



2nd Statement by Farid Esack on

On an Islamic State, Israel's Right to Exist, Terrorism and Violence

Johannesburg, 8 February 2017

Introduction and Summary

Some German politicians and the Israeli Embassy in Berlin have accused me of anti-Semitism, calling for an Islamic State in Germany, and of supporting violence. While there has been daily coverage in the German press on the matter – with a single exception – none of the journalists have ever bothered to contact me for my side of the story. Rather strange for a democracy.

My detailed statement follows after this summary.

- I have consistently fought against the idea that good or evil flows in the blood or genes of a people. This is the core of all forms of racism – including Anti-Semitism.
- I have never said or implied that there is anything uniquely evil about the State of Israel, let alone of the Jewish people.
- Given that there are only 24 hours in a day, people committed to justice are entitled to focus on a particular area of activism without being accused of having a particular hatred for the perpetrators in the same way that women activists against male violence should not be accused of actually harbouring a deep hatred towards all men.
- While affirming all people's right to articulate their views of what their ideal states are, I do not believe in ethnic or religious states.
- I am opposed to all forms of violence to achieve political objectives – particularly those aimed at or causing collateral damage to civilians.
- In my opposition to violence I do not distinguish between that operated like computer games such as drones or the more headline grabbing ones such as busses being rammed into civilians. They all cause death and injury and they all leave bereaved families and loved ones behind. All of us are diminished as people when one among us act in this way.
- During my classes at the University of Hamburg, I have never once referred to BDS or my support for it; not because I attempted to hide it, but my announced subject matter did not cover it.

Statement

In the recent past there has been various accusations levelled against me with the intention of delegitimizing my support for the Palestinian liberation struggle. As I made clear in an earlier statement, this is largely connected to an artificially engineered attempt to limit the discussion in some countries about the oppression of the Palestinian people rather than the question of anti-Semitism. (See my earlier statement below.)

Some new accusations have emerged in the last two weeks or so and I respond to them in some length in the interest of setting the record straight. I am aware that my detractors - in a very Trumpian fashion - prefer short simplistic and dumbed down tweets. My response is aimed at those who prefer truth to 'alternative facts'.

On an Islamic State

I am accused of implicitly calling for an Islamic State whilst speaking in Germany. This is based on comments that I supposedly made at a conference in Germany. I was invited by the Hamburg Schura, a legal federation of local Muslim organizations, to speak at a conference on Islamophobia in Europe on 15 January 2017. My assigned topic was "Islam and democracy" and the venue for the conference was the Imam Ali Mosque. The conference was attended by people of all hues, colours, religions and political views - including Zionists and members of the Green Party.

In my presentation I defended the right of various communities to argue the case for their own political utopias. I said that, coming from South Africa, this included the right for people to argue for a state inspired by Islamic values or for vegans to make the case for a society where all meat consumption is banned. I pointed out that in South Africa, while a tiny proportion of the population would describe itself as communist; we have a vibrant and very visible Communist Party that is in alliance with the ruling party. The points that I made were that:

ideally societies must provide the maximum freedom for its citizens to express diverse ideas;
and
that ideas must be challenged with ideas and not with violence.

I furthermore do not believe that freedom of expression must be extended to include hate speech, incitement to violence or to fascist ideas which itself are opposed to freedom of speech.

There are multiple understandings of Islam as there are of democracy. Some forms of a state founded on Islamic values rather than a literal interpretation of fourteen century old laws may well be compatible with contemporary notions of democracy.

This notwithstanding, I have personally never supported the idea of an Islamic State where religious identity and theology are used or manipulated to structure a society in ways that are contrary to democratic principles and human rights for all people irrespective of race, religion, ethnicity or gender.

On Israel's Right to Exist

I am not well disposed towards any state founded for any particular religious or ethnic community regardless of what such a state is named or what the historical basis of its founding is. I believe that it is inevitable that such states must resort to discrimination against its citizens who do not fit the relevant religious or ethnic label in order to preserve their exclusivist religious, racial or ethnic identity. For me this has to lead to - at the minimum - socio-legal discrimination against religious or ethnic minorities and may culminate in ethnic cleansing. The most shameful example in modern history of the latter being the Nazi Holocaust. I invite you to read a three-year old [editorial piece of mine](#) "If the Jews disappear, then so do we" in a South African newspaper. Nothing in my views have changed since then.

It is shameful that the above views of mine have been deliberately misinterpreted to suggest that I calling for the destruction of a particular state. This accusation is part of a calculated attempt to brazenly re-define "anti-Semitism" as "anti-Israeli". (As an aside, historically and today - for example, some in Trump's administration - hold anti-Semitic views but support Israel and not criticized for their anti-Semitism by the pro-Israeli lobby because of their uncritical support of Israel.)

First, I reject the notion of any particular country being particularly 'blessed' or 'favoured' in some ahistorical manner. The idea that God looks with particular affection on some land or has a very different gaze at the land on the other side of river, railway line, mountain, wall, or imaginary line drawn up in some imperial capital, strikes me as utterly bizarre.

Regardless of ones patriotism, the cold historical fact is that countries come and go; they are shaped and reshaped. The German Reich that was supposed to last for a thousand years did not. One's desperate desires, personal attachment, religious conviction or child-like patriotism does not equal historical truth.

"Eternal" is not a concept that I can apply to any socially or politically created entity such as states. If others want to confuse or conflate their personal or political histories with some ahistorical entity – usually called God – that's up to them. It is, however, rather silly to expect me to buy into it. It is cruel and inhuman to expect others to pay the price for it.

Besides being a Muslim, I am also an internationalist. There was only one moment that I felt proud of my own country's flag; the midnight moment on 26/27th April, 1994 when the flag of Apartheid South Africa came down and the one of a new democratic non-racial, non-sexist and undivided country went up.

As far as current states are concerned I accept their existence as a matter of historical and political fact knowing full well (but having no solid opinion on the matter) that such borders can be undone in the same way that they were constructed. I refuse to succumb to the insistence that I must affirm any particular state's right to exist. Some ideologues – some people driven by religiosity, others by nationalism, and others by their own national histories, shame and politics - insist on elevating the question of Israel's right to exist into a litmus test of civilization. This is not my position.

My litmus test of civilization is based on justice. It is not based on the promises of a particular God to a particular group of people – whether this group is the Afrikaners during the

Apartheid era in South Africa, the Protestants of Northern Ireland, Pre-Partition Indian Muslims who desired a Muslim state later called 'Pakistan' (literally, 'the land of the pure' in Urdu) or some Jews who believe in a Promised Land in historic Palestine for only Jews.

Reducing one's God to a particular community's real estate/property agent who parcels out land to His favourite children leads to exceptionally messy and ugly consequences for other people – especially if they and their ancestors have lived in that land for thousands of years.

I lived in one such state during my theological training for eight years. I loved its people immensely – and fought with all my might against the social oppression that Christians suffer in that country.

My refusal to recognize the ethical basis of such states does not mean that I hate their inhabitants or that I am disdainful of International Law. Rejecting the ethical, political and legal dimensions of a nation state does not mean rejecting the citizens of that state as human beings who are eligible for the same treatment, opportunities and rights as any other human being from any other nation state. It simply means calling for a rebirth of such a nation state to chart a different direction in the same way that the anti-apartheid struggle called for a new South Africa based on democratic principles and human rights and not the destruction of South Africa and its inhabitants

Because I reject any notion of inherent evil in any person, I believe that in the same way that a male chauvinist can be redeemed by a more just relationship with other women, a racist state can be transformed. I also believe that some parts of my sexist self has to die for me to become truly human. This is not a call for me to commit suicide or an invitation for others to kill me.

On Supporting Terrorism

I come from a continent, Africa, which acquired its freedom and liberation - from European colonial that terrorized its people - largely through what was earlier called 'terrorism'; a country whose founding father, Nelson Mandela, served 27 years in prison. Mandela did not go to prison for having peace concerts in a park or organizing Sunday school picnics – but for being trained in the armed struggle and leading such a struggle against the Apartheid regime. Mandela - it is now convenient to forget - was given the choice by the Apartheid regime to leave prison ten years before he did if he undertook to renounce violence. He chose not to; Mandela, in fact, remained on the US list of terrorists for four years after he was released from prison – by which time he was a Nobel Peace Prize Winner and the world's favourite grandfather.

Mandela is not alone in having had his status transformed from "terrorist" to something else. Gerry Adams from the Irish Republican Army, Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon are a couple of others to name but a few. Only recently it was announced that Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, an Afghan warlord or statesman (take your pick), had been removed from some US list of terrorists. The Irgun and the Haganna were two Jewish organizations that waged a war of terror against the British in Palestine. The Irgun were responsible for the bombing of the King David Hotel, the central offices of the British Mandatory authorities, in July 22, 1946 that saw the death of 91 persons including many diplomats.

Today, for some, these figures have become legends and for others they remain terrorists. Some who die in these battles are considered as destined for hell and others are considered martyrs. "Terrorism" is always a messy word and depends entirely on when or who wants to use it and for what political ends.

Much has been made of Leila Khaled's visits to South Africa. Khaled, from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, is still hailed as freedom fighter by most of the population and there are countless South Africans named after her. On her visits to South Africa she is usually met at the airport by Cabinet Ministers and at most of the public meetings Ministers share the platform with her. (In fact, the one picture that is doing the rounds with me standing behind her, shows a Cabinet Minister, Ayanda Dlodlo, next to her). Even Grandpa Mandela asked to meet with her and requested to be photographed with her. Here are two pictures of three such terrorists – two of whom ended up with Nobel Prizes.

<http://ymlp.com/zKJiYw>

<https://twitter.com/bdssouthafrica/status/409243321911885824>

I can understand that for some people Khaled is still considered as a terrorist. This is pretty much in the same way that Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon are still regarded by many others as terrorists. The use of violence – or the threat of violence – has always been a controversial issue in all struggles for liberation, self-determination or power. At times such violence is excused or explained away and at other times it is rejected and held liable. In the end, any use of violence where civilians are targeted, is an indictment on the appalling nature of the global human community where violence has been normalized as an instrument to deal with difference.

BDS-South Africa and Violence

Have I or anyone else in BDS-South Africa ever raised money for Leila Khaled or for any other organization designated as a terrorist organization by anybody? No!

Do we advocate violent means to resolve political problems? No, we never have and we don't!

BDS is a non-violent human rights organization committed to exposing Israel's crimes of apartheid against the Palestinian people – Muslim, Christians, and people of whatever other or no religious faith.

For BDS-South Africa, violence in any form is not an option that we elect to end the brutal Israeli occupation of the Palestinian people. This is precisely why we call upon people to engage in the peaceful and non-violent boycott of, divestment from and sanctions against – not the biblical eretz Israel, nor the Jewish people, but the modern Apartheid State of Israel.

Our position is a rather mainstream one in the country that I come from – a country that fought hard for its liberation and remembers who its allies were and who were the staunchest allies of Apartheid (which included the State of Israel). We are a people who recognize Apartheid when we see it.