

Dear friends, I spent yesterday in Washington, DC at an AIPAC summit for Midwest rabbis. I was surprised to hear some of the presenters refer to Mahmoud Abbas as Abu Mazen, literally the father of Mazen, which I understood to be a friendly nickname, even a term of endearment. I wrote to an Israeli colleague with more expertise than I on these kinds of things. Here is part of his response:

You are correct in the assumption that there is a measure of familiarity or what I might call "respectful affection" associated in the use of a kunya. I would not refer to Yasser Arafat as Abu Amar nor to Muhamad Abbas as Abu Mazen.

Why, then, were the presenters using this form of address? Is it a trivial matter on which I should not waste energy? I think not. I have a passion for clarity

in general which includes a passion for clarity in speech. This talk is about such clarity.

Sunday will be the anniversary of a date which is one of the most infamous in the history of our nation. September 11, 2001 is on a par with December 7, 1941. On this tenth anniversary of the attack on America, I would like to ask the following question: is the world any more clear about terrorism today than on September 10, 2001?

I have a copy of the Fort Myers News-Press from seven years ago. The headline reads BIN LADEN VIDEO AIRS ON EVE OF ANNIVERSARY, and the sub-headline reads TERRORIST PRAISES 9-11 HIJACKERS, CALLS FOR JIHAD. The first sentence of the article begins with the words *The man blamed for the deadliest terrorist attacks in U.S. history...*

I cite this as proof that the media does know that the word terrorist exists, and can recognize terrorism, at least when it takes place in the United States. But I challenge you to find a media outlet, with the possible exception of Fox News, that calls Hamas a terrorist organization. Even the traditionally Arabist U.S. Department of State calls Hamas terrorists, but not the media. Fly a plane into the World Trade Center and you are a terrorist. Blow up a bus full of Israelis and you are a militant.

If you think this is an insignificant matter of semantics, then listen to the following two sentences:

1. During World War II, a group of Jewish militants staged an uprising in the Warsaw ghetto against the Nazis.

2. During World War II, a group of Jewish terrorists staged an uprising in the Warsaw ghetto against the Nazis.

It's not at all the same, is it? One word defines someone as a combatant in the service of a cause, but the other carries with it obvious contempt for the tactics and morals of the perpetrator. To call terrorists militants legitimizes their heinous acts. Anyone or any entity that does so is making a contribution to the acceptance of terrorism as a means of expression.

Did you know that the United States Department of State, which as I said is historically pro-Arab, has an official definition of terrorism? Listen to how the State Department defines it:

...premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by

subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience. For the purposes of this definition, the term “noncombatant” is interpreted to include, in addition to civilians, military personnel who at the time of the incident are unarmed and/or not on duty.¹

Please do not make the mistake of thinking that this use of the term militant in place of terrorist is not a conscious policy decision on the media’s part. Several newspapers have published articles dealing with the issue. Some of them even get it right.

Listen to what the *St. Petersburg Times* editorial editor, Philip Gailey, wrote in an Op-Ed piece:

When a Palestinian suicide bomber recently boarded a bus in Jerusalem and blew 20 men, women and

¹ From Title 22 of the United States Code, Section 2656f(d) and the State Department's "Patterns of Global Terrorism" 2000

children to bits, most of the wire service reports I saw, including one from the Associated Press, said the carnage was the work of Palestinian “militants.”

By that standard, I suppose Osama bin Laden is a militant, as was Mohammed Atta, who led the 9/11 terrorist attacks that killed more than 3,000 people in New York and Washington. And [the] war on terrorism is really a war on militancy.

For me, it's not a hard call. Acts of terror are committed by terrorists, and the horrific bus attack on Israeli civilians, like the dozens of suicide bombings that preceded it, was an act of cold, indiscriminate terror.

Here, thank God, is a journalist with moral clarity and the courage to write what he knows is right. But too many lack his moral clarity. The *Orlando Sentinel*

addressed the issue with the following policy statement from its style committee:

“Use caution when using these terms (militants, terrorists), which can show bias toward one side in a conflict. Generally, ‘bombers’, ‘attackers’, or ‘suicide bombers’ are preferred terms.”

In Philip Gailey’s article, he wrote about the response to the style committee from the *Sentinel’s* public editor:

Manning Pynn, the Sentinel’s public editor, recently wrote that despite the style committee decision, the paper will continue to use “militant” to describe Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, both of which are on the State Department’s list of terrorist organizations. “The term ‘terrorist’ certainly expresses judgment: It imputes to the person or organization being described

the motive of trying to instill fear. ‘Militant’ seems to me much more neutral,” Pynn wrote.

My friends, I cannot begin to express the contempt I have for this man’s views. I totally reject the suggestion that his views reflect an appropriate journalistic neutrality. You may disagree, and that is your right, but it is crystal clear to me that not calling terrorism and terrorists what they are, instead giving them a more acceptable moniker, is in and of itself taking sides—the wrong side.

I have said this countless times but I will say it again,: there is no difference as vast as the moral difference between Israel and the Palestinians. Israel has a group called Rabbis for Human Rights who protest when they think Israel has dealt too harshly with terrorists. I am not a member because our philosophies are quite different, but it is to Israel’s

credit that there is such a group. Where is the Palestinian equivalent? Where is Imams for Human Rights? Where is the Palestinian peace movement? I am sure there are Palestinians who would prefer peace with Israel. I know there used to be, and if you want to see photos of their dead bodies hanging in public squares after being killed by their fellow Palestinians for their views, I can tell you where to find those pictures. If Israel had magic powers, there would be peace in the region now. If the PA had such powers, there would be no such thing as Israel. After September 11, 2001, many rabbis including me said that sadly, now Americans know how Israelis feel. We were stupid. We were stupid. We dared to hope that this would bring moral clarity to the west and to our media, and maybe to some extent it has, but not enough. Not enough.

My friends, this is not a political issue for me, it is a Jewish issue. The same Hebrew word, *davar*, means both word and thing. Words are real things. There is a difference between a militant and a terrorist. Ten years after 9/11, the world still blurs the line. Israel is not trying to survive in the face of militants. Israel is trying to survive in the face of terrorism. May we all live to see the day when the world will not be satisfied with denying reality by pretending terrorists are merely militant. The New York Times got it right when it happened here. Now all they and the rest of the media need to get it right when it happens in Israel.