A Unique and Powerful Defense of Israel

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I thought that members of our University Network would be interested in this remarkable defense of Israel by a student at Cambridge University.

Let me take this opportunity to wish you a happy Thanksgiving, and a happy Hanukkah.

The remarkable speech below was presented by Gabriel Latner, a 19-year-old Cambridge student, at a recent debate of the prestigious university's debating society. UN Watch is proud to announce that Mr. Latner will be coming to the United Nations in 2011 as an intern with our organization.

The Cambridge debate centered on the motion that "Israel is a rogue state." It was proposed by England's Lauren Booth, an extreme opponent of Israel who works for Tehran's state-run global TV channel, and who recently converted to Islam on a visit to Iran. Her side of the debate was joined by Mark McDonald, founder of the Labor Friends of Palestine, and Mr. Latner.

The Irish Independent has called Mr. Latner's speech "the most brilliantly audacious defence of Israel since Moses parted the Red Sea."

Israel is a Rogue State

Gabriel Latner

This is a war of ideals, and the other speakers here tonight are rightfully, idealists. I'm not. I'm a realist. I'm here to win. I have a single goal this evening -- to have at least a plurality of you walk out of the "Aye" door.

I face a singular challenge -- most, if not all, of you have already made up your minds. This issue is too polarizing for the vast majority of you not to already have a set opinion. I'd be willing to bet that half of you strongly support the motion, and half of you strongly oppose it.

I want to win, and we're destined for a tie. I'm tempted to do what my fellow speakers are going to do -- simply rehash every bad thing the Israeli government has ever done in an attempt to satisfy those of you who agree with them. And perhaps they'll even guilt one of you rare undecided into voting for the proposition, or more accurately, against Israel.

It would be so easy to twist the meaning and significance of international “laws” to make Israel look like a criminal state. But that's been done to death.

It would be easier still to play to your sympathy, with personalized stories of Palestinian suffering. And they can give very eloquent speeches on those issues.

But the truth is, that treating people badly, whether they're your citizens or an occupied nation, does not make a state “rogue.” If it did, Canada, the U.S., and Australia would all be rogue states based on how they treat their indigenous populations. Britain’s treatment of the Irish would easily qualify them to wear this sobriquet. These arguments, while emotionally satisfying, lack intellectual rigor.

More importantly, I just don't think we can win with those arguments. It won't change the numbers. Half of you will agree with them, half of you won't. So I'm going to try something different, something a little unorthodox.

I'm going to try and convince the die-hard Zionists and Israel supporters here tonight, to vote for the proposition. By the end of my speech I will have presented five pro-Israel arguments that show Israel is, if not a “rogue state,” than at least “roguish.”

Let me be clear. I will not be arguing that Israel is “bad.” I will not be arguing that it doesn’t deserve to exist. I won't be arguing that it behaves worse than every other country. I will only be arguing that Israel is “rogue.”

The word “rogue” has come to have exceptionally damning connotations. But the word itself is value-neutral. The Oxford English Dictionary defines rogue as “aberrant, anomalous; misplaced, occurring (esp. in isolation) at an unexpected place or time,” while a dictionary from a far greater institution gives this definition: “behaving in ways that are not expected or not normal, often in a destructive way.”

These definitions, and others, center on the idea of anomaly -- the unexpected or uncommon. Using this definition, a rogue state is one that acts in an unexpected, uncommon or aberrant manner. A state that behaves exactly like Israel.

The first argument is statistical. The fact that Israel is a Jewish state alone makes it anomalous enough to be dubbed a rogue state: There are 195 countries in the world. Some are Christian, some Muslim, some are secular. Israel is the only country in the world that is Jewish. Or, to speak mathmo for a moment, the chance of any randomly chosen state being Jewish is 0.0051%. In comparison the chance of a UK lotto ticket winning at least £10 is 0.017% -- more than twice as

likely. Israel’s Jewishness is a statistical aberration.

The second argument concerns Israel’s humanitarianism, in particular, Israel’s response to a refugee crisis. Not the Palestinian refugee crisis -- for I am sure that the other speakers will cover that -- but the issue of Darfurian refugees. Everyone knows that what happened and is still happening in Darfur is genocide, whether or not the UN and the Arab League will call it such. (I actually hoped that Mr. Massih would be able to speak about -- he's actually somewhat of an expert on the crisis in Darfur, in fact, it's his expertise that has called him away to represent the former dictator of Sudan while he is being investigated by the ICC.)

There has been a mass exodus from Darfur as the oppressed seek safety. They have not had much luck. Many have gone north to Egypt -- where they are treated despicably. The brave make a run through the desert in a bid to make it to Israel. Not only do they face the natural threats of the Sinai, they are also used for target practice by the Egyptian soldiers patrolling the border. Why would they take the risk?

Because in Israel they are treated with compassion -- they are treated as the refugees that they are – and perhaps Israel's cultural memory of genocide is to blame. The Israeli government has even gone so far as to grant several hundred Darfurian refugees citizenship. This alone sets Israel apart from the rest of the world.

But the real point of distinction is this: The IDF sends out soldiers and medics to patrol the Egyptian border. They are sent looking for refugees attempting to cross into Israel. Not to send them back into Egypt, but to save them from dehydration, heat exhaustion, and Egyptian bullets.

Compare that to the U.S.’s reaction to illegal immigration across their border with Mexico. The American government has arrested private individuals for giving water to border crossers who were dying of thirst -- and here the Israeli government is sending out its soldiers to save illegal immigrants. To call that sort of behaviour anomalous is an understatement.

My third argument is that the Israeli government engages in an activity which the rest of the world shuns -- it negotiates with terrorists. Forget the late PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, a man who died with blood all over his hands -- they're in the process of negotiating with terrorists as we speak. Yasser Abed Rabbo is one of the lead PLO negotiators that has been sent to the peace talks with Israel. Abed Rabbo also used to be a leader of the PFLP -- an organisation of “freedom

fighters” that, under Abed Rabbo’s leadership, engaged in such freedom-promoting activities as killing 22 Israeli high school students.

And the Israeli government is sending delegates to sit at a table with this man, and talk about peace. And the world applauds. You would never see the Spanish government in peace talks with the leaders of the ETA -- the British government would never negotiate with Thomas Murphy. And if President Obama were to sit down and talk about peace with Osama Bin Laden, the world would view this as insanity. But Israel can do the exact same thing -- and earn international praise in the process. That is the dictionary definition of rogue -- behaving in a way that is unexpected, or not normal.

Another part of the dictionary definition is behaviour or activity “occurring at an unexpected place or time.” When you compare Israel to its regional neighbours, it becomes clear just how roguish Israel is. And here is the fourth argument: Israel has a better human rights record than any of its neighbours. At no point in history, has there ever been a liberal democratic state in the Middle East -- except for Israel. Of all the countries in the Middle East, Israel is the only one where the LGBT community enjoys even a small measure of equality.

In Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, and Syria, homosexual conduct is punishable by flogging, imprisonment, or both. But homosexuals there get off pretty lightly compared to their counterparts in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, who are put to death. Israeli homosexuals can adopt, openly serve in the army, enter civil unions, and are protected by exceptionally strongly worded ant-discrimination legislation. Beats a death sentence. In fact, it beats America.

Israel’s protection of its citizens’ civil liberties has earned international recognition. Freedom House is an NGO that releases an annual report on democracy and civil liberties in each of the 195 countries in the world. It ranks each country as “Free,” “Partly Free,” or “Not Free.” In the Middle East, Israel is the only country that has earned designation as a “free” country. Not surprising given the level of freedom afforded to citizens in, say, Lebanon -- a country designated “partly free,” where there are laws against reporters criticizing not only the Lebanese government, but the Syrian regime as well. I’m hoping Ms. Booth will speak about this, given her experience working as a “journalist” for Iran.

Iran is a country given the rating of “not free,” putting it alongside China, Zimbabwe, North Korea, and Myanmar. In Iran, as Ms. Booth I hoped would have said in her speech, there is a special “Press Court” which prosecutes journalists

for such heinous offences as criticizing the Ayatollah, reporting on stories damaging the “foundations of the Islamic republic,” using “suspicious (i.e., Western) sources,” or insulting Islam. Iran is the world leader in terms of jailed journalists, with 39 reporters (that we know of) in prison as of 2009. They also kicked out almost every Western journalist during the 2009 election. (I don't know if Ms Booth was affected by that.)

I guess we can’t really expect more from a theocracy. Which is what most countries in the Middle East are. Theocracies and autocracies. But Israel is the sole, the only, the rogue, democracy. Out of every country in the Middle East, only in Israel do anti-government protests and reporting go unquashed and uncensored.

I have one final argument -- the last nail in the opposition's coffin -- and it’s sitting right across the aisle. Mr. Ran Gidor’s presence here is the all evidence any of us should need to confidently call Israel a rogue state. For those of you who have never heard of him, Mr. Gidor is a political counsellor attached to Israel’s embassy in London. He’s the guy the Israeli government sent to represent them at the UN. He knows what he’s doing. And he’s here tonight. And it’s incredible.

Consider, for a moment, what his presence here means. The Israeli government has signed off, to allow one of their senior diplomatic representatives to participate in a debate on their very legitimacy. That’s remarkable.

Do you think for a minute, that any other country would do the same? If the Yale University Debating Society were to have a debate where the motion was “This house believes Britain is a racist, totalitarian state that has done irrevocable harm to the peoples of the world,” that Britain would allow any of its officials to participate? No.

Would China participate in a debate about the status of Taiwan? Never.

And there is no chance in hell that an American government official would ever be permitted to argue in a debate concerning its treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay.

But Israel has sent Mr. Ran Gidor to argue tonight against a “journalist”-cum-reality TV star, and myself, a 19-year-old law student who is entirely unqualified to speak on the issue at hand.

Every government in the world should be laughing at Israel right now -- because it forgot Rule No. 1. You never add credence to crackpots by engaging with them.

It's the same reason you won't see Stephen Hawking or Richard Dawkins debate David Icke. But Israel is doing precisely that. Once again, behaving in a way that is unexpected, or not normal. Behaving like a rogue state.

That's five arguments that have been directed at the supporters of Israel. But I have a minute or two left. And here's an argument for all of you – Israel wilfully and forcefully disregards international law. In 1981 Israel destroyed Osirak -- Sadam Hussein's nuclear bomb lab. Every government in the world knew that Hussein was building a bomb. And they did nothing. Except for Israel. Yes, in doing so they broke international law and custom. But they also saved us all from a nuclear Iraq.

That rogue action should earn Israel a place of respect in the eyes of all freedom-loving peoples. But it hasn't. But tonight, while you listen to us prattle on, I want you to remember something: while you're here, Khomeini's Iran is working towards the Bomb. And if you're honest with yourself, you know that Israel is the only country that can, and will, do something about it. Israel will, out of necessity, act in a way that is the not the norm, and you'd better hope that they do it in a destructive manner. Any sane person would rather a rogue Israel than a Nuclear Iran. Except Ms. Booth.

The author, a Cambridge University law student, will be a 2011 intern with UN Watch. Text edited for publication from the original.

University Network Newsletter