

# Roger Cohen: The dominion of the dead

By Roger Cohen

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NEW YORK: I had a dream: Israeli Arab students, enraged by the war in Gaza, were protesting at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. A counter-demonstration by Jewish students erupted. When the head of university security, a Holocaust survivor, tried to intervene, the Arab students called him a Nazi.

Actually, I didn't dream this. Shlomo Avineri, a political scientist at the university, related the incident. But dreams cut to the quick. There's no point denying that a line of sorts runs from the dozens killed by Israeli fire near a United Nations school in Gaza back to the Palestinian "Nakba" of 1948 and Berlin, 1945.

History is relentless. Sometimes its destructive gyre gets overcome: France and Germany freed themselves after 1945 from war's cycle. So did Poland and Germany. China and Japan scarcely love each other but do business. Only in the Middle East do the dead rule.

Their demand for blood is, it seems, inexhaustible. Their graves will not be quieted. Since 1948 and Israel's creation, retribution has reigned between the Jewish and Palestinian national movements.

I have never previously felt so despondent about Israel, so shamed by its actions, so despairing of any peace that might end the dominion of the dead in favor of opportunity for the living.

More than dreams, I've been having nightmares. I cannot see a scenario in which any short-term Israeli tactical victory over Hamas is not overwhelmed by the long-term strategic cost of this war.

But before I get to that, let me return, for a moment, to those protesting Israeli Arab students.

There are about 1.3 million Arab citizens of Israel, or a little less than 20 percent of the population. Their loyalties are divided, but never have they

protested so vigorously. That's a fair guide to the virulence of general Arab sentiment in the second week of the Gaza war. President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, using the same loaded World War II lexicon, has called Gaza "a concentration camp."

These jackboot allusions are odious: A Jewish minority in any Arab state of the size of the Arab minority in Israel is unimaginable. Israel remains a small island of relatively liberal democracy in a repressive Arab sea. But it is ghettoizing itself.

The high-tech security fence built to wall off the West Bank and the near-hermetic sealing of Gaza since withdrawal in 2005 are in the end attempts to shut out reality. Palestinians have become a vague abstraction to the vast bulk of Israelis not within the range of Hamas rockets: out of sight, out of mind. Israel, shamefully, has even prevented international journalists getting into Gaza to tell the story as they see it.

In this context the hallucinogenic appeals of the government of caretaker Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to ordinary Palestinians in Gaza, asking them to realize Hamas is their common enemy, become more understandable.

Mark Regev, Olmert's spokesman, has accused Hamas of "holding hostage" these Palestinians. Under aerial and tank bombardment from an alien power, with more than 500 dead and 2,500 wounded, that's not how most people would view their democratically elected government.

Tzipi Livni, the foreign minister, who cordially despises Olmert, has meanwhile talked about changing "the equation" in Gaza. The only changed equation I see over time is more entrenched hatred for Israel in Gaza: Those 3,000 dead and wounded have relatives, some of whom may one day strap on suicide belts.

As for Ehud Barak, the third of the sound-bite-mouthing Israeli troika and leader of the Labor Party, his talk of deepening and broadening the campaign in Gaza has not been unrelated to an attempt to deepen and broaden his appeal among Israelis who seem to have seen him as a peacenik. The subtext of political maneuver ahead of elections on Feb. 10 has been one of the more repellent aspects of the Gazan carnage.

The heroic Israeli narrative has run its course.

But what of the intolerable Hamas rockets on Sderot, the 20 Israelis killed by those rockets since 2005 (four of them in the current violence), the unconscionable annihilationist language of the Hamas Charter? Yes, there has to be a response to Hamas, but this is the wrong one.

It's been wrong since James Wolfensohn, the former World Bank president, saw his attempts to get economic activity going in Gaza in 2005 thwarted by border closure and "everything getting wasted." It's been wrong since the Hamas electoral victory in 2006 led to ostracism.

Israel has the right to hit back at Hamas when attacked - but not to blow Gaza to pieces. What it does not have the right to do is delude its people into thinking that peace is achievable without coming to terms with the deeply entrenched Middle Eastern realities that are Hamas and Hezbollah.

Those realities have been strengthened by Olmert's last fling, the reckless foray of a failed leader.

I had another dream: that Israeli Arabs, in need of work and cash, were building bomb shelters for Jews in Sderot. Like the first, it proved to be true. Money still talks in the Middle East. Alas, the dead talk louder.