The Weaponization of *Everything*

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When Christiane Amanpour interviewed Sen. Bernie Sanders in early May, protests were still raging across US campuses. She asked him, "where does the line get crossed between antisemitism and criticizing a government policy?" She noted that, just the day before, Kenneth Stern—the person who led the drafting of the working definition of antisemitism for the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (now endorsed by more than forty countries)—was asked about the same issue. "I jealously guarded the term 'antisemitism,'" Stern said. "To have a sting, it has to be used only in the clearest case . . . . Now there's a push to make it almost ubiquitous—and when everything becomes antisemitic, nothing is antisemitic, and that makes it harder to fight antisemitism."

The logic that crying "wolf" when unwarranted could dull our senses, making us less alert to *real* dangers, is sound. However, instead of addressing the actual claims over antisemitism within campus protests and examining their merits, Ms. Amanpour framed her question by noting the issue's politicization, particularly how "the Republicans are using it a lot." Senator Sanders, familiar with the historical atrocities driven by antisemitism, emphasized the importance of vigorously combating antisemitism while noting that critiquing the policies of Israel, as a state, is not necessarily antisemitic in and of itself.

However, the Senator's answer wasn't what caught my attention. After his reply, Ms. Amanpour added a remark that broke the needle in my irony detector. "For our generation," she said, "who grew up in the era of 'never again' and are very, very committed to that, I think it's really tough when we see this word [antisemitism] *weaponized* and maybe lose its sting and its importance—as Kenneth Stern warns."

No doubt, former CIA Director Gen. David Petraeus was referring to physical threats when he warned a few years ago that the world has entered the age of "the weaponization of everything." Yet, in this era where terms are

hurled for political purposes like weapons in a war, it's evident how words and concepts themselves have been weaponized as well. Instead of applying terms based on their accepted definitions or meanings, an attacker cynically exploits their well-established connotations. By improperly employing a term in this way, the attacker aims to force the public to conflate the target of the attack with these negative connotations. As a result, all the negative associations and implications of the term are unfairly attributed to the target of the attack. We all know it when we see it, even if we haven't always labeled it as such.

In Ms. Amanpour case, the innuendo is clear: it's not just that criticism of Israel is not necessarily antisemitic, as the Senator noted. Now, even the accusation that there is antisemitism within the protests is suddenly presumed, for no apparent reason, to be such an inherently malicious weaponization of the term. The innuendo was followed by what appears to be a sincere worry for the word losing its gravitas. And yet, I couldn't help but notice that this very same call for caution is puzzlingly absent when it comes to another term of no less importance that is being constantly—and bombastically—flailed during these protests: genocide.

After all, what are all these college students saying they are protesting against? Why do too many of them feel entitled to vandalise, trespass, and even bully Jewish students? What magic wand do they wave that suddenly grants them the *right* to do as they please, all while cloaked in self-righteous indignation? It's 'the genocide'.

A charge of genocide is, rightly, a very serious accusation, and should be taken as such. However, it is important to recognize that genocide is a term of art—a legal term with a very specific meaning. The Genocide Convention, signed in 1948 in the wake of the Holocaust, was the *first* UN human rights treaty. Again, rightly, it was signed by every self-respecting country, and the undertaking to eradicate this phenomenon became a tenet of the international community. As genocide is "the crime of crimes"—the most heinous and inhumane offence humanity had yet to know—it is *never* justified (keep that 'feature' in mind).

Notwithstanding this collective locking-of-arms against genocide, the countries that deliberated its definition at the UN were not naïve, and they understood very well the dangers lurking in failing to do so *precisely*. Mr. Maktos, for the United States, pointed out that a vague definition could spark international tensions by enabling countries to abuse any wiggle room and accuse one another of genocide as a political battering ram. An imprecise or non-exhaustive definition of genocide "would make it possible to include, in the list of crimes constituting genocide, all acts which one might *wish*, wrongly

or rightly, to consider as such."

The same concern about an over-inclusive definition, like Mr. Stern expressed with antisemitism, was also voiced in an earlier Secretariat draft to the UN General Assembly with regard to genocide: "there is a danger of the idea of genocide being expanded indefinitely . . . . if the notion of genocide were excessively wide, the success of the convention for the prevention and punishment of what is perhaps the most odious international crime would be jeopardized." To put it in Mr. Stern's words: when everything becomes a genocide, nothing is a genocide—and that makes it harder to fight *real* genocide when it happens.

A very precise definition of genocide was ultimately achieved, enshrined in article II of the Genocide Convention. It specifies that genocide is at least one of five enumerated acts, committed with the highly-specific and special intent "to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such." It is this excess—the special intent to destroy a group as such—that distinguishes genocide as supremely evil. This was reaffirmed by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in its 2007 judgment in the case of *Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro*: "It is not enough to establish . . . that deliberate unlawful killings of members of the group have occurred. [The genocidal intent] must also be established, and is defined very precisely. It is often referred to as a special or specific intent or *dolus specialis* . . . . It is not enough that the members of the group are targeted because they belong to that group, that is because the perpetrator has a discriminatory intent. Something more is required. The acts listed in Article II must be done with intent to destroy the group as such in whole or in part. The words "as such" emphasize that intent to destroy the protected group." Even a pattern of atrocities, the Court clarified, is not enough on its own to satisfy the required intent: "unless a general plan to that end can be convincingly demonstrated," for a pattern of conduct to be accepted as evidence of genocidal intent, "it would have to be such that it could *only* point to the existence of such intent."

Despite the years-long process required for the ICJ to deliver a formal judgment on the merits of the case, the legal parameters are already clear and unequivocally lead to the *rejection* of any allegations of genocide against Israel in Gaza. "Whatever Israel is doing and has done, it is not what is legally meant by that term [genocide]: intentionally destroying the Palestinian people. It is not happening either in the West Bank or in Gaza," explained Menachem Rosensaft—a Cornell University law professor, scholar of the Law of Genocide, and general counsel emeritus of the World Jewish Congress—to the Italian *La Repubblica*. According to the definition of genocide, he elab-

orates, to be considered a genocide "the objective of the conflict should be the specific intent on the part of Israel to destroy the Palestinian national, religious, ethnic group in its entirety or in part." However, "the reason for this war is that Israel is—legitimately—trying to remove the existing threat posed by Hamas. The fact that Gaza civilians are suffering is regrettable and tragic—but that is not the purpose of the war."

Not only that, he adds, "If anything, it is the Hamas terrorists who have a genocidal agenda. The October 7 attack was a deliberate action perpetrated by a terrorist organization that targeted Israeli—that is, Jewish—civilians: women, men, children and the elderly. It subjected them to terrible, deliberate and intentional horrors and atrocities. Torture, rape. It cannot be ignored . . . . One of the things that bothers me is the intellectual dishonesty resulting from ignoring October 7. The war would not have happened and no Gaza civilians would have died without that attack."

Irony often threads through Jewish history, yet it would be a bitter first to suffer genocide twice, only to be accused of perpetrating it when defending against those who orchestrated one of them.

Because it is never justifiable, and because those who do it ought to be stopped, protesters are clinching on to 'genocide' in a hail mary, despite the fact that the shoe clearly doesn't fit. This is why we see comments like those by Rep. Ilhan Omar labeling some Jewish students—the 'bad' Jews, one might say—as "pro-genocide." After all, an accusation of genocide, whether true or false, is the ultimate political knockout punch. What other term could she have used to completely delegitimize Jewish students who disagree with her agenda?

Even though the protesters are conclusively wrong on the question of genocide, they still have the right to say that there is one going on. What worries me is not that they have the right to say it. Rather it is that—curiously enough—the capacity to cynically weaponize terms seems to reside only with Jews decrying antisemitism and not with protesters shouting 'genocide.' The weaponization of 'genocide,' it seems, is not even considered a possibility, or to have ever crossed anyone's mind—definitely not in the same way and to the same extent that Ms. Amanpour demonstrated with 'antisemitism.'

Why are the legitimate concerns of Jewish students about antisemitism in college protests dismissed—despite ample evidence—as proverbially crying "wolf," and suspected of being a political weaponization of the term, while protesters—who seem to have an almost divine permission to do whatever they want if their incantations will only include 'genocide'—are not treated to the same suspicious undertone and innuendos of subversion? Can the

moral outrage an accusation of genocide *naturally* evokes not be weaponized? Can it not be politically abused, in just the same way, in an attempt to delegitimize what is otherwise legitimate? Is the "sting" and "importance" of 'genocide' not worth preserving just as much? Why the double standard?

Just like college protesters hijacked 'genocide' as a weapon to attack and delegitimize what is not a genocide for their own political purposes, they engaged in a similar tactic with 'Intifada.' Only this time narrowing the definition's boundaries instead of extending them to where they don't belong, feigning it doesn't encompass actions and connotatioons that are inherent and indissoluble from it in order to make it "Kosher."

Slogans like "globalize the Intifada" and "Long Live the Intifada" have been omnipresent in practically every campus that had protests. After Cornell University correctly condemned in a statement the chant "there is only one solution, Intifada Revolution" used by protesters, a group of Cornell professors opposed it, writing in *The Cornell Daily Sun* it's "based on a failure to understand the literal and historical meaning of an Arabic word, *intifada* . . . . which means 'uprising'."

'Intifada' doesn't have a legal definition like 'genocide,' but six students poignantly refuted the professors' arguments in an article of their own, pointing out that "the word 'intifada' has a specific meaning in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" because it refers to two very unique historical events: the First and Second Intifadas. "While both intifadas were characterized by Palestinian terror attacks against Israelis, the Second Intifada was a particularly painful and scarring period. Over 1,000 Israelis were killed, largely in random acts of terrorism . . . . (such as suicide bombings in buses, Passover seders, restaurants and markets)." Seems like it's not so Kosher after all.

They concluded: "The professors' letter weaponizes their 'expertise' to give authority to those who celebrate violence against Jews. Using their credentials to obfuscate the meaning of 'intifada' and give cover to those who call for Israel's annihilation." Trying to feign that 'intifada' is divorced from deliberate violence against civilians—instead of its most central element—is not a good look for professors who argue from (their own) authority. I'll leave it to you to judge if the possibility they *actually* didn't know that fact makes it better or worse.

Scrolling down, past the working definition of 'antisemitism,' the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance also lists contemporary examples of antisemitism in public life. One of them, is applying double standards and requiring a behavior not expected or demanded of others. If we want to do a balance sheet of how words are being weaponized, that's fine. But it would

be quite ironic to single out accusations of antisemitism in protests as somehow insincere or politically motivated, while at the same time giving a carte blanche to whoever shouts 'genocide' or obfuscates their more insidious intentions behind calls for an 'Intifada.'

At least we'd have the irony.