

"GAZA = AUSCHWITZ"

<http://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/2014/08/gaza-equals-auschwitz/>
Holocaust inversion—the claim that Israelis are the new Nazis and Palestinians the new Jews—has come to the American university campus.

August 26, 2014 | Martin Kramer

Five years ago, during an earlier Israeli operation in Gaza, the British novelist Howard Jacobson [explained](#) why “call[ing] the Israelis Nazis and liken[ing] Gaza to the Warsaw Ghetto” goes far beyond mere “criticism” of Israel:

Berating Jews with their own history, disinheriting them of pity, as though

pity is negotiable or has a sell-by date, is the latest species of Holocaust denial. . . . Instead of saying the Holocaust didn’t happen, the modern sophisticated denier accepts the event in all its terrible enormity, only to accuse the Jews of trying to profit from it, either in the form of moral blackmail or downright territorial theft. According to this thinking, the Jews have betrayed the Holocaust and become unworthy of it, the true heirs to their suffering being the Palestinians.

Experts call this Holocaust inversion. Based in the claim that Israel now behaves toward the Palestinians as Nazi Germany behaved toward the Jews, it originated in post-World War II Soviet propaganda, and from there spread to the Soviets’ Arab clients. It is now fully embedded in the Arab-Muslim world, where it grows and mutates in symbiosis with outright denial that the Holocaust occurred or a radical reduction of its genocidal scale, ferocity, and number of victims. Holocaust inversion has a graphic omnipresence in [cartoons](#) all over the Arab and Iranian press, where Israelis are regularly



A woman demonstrating against Israeli action in Gaza outside of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC.
Photo by MANDEL NGAN/AFP/Getty Images.

portrayed in Nazi regalia. Elsewhere in the Middle East and beyond, it has surfaced in the rhetoric of populist demagogues and the media. In Turkey's new president and long-time prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, it now has a [champion](#) in a head of state. In Europe, Holocaust inversion is busy spreading beyond its original locus of infection and finding a home among intellectuals and activists, especially on the Left.

Thankfully, the disease is still rather hard to find in America, where it festers in only a few dark places. Some of those places, regrettably, operate as institutions of higher learning, and in one of them—Columbia University—a number of professors, mainly instructors in Middle East studies, have distinguished themselves in the black art of defaming Israel as a Holocaust emulator. Only a decade ago, Columbia was compelled to [investigate](#) departmental instructors who had been accused of intimidating their students with extreme anti-Israel diatribes. Not only did the university absolve its professors, however, it even granted tenure to the one faculty member against whom its own investigators [found](#) a student's claims to be "credible." Encouraged by this green light, the extremists have been tunneling under Morningside Heights ever since, fortifying their positions and waiting for a signal to emerge firing.

The recent war in Gaza has supplied the signal. Columbia now boasts three American exponents of the process described by Jacobson as "habituation to a language of loathing."

The first is Hamid Dabashi, the Hagop Kevorkian professor of Iranian studies and comparative literature. Almost exactly ten years ago, Dabashi sized up the security personnel working at Israel's Ben-Gurion airport—a "fully fortified barrack," he called it—in [these words](#):

Half a century of systematic maiming and murdering of another people has left its deep marks on the faces of these people, the way they talk, the way they walk, the way they handle objects, the way they greet each other, the way they look at the world. There is an endemic prevarication to this machinery, a vulgarity of character that is bone-deep and structural to the skeletal vertebrae of its culture.

Now, ten years later, Dabashi hasn't lost his capacity for demonizing Jews. In an [article](#) entitled "Gaza: Poetry after Auschwitz," Dabashi borrows a title and what he imagines is a license from the post-Holocaust theorist Theodor Adorno to make his key point:

What are Israelis? Who are Israelis? They are Israelis by virtue of what? By a shared and sustained murderous history—from Deir Yassin in 1948 to Gaza in 2014. . . . After Gaza, not a single living Israeli can utter the word “Auschwitz” without it sounding like “Gaza.” Auschwitz as a historical fact is now archival. Auschwitz as a metaphor is now Palestinian. From now on, every time any Israeli, every time any Jew, anywhere in the world, utters the word “Auschwitz,” or the word “Holocaust,” the world will hear “Gaza.”

Once again, there is the conflation of Israel with “murder”—and not just murder but, in a new step for Dabashi, a “sustained murderous history” that has finally achieved Holocaust-class status: in Gaza, he writes, Israel has created an Auschwitz. As a “historical fact,” the real Auschwitz—the one where 500 totally innocent Jews perished for every single innocent or guilty Palestinian killed in Israel’s recent operation—is now merely “archival.” Now, the world’s most infamous death camp has become a “metaphor” for a place where, as it just so happens, the population grows by almost three percent per year. Such is the abyss of ignorance, bigotry, and casual mendacity inhabited by Columbia’s chaired professor of Iranian studies and comparative literature.

Next up is Joseph Massad, associate professor of modern Arab politics and intellectual history and the man who, having compiled the clearest record of classroom intimidation at the very time he was being considered for promotion to permanent faculty status, stood at the center of the last Columbia scandal. Then, in his struggle for academic survival, Massad had [protested](#) to the university’s investigating committee that the “lie . . . claiming that I would equate Israel with Nazi Germany”—the essence of one student accusation—“is abhorrent. I have never made such a reprehensible equation.” In a moment that won’t be remembered as Columbia’s finest, President Lee Bollinger and his board, succumbing to the bullying of radical faculty members, granted him tenure.

By 2009, after another Gaza flare-up, Massad no longer had any need for dissimulation. The professor who had found “reprehensible” the equation of Israel with Nazi Germany published an [article](#) entitled “The Gaza Ghetto Uprising.” Illustrated by the famous image of a surrendering child in the Warsaw ghetto, the article invoked an alleged Israeli plan to “make Israel a purely Jewish state that is *Palästinener-rein*,” and characterized the Palestinian Authority—or, rather, “the Israeli-created Palestinian Collaborationist Authority”—as “the *judenrat*, the Nazi equivalent” in this scenario. *Al Jazeera* ran a pathetic [response](#) by an American Jewish critic of Israel who scolded the author for damaging the Palestinian cause.

Last year, Massad penned another [effort](#), “The Last of the Semites,” carrying the equation back in time. It was, he, postulated, their “shared goal of expelling Jews from Europe as a separate unassimilable race that created the affinity between Nazis and Zionists all along.” Massad ended the article by anointing the Palestinians as the true “heirs” of the pre-Holocaust Jewish struggle against anti-Semitism. So great was the revulsion caused by this piece of Holocaust inversion that its publisher, *Al Jazeera*, [pulled](#) it for a time.

Massad views each Israeli-Palestinian crisis as an opportunity to extend the range of his “language of loathing.” The Nazi analogy no longer sufficing, he has now seized upon the latest conflict in Gaza to promote yet another loaded trope: Israel as the international Jew engaged in child sacrifice. In an [piece](#) devoted to the role of foreign volunteers in the Israeli military, Massad slips in a crucial phrase denouncing these “international Zionist Jewish brigades of baby-killers.”

There’s an irony here, and a tragic one. During Columbia’s investigation of the complaints against him, Massad was most vigorously defended by an unlikely student supporter, who once [showed up](#) on campus in a sandwich board inscribed “I served in the Israeli army. I love Massad.” The student, who insisted that “nobody calls me a baby-killer when I go to office hours,” later committed suicide, and is memorialized at Columbia through a summer travel [scholarship](#) for students in the Middle East program. With Massad’s own airing of the “baby-killer” canard, the professor has now betrayed the ghost of his most ardent Jewish defender.

And then there is Rashid Khalidi, holder of the Edward Said chair of modern Arab studies and a professor of a somewhat higher class. While Dabashi and Massad find it difficult to place their effusions in publications other than the death-to-Israel *Electronic Intifada* or the angry-Arab *Al Jazeera* and *Ahram Weekly*, Khalidi has entrée to the elite liberal New York press. He also knows enough not to try his editors’ patience with naked examples of Holocaust inversion. Yet here he was, in a [piece](#) for the *New Yorker*, creeping up to the edge. Decrying the “collective punishment” being meted out to Gaza, Khalidi introduces his telltale allusion: “The truth of ghettos . . . is that, eventually, the ghetto will fight back. It was true in Soweto and Belfast, and it is true in Gaza.”

Soweto and Belfast? Where’s Warsaw? It’s there, hovering in the background, as was [pointed out](#) by two political scientists examining the increasingly popular use of “the language of genocide and the Holocaust with reference to Gaza”:

An example of this trend [they write] is a growing use of the word “ghetto,” a term associated directly (but in no way exclusively) with the Holocaust to describe the Gaza Strip. . . . While [Rashid] Khalidi does not directly compare the Gaza violence to the Holocaust (he uses the examples of Belfast and Soweto), the image of a fighting ghetto is strongly associated with the Warsaw ghetto.

Indeed, a few days after his article appeared, Khalidi [confirmed](#) just which ghetto he meant by denouncing “the siege, the blockade, the starvation of these people” in Gaza. The Nazis did indeed [starve](#) the Warsaw ghetto, and famine killed thousands. But not a soul has died of starvation in Gaza, and if stunted growth in childhood is a measure of poor nutrition, Gaza’s rate is [lower](#) than that of any Arab state but Qatar. Philip Gourevitch, also [writing](#) in the *New Yorker*, characterized Khalidi’s ghetto-referencing piece as an instance of “magical thinking.” He was being charitable.

Beyond these three cases, another Columbia-related episode is worth noting. Probably the cleverest of the anti-Israel lot on Morningside Heights is Nadia Abu El-Haj, associate professor of anthropology at Barnard College. A few years back, she, too, won a bruising tenure battle. But in her case, the outcome was never in doubt because (unlike Massad) she trod lightly. “I’m not a public intellectual,” she [said](#) at the time. “I’m drawn to archives, to disciplines where the evidence sits for a while. I don’t court controversy.” This, despite the fact that her entire “academic” project is aimed at [casting](#) Zionism as the fabrication of a totally specious national identity. “Israel is a *settler*-nation,” she writes, “that is, a project of European colonial settlement that imagined and believed itself to be a project of national return.” Those deceiving Zionists—they even duped *themselves* into thinking they were going home!

Much too smart to indulge in Holocaust inversion, Abu El-Haj hit upon an alternative in a recent [contribution](#) to the *London Review of Books*:

The IDF’s tactics [in Gaza] recall the logic of the British and American firebombing of German and Japanese cities during World War II: target the civilian population. Make them pay an unbearable price. Then they will turn against their own regime. When Israel attacks hospitals in Gaza, when it wipes out extended families, when it mows down children running on a beach, it is engaged in a premeditated act.

No Auschwitz or Warsaw ghetto for Abu El-Haj. But Dresden and Tokyo—why not? So what if Israel, unlike the Allies in World War II, warns civilians

of impending strikes and, again unlike the Allies, eschews area bombardment and incendiary bombs? So what if one night of bombing over Tokyo killed 50 times as many as Israel's month-long campaign in Gaza?

When you see four boys dead on a Gaza beach, Abu El-Haj wants you to "recall," with her, the 40,000 civilians killed in Hamburg. (Sorry, the actual figure was 42,000—but what's another 2,000 here or there? Either way, the entire toll in Gaza fits into the margin of error of one firebombing in World War II.) Might the Israelis, in their targeting, ever commit something as human as a mistake, even a negligent one? No, they're far too inhuman for that: when they kill, it's always "premeditated." "Nothing Unintentional" is the delicate title of Abu El-Haj's article, which might as well have been called "Baby-Killers."

There is such a thing as legitimate criticism of Israel, and there is such a thing as crossing the line into demonization and, to put it plainly, Jew-baiting. The analogies spewed by Columbia's tenured professors are of the latter kind, and are obscene. Jew-baiting covers a wider range than anti-Semitism, and Holocaust inversion is its favorite technique. Jew-baiting is the demand that Israel and its supporters [explain](#) why Gaza *isn't* like a Nazi extermination camp or a starved ghetto for the doomed, or why a targeted air campaign *isn't* just like the incineration of Dresden. That it should be practiced so openly by tenured professors at New York's Ivy League home is a scandal, and a warning.

Martin Kramer is president of Shalem College in Jerusalem. Among his graduate degrees is a Master of Arts in history (1976) from Columbia University.