

# Jewish Anti-Zionists and the Delegitimization of Israel

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The frequent debates held by British universities (most famously Oxford, Cambridge and London) on Zionism and the right of the State of Israel to exist, more often than not include Jews and Israelis on both sides of the chamber. In recent years, one such prestigious line-up of anti-Zionist Israelis and Diaspora Jews supported the motion “Zionism is the worst enemy of the Jews” in front of approximately 1,000 members of the greater London community – and were opposed by a panel of three Zionist Israelis and Diaspora Jews. In the audience’s eye, the Jewish and Israeli identity of the speakers makes the topic legitimate. In all circumstances, the motion carried the day by wide margins.

These debates are just one example of the ways in which Jewish and Israeli intellectuals provide strong cases against Israel’s right to exist. By doing so, they cancel out any accusations of anti-Semitism which could otherwise be leveled against those who support these arguments, since a Jew cannot be an anti-Semite. Regardless of whether this is the case, in a world where identities matter, a Jewish or Israeli background provides a powerful alibi to those who support, endorse, and articulate the denial of Israel’s right to exist. Israel’s detractors readily seize upon such Jewish and Israeli censors of Israel to prove the most extreme arguments against Israel. This article will discuss the problem of Jewish anti-Zionists and their role in the delegitimization of Israel.

Especially, but not exclusively when Israelis and Jews are involved in pernicious characterizations of Israel, many still reject accusations that this is a form of anti-Semitism, even in obvious and extreme cases, such as comparisons of Israel to Nazi Germany, the use of blood libel imagery, or the depiction of Israelis as Christ-killers. Those who deny that these portrayals are anti-Semitic do so through the use of two techniques. Firstly, they dismiss the accusations as blackmail, insinuating that they are an attempt to silence all criticism of Israel. Secondly, they produce Jewish anti-Zionists (with or without an Israeli

passport) as proof that they are not attacking all Jews, only those who support Israel's right to exist. They often cite these Jews as the sources of their information, frequently producing their rhetoric and writings as evidence that Jews argue against Israel in much the same way. They claim that given such company, and such similarity of discourse, they can hardly be accused of anti-Semitism. And they rely on the specifics of such rhetoric in support of their argument, since it usually appeals to unspecified "Jewish values."

The rhetoric of these anti-Zionist Jews is, interestingly enough, a discourse about saving the Jews from themselves. The salvation they offer depends on ending Zionism and all its consequences. It is therefore, for all intents and purposes, a linguistic mandate to destroy the Jewish state, articulated by Jews in the name of Jewish values and for the sake of the Jewish people.

In a world where anti-Semitism is unacceptable in social and political discourse, these Israeli and/or Jewish intellectuals comply with the calls of Israel's critics, offering themselves as an alibi against accusations of anti-Semitism. Their presence in the debate emphasizes the legitimacy of an argument from an ethnic or religious perspective, not on its merit. Many commentators use this technique, including John J. Mearsheimer and two of the many frequent English commentators on the conflict, John Pilger and (a more extreme example) Anatol Lieven, a columnist in the *Financial Times*. The latter has in the past evoked the "iron grip of the Jewish lobby" over U.S. foreign policy and its alleged ability to stifle public debate. He is always careful to mention both the Jewish ancestry of people who disagree with him in order to delegitimize their argument and the Jewish ancestry of people who support his case, in order to strengthen it. Likewise, Alan Hart, a British journalist, points out in the introduction of his book *Zionism: The Real Enemy of the Jews* that "all of the most perceptive and most devastating Zionist critics were and are Jews." If this is the case, clearly the worst type of rhetoric against Israel can never be anti-Semitic because Jews themselves have voiced it.

Max Hastings, a conservative commentator in Great Britain, wrote in the *Guardian* in June 2006 that

Younger Europeans, not to mention the rest of the world, are more skeptical about Israel's territorial claims. They're less susceptible to moral arguments about redress for past horrors, which have underpinned Israeli actions for almost 60 years. We may hope that it will never be respectable to become anti-Semitic. However, Israel is discovering that it can no longer frighten non-Jews out of opposing its policies merely by accusing them of anti-Semitism.

A further step in the process that transforms anti-Semitic discourse into acceptable language is that any attempt to expose this is instantly dismissed as an apology of Israel. Israel, according to the promoters of this argument, is indefensible. Israel, and its founding ideology Zionism, are presented not just as a threat to peace in the region, but to the world. They are also accused of first and foremost harming the Jewish people. Jews are requested to distance themselves from the evil which is Israel in order to save themselves from the resulting abuse. This abuse is not because of prejudice but due to attachment to and sympathy for Israel. The Irish intellectual Justin Keating (writing in 2005) depicted Israel and Zionism as a betrayal of Judaism which invites anti-Semitism:

Jews have made an immense contribution to civilization, developing as they were between the great empires of Mesopotamia and the Nile, with both of which they had intimate contact, and by which they wanted to avoid being swallowed. They developed a religion and ethos based on independence, liberty and democracy to which we all owe a debt. That religion is based on the twin concepts of Law and Righteousness, which inspired over the millennia extraordinary contributions to culture and morality, all admirable. In Israel/Palestine where are they now? Zionists have betrayed all this, and that is a tragedy not just for Jews, but for all of us.

In October 2001, Barbara Spinelli, a frequent commentator in the Italian daily newspaper *La Stampa*, defined Israel as ultra-nationalist and called it a “scandal” (a scandal first and foremost for the Jews, since it is well known in Europe that Jews were the ultimate victims of modern nationalism). It is therefore only logical (her logic) that the Jews have a special duty to denounce Israel and defend the victims of Israel publicly, lest they be suspected of complicity. She wrote, “if one thing is missing in Judaism this is precisely it: a *mea culpa* vis-à-vis the peoples and individuals who had to pay the price of blood and exile to allow Israel to exist.” In one sentence, she manages to conflate new history’s false accusation that Israel’s birth is tainted by the expulsion of Palestinians with the old anti-Jewish stereotype about Jewish self-righteousness, Jewish collective responsibility, and the fact that Israel and Judaism are one and the same. And she decries the lack of a typically Christian element in Judaism – the need for confession. Not bad for a column written less than two months after 9/11.

She then proceeded to invite world Jewry to make immediate public amends: “If the initiative does not come from Jerusalem, then it should start in the diaspora, where so many Jews live a double and contradictory loyalty: to Israel, and to the state they belong to and vote in. A solemn *mea culpa*, proclaimed from the scattered communities in the West.”

These are just a few egregious examples of a widespread phenomenon which, due to space limits, cannot be fully documented here. Suffice them to serve the purpose of surveying and briefly illustrating two central techniques in the current discourse of delegitimization in the Western world – the distinction between Israel and Jews, on the one hand, and the use of Jewish anti-Zionists to endorse attacks on Israel, on the other. These techniques enable Israel’s opponents to avoid accusations of anti-Semitism. According to this argument, Israel’s evil is not only the result of its supposedly terrible actions within the context of the Middle East, but also the worst possible betrayal of Jewish authenticity. Jews are called upon to dissociate themselves from it and are warned – if you keep such company, do not be surprised if violence will come your way; and if you then cry anti-Semitism, we will not be fooled, we told you so!

An attempt is underway, led by Jews and non-Jews alike, to reclaim Jewish identity as something completely devoid of nationalism and detached from the Land of Israel. If this attack is allowed to succeed, it will eradicate many aspects of what it means to be Jewish, leaving behind only a secular, post-nationalist, anti-Zionist understanding of Jewish identity.