

# Jews, Israel, and the Third World

Barry Rubin

**T**he overwhelming vote against Israel by Third World nations in the U.N. has raised some interesting and important questions about the attitude toward Jews in those countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, whose populations, after all, represent the majority of the human race.

Puzzlement over this issue was expressed by Saul Bellow at the December P.E.N. international writers' conference in Israel. "It is a remarkable thing," said Bellow, "that nations which have no knowledge of, or contact with, Jews, no history of anything to do with Jews, should become consistently hostile. Why should the new nations of Africa and Asia turn against us? Can it be put down to the influence of the Arabs?"

In a sense Bellow has answered his own question. It is precisely that lack of knowledge and contact with the Jewish situation, added to Arab political and economic influence, that has made it so easy for Third World countries to take such stands. This does not mean, however, that these political decisions are based on anti-Semitism. "Our failure in the United Nations," wrote Yoseph Lapid in the Israeli daily *Maariv*, "is not the result of anti-Semitic conspiracy or of the breakdown of international ethics....The 'Third World' nations—Asia and Africa—do not know at all what anti-Semitism is."

My most startling personal experience with this information gap was in a discussion with a member of Puerto Rico's observer delegation to the U.N., a well-traveled and well-educated young man, who asked me in all sincerity whether there weren't forty million Jews in the United States. During a trip to the People's Republic of China in 1972 I asked my translator if she had ever met any Jews. "Aren't all Jews capitalists?" was her reply. Of course, in the atmosphere of China that old stereotype was a particularly harsh one. This ignorance provides fertile ground for the anti-Jewish

propaganda being disseminated by some Arab states and, increasingly, the Soviet Union. Then there is the experience related by a Peace Corps volunteer who was serving in an African country during the October, 1967, war. The Corps had engaged a Jewish doctor as the staff physician. "Jews were definitely persona non grata during this period, and the only thing that saved the doctor was that the Mauritians had no idea what a Jew looked like. Following the propaganda broadcasts from Radio Cairo, they were on the lookout for a cross between Godzilla and King Kong, and our doctor bore little resemblance to either."

The other aspect of the problem is primarily political. Originally the term "Third World" referred to those countries neither capitalist nor Communist. But in practice the phrase is usually used in relation to the "nonwhite" world: Africa, Asia, and Latin America (although Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, and others are more "white" than the United States). At any rate, in this division of the world Jews are identified as being "white" and "Western." The line of reasoning seems to be that if Jews are seen to be an assimilated Western people, then as "assimilated" they do not need a Jewish state and as "Western" they are part of the "enemy." It is only a short step to the Arab position that Israel is not a real country based on real needs, but only a front, a deception, to hide imperialist machinations of some sort.

This is an important theme in Arab propaganda. Khaled Hassen, a Palestine Liberation Organization representative, told the black American magazine *Encore* recently that for "The Zionists...Israel is a jumping-off spot....They want to use Israel to jump to the Middle East, to the oil countries, to Africa, to Southeast Asia." In Africa, Hassen claims, "The United States wants to be the master, and it seeks to do this through Israel...."

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**I**ronically, some Third World conceptions of Jews and of Israel are fueled by Israel's

supporters. *First*, it is often forgotten that many Jews live in the Third World and that the majority of Israeli Jews are not of European but of Middle Eastern or North African backgrounds. As a walk down any street in Israel will quickly show, Israelis have more variation in skin color than practically any other nation in the world. *Second*, both Arab propagandists and conservative American Zionists argue that Israel serves as a "beachhead" for the U.S. in the Middle East, ignoring the importance of America's Arab allies and the many conflicts that have historically marked U.S.-Israel relations over the years. In another area one sees an interesting turnaround of the usual formula that the U.S. support for Israel hurts the U.S. internationally. In today's world—given particularly the Vietnam war and U.S. support for white regimes in Southern Africa—one might argue that Israel's association with the United States damages Israel in the eyes of much of the Third World. *Third*, the role of many Jews in progressive and pro-Third World activities are often played down by both the participants and by the established leadership.

There has perhaps been a lack of sensitivity among Israel's leaders on some of these problems. Israel's tendency to ignore and discriminate against its Oriental Jewish citizens has prevented a decisive challenge to some Third World stereotypes. One reaction to the events at the U.N. may be particularly dangerous. Lapid, in the *Maariv* article I mentioned, wrote: "Our information efforts today can have only one aim: to explain to the Western world that the issues involved do not concern us alone....Asian and African masses, Communist weapons, and Arab oil are cooperating to destroy the Western world, its Judeo-Christian culture, its governmental practices, its wealth and its historical position." Lapid compares these forces to the "barbarians" who destroyed the Roman Empire and to "Huns from the East." If Israel were actually to seek support on this basis, only disasters could be expected.

Another important aspect of Third World thinking on Israel has come from the former's direct, brutal experience with colonialism. "Settler colonial states" in the Third World have resulted from amorphous collections of Westerners, bent on pillage and profit, who came to live in privilege and comfort on the backs of the "native" peoples of a country, among whom they composed a tiny minority. The difference between Israel and such states is clear and important: Jews emigrated to escape persecution and oppression and to build a national homeland; they do not compose an élite, but have a complete class structure; most come from the region; and they outnumber Palestinians (including refugees). This does not mean that injustices have not been committed or that Palestinian rights can be ignored in any political settlement, but it does mean that attempts to compare Israel to South Africa are ludicrous.

Often forgotten is that when large numbers of Jews lived in the Arab countries they were never treated as

equal citizens by the indigenous people. As Albert Memmi writes: "Most of the young nations, in particular, removed Jews from all governing positions. They explained to them politely, regretfully, that the present generation, the new classes sprung from the masses this time, were claiming the positions and the responsibilities; and in this there is some truth...but they implied that Jews were not genuine offspring of the people." The Chinese of Southeastern Asia, the Lebanese in West Africa, and the Asians in East Africa—all have faced similar problems. Israel provided a refuge for 560,000 Jews from Middle Eastern countries—a number equal to the Arab refugees in 1948.

Yet when Yasir Arafat said in his U.N. speech that Britain created Israel, he was trying to say that the destruction of Israel is part of the worldwide movement toward decolonization. An example of this kind of argument is contained in the December 7 issue of *Jeune Afrique*, an influential Arab-owned weekly widely circulated in Africa. The Saudi Arabian U.N. delegate is quoted as saying: "There is only one Palestine and its frontiers are known to all, displeasing as it is to the European paralyzed by the Rothschilds and the Oppenheimers of South Africa."\* This combines traditional anti-Semitic themes (conspiracies of international financiers) and a tie-in to white settler South Africa. The irony comes with the full-color back-page ad in the same issue of the magazine for Rothman's cigarettes, a South African-based company.

As in this case, such propaganda often has a strong element of hypocrisy. We find, for example, Kuwait investing \$16.5 million in the London-Rhodesia Company (Lonrho) and Jordan selling military equipment to South Africa. In addition, there is an important aspect of self-fulfilling prophecy here, for Israel's ties with South Africa have grown mostly only after black African countries have severed their ties with Israel. In fact, Israel once offered a contribution to the Organization of African Unity's Liberation Committee, which was turned down because it might offend the group's Arab members. At the risk of setting a precedent Israel even voted in the United Nations for the admission of the People's Republic of China and the expulsion of Taiwan. Still, it is clear that these anti-Israel arguments have had some impact.

Most important, of course, have been economic motivations for Third World countries in taking a pro-Arab position. Oil riches make Arab countries attractive friends, and two African states—Mauritania and Somalia—have obtained what they perhaps believe to be the ultimate ticket for gaining oil-money aid, membership in the Arab League. In a recent interview Abdoulaye Djemouna, the Chad minister in charge of

\*The Oppenheimers are neither Jewish nor Zionist, by the way.

drought relief, frankly revealed how mercenary some states were in formulating policy. He complained about the small contributions from Arab states, even though Chad supported them against Israel. The break with Israel, he said, "was not so much to show friendship with the Arabs, but because Israel did not do much for us. All they did was train some soldiers for us."

While Israel had a well-organized aid program with Africa, sending out over three thousand specialists to help on different projects between 1958 and 1972, it could not hope to compete with Arab oil money. The first major sign of the erosion of Israel's position in Africa occurred in April, 1972, when Ugandan President Idi Amin, faced with a trade deficit with Israel and promises of a large Libyan aid package, broke relations. In several African states specific political concessions were offered as well as money. Thus there is evidence that both Chad and Ethiopia were motivated by pledges that the Arab states would cut back on aid to guerrillas fighting the central governments of those countries.

The most serious relationship between these economic pressures and anti-Semitism is, however, found in Latin America. In Argentina, where 600,000 Jews live, talented liberal Economy Minister José Gelbard was forced to resign, partly because his main rival, rightist Welfare Minister José Lopez Rega, complained after visiting Arab oil states that having a Jewish Economy Minister was an impediment to trade relations with the Middle East. Lopez Rega's supporters conducted a campaign with slogans like "Out Jew Gelbard," "Gelbard, Zionist Jew," and "Gelbard, Jew Bolshevik."

In neighboring Uruguay last year, according to Carlos María Gutierrez, a well-known Uruguayan journalist, a Libyan diplomat told Uruguay's commander-in-chief, General Hugo Chiappe Ponce, that Libya would supply all the oil Uruguay needs if all Jewish

cabinet members were forced to resign. Chiappe reportedly replied that Uruguay was a sovereign country, but fellow generals later asked him: "What are we supposed to burn" for fuel, "sovereignty?" Finance Minister Moises Cohen, the last remaining Jew in the cabinet, was forced out soon afterward.

Still, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between the breaking of diplomatic relations with Israel by Third World countries and their position on Israel's right to exist. The great majority of these states do not call for Israel's destruction, but are protesting Israel's policy over the territories occupied in the 1967 war. They support a compromise political settlement. Even in the U.N. Nigeria and the Ivory Coast tried to tone down the anti-Israel resolution at the last session. There are also some important practical considerations involved for them. Most African and Asian states are multiethnic and have arbitrary boundaries, and the destruction of any state might create a dangerous precedent encouraging aggression against them or internal secession movements (e.g., Biafra).

Further, many Third World governments are quite unsatisfied with their treatment by Arab oil producers. The African Development Bank is already overcommitted on a promised \$250 million Arab loan that has yet to materialize. There has also been criticism that Arab states hold 37 per cent of the Bank's controlling votes and over half the strategic posts, although they number only seven out of thirty-nine representatives. Arab attempts to take over the Organization of African Unity have also led to some bitterness.

Certainly it was not so long ago that the Nairobi (Kenya) *Daily Nation* editorialized: "Egypt's war with Israel is not a war between Israel and Africa. Egypt and Syria do not and cannot determine who our friends and enemies shall be." There is ample reason to believe that if the Israeli Government shows flexibility in negotiations, Third World countries will revert to this judgment.