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Column: One impact of the Intifada

A call to tolerance of those who dissent

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Over the summer I made a pledge to study the opinions of those with whom I disagree. Searching for inspiration for this column, I found a perfect opportunity to journey outside my comfort zone and attended an event sponsored by Students for Justice in Palestine featuring Diana Buttu, legal advisor to the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Fifteen minutes before the event, its organizer - with whom, by chance, I had previously interacted with on numerous occasions - offered me some time to talk with Ms. Buttu at the conclusion of her remarks. During my interview, I was eager to ask her if she believed the Second Intifada helped or hurt the Palestinian cause.

"Both," she said. Perhaps most interesting was her belief that the Intifada resulted in the complete polarization of Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians to the point where those venturing outside his or her community's belief are branded traitors. At that moment, something clicked in my head; she had just articulated a sentiment I shared, but had trouble expressing.

My politics about Israel are no secret; while both Jewish and a strong supporter of Israel's right to exist, I repeatedly find myself at odds with Israeli government policy. While I enthusiastically greet anyone who wants to engage me in a debate on the issues, some of my Jewish colleagues opt to slander. I've heard all the whispers; the lowest of these perhaps is the racist contention of a few that I have "Palestinian blood running through my veins," as if there were something inherently wrong with it. There isn't.

Another low point came last year when a Web site, purporting to identify anti-Israel bias in college newspapers, lambasted a column of mine on the Geneva Accords - a non-sanctioned Israeli-Palestinian effort to produce a blueprint for a final-status peace agreement - as its "Biased article of the week." In response to this careless vindictive diatribe, e-mailers pigeonholed me as anti-Semitic and accused The Hatchet of media bias tantamount to anti-Semitism. What upset me most is this Web site neglected to mention my long-standing service to the Jewish community.

There is nothing anti-Semitic about believing Israel's settlement policy is both abhorrent and unwise. There is nothing anti-Semitic in believing the route of Israel's security fence places undue hardships on Palestinians while believing the fence itself helps shield Israelis from terrorism. There is nothing anti-Semitic in decrying Ariel Sharon as a visionless leader hopelessly leading Israel down the path to its own demise. And there is certainly nothing anti-Semitic about reaching out to members of the Palestinian community in an attempt to establish dialogue and foster understanding.

Many Jewish opinion makers disparage Jewish criticism of Israel. Bret Stephens, the recently departed editor-in-chief of the Jerusalem Post, contends in his farewell column that Jews living outside Israel should refrain from criticizing its policies because they don't live there. He argues that left-of-center thinkers in the Diaspora should not wantonly criticize Israeli policy because they themselves are not

living with threat of terrorism. Frankly, this analysis is appalling. My best friend works in a bar which one short year ago was the target of a suicide bomber. People about whom I care deeply ride buses to school and work daily in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa. I know people who currently serve, or will serve, in the Israeli Defense Forces. Israel is a place I think about daily, and the precept of a state for the Jewish people is an ideal I hold dear. To say the policies of the Israeli government do not affect me, simply because I live in the United States, is just plain wrong.

American Jews of our generation have never been forced to consider a true Israeli existential crisis. One now exists. Without concerted action against the current Israeli government policy, the dream generations fought for could cease to exist. If Israel does not work in earnest end to its conflict with the Palestinians - regardless of who is to blame for the cyclical violence - it is entirely possible a new generation of Jews will know Israel only through stories and laments. When that happens, I won't derive any pleasure in saying "I told you so."

-The writer, a junior majoring in international affairs, is Hatchet opinions editor.

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