

Zionist right attacks Britain's chief rabbi for criticising Israeli policy

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Criticism of the Sharon regime's military suppression of the Palestinians by Britain's Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks provoked a vitriolic response within the Israeli political establishment.

Sacks voiced his concerns over the direction of Israel's policies in an interview with the *Guardian* on August 27. He described the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as "nothing less than tragic. It is forcing Israel into postures that are incompatible in the long run with our deepest ideals."

Daily events in Israel "make me very uncomfortable as a Jew," he said. In particular, he was "profoundly shocked" by reports of Israeli soldiers being photographed smiling alongside the body of a dead Palestinian. "There is no question that this kind of prolonged conflict together with the absence of hope, generates hatreds and insensitivities that in the long run are corrupting," he continued.

Just one day after his interview appeared, the *Jerusalem Post* demanded, "Resign, Rabbi Sacks". "If Sacks is so embarrassed by the sight of Jews defending themselves as best and as morally as they know how that he cannot contain himself, that is his right, but he cannot at the same time hold office as leader of an important Diaspora Jewish community", the paper editorialised.

Rabbi Shalom Gold, dean of a Jerusalem college for adults, told the BBC, "I have a great deal of respect for the chief rabbi and therefore it is extremely sad for me to hear him make such comments of such nature, a nature which for all intents and purposes will now make him irrelevant in the world Jewish community."

Voice of Israel, Israel's state radio, featured Sacks's remarks, which it prefaced with reports of the chief rabbi's meetings with radical Muslims, including an Iranian ayatollah, and his comment that they quickly

"established a common language".

The president of the British section of Israel's ruling Likud Party, Eric Grauss, said, "The great worry is that the terrorist organisations will see this as a split in the Jewish community and see it as evidence that their tactics are working."

Sacks is a prominent figure within international Judaism and the British establishment. As chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation of the British Commonwealth since 1991, he holds one of the most prominent rabbinical positions in the West and is a regular contributor on "Thought for the Day", the two-minute religious slot on the BBC's "Today" programme. He has regular contact with Prime Minister Tony Blair, and describes his relationship with Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown as one of his "loveliest friendships".

The chief rabbi has in the past avoided making any critical comments on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, unlike his predecessor, who was an outspoken critic of the Zionist settlements in the Occupied Territories. In his interview, Sacks claimed that the Israeli "peace camp" had been repeatedly "checkmated" by Palestinian terror and argued that it was Israel that made the biggest compromise when former prime minister Ehud Barak offered major concessions to the Palestinians. Unfortunately, "there has been no parallel cognitive leap" by the Palestinians, he added.

His decision to make even mild criticisms of Sharon's war against the Palestinians is indicative of the growing concern amongst many Jews over the brutal oppression that is being conducted in their name, and a fear amongst many leading Zionist politicians that Sharon's actions are jeopardising Israel's very existence.

In scenes reminiscent of Nazi atrocities during the

Second World War, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have been herded into poverty-stricken ghettos so lacking in basic amenities that nearly half of all Palestinian children suffer from malnutrition.

If the constant lock-ins and curfews were not enough, the refugee camps are also prime military targets for the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). In April, IDF forces invaded the West Bank in an operation that left 497 Palestinians dead. Accounts of the indiscriminate killing of civilians, including children and the disabled, in the Jenin refugee camp have been confirmed by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and, somewhat reluctantly, the United Nations.

Such atrocities against civilians are increasingly commonplace as Sharon steps up his efforts to destroy any basis for a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. The Palestinian Red Crescent reports that 30 of the 49 Palestinians killed by Israeli forces during August were unarmed civilians, seven under the age of 15.

Sacks's remarks were clearly intended as a friendly note of caution to the Sharon government that its actions are not supported by many Jews, including those whose defence of Israel could once have been regarded as automatic. But the Sharon regime cannot tolerate even such a mild rebuke. It justifies the military suppression of the Palestinians on the deeply pessimistic and fatalistic grounds that the strong arm of the Israeli military is the only defence of the Jewish people from a hostile world and the only way to preserve the state of Israel as both their champion and potential refuge.

Sharon rests on the support of a relatively thin layer of right-wing zealots and neo-fascist settlers, whose interests determine government policy in a manner out of all proportion to their social weight.

In contrast, many secular Jews do not support Sharon's actions, with repeated opinion polls showing a substantial majority in favour of Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza. In face of Labour's collaboration with Sharon, and the political disarray of Israel's peace movement, this sentiment remains largely inchoate. But it has found expression in the courageous action by hundreds of Israeli military reservists in refusing to serve in the Occupied Territories.

The fear amongst sections of the Israeli establishment

is that in expressing his differences, Sacks has not only drawn attention to the political divisions that exist amongst Jews—thereby compromising Sharon's claims to be acting on behalf of the entire Jewish people—but that he may even encourage opposition.

Sacks and his defenders responded to this ferocious broadside by insisting on his loyalty to the State of Israel. A statement from the chief rabbi's office said, "It will be clear to anyone who reads the actual *Guardian* interview, as opposed to the front page headlines, that the chief rabbi expressed passionate support for Israel, in a newspaper that has often taken a critical stance."

Israel's deputy foreign minister, Rabbi Michael Melchior, insisted that Sacks had done Israel a service by helping its critics understand the moral challenges it faced. "Our war is just and we don't have to apologise for it, but the reality is that hundreds of thousands of Palestinians are suffering at our hands", he added.

But diplomatic niceties cannot conceal the political crisis being created by Sharon's reckless turn to militarism. It is not the wise heads of old that are in charge of Israel's destiny, but an indicted war criminal, whose watchword has always been, "Escalate, Escalate, Escalate!" The dream of a democratic homeland that inspired millions in the aftermath of the Holocaust has turned into a political nightmare from which the mealy mouthed protest by Sacks and his kind cannot extricate the Jewish people.



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