

# The Ha'aretz Cartoons

## Outraged over outrage

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Cartoons have become explosive, underlining deep political fault lines in the new world order and more often than not, concealing bigotry and diverting debate from racism and imperialism to the much abused concept of “freedom of expression”.

The latest episode was started by a cartoon published in Ha'aretz in which the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Minister of Defence Ehud Barak, say farewell to troops on the way to bomb Iran, while asking them to bomb the UNESCO offices in Ramallah on the way back. This was in reference to the recent decision by UNESCO to accept Palestine as a full member of the institution –something which led to a US, Canadian and Israeli tantrum, or more precisely it led to an effort to blackmail the institution by withholding their funds from it.

This cartoon caused UNESCO to reprimand Israeli authorities, saying that it could be read as incitement to hatred and endanger the lives of their staff. The Ha'aretz report counterclaimed that the cartoon was in fact a “riff on the government’s anger at UNESCO’s decision to accept Palestine as a full member”. However the ambiguity of this cartoon was evidenced by the response of Israeli ambassador Nimrod Barkan who harangued UNESCO: “Ask yourselves what you did to make a moderate paper with a deeply internationalist bent publish such a cartoon (...) Perhaps the problem is with you.” After that, he added “What exactly does UNESCO want of us – to send our fine boys to protect UNESCO’s staff, or to shut down the paper? It seems your work environment is getting more and more reminiscent of ‘Animal Farm.’”<sup>1</sup>

Leaving aside the fact that it is questionable that one can be a “moderate” supporter of a colonial project such as Israel, both the rabid responses of pro-Zionist bloggers complaining about “Islamic-dominated UNESCO” not “getting it right”<sup>2</sup> and the extraordinary response of Barkan only proves that this was not an innocent cartoon after all. It contained a barely concealed attack, and UNESCO was right to complain of incitement to hatred.

With political satire there is always a thin line; in this case it is particularly thin – UNESCO is entitled not to take such a cartoon lightly since UN personnel, buildings and schools have in the past been bombed by the Israeli army, for instance during Operation Cast Lead in 2009. Yet, the tone in the Ha'aretz article is mocking, implying that it is ridiculous to suggest that a “civilized

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<sup>1</sup> [www.haaretz.com](http://www.haaretz.com)

<sup>2</sup> For one of many examples: [elderofziyon.blogspot.com](http://elderofziyon.blogspot.com)

country” such as Israel would do such a thing as bomb a UN building – thus the outrage expressed by UNESCO is farcical.

UNESCO, with the reprimand, was asking the Israeli ambassador for guarantees that UNESCO would not be targeted. It was this guarantee which Barkan refused to give. Far from it, he blamed UNESCO for fuelling such Israeli hostility. No reassurance then –rather the coded hostility of the cartoon is repeated, but this time by the representative of the very State that bombs UN installations.

So to reduce the issue to one of “freedom of expression” as put forward by the Israeli spokesperson Yigal Palmor is a bit rich: *“We’ve heard of Islamists raging against supposedly disrespectful cartoons, but U.N. officials going down the same road – that’s a whole new ballgame”*<sup>3</sup>.

The case referred to by Palmor is that of the Prophet Mohammed cartoons published in 2005 by the Danish right-wing paper Jyllands-Posten, which created a good deal of controversy about the thin line between incitement to hatred and freedom of expression. The cartoons predictably caused uproar in the Muslim world – they had after all been commissioned with the explicit purpose of offending Danish Muslims, to prove the paper was not scared of doing so. The aim in doing so was not centrally about freedom of expression or religious tolerance: the paper had after all previously rejected cartoons mocking Jesus. The Prophet Mohammed cartoons were commissioned as part of the Jyllands-Posten’s strong pro-Israel, pro-US wars, anti-immigrant (particularly anti-Arab) stand. The “religious tolerance” and “freedom of expression” façade fails to conceal the bigotry and provocative nature of such an editorial decision.

Similar hypocrisies abound within Israel itself. Here too, bigotry is used to justify brutality. Anything goes when it comes to depicting Palestinians in Israel. To take a couple of examples from a myriad of possible ones, there is the popularity of the (oh, so monotonous, predictable, down-the-line racist) animations of “Ahmed and Salim”<sup>4</sup>. The Jerusalem Post, another respectable and “moderate” Israeli paper, published an animated cartoon which makes fun of the murder of over 400 Palestinian children in Gaza during Operation Cast Lead, an atrocity which they label the “ Hamas Air Defence System”<sup>5</sup>. This is a Zionist sense of humour at its “finest”. Such Israeli cartoons express the racism of the powerful who feel they have the right to print and say whatever they wish about those they bomb and dispossess, under the banner of ‘freedom of expression’.

And yet, such freedom of expression is very much a one-way street. While Israel expresses outrage at anyone being outraged at its expressions of hatred, there is also the outrage over anything that criticises Israel. Here freedom of expression does not reign – far from it, any criticism is indicted as being antisemitic. Israel’s advocates engage in a constant wearying game of blaming, persecuting and harassing artists, journalists, historians and others as antisemites if they criticise Israel’s monstrosities against Palestinians. Cartoonists like Latuff are routinely branded as “Antisemitic” and “Jew-haters” for daring to compare the Warsaw Ghetto to Gaza. This is antisemitism devoid of its real meaning, used instead to close down debates and deflect criticism.

So who draws the line on where freedom of expression is permitted? Or rather, who is subject to its rules? There is apparently one rule when it comes to freedom of expression for Israel and

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<sup>3</sup> [www.miamiherald.com](http://www.miamiherald.com)

<sup>4</sup> [www.ahmedandsalim.com/](http://www.ahmedandsalim.com/)

<sup>5</sup> As reported in the website [jewssansfrontieres.blogspot.com](http://jewssansfrontieres.blogspot.com)

yet another for the rest of the world? Are Israelis entitled to express whatever opinion of others, no matter how hateful, but are untouchable themselves?

Political cartoons are more than a matter of “freedom of expression”. To frame the issue this way undermines a debate about the legacies of colonialism and the unfair imperial order of today’s world, a world where some feel entitled, through these “innocent” cartoons, to justify the violence of that order. An ‘innocent drawing’ can be far more effective as a vehicle for bigotry than speech. Israeli outrage at UNESCO’s reaction to the Ha’aretz cartoons is exactly the outrage of the bigot who has been caught out and says he was only having a laugh, then accuses his accusers of having no sense of humour.

This outrage is expressed both when Israel can’t get away with absolutely everything, and when their critics say anything. As for the Ha’aretz cartoons, let us say that they are a powerful reminder of how dangerous the Israeli State can be for the people of the world. Moshe Dayan, the Israeli General, once said that “*Israel must be like a mad dog, too dangerous to bother*”.<sup>6</sup> In that, the Israeli State has most certainly proved successful.

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<sup>6</sup> [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)

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