

Op-Ed: Response to Fire Illuminates Challenges for Israel

By Abraham H. Foxman

New York (JTA) — One of the reactions of Israelis to the fact that their government called on the international community for assistance to combat the Carmel Forest fire is a sense of shame. After all, Israel is a leader in the high-tech world and an innovator in dealing with crisis situations. Now Israel had to admit that it wasn't capable of dealing with the blaze alone.

More than that, for some in Israel there is a reluctance to admit that Israel is not isolated, that not everyone is against Israel. The willingness of nations and peoples to rush to Israel's side, including the Turks and the Palestinians, challenged this assumption.

I remember when Yitzhak Rabin took over as prime minister in 1992, his inaugural address to the Knesset took a different tack than the norm. He spoke to the idea that Israelis need to get beyond the way of thinking that assumed that everyone was against them. He argued that this was neither accurate nor productive, as it led to distorted policies.

Rabin in some quarters was hailed for his comments; in others he was condemned.

Which brings us to our own times: Where do things stand and how does the response to the fire illuminate matters?

I would argue that there are two

parallel tracks, both of which need to be understood, taken seriously and factored in to policymaking.

On the one hand is the dangerous process of delegitimization campaigns against Israel. These campaigns are picking up momentum around the world. Boycotts of Israel by trade unions, universities and entertainers seem to pop up almost on a daily basis. Israeli officials refrain from visiting certain countries lest they be arrested on war criminal charges. The U.N.'s Goldstone Report questions Israel's right to self-defense.

Israel is compared to the South African apartheid regime or to the Nazis. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad can openly call for Israel's disappearance without any repercussions. And the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva focuses most of its attention and resolutions on condemning alleged Israeli violations of human rights.

In other words, there are grounds for concluding that the world has turned against Israel in ways that even suggest a heavy dose of anti-Semitism within it. It is no longer the individual Jew who is the target of anti-Semitism, some argue, but the collective Jew through the assault on the Jewish state. And it is argued, with some reason, that it is not particular Israeli policies but Israel's very

existence that is the problem for many of its critics.

The picture, however, is more complicated, and the response of many nations to Israel's plea for help this week is the tip of the iceberg. It is obvious that not only does Israel have a special relationship with the United States, but it has excellent bilateral relations with states throughout the globe, including some that routinely vote against Israel at the United Nations.

Moreover, even in the Arab world things are not simple.

It is true that what we all want, an acceptance by Arab leaders of the legitimacy of the Jewish state in the Middle East, has not been achieved. Having said that, on practical grounds there has been progress over the years in the acceptance of the reality that Israel is here to stay. Indeed, that notion is so strong in the Arab world that Ahmadinejad feels it necessary to harp on the idea that Israel will disappear in an effort to get the Arabs to turn back the clock to a time when they not only rejected Israel's legitimacy but envisioned ways to achieve Israel's demise.

Arab acceptance of the reality of Israel is not insignificant because it then forces an answer to the question of how one deals with an entity that's here to stay. Anwar Sadat's answer after the Yom



Kippur war was to make peace.

We see these changes as well in the WikiLeaks documents: Arab leaders such as the king of Saudi Arabia and the crown prince of Bahrain focusing on the Iranian threat and understanding the common interest that Israel and the moderate Arabs have in containing Iran.

And now comes the Carmel Forest fire. The fact that both Turkey and the Palestinian Authority provided assistance to Israel is not insignificant. It obviously does not negate the problematic aspects of Turkish and Palestinian policies toward Israel. But it should alert Israeli leaders to openings, to shades of gray, to possibilities that things don't always have to remain the same,

to the idea that resentment can also be overcome.

The great challenge for supporters of Israel in the period ahead is not to lose sight of either of the two tracks. There are immense dangers to Israel up ahead, as reflected in the delegitimization efforts, and we must do our all to combat them. But there are opportunities as well, and the mark of leadership is to explore them and seed them while never ignoring the landmines that lie beside them. ✧

(Abraham H. Foxman is the national director of the Anti-Defamation League. His latest book is "Jews and Money: The Story of a Stereotype," Palgrave Macmillan, November 2010).

Op-Ed: Fire's Devastation Can Lead to Positive Change

By Rachel Liel and Daniel Sokatch

San Francisco (JTA) — It is hard to explain just how devastated Israelis are by the Carmel fire. But it is easier to explain how that devastation can become a positive force for positive change, right now, in Israel.

The fire consumed at least 43 lives, thousands of forested acres and millions of shekels in property. With the assistance of a dozen foreign nations, the beleaguered firefighters finally got the resources they needed to battle a blaze that consumed more than its obvious victims. What may have perished in the fire is Israel's sense of self-reliance, and the confidence of ordinary people that they can rely on their government and society to meet their needs.

Just as the Second Lebanon War provoked questions about Israel's readiness to withstand a bombing campaign, the Carmel fire illuminates issues that have been too readily subsumed in the endless attention to the conflict. We at the New Israel Fund are painfully aware that Israel is often seen two-dimensionally, even by its own government. It is of course a priority for Israel to pursue peace and security, but an exclusive focus on these issues skews attention and resources away from an equally critical task.

We, the organization that founded and funded Israel's civil society and that works every day on intractable social issues, know what that task is. It is building a society founded on equity and social justice, where every person has the opportunity to live a decent life, and building the infra-

structure and the institutions that provide this opportunity to all. It is security, yes, but in a sense that extends far beyond fighter planes and a separation fence. What Israel discovered last week is that while it prides itself on its strength, it is in some ways far, far too weak.

There wasn't the proper equipment for fighting fires, and the supply of fire-retardant chemicals was exhausted even before the Carmel ignited. Just a few weeks ago, when the 40-story Shalom Tower in Tel Aviv was burning, it turned out that the Tel Aviv Fire Department does not have a hook-and-ladder truck that extends beyond ten stories. Israel sits on an earthquake fault and has done little to plan for that eventuality, while in a drought-stricken region water and development policies are enmeshed in money interests and politics, not in sustainable growth.

For too long, under successive governments, Israeli society has polarized between the center and the periphery, the Jews and the Arabs, the religious and the secular, the haves and the have-nots.

The current government, paying attention to the demands of its political coalition, is channeling even more money into stipends for non-working yeshiva students and radical settler incursions into Palestinian neighborhoods of eastern Jerusalem. But every government has been held hostage to the demands of specific constituencies, the inequalities persist, and

now poverty in Israel is more widespread than in any of the 30 European Union nations. Income



The fire was so large that it could be seen easily in a satellite photo.

inequality in Israel is second only to the United States among developed nations, and Israeli schools, public lands and infrastructure are deteriorating quickly.

This situation can and must change. The Carmel fire may have been Israel's Katrina, but we and many people like us will insist on a faster recovery than New Orleans experienced. We know the real strength of Israel is not only in its military but in its people — the thousands of ordinary people we work with every day.

The day the fire started, grassroots organizations of the North began mobilizing. A day after it ended, our Haifa office was already gearing up with our grantees and partners for the huge tasks of long-term recovery. We will work to ensure that there is compensation for the victims and the homeless, and that it is distributed fairly. Environmental groups are too infrequently consulted in Israel; we will make sure they are at the table when the future of the

Carmel Forest is considered.

The fire re-ignited anti-Arab invective in some segments of society; our longstanding leadership of Arab and Jewish groups in the North will substantiate efforts to eradicate racism and build a truly shared society.

Israel's beautiful Carmel Forest is burnt and black. Its people's faith in their government is shaken. But Israel does have a civil society, which means that there is a force that enables ordinary people to change their circumstances, even if they are not wealthy or politically connected. Civil society empowers and ennobles and, yes, sometimes enrages the powers-that-be.

Now is the time for ordinary Israelis to insist on leadership that is accountable and fair, and on a society that plans for peace and prosperity, not just for defense and war. It is time for all of us, Israeli and American, to see Israel in all its dimensions, in all its needs and in all its possibilities. ✧

(Rachel Liel is the executive director in Israel and Daniel Sokatch the CEO of the New Israel Fund.)

**“Our rabbis said:
Even those things
that you may
regard as
completely
superfluous to
Creation -- such as
fleas, gnats, and
flies -- even they
too were included
in Creation; and
God's purpose is
carried out through
everything -- even
through a snake,
a scorpion, a gnat,
or a frog.**

**-- Genesis Rabbah,
10:7**

**“Mediation and prayer before God are
particularly efficacious in grassy fields and
amid trees, since a man's soul is thereby
strengthened, as if every blade of grass and
every plant united with him in prayer.”**

--Nachman of Bratslav