallenged attitude in mainstream UK politics and media, and especially within trade unions and NGOs. The narrative of Israel's opponents is now heard in those arenas much more than previously, and calls for economic sanctions, cultural boycotts, and diplomatic isolation are no longer confined to the margins.

The sheer quantity of media coverage that events involving Israel receive leaves many British Jews feeling uneasy. There are rational explanations for the amount of coverage--for instance, that the conflict is an important one that affects Britain's national interests; that there are significant constituencies in Britain (including British Jews) with a strong interest in the conflict; that Israel is an open society full of English speakers, in which journalists can operate with ease; the expansion of online news coverage; but added together these do not fully explain why, for example, the *Guardian* website (shared with its Sunday newspaper the *Observer*) published 95 different news articles, cartoons, photo galleries, videos, rolling news blogs, and opinion pieces on the *Mavi Marmara* story in just five days. There are some parts of the media that seem to have an emotional investment in the Israeli/Palestinian issue that does not apply to any other conflict not involving British forces. The *Guardian*, in particular, gives the impression of not only reporting on the plight of the Palestinians but actively campaigning on their behalf, through both their editorial content and news reporting.

Complaints that this is unfair to Israel may be right, but they won't change this reality. Nor is this just about paying more attention to Israel's PR. The consensus among Israel's supporters that the outpouring of anger over the *Mavi Marmara* episode could have been assuaged by better Israeli PR in its aftermath is wrong, and misses the point. In asymmetric warfare, PR is the battlefield, and victory and defeat are not measured by traditional means. The *Mavi Marmara* is a perfect example of this: While Israel achieved its military objective of preventing the ship from reaching Gaza, this was a battle that Israel lost nonetheless.<sup>1</sup> To view events on the ship and the PR fallout afterwards as separate and distinct is itself a fundamental mistake. While Israel is engaged in a conflict with Hamas that requires the regular use of armed force to protect Israeli citizens, each use of force by Israel outrages (and thereby energizes) Israel's opponents in Europe and elsewhere. In other words, actions taken by Israel to weaken short-term threats on its doorstep are strengthening a long-term threat that is growing overseas. The recent Reut Institute report *Building a Political Firewall Against Israel's Delegitimization*, which called for a reorientation of Israel's policies to take this threat into account, could not have been more timely.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to separate the impact that the Gaza War had on people who were already hostile toward Israel from the impact on the much larger number of uncommitted people in the middle ground. In short, the war motivated, energized, and radicalized the former; it made the latter more receptive to the idea that Israel is the "bad guy," without mobilizing them--as yet--in significant numbers toward political action. For both groups, there is less patience with Israel when it is perceived to have misbehaved, less willingness to listen to Israeli explanations for their actions or positions, and more haste to assume that Israel behaves in bad faith, acts out of cruelty, and has no interest in making peace.

There are still many people in Britain who sympathize with Israel's position. Most people

do not pay that much attention to the conflict, much less have a fixed view of it. It is also important not to overstate any consequent anti-Semitism. Opinion polling shows that attitudes toward Muslims, for instance, are much more negative than those held toward Jews. However, it would be complacent to assume that anti-Israel agitation will come to nothing. The idea that Israel is out of control and needs to be reined in by international action is commonly voiced among opinion-forming elites during moments of crisis. A growing number of people are fed up with the seemingly endless conflict and blame Israel, as the sovereign power, for the lack of a solution. Many in Europe reject the use of force to solve any problem (even in self-defense) and do not understand the concept of an ideologically-motivated enemy, committed to total victory, and impervious to compromise, much less accept that such a thing exists. This applies when Israel uses military force against Hamas, and even more so when Israel uses force against foreigners in international waters. The humanitarian narrative, which is the dominant framework through which British audiences understand Israel and Gaza, overshadows complicated and hard-edged geopolitical explanations for Israel's actions. The more incidents such as the *Mavi Marmara* that take place, the more likely it is that Israel will be treated like a pariah.

The fact that anti-Israel campaigns make many Jews feel uncomfortable does not make them antisemitic. As Anthony Julius writes in *Trials of the Diaspora*, "It would be a mistake in analysis to regard confrontations with Zionism and Israel as taking place between Jews and anti-Semites alone."<sup>3</sup> What is the case is that the hardening of attitudes toward Israel has opened the door to more extreme, and sometimes antisemitic, language when Israel or Zionism is discussed. To give just a few examples from the past 12 months involving British parliamentarians:

- In December 2009, then-Respect MP George Galloway, having initially refused to believe allegations that Israel harvested the organs of Palestinians, offered the Swedish

journalist who first made the claim a public apology in his newspaper column and accused Israel of “playing mini-Mengele on Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails.”<sup>4</sup>

- In February 2010, Liberal Democrat Baroness Jenny Tonge, who has a record of slipping into unconscionable language in the course of her pro-Palestinian activism, called for an investigation into allegations that the IDF harvested organs in Haiti under the cover of their relief efforts. Tonge did say that she thought the allegations were baseless, but nonetheless said that they should be investigated. Tonge was sacked as the Liberal Democratic spokeswoman on health as a result.<sup>5</sup>
- In March, two Labour MPs, Martin Linton and Gerald Kaufman (the latter a longstanding Jewish critic of Israel) used a pro-Palestinian meeting in Parliament to argue that people should vote Labour in the forthcoming general election because the Conservative Party was controlled by pro-Israeli and Jewish money. Linton alleged that, “There are long tentacles of Israel in this country who are funding election campaigns and putting money into the British political system for their own ends”; Kaufman claimed that, “Just as Lord Ashcroft owns one part of the Conservative Party, right-wing Jewish millionaires own the other part.”<sup>6</sup>

More generally, the comparison of Israel to Nazi Germany has, in some quarters, overtaken the comparison with apartheid South Africa.

All four of these current and former parliamentarians have a long record of anti-Israel activity. For those who already thought ill of Israel, it is more than ever seen as an aggressive, even genocidal, racist state, at the heart of every problem relating to the Middle East, terrorism, extremism, and human rights. Bob Marshall-Andrews, who visited Gaza as a Labour MP<sup>7</sup> in March 2010, on a trip organized by a pro-Palestinian group, wrote:

“This ruthless, genocidal repression is the worst in today’s world. It is worse than the Sudan, worse than the Congo, worse than Burma--a large claim but true, and that truth lies not in the identity and suffering of the victims but in the identity and nature of the perpetrators.”<sup>8</sup> Marshall-Andrews’s argument was that Israel is a democracy, allied to America, and therefore its alleged crimes outweigh the millions killed in civil wars or massacres in Congo or Sudan. This hints at another frustration of Israel’s opponents. The election of Barack Obama was greeted with widespread acclaim in Britain, where George W. Bush was reviled as the architect--with the UK’s own Tony Blair--of the Iraq War, which caused huge amounts of anger and resentment on all parts of the British political spectrum and a particular sort of shame for the British left. This plays into British post-colonial guilt over the Balfour Declaration and a sense of rising impotence over Britain’s failure to right this historic “wrong.”

For supporters of Israel--meaning not its professional advocates, but rather the large majority of British Jews who identify to some degree with Israel as a country and a nation--the *Mavi Marmara* was another episode that left their sense of well-being and belonging somewhat bruised. This is a process that began some years ago, but which continues to be fueled by attitudes toward Israeli policy in Gaza. Throughout the autumn and winter of 2009-2010, a large number of people--mainly young Muslims--have appeared before the courts for acts of violence and severe public order offences committed at anti-Israel demonstrations in London during the 2009 Gaza War. Sentencing has been strong, and many have been sent to prison. Those politicians and parts of the media who support the protestors have warned of the impact that such stiff sentencing will have on British Muslim political participation. Yet few of the protestors or their supporters seem to have considered the chilling effect that the violence had on British Jews. This lack of empathy with Jewish feelings and concerns, borne in part out of the post-Gaza assumption that

Israel is pretty much always in the wrong, has had a damaging impact.

Various factors have mingled together in the consciousness of many ordinary British Jews to create a sense of uncertainty and fear for the future: hostile media coverage of Israel; over-the-top language, sometimes straying into antisemitism, from some high-profile figures; and totally unrelated events such as a High Court ruling that the system of Jewish school admissions was unlawful. Some of the worries are well-placed and some are not. It is not always easy, in this atmosphere, to separate the legitimate from the illegitimate. *Jewish Chronicle* editor Stephen Pollard has written of his despair at people who see antisemitism behind every hostile media report or government action relating to Israel. The British intellectual scene, particularly in the media and academia, is dominated by a liberal left worldview that sees the Palestinians as the underdog and Israel as little America. This is different from antisemitism, even if it sometimes looks similar. The growing campaign against the Gaza blockade and the inevitable flashpoints it throws up will continue to feed this view, with all that it entails for public policy and debate.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For more on the *Mavi Mamara*, see Dave Rich, "The Mavi Marmara Metaphor," *Standpoint* (July/August 2010), <http://standpointmag.co.uk/node/3210/full>.

<sup>2</sup> Reut Institute, *Building a Political Firewall Against Israel's Delegitimization* (March 2010), <http://reut-institute.org/data/uploads/PDFVer/20100310%20Delegitimacy%20Eng.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora* (Oxford, 2010), p. 4

<sup>4</sup> George Galloway, "Dark Echoes of Holocaust," December 28, 2009

<sup>5</sup> Simon Rucker & Martin Bright, "Tonge: Investigate IDF stealing organs in Haiti", *Jewish Chronicle* 11 February 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Bright and Robyn Rosen, "MP: Israel's Tentacles Will Steal the Election," *Jewish Chronicle*, March 29, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Marshall-Andrews stepped down as an MP at the 2010 general election.

<sup>8</sup> Bob Marshall-Andrews, "Speechless in Gaza," March 6, 2010, <http://www.labourlist.org/speechless-in-gaza-bob-marshall-andrews>.