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How Israel Silences Dissent

By MAIRAV ZONSZEIN

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On July 12, four days after the latest war in Gaza began, hundreds of Israelis gathered in central Tel Aviv to protest the killing of civilians on both sides and call for an end to the siege of Gaza and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. They chanted, “Jews and Arabs refuse to be enemies.”

Hamas had warned that it would fire a barrage of rockets at central Israel after 9 p.m., and it did.

But the injuries suffered in Tel Aviv that night stemmed not from rocket fire but from a premeditated assault by a group of extremist Israeli Jews. Chanting “Death to Arabs” and “Death to leftists,” they attacked protesters with clubs. Although several demonstrators were beaten and required medical attention, the police made no arrests.

The same thing happened at another antiwar protest in Haifa a week later; this time, the victims included the city’s deputy mayor, Suhail Assad, and his son. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made no statement condemning the violence, even though he had previously stated his primary concern was the safety of Israeli citizens.

The vilification of the few Israelis who don't subscribe to right-wing doctrine is not new. Similar acts of incitement occurred before the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. But now they have multiplied, escalated and spread.

On July 10, the veteran Israeli actress Gila Almagor did not show up to perform at Tel Aviv's Habima Theater; she had received threats that she would be murdered on stage. In an interview in the Israeli daily Yediot Aharonot a few days earlier, she had expressed feeling ashamed after a 16-year old Palestinian, Muhammad Abu Khdeir, was kidnapped and burned alive by Jewish extremists.

In an interview during the Gaza war, the popular comedian Orna Banai said she felt terrible that Palestinian women and children were being killed — she was subsequently fired from her position as spokeswoman for an Israeli cruise ship operator. And Haaretz hired bodyguards for its columnist Gideon Levy after he wrote an article criticizing Israeli Air Force pilots.

The aggressive silencing of anyone who voices disapproval of Israeli policies or expresses empathy with Palestinians is the latest manifestation of an us-versus-them mentality that has been simmering for decades. It is based on the narrative that Palestinians are enemies who threaten Jewish sovereignty and are solely to blame for the failure to achieve peace. The Israeli peace camp — which remains obsessively focused on stopping settlement expansion and pursuing the ever-elusive two-state solution while ignoring Israel's failure to separate religion and state and guarantee equal rights for Arab citizens — has been incapable of challenging this mentality.

Israeli society has been unable and unwilling to overcome an exclusivist ethno-religious nationalism that privileges Jewish citizens and is represented politically by the religious settler movement and the increasingly conservative secular right. Israel's liberal, progressive forces remain weak in the face of a robust economy that profits from occupation while international inaction reinforces the status quo. In their attempt to juggle being both Jewish and democratic, most Israelis are choosing the former at the expense of the latter.

Israel has never, for example, genuinely addressed the fact that non-Jewish Arabs who generally identify as Palestinian account for about 20 percent of the population (this excludes the approximately three million Palestinians living under Israel's control in East Jerusalem and the West Bank). Israel has also never clearly defined its borders, preferring to keep them vague and porous. Nor has it defined what it means to be "Israeli," as distinct from being "Jewish," leaving a vacuum that has been filled by nationalist and religious ideologues.

During the cold war Israel had nothing to fear as far as the U.S. ever questioning their policies towards Palestinians - they were essential...

Martin Luther King spoke out about war and America's aggressive stance in the world. It made him many enemies. Those of us who were young...

The problem here is that criticism of Israeli policies quickly devolves into anti-Semitism as is in evidence from the most recommended...

This has allowed the us-versus-them mentality to bleed into Israeli Jewish society. “Us” no longer refers to any Jewish citizen, and “them” to any Palestinian. Now, “us” means all those who defend the status quo of occupation and settlement expansion, including many Christian evangelicals and Republicans in America. And “them” means anyone who tries to challenge that status quo, whether a rabbi, a dissenting Israeli soldier or the president of the United States.

Perhaps this shouldn’t come as a shock. For most of Israel’s existence, the majority of Israelis have allowed the state, in the name of Jewish sovereignty and security, to violate Palestinians’ basic human rights — including access to water and the freedom of movement and assembly. The state has killed unarmed protesters and then failed to carry out investigations; it has allowed settlers and soldiers to act with impunity; and it has systematically discriminated against non-Jewish citizens. After so many years of repressing those who stand in the way, the transition to targeting “one of your own” isn’t so difficult. Now it is the few Jewish Israelis who speak the language of human rights who are branded as enemies.

Zeev Sternhell, a political scientist and an expert on fascism, believes that “radical nationalism” and the “erosion of Enlightenment values” have reached new heights in Israel. “To grieve for the loss of life on both sides is already a subversive act, treason,” he told Haaretz. Mr. Sternhell has experienced Jewish extremist violence firsthand; in 2008, a settler planted a bomb in his home that wounded him.

Israelis increasingly seem unwilling to listen to criticism, even when it comes from within their own family. Not only are they not willing to listen, they are trying to silence it before it can even be voiced. With a family like that, I would rather be considered one of “them.”