

Reply to Bennett Muraskin on Gaza Protest Blog

September 7, 2014

Bennett Muraskin complains that a blog post of mine — a report on a demonstration in Newark protesting the blank check given by NJ senators Menendez and Booker for Israel's crimes — is missing "full recognition of Hamas' war crimes and vile ideology."

Muraskin's charge is muddleheaded on several counts.

First of all, not all things one believes have to be stated in all articles. What is the relevance of Hamas's war crimes and ideology to my report? Do these in some way justify Israel committing its (vastly larger) war crimes? Do they justify the U.S. government providing the military and diplomatic wherewithal that enable Israel to commit its war crimes? International humanitarian law clearly states that the war crimes of one side do not legitimate war crimes by the other (as I've discussed elsewhere). Likewise, someone's ideology, let alone the ideology of a ruling party, has no bearing on the permissibility of attacking innocent civilians, and no bearing on the permissibility of other governments providing support to those who attack innocent civilians.

Now in fact, as Muraskin acknowledges, I did offer a judgment on Hamas's conduct, calling its rocket fire "unjust." But this is not enough for Muraskin. How come I only refer to the six civilian deaths and not to the broader impact of the rockets? There is no doubt that the rocket fire caused much trauma in southern Israel, unjustifiably. But when I mentioned the toll of the Israeli assault on Gaza, I failed to describe the terrible trauma suffered by the people of Gaza — eliciting no comparable complaint from Muraskin. I suspect that the trauma to the two populations (Israeli and Gazan) was in the same proportion as the deaths that occurred in each place. That is, the people of Gaza were victimized by war crimes causing death, injury, destruction, and trauma on a scale hundreds of times greater than that suffered by the Israeli civilian population.

Muraskin says I failed to mention the tunnels Hamas "built under the Israel/Gaza border for the sole purpose of attacking civilians." Sole purpose? This is a Netanyahu talking point, but hardly convincing. In fact we know that every time Hamas militants emerged from one of the tunnels on the Israeli side they attacked military targets. No civilian was even injured by use of one of these tunnels. To be sure, the tunnels *could* lead to an attack on civilians, but in that respect they are just a smaller scale version of Israel's F-16s. Both are weapons that can be used to attack military targets, but that could also be directed at civilians (though the tunnels have not yet been so directed, while the F-16s have). The tunnels' mere existence is not a war crime.

Muraskin says Hamas praised "the abduction and murders" of the Israeli teens. In fact, however, Hamas praised the abductions, but not the murders. Many Palestinians approved the abductions because they hoped it would lead to the release of some of Israel's 7,500 Palestinian prisoners, several hundred of whom were being held without charge and were in the midst of a hunger strike. Others were supposed to be released as a result of a deal Netanyahu agreed to with Abbas and Kerry, but on which the Israeli prime minister had reneged. This doesn't make the abductions justified, but Muraskin saying that Hamas cheered the murders is inaccurate.

Muraskin then goes through the usual litany of the Hamas Charter, Hamas's previous record of terrorism, and its position on a settlement of the conflict. I've discussed these issues at length in the past; Muraskin adds nothing new to the conversation, so there's no need for me to respond here.

Just one point: Hamas's anti-Semitism is clear, but Muraskin offers a misleading summary of *The Forward* interview with Mousa Abu Marzook. Yes, Marzook did refer to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, but when told by the interviewer that the book was a forgery, he replied that he didn't know that and asked the interviewer to "help me about this" and send him an article on the subject because it was widely believed in the Muslim world. So he was hardly "vouch[ing]" for its authenticity.

Muraskin quotes assessments by B'Tselem and Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery that Hamas's conduct violated international humanitarian law and says he thinks "if pressed, Shalom would admit that he accepts" their views. This is obnoxious; I have long been on record condemning Hamas's ideology and conduct — without having had to be "pressed" by Bennett Muraskin. Muraskin goes on to say in the same sentence "yet there is something about the pro-Palestinian movement in the US that cannot openly admit that Hamas commits war crimes." So why write to me rather than to someone who takes that position?

There is much to condemn about Hamas, but one would hope that a proper sense of proportion would lead those who condemn Hamas's crimes to direct much greater condemnation toward Israel's far greater crimes, on behalf of a nearly fifty-year occupation. And toward the U.S. government that makes those far greater crimes possible.