

THE DOG

*Why the
UK Jewish
Community
Supported
Operation Pillar
of Defence*

THAT

DIDN'T

BARK

BY KEITH KAHN-HARRIS

We'd been here before. When Israel carried out Operation Pillar of Defence in Gaza from 14-21 November 2012, the similarities to Operation Cast Lead in December 2008 to January 2009 were unmistakable: the IDF's attempts to destroy the Hamas infrastructure and Hamas's firing of rockets into Israel. As before, both sides suffered, but casualties on the Gazan side were much higher and included many civilian fatalities. As before, Israel faced enormous international condemnation, both governmental and on the streets. As before, Hamas remained in control of Gaza and both sides claimed victory. But one thing, at least, wasn't the same. In the UK Jewish community, Operation Cast Lead met with confusion and discord as to the appropriate response. By contrast, Operation Pillar of Defence prompted a surprisingly swift, united show of support for Israel, which raised questions about the health of Jewish politics in the UK today.

Since the second intifada in 2000, traditional UK Jewish support for Israel had become increasingly difficult to maintain as more and more Jews saw Israeli intransigence as a contributing factor in the failure of Oslo. While at first such "dissidence" from communal support for Israel was largely confined to the left and groups such as Jews for Justice for Palestinians and Independent Jewish Voices — groups that were, often unfairly, dismissed as comprising secular, uninvolved, marginal Jews — as the 2000s wore on, the consensus at the heart of the community also came under strain.

Operation Cast Lead divided UK Jewish community leaders and organisations, who could not agree upon a unified response to the conflict. The traditional solidarity rituals associated with Israel's wars were accompanied by much soul-searching as the conflict continued and Gazan casualties spiralled. The solidarity rally held in Trafalgar Square on 9 January, 2009 could only take place after intensive behind the scenes negotiation and an odd compromise that set up a phone line via which donations to both Israeli and Palestinian medical charities could be made; even then the small but significant Liberal Judaism movement found itself unable to take part. Towards the end of Cast Lead, a letter in the Observer appeared, signed by liberal but mainstream Jewish figures such as Rabbis Tony Bayfield and Danny Rich, expressing concern for civilian casualties in Gaza and calling for a ceasefire. Post-Cast Lead, some Jewish leaders and organisations began calling for a more open communal conversation on Israel. Most famously, in 2010 and 2011 the then UJIA and Jewish Leadership Council chair Mick Davis argued for the right of Diaspora Jews to express their honest opinion about Israel. Organisations such as the Jewish Leadership Council spoke of a communal "big tent" that could encompass measured criticism of Israel. Yachad, formed in 2011 after a long gestation, has aimed to provide a home for liberal-left Zionists who are deeply

concerned about Israel's current direction, oppose settlement-building and wish to emphasise the urgency of a two-state solution based upon withdrawal from the territories. While these developments sound modest, they reflected a significant and growing heterogeneity in the UK Jewish community opinion with regard to Israel. Operation Pillar of Defence was the first real test for this emerging pluralism. But despite the sanction of careful criticism of Israel by a significant portion of the UK Jewish communal leadership, the renewed assault on Gaza and Hamas prompted an immediate return to pre-Cast Lead unity.

On 15 November, an open letter to Daniel Taub, the Israeli Ambassador in London, was released by the Jewish Leadership Council. The letter was signed by 62 individuals and leaders from most of the main non-Haredi community organisations. The content of the letter was so striking that it is worth quoting in full:

*Dear Ambassador,
At this difficult and challenging time for the State of Israel and its citizens we wanted to send you an important message of support and solidarity from leaders and key institutions of the UK Jewish community. These sentiments prevail across all sections of our community, reflecting the national consensus within Israel itself.*

The claim made in the second sentence is strong. There was no poll of UK Jews during Pillar of Defence but surveys show that the majority of British Jews see themselves as supporters of Israel. The use of the term "prevail" is significant, implying a conflict inside the Jewish community being won by those in favour of solidarity. This claim is more tendentious given that the fast turnaround of this letter left no time to test the waters of communal opinion. Moreover, claiming that these sentiments prevail "across all sections" of the community is even more problematic. Certainly, the secular Jewish left and sections of the radical "post-denominational" youth are likely to have been ambivalent and even opposed to Pillar of Defence. It is unclear whether the letter is ignoring these sections of the community or actively attempting to exclude them. The claim that opinion in the UK Jewish community reflects "the national consensus in Israel itself" seems to suggest that support for Israel in the UK can be validated with reference to Israeli opinion. Certainly, most Israelis (or at least Israeli Jews) did support Pillar of Defence. Whether the majority view in Israel is worthy of unquestioned backing by UK Jews is highly questionable.

Over the past decade we have rallied together in support of Israel under the banner of "Yes to Peace, No to Terror and No to Hamas". The current Operation Pillar of Defence is an entirely understandable response to the intolerable assault upon the citizens of Southern Israel and the

23 ◀ *continued provocations of Hamas — an antisemitic terrorist organisation.*

“Yes to Peace, No to Terror” has indeed been a slogan commonly used in pro-Israel activity in the UK. “No to Hamas” has been less commonly used but there is little doubt that Hamas is viewed with fear by a majority of British Jews. The characterisation of Hamas at the end of the paragraph as “an antisemitic terrorist organisation” skirts over the difficult fact that Hamas was democratically elected by the people of Gaza and seems to close the door on any future negotiation with it (which even some Israeli politicians have suggested may have to happen). The “we” in the first sentence of this paragraph elides the increasing difficulties in mobilising Jewish support for Israel over the past decades and goes too far in implying a unified community that can agree on a common platform. The second sentence places the responsibility for Pillar of Defence clearly on Hamas: Israeli actions are a “response”, although the ambiguous wording — an “entirely understandable response” — does not necessarily mean that the response is a wise one. That the letter is trying to justify Israel’s actions as a response, implies discomfort with Israel as an active agent in the conflict. The “Yes to Peace” in the first sentence is more than rhetoric: the idea of Israel initiating conflict is a worrying one.

We take pride in the commitment of Israel’s political and military leadership to leave no stone unturned in seeking to avoid civilian casualties and remain true to the Jewish ethical ethos that underpins the doctrine of the IDF.

That this sentence should appear at all reveals the anxiety provoked by the high civilian casualties during Cast Lead and other recent conflicts. An emphasis on Israel’s attempts to minimise them has been a cornerstone of pro-Israel campaigning in recent years. Given that this statement was written when the conflict had only just begun and before any proper assessment of Israel’s conduct could be made, it implies a complete trust in Israel’s leadership. By failing to acknowledge the densely populated nature of the Gaza strip, the sentence ignores the inevitability of civilian casualties. It could also suggest that support is conditional upon the IDF remaining true to its “Jewish ethical ethos”.

We also take this opportunity to commend you personally on the admirable manner in which you stepped up to take an important lead in advocating for Israel so effectively across the UK national media over the past twenty-four hours. This is a difficult and often hostile arena. You have done your country proud.

The personal tone of this paragraph reflects the fact that Daniel Taub was born and raised in the UK Jewish

community. Like his predecessors, Taub has invested time developing relations with community leaders and speaking at community functions. The need for effective pro-Israel “advocacy” has become increasingly urgent in the past decade. Much of “the media” is perceived as hostile to Israel. Nonetheless, in identifying so closely with the Israel ambassador, the letter seems to be eliding “Israel” with “the government of Israel”. Ambassadors have to defend the actions of their country. The letter suggests that that is what Jews should do too, a far cry from the guarded pluralism that many of the signatories have advocated in the past. By singling out the UK media as “often hostile” — and therefore impartial — the letter allows for intra-Jewish discussion on the war to trump any critical or uncomfortable coverage from the UK media.

Your Excellency, please convey to your Government the support and sentiments of the leadership of this community.

Yours in solidarity,

While the list of signatories is broad and diverse, it does not include every UK Jew who can be described as a community leader. “Solidarity” implies support for Israeli government actions rather than empathy with those Israelis under rocket fire. Oddly, the letter does not even mention the suffering of Israeli civilians in the south. This letter could have been a simple statement acknowledging the fear that Israelis were feeling. Yet it went much further to stand with the choices of the Israeli government. The letter would have generated little interest had its list of signatories not included figures at the forefront of the critical line: Rabbi Danny Rich, CEO of Liberal Judaism, has appeared on panels with non-Zionist Jews. Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner of the Movement for Reform Judaism, had, a few days prior to signing the letter, hosted a public conversation with Amos Oz, in which the writer had called for a boycott of settlement products. Other organisations whose leaders had signed up, such as UJIA, have also been active players in the new pluralism. The date of the letter goes some way towards explaining the surprisingly broad temporary coalition: Operation Pillar of Defence began on 14 November and the letter was released the next day. Not signing would have been extremely hard, especially at a time of financial pressure on Jewish organisations. Yet the liberal end of the communal spectrum was broadly supportive; on 16 November, Yachad’s director Hannah Weisfeld sent an email to its supporters stating that “We unequivocally support Israel’s right to self-defence” and that “It is also a guiding principle of every Israeli military operation that it will do all it can to minimise civilian casualties.” While it did “mourn the loss of innocent lives on both sides” and reiterated the need for “the cycle of violence” to end, the tone of the email was unambiguously pro-Israel. It is true that, alongside the statements of

support, some Jewish organisations cautioned a more nuanced approach. In a note to its members on 15 November, the Movement for Reform Judaism stated that “We will actively debate and lobby for equal rights for all citizens in Israel and will openly disagree with decisions and actions of the Israeli Government which fall short of these principles. However, when it comes to threats to Israel’s survival from military or terrorist actions or campaigns to de-legitimise the State, our support is unconditional.” Similarly, on 20 November the Reform Assembly of Rabbis qualified their support to an extent by stating that “We are deeply concerned that once this particular struggle is over, and may that day be soon, unless there is real progress towards a long-term solution, Israelis and Palestinians will be doomed to an endless cycle of debilitating conflicts.” Jews for Justice for Palestinians and Independent Jewish Voices were the only UK Jewish organisations to condemn Pillar of Defence. These organisations are often marginalised by self-defined “mainstream” Jewish leaders. Given that both groups include members who reject the Zionist idea of a Jewish state as well as members who advocate boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel (although not exclusively as is sometimes alleged) they are not included in the cautious pluralism that has opened up since Cast Lead. Yachad has kept a careful distance from them, keen to stress its own “pro-Israel” credentials through redefining pro-Israel as a critical friendship designed to save Israel from itself. But during recent times of relative quiet, the gap between groups like IJV and JFJFP and the more “acceptable” liberal Jewish groups appeared to shrink; Yachad’s online campaign against house demolitions in the West Bank aligned its concerns with those of JFJFP, not the traditional UK pro-Israel organisation. But Pillar of Defence redrew these progressive lines and reinstated the old definition of “pro-Israel” as “Israel right or wrong”.

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The reaction to Pillar of Defence revealed the limitations of UK Jewish politics, a state of affairs that dates back to the postwar years. The massive expansion of the UK Jewish community at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was accompanied by the transplanting of Eastern European Jewish politics to the new country. In the prewar period Zionists, Bundists, Communists and Anarchists made up a vibrant and often highly conflictual Jewish public sphere. Yet the communal grandees at the Board of Deputies — anxious to convince the British of the good citizenship of UK Jews — espoused a more discreet kind of political representation that took hold as Jews became more upwardly mobile and radical movements lost their appeal. This process was boosted by the triumph of Zionism as, with the new state declared and the conflict with the British mandate ended, support for Israel became mainstream. By the time of the Six Day

War, solidarity with Israel had become an article of faith and anti-Zionism was pushed to the margins, to sections of the secular left and the ultra-orthodox right. This unity over Israel coalesced at the same time that the Jewish community was fragmenting and polarising in other ways. Non-orthodox movements blossomed and began to demand a seat at the communal table, making consensus harder to achieve. Raising funds for Israel through organisations such as JNF, collective Yom Haatzmaut celebrations and educational tours to Israel, became essential to bring a fragmenting community together, as well as to engage disinterested Jewish youth. As such, Israel became the object of both emotional and financial investment. As the UK Jews came to rely upon Israel as form of communal glue, political engagement with Israel was pushed to the sidelines. The Jewish political tradition and in particular the once-controversial nature of Zionism was forgotten. The Zionist youth movements — once highly politicised groups aimed at creating change in Israel in the pre and post-state periods — moved away from political mobilisation towards education and consciousness-raising. It is hard to abandon what has become the central point of communal unity and accept that Israel could be a source of controversy and tension. Liberal-left proponents of pluralism have found progress to be slow and there remains a political vacuum at the heart of their work: Yachad has confined its activity largely to education, hosting meetings at which diverse views can be aired and, in particular, in running tours to the occupied West Bank. Yachad’s work has been ground-breaking and its “pro-Israel” mantra may help it achieve mainstream acceptance, but its critical potential is restricted by endless caveats.

The other problem faced by the liberal-left is that its views on Israel may be too nuanced and conflicted to translate into decisive action. Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg, who had signed the JLC letter, published “A Prayer for These Difficult Times” on 20 November, just as the Cast Lead conflict was winding down:

Thank God, tonight there seems to be more talk about a cease fire. Let’s pray that it may be the beginning of a process which removes the rocket attacks on Israel’s cities and lands not just in the short but in the long term. Let’s pray too that the people truly suffering in Gaza will find safety and hope for their future.

Yet however much the Jewish liberal-left may wish to escape from the “Israel-right-or-wrong” modes of the past, the pro-Israel camp remains an easier environment than the pro-Palestinian camp. Post-1967, and particularly since 2000, the cause of Palestinian liberation has been taken up by the global left. Israel’s metamorphosis from an embattled, socialist state to a regional superpower and occupying colonial force has ▶

25 ◀ shifted world sympathies towards the Palestinian cause. In the UK, the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign, founded in 1982, has formed the core of a growing mass movement with considerable support from public figures, intellectuals and the Muslim community. Since 2001, it has worked closely with the Stop The War coalition as part of the movement against the Iraqi war and subsequent conflicts. In the last few years, calls for a one-state solution (the dissolution of the Jewish state), a Palestinian right of return and calls for boycotts, divestment and sanctions have become mainstream in pro-Palestinian campaigning. Extreme rhetoric, support for Hamas and antisemitic statements by some pro-Palestinian campaigners have alienated many Jews who might have otherwise been supportive. For those Jews such as members of Yachad, who remain Zionists even as they seek justice for Palestinians, it is almost impossible to make common cause with the pro-Palestinian movement — and nor would most pro-Palestinian campaigners want anything to do with self-confessed Zionists. During Pillar of Defence, pro-Palestinian campaigners formed a perfect mirror image to pro-Israel campaigners. They supported one side without equivocation, seeing Hamas's rocket assault on Israel as an entirely understandable response to the Israeli blockade of Gaza. Although JfjFP and IJV, in broadly allying themselves with the pro-Palestinian movement, did take a guardedly critical stance. In a statement on 19 November, IJV prefaced its criticisms of Pillar of Defence with this caveat:

No citizens should have to live under the threat of rocket attacks. But the feeling of Israelis, and their supporters worldwide, that something must be done does not mean that we should support what is being done.

The statements ended with the following words:

The Israeli children of Sderot, and the Palestinian children of Gaza, need peace. The long term security of the Israeli people will not come from repeated wars and the infliction of death and destruction on the Palestinians. It can only come from an agreed peace, and an end to occupation and the blockade. Those with Israel's interest at heart should be arguing at this moment for such a peace, rather than supporting the warmongers.

This attempt to couch criticism of Israel within the language of empathy distinguished IJV's response to that of the pro-Palestinian movement, where this empathy was almost entirely lacking. Nonetheless, the impact of such statements was minimal and in practice groups like IJV and JfjFP ended up being subsumed into a wider anti-Israel wave just as critical voices on Israel ended being subsumed into a wider pro-Israel movement. What was missing during Pillar of Defence was a response to the violence that acknowledged the historical context

of both sides and allowed for a respectful way forward. Certainly, there was plenty of anguished commenting in social media and in private conversations that I have had access to — not just among Jews — that the responsibility for the conflict was not confined to one side. While the asymmetries of the conflict do mean that even-handed sharing of responsibility is problematic, the very fact that both Hamas and Israel can decide or not decide to use violence shows that the conflict is not a zero-sum game between power and powerlessness. But this anguish did not translate into political action. Groups that promote Palestinian-Israeli reconciliation, such as One Voice or the Bereaved Families Forum, do have a presence in the UK, but like the Jewish liberal-left, have not found a way to develop a strongly political campaigning voice. Although there are many UK-based projects and organisations that foster coexistence and cooperation, there is no bipartisan Middle East peace campaign in the UK that could draw Jews, Muslims and others together. Faced with these multiple political vacuums, the choices available during times of conflict in Israel-Palestine are incredibly limited. The presence of liberal-left Jews among the signatories to the JLC letter and Yachad's support for Pillar of Defence should not be seen as a failure of will or as a symptomatic of a critique of Israel that is only skin-deep. It is rather the result of a political trajectory that forces people into making one of two choices — pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian.

During times of relative quiet, the choices will become more extensive again. UK Jews who are committed to pluralism or who are unhappy with Israel's current direction would do well to start planning for the next round of conflict now. If there are to be more than two choices during future wars, the hard work of building a heterogeneous political environment begins here. — JQ

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