

August 5, 2004

The following is the fourth item in the exchange between former Ambassador Michael Bell and Prof. Gerald Steinberg regarding in Canadian policy in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The first three pieces (Mr. Bell's article, Steinberg's analysis, and Bell's response) can be found on www.ciia.org "Behind the Headlines".

Gerald M. Steinberg

Mr. Bell's response to my critique consisted of unsupportable personal attacks that divert attention from the substance of his analysis of Canadian policy in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Beyond a few quibbles, he has chosen to ignore the real issues, including systematic errors in fact, and the misleading analysis and recommendations that resulted.

1) Ambassador Bell wrote: "His Israel is besieged, true enough, but Israel is also an occupier."

Here, as in his initial essay, Mr. Bell has highlighted "Israeli occupation" outside the context of the history of Arab wars, terrorism, and rejectionism. This confusion between cause and effect is at the core of the demonization of Israel in the UN, Europe and elsewhere. It is also a key reason for the outcome of the Oslo process and the Roadmap, and the abject failure of European, Canadian and UN approaches to this conflict.

2) "His [Steinberg's] cultural absolutism and political exclusionism seem based on a paradigm of distrust and fear, a demonization of the other, which will ultimately threaten the foundation of the Zionist democracy which Israel's founders sacrificed so much to create.Dr. Steinberg is crystal clear that he sees Israelis as the victims, indeed the sole victims.Dr. Steinberg might wish that it were otherwise but he can't have it both ways. His binary thinking is death to any negotiating process, but then his expertise is in conflict management not conflict resolution."

Such assertions, which constitute the dominant theme of this response, constitute a transparent effort to attack the messenger, rather than confront the substantive issues. I speak for myself, my views are on the public record and are nothing like the caricature that he presents. This is simply more evidence of Mr. Bell's inability to distinguish fact from fiction in the Middle East.

As for his claimed concerns regarding the future of Israel, these are all well and good, but entirely subjective and do not in any indicate their veracity.

3) "My greatest inspiration in fact has been those of his fellow countrymen who believe Israel must cope with its inner demons, and demographic realities, if a Jewish state and democracy are to survive and prosper."

As a former diplomat and now on the staff of the University of Toronto's Munk Center, Bell's appeal to anonymous sources to justify his agenda is very disturbing. Israel is a pluralist democracy, reflecting many different views, and anyone can find a handful of people who will support any position. Diplomats, academics and journalists who

carefully choose their sources from a very narrow group in order to defend a pre-set agenda are prone to unrealistic assessments and ineffective recommendations.

4) "I am not looking for exclusivist moral judgments but a way of bringing violence to an end so that Israeli kids can ride a bus, eat a pizza, go to the cinema without parents worrying if and when they will come home: so that Palestinian kids can help parents pick olives on undisputed land, play with friends on the streets without the need for an Israeli military outpost manned by young men who would far rather be back in Israel dating."

Beyond the noble intentions, this is another example of the artificial and immoral balance between Palestinian terror and Israeli defence that Mr. Bell's attempts to deny.

4) "He [Steinberg] addresses Palestinian and Arab failings, and I agree there are many, but he declines to consider even in passing why Palestinians might feel the way they do..."

Another attempt to speak for me, which ignores all of my publications and public statements on the tragedy of this conflict.

5) "... the settlement enterprise, which I'm sorry is a land grab. No one argues any more that settlements contribute to Israel's security. The reality is they threaten that security because they prevent the realization of a homogeneous Jewish state."

In his analysis, Mr. Bell referred to the Israeli defensive barrier as a "land grab"; one of the terms favored by Palestinian propagandists. In his rebuttal to my critique, he has chosen to change the focus and falsely imply that I am a member of the Israeli "pro-settlement" constituency. This is a red herring.

5) "Dr. Steinberg suggests that I labor under the misguided 'myth of balance and evenhandedness.' I prefer to describe my approach as open and fair-minded. ... I see the need for dignity and, in the words of a Canadian jurisprudence expert, Irwin Cotler, "minimum justice for both peoples."

I sympathize with Mr. Bell's attempt to describe his immoral equivalence between Palestinian hatred and Israeli defense as "fair-minded", but it won't fly. The quotation from Minister Cotler is taken out of context, and without the Minister's uncategorical condemnation of Arab and Islamic hate speech, terrorism, and rejectionism, as was demonstrated at the Durban Conference. This would indeed be a worth model for Mr. Bell and his colleagues in proposing a moral and principled Canadian approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict.