

Dueling Discourses: Diaspora Demonization vs. Palestinian Pragmatism

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ABSTRACT

Most Israeli Arabs are unaware of the anti-Israel delegitimization campaign sweeping through Europe and the United States. In Israel, Arab citizens are engaged in a practical civil discourse with fellow Israeli citizens that aims to improve their quality of life and which reflects their desire to build a shared and more equitable society.

In contrast, radical pro-Palestinian activists and their supporters promote inflammatory propaganda in the Palestinian diaspora and academia, radicalizing the Western Left against Israel, without considering the actual and concrete interests of Palestinians or Israeli Arabs.

The pragmatic approach of Palestinians and Israeli Arabs addresses quality of life issues, such as better security and health care, enforcement of equal rights laws, and greater economic opportunity.

It may come as a surprise to Western observers that two contradictory Palestinian discourses are operating simultaneously. Outside of Israel, one discourse is being driven by Palestinian academics and activists who have led and galvanized the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions campaign against Israel.

This discourse has been mainstreamed and mass-marketed in Western academia, the international media, and institutions such as United Nations agencies. This diaspora discourse asserts that the Palestinians are the “good guys” victimized by the Israeli “bad guys” - colonialists, oppressors, and evil “apartheid” Jews.

This narrative, which reflects this compendium’s title, *Israelophobia*, is promoted in large part by Palestinian academics, faculty, and students at leading American universities. This extreme anti-Israel narrative has targeted Western universities as fertile ground for mobilizing faculty and students to reject and shun any connection to Israel.

This radical, diaspora campaign to delegitimize Israel stands opposite a far more pragmatic, cooperative Israeli Arab and West Bank Palestinian dialogue with Israel. The local dialogue focuses on topics of common concern: quality of life, health, Arab-Jewish cooperation, and socio-economic issues, which more closely reflect the reality in Israel and the West Bank.

There is a fundamental difference between the external and internal Palestinian discourses. For example, a panel discussion in London on Israel that includes local Jewish and Palestinian organizations, leaders, and activists, reflexively transforms into an anti-Israeli diatribe.

Palestinian Academics like Saree Makdisi, Noura Erakat, and Hatem Bazian, who play aggressive public roles in promoting this narrative in the United States, frequently brand Israel an apartheid, colonialist, genocidal state. Makdisi’s polemics compare Israel to apartheid South Africa. Bazian has called Israel “wholesale settler colonial thievery,” and Erakat refers to Israel as a “settler sovereign.” This extremist nomenclature frequently parallels the language of Palestinian officials, adding to its perception of authenticity in the West.

This is part of a strategy by the Palestinian Authority and its parent Palestine Liberation Organization leadership and affiliate NGOs to isolate Israel in the international community, just as former apartheid South Africa was isolated in the 1970s and 1980s, eventually leading to the regime's collapse.

There are two problems with this analogy. First, Israel, unlike former apartheid South Africa, is a democratic state with a Jewish majority. Second, the above-mentioned extremist discourse does not reflect either the Israeli Arab or West Bank Palestinian realities. How can a Palestinian live under "apartheid" if he has two governments, the Palestinian Authority and the State of Israel?

Since 1994, Palestinians in the West Bank have lived under the internationally sanctioned and de facto sovereign Palestinian Authority. West Bank Palestinians living under PA jurisdiction have a PA judicial system, parliament, police force, stamps, and Palestinian passports. Israeli-imposed travel restrictions are determined exclusively by security-related issues. However, numerous U.S. campus activists have told me that Israel is an apartheid state because of the "fence" in the West Bank. I told them that both Jews and Palestinians live on both sides of that "fence." This is a security requirement to guard against terrorism, not a racial issue. This is one of many misconceptions that has been exploited to cast Israel as a racist apartheid state in the mind of the international community.

The external, extremist anti-Israel discourse does not reflect the aspirations or represent the interests of Israeli Arabs, and is unrelated to their situation. Instead, Arabs in Israel are demanding greater enforcement of their legally guaranteed democratic rights, fewer building zoning laws, better jobs, and more law enforcement in their communities. This dichotomy in the discourse begins to

explain how the Israel debate among diaspora Palestinians has become an inflamed political issue about how to delegitimize Israel, not a discussion about bettering the lives of Israeli Arabs as equal citizens with guaranteed rights, or creating opportunities for West Bank Palestinians, in line with the Oslo accords.

To illustrate this point, there have been various recent demonstrations by Arabs in Israel as part of a campaign for better Israeli police action to fight violent crime in Arab towns and cities across Israel. None of the protesters demonstrated against Israel as an “apartheid state” or protested against “Israeli occupation.” Israeli Arab citizens and residents of East Jerusalem protested for *better* Israeli law enforcement and policing, not *against* Israeli law enforcement and policing. These Arab protests in Israel demanded inclusion and protection of democratic rights guaranteed by law. This reflects the exact opposite of a delegitimization campaign.

Israeli Arabs are not seeking separation from Israel, rather, they seek greater inclusion as Israelis. The encouraging result of these protests has been a growing cooperation between the Arab community and Israel’s public security echelons in collecting weapons and cracking down on crime. The head of this operation is a high ranking Israeli Arab Police officer, Brigadier General Jamal Hakrush of Kafar Kanna in Israel’s North.

Israeli Arabs are disconnected from the external campaign of delegitimization. In fact, most are unaware of it. In essence, two separate campaigns are taking place: one is a positive civil discourse, and the other is a destructive political one. BDS-style Israelophobia has to be understood in the context of a protracted political conflict that lends itself to unhinged tirades, as opposed to civil discourse, which reflects the real desire to build a shared and productive society.



A woman votes for Knesset
in Tayibe, Israel, 2019

Photo: Ahmad Gharabli/AFP

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This contrasts with the inflammatory propaganda of Omar Barghouti, the co-founder of the BDS movement, who has coalesced with left-wing Western anti-Israel figures and groups in promoting Israel hatred without even considering the interests of Palestinians or Israeli Arabs. As a result, many academics who have expressed animus towards Israel have energized an Israelophobic narrative that legitimizes the perception of Israel as an illicit and illegitimate state.

Respected Western academics like Noura Erakat of George Mason University, Hatem Bazian of UC Berkeley, Rashid Khalidi of Columbia, and Saree Makdisi of UCLA, lend international academic credibility to the BDS movement. This credibility is irrelevant to Israeli Arabs and West Bank Palestinians. Even the rhetorically extreme Palestinian Authority is more pragmatic in its approach.

The above-mentioned academics have advanced their agenda by asserting Israel's illegitimacy as a Jewish and democratic state and by shutting down fair and reasonable academic debate. Ironically, these "liberal arts" academics' rhetorical extremism on Israel has emboldened Hamas and Islamic Jihad and undermined the Palestinian Authority. If these so-called "liberal" educators promote the terror group-affiliated BDS campaign, declare Israel an apartheid state that does not want peace, and decry illegal occupation, then how can Mahmoud Abbas ever negotiate with, or even meet with an Israeli Jew? Any cooperation would make him complicit in Israeli crimes.

This discourse justifies Hamas' terrorism. Hamas says, "You see, we told you that Jews don't want peace. Even in the international community, professors are on our side." The delegitimization of Israel strengthens Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and even Hizbullah. In this way, BDS and their ilk do a great service to radicals.

When I visited campuses in the United States, the Arab Palestinian academics and professors I heard speak sounded even more extreme than Hamas leaders I've met, and I've interviewed many Hamas officials. While engaging with them, I noticed their anger at the "Zionist colonial project" that created Israel. They invoked the language of "human rights," "occupation," "checkpoints," and "settlements" to veil their blind hatred, in an effort to make it appear logical to others, including fellow academics and high-level professionals.

Their tone and word choice - "the Zionist entity," "the state of Tel Aviv," referring to Jews living inside of Israel as "settlers," and to the borders of Palestine as those of 1948 - match the Hamas party line. This is the rhetoric employed by those who do not believe in Israel's right to exist and who wish to make Israel a pariah state in the eyes of the international community.

Those presented by the media and other groups as "famous Palestinian academics and highly respected professors" are completely unknown by most Palestinians. Being influential on U.S. campuses does not mean that they have a following in Tulkarm or Nablus. Their ideas and views do not appeal to Palestinians; in fact, they contradict their interests.

The great majority of Palestinian activists outside of Israel hold extremist views simply because they do not live in Israel, and do not have Jewish neighbors. They assume that Jewish settlers are all criminals. The only Jews they associate with in the West are those who confirm their suspicions, fears, and allegations. Most of them have not lived in the West Bank or pre-1967 Israel. Their upper middle class background provides them "license" to be more extreme than people on the ground in Israel and the West Bank.

These activists are more dedicated to hating Israel than helping Palestinians. If they really wanted to promote and serve the interests of their people, they would promote dialogue, pragmatism, and moderation, and call for an end to violence and boycotts, not the opposite. To the contrary, they expend their efforts to turn Israel into a monster, into a second apartheid South Africa, in order to delegitimize, weaken, and undermine the state. They are not a peace camp, and calling them “leftists” would be inaccurate, since spouting hatred against Israel does not make you “liberal.” This also goes for similarly extremist political rhetoric in the Palestinian Authority.

For example, PA incitement against U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s decision to recognize Israeli settlements as “not illegal per se,” is not grassroots nor is it spontaneous. The Palestinian Authority and the Fatah organize these activities. They are not spontaneous mass protests; they are well-planned demonstrations. There was no major violence because it was not a popular uprising; it was a politically motivated event. In fact, many Palestinians lampooned the Palestinian Authority on social media and elsewhere, criticizing Mahmoud Abbas. In Gaza, only 60 people demonstrated, making the promised “intifada” look like a big joke.

This reflects the contradiction between the discourse of “Israelophobia” outside of Israel and the pragmatic civil discourse in Israel. If I were to interview a Palestinian on the street, whether in the West Bank or in any Israeli city, about what he wants, he would likely say that he wants a work permit to gain better employment in Israel or to start a business, and that he would like to see the economy improve. He is not interested in demonstrating for an independent Palestinian state with

a capital in East Jerusalem, based on United Nations resolutions. Israeli Arabs are not marching on the streets demanding a Palestinian state there, in the West Bank, or even Palestinian police here in Israel. They are asking for greater Israeli police presence in Israel, when they need assistance.

Yet, in the media and abroad, people align themselves with politically correct rhetoric. PA officials speak of a two state solution with East Jerusalem as its capital, parroting the official PA line. However, the average Palestinian is not concerned with a PA leadership that has been accused of corruption, failure to protect Palestinians from local gangs and thugs, and a leadership that fails to protect Palestinian civil rights. The average Palestinian, like the average Israeli or the average American or European, wants stability, security, and prosperity. That means upwardly mobility, freedom of movement, Israeli-level health care, and good education for their children.

The real discourse among Israeli Arabs and Palestinians, reflecting their own interests, is what Israel does or does not do on the ground. Some Arab citizens of Israel are frustrated at what Israel *does not do*: Israel does not provide enough citizen services, employment, infrastructure, public funds, law enforcement, affirmative action, integration, or legal and political action against discrimination.

Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are angry with Israel because of what Israel *does do*, what they see as unjust: overarching security measures and restrictions. Yet, West Bank Arabs are not trying to spread hatred and Israelophobia; in many ways, they demand the same things that Israeli Arabs want, which is for Israel to treat them better. They want improved infrastructure, health care, and education.

Israelophobia, or hatred of Israel, stunts progress for Israeli Arabs and Palestinians in the West Bank. That is because Israelophobia is about casting Israel as an illegitimate entity.

The Israelophobia narrative charges that Israel is not a democracy, does not respect human rights, oppresses people, and practices apartheid and racism. Yet the truth is exactly the opposite. Israel respects the freedom of the media and freedom of speech, it respects women's rights, gay rights, and it is a country where Arab Muslim and Christians are free to worship, just like in the United States.

The Israelophobia discourse is disconnected from reality, and makes me, and most other Arab Israelis, feel uncomfortable. These "pro-Palestinian" activists in Europe and the United States are not helping me. They are self-serving and politically narcissistic. They are merely trying to delegitimize the state that I am living in. Some of their claims contain a grain of truth that is blown out of proportion, but most of their rhetoric is just a vile distortion of the truth, that shows that they have a problem with Israel's existence. How can you support a movement that campaigns against your rights and interests?

We should talk less about national political issues and delve into more practical details about what Israeli Arabs and Palestinians want and need. In short, just like Israelis, Palestinians, and Israeli Arabs want a better life.