



## Criticism of Israel and Antisemitism: How to Tell Where One Ends and the Other Begins

by Rabbi Jill Jacobs

Since Hamas's brutal attacks on October 7, and Israel's retaliatory assault on Gaza, college campuses, public streets, city councils, cultural institutions, and social media platforms across the U.S. have turned into battlegrounds of their own. Educators, local politicians, non-profit leaders, artists, academics, and everyday people have struggled to navigate amid heated rhetoric, conflicting demands, and accusations of bias and bigotry.

Six years ago, in the midst of a different round of violence in Gaza, I wrote an [article](#) for the Washington Post entitled "How to Tell When Criticism of Israel is Actually Antisemitism." Today, as antisemitic and Islamophobic harassment and violence spikes in the U.S. and around the world, and in the midst of a new round of campus protests, I've received question after question about how some of today's popular rhetoric fits into this framework. In this time of inflamed passions, it's crucial both to ensure that criticism of Israel does not cross the line into antisemitism, and to protect the free speech of those protesting Israel's actions.

Like any other country, Israel has both the right to defend its citizens and the responsibility to uphold international law and to protect the human rights of those under its jurisdiction. And like every country, Israel may be criticized, protested, or forced to suffer consequences when it fails to meet these commitments. This feels particularly urgent in the midst of a war that has already killed tens of thousands of Palestinians, while leaving hundreds of thousands at risk of famine and Gaza in ruin.

Hamas must be condemned for murdering, raping, and kidnapping Israelis and foreign workers on October 7, and for their use of Gazan civilians as human shields. Both are gross violations of human rights and international law, which do apply to non-state actors as well. Yet Israel, too, must meet its obligations under international law, and its supporters and citizens must confront its heavy share of responsibility for the deaths and suffering of Gazan civilians.

As protests against the war have erupted, so has significant confusion — sometimes deliberate and sometimes not — about the boundaries between criticism of Israel and



antisemitism. This may be understandable given Israel's standing as the only Jewish country in the world, which can lead to conflation between Israel as a country and Jews as a people. Add to the mix the persistence of antisemitism over more than two millennia, and the confusion becomes even less surprising.

Antisemitism must be fought because it menaces, harms, and kills Jewish people. Like other kinds of prejudice, it also undermines legitimate efforts to build coalitions around important issues of peace, justice, and human rights, including but not limited to Israel and Palestine.

In order to fight antisemitism, it is important to be clear about what it is and what it is not. Too many on the right have levied false charges of antisemitism against virtually any criticism of Israel. This has allowed for crackdowns on legitimate free speech and has also allowed some on the left to conclude that *no* criticism of Israel is antisemitic. But some criticism does, in fact, cross the line into antisemitism. In the past few months, such rhetoric has likely contributed to the rise in violence and vitriol directed against Jews, as well as attacks on [synagogues](#) and [other Jewish institutions](#).

Antisemitism simply means hatred of or prejudice against Jews as Jews. It has expressed itself over the centuries through hateful stereotypes about Jews; restrictions on political, civil, and religious rights; and in the worst instances, expulsions, forced conversions, mass murder, and genocide. The word "antisemitism" stems from a nineteenth century attempt to make this ancient hatred sound more scientific by defining Jews as a "Semitic" race of people who could never become full members of Western society. Though Arabic is also a Semitic language, the word "antisemitism" always refers to hatred of Jews.

Here are some of the instances in which criticism of Israel does *not necessarily* cross the line into antisemitism.

### **1. Criticizing Israel based on its human rights record, its policies, and its adherence or failure to adhere to international law**

Just as Americans took to the streets to protest President Trump's anti-immigrant policies, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the genocide in Darfur, it is legitimate for Americans to protest Israeli policies or actions.

This can include criticism of the occupation of Palestinians, which has persisted for decades, wartime practices including those of this current conflict, objections to any Israeli



internal or external policy, or calling attention to the impact on Palestinians of the founding of the state.

It is not antisemitic to call attention to the high death count in Gaza, to demand an end to the war, or to advocate for changes in U.S. policy including regarding military support for Israel.

## **2. Boycotting Israel or its territories**

Like any other country, Israel can be subject to boycott. Boycotts, whether of countries or businesses or U.S. states, are protected free speech. As is always the case with free speech, we need to protect this right even for those with whom we disagree.

Some argue that calls for boycotts, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) of Israel may be protected free speech, but nevertheless are hate speech because of Israel's identity as a Jewish state. It's certainly true that it would be antisemitic (and illegal) to refuse to do business with individual Jews or Israeli nationals in the United States. But Israel is a country just like any other.

It is not, for example, anti-Chinese bigotry to boycott China in response to the genocide of Uyghurs, but it would be racist to take that protest to a local Chinese restaurant or to refuse to do business with Chinese Americans or Chinese nationals in the U.S. because they are Chinese.

It is especially galling to classify as antisemitic a [boycott of settlements](#) — a strategy that appropriately distinguishes between the internationally recognized borders of Israel and the occupied territories.

While boycotting Israel is not, on its own, antisemitic, as we will discuss below, there is certainly antisemitism within the BDS movement, including among movement leaders and participants who call for eliminating Israel altogether, oppose any cooperation with Israeli Jews, or who traffic in antisemitic tropes.

Activists who choose to promote BDS need to be keenly aware of the history of boycotts of Jewish businesses, professionals, and academics, for example in Nazi Germany leading up to the Holocaust, to understand why many Jews find calls to boycott Israel and Israelis to be upsetting evidence of bigotry.



### **3. Engaging in activism only on Israel/Palestine**

Those seeking to defend Israel from criticism often accuse pro-Palestine activists of singling out Israel, or applying a double standard. Yes, this issue has galvanized the left like no other foreign policy issue in recent history. And no, there have not been mass protests in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Pakistan's expulsion of more than a million Afghan refugees, or the ongoing genocide in Sudan. But we cannot blame the heightened attention to Israel on antisemitism alone.

Individuals get involved in activist movements for any number of reasons, including personal connection to a cause, social networks, trendiness of the cause, and more. It's not always possible to explain why certain causes gain traction while others don't.

That said, there are a few common explanations for the growth in pro-Palestine activism in the United States. These include Israel's standing as the largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid, the close connection that members of three major religions feel to Israel, the large number of Americans who have visited the region, the existence of a large Palestinian diaspora community in the U.S., as well as the decades of building a Palestinian national movement and the presence of visible pro-Israel advocacy organizations that serve as useful foils.

Israel is also the only self-identified democracy currently carrying out an occupation of another people. In this moment, the overwhelming death and destruction in Gaza has understandably sparked even more activism. Finally, activists may be less likely to criticize countries in the Global South, either for fear of amplifying racism, or out of the racism of low expectations of these countries' adherence to human rights law.

Even given these many legitimate reasons to focus on Israel and Palestine, activists without a direct connection to either people should reflect carefully on whether they relate to Israel as they would to another country, whether kernels of antisemitism motivate this focus for their activism, and whether aspects of Israeli injustice seem to confirm or feed negative stereotypes that they believe deep down about Jews. Some people, for example, seem to experience satisfaction, or even glee, at portraying Jews as today's oppressors rather than yesterday's victims.



#### **4. Showing solidarity by displaying symbols of the Palestinian national movement.**

Waving the Palestinian flag or wearing a keffiyeh — both of which are symbols of the Palestinian national movement, just as the Israeli flag is a symbol of the State of Israel — is not antisemitic. The watermelon, a common stand-in for the Palestinian flag following Israel's ban on Palestinian flags at demonstrations, is certainly not antisemitic.

We will now move into examining when criticism of Israel crosses the line from criticism of a country into antisemitism.

##### **1. Using anti-Jewish tropes to describe Israel or Israelis**

The hatred of Jews, which dates back more than 2,000 years, has been expressed through a variety of stereotypes, including viewing Jews as greedy or obsessed with money, or as lusting after the blood of Christian children. In modern discourse, these tropes sometimes manifest through equating Jews or Israelis with capitalism (though the flexibility of antisemitism means that Jews have been blamed for both capitalism and communism), through descriptions of Israel or Israelis as “bloodthirsty,” or through false allegations that Israel harvests and sells Palestinians’ organs.

Ever since the publication of the influential antisemitic forgery, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, one of the most common antisemitic tropes imagines a worldwide Jewish conspiracy wielding outsized power, manipulating world events, including war and disease, by means of wealth and whispers.

On the right, this may appear as warnings of “globalists” — a common codeword for Jews, long portrayed as rootless wanderers who despise ordinary folk and local cultures. Also prevalent in white nationalist circles is the great replacement theory, which posits that Jews are trying to replace “real” Americans — that is, white Christian Americans — with non-white, non-Christian immigrants. This dangerous belief has led to the murders of Jews praying in a synagogue in Pittsburgh, as well as to racist attacks on Black shoppers in Buffalo and Latino immigrants in El Paso, all carried out by gunmen whose writings [reflect this antisemitic conspiracy](#).

On the far left, this trope can lead to beliefs that Israel is controlling the United States government, that “Zionists” control universities and other major institutions, that the Jews control the media and the banks, that the Mossad carried out 9/11, and that Israel faked



the October 7 attacks. Some ideologies blame Israel or Zionism for a host of other sins, including white supremacy, U.S. imperialism, and police violence, all of which have long histories in the United States predating 1948. In the past few years, some activist groups have even published maps of supposedly Zionist organizations in [Boston](#) and [New York](#), including major universities, cultural institutions, hospitals, and banks.

## **2. Using the word “Zionist” as code for “Jew,” or “Israeli” or “Zionist Entity” rather than “Israel”**

Zionism denotes a political movement, forged in the late nineteenth century in the context of many other national and minority rights movements, for Jewish autonomy and freedom. Jews of this period debated whether safety would best be secured by demanding political and cultural autonomy in the places they lived, relying on nation-states to grant individual rights, or settling in the ancestral land of Israel either as subjects of the Ottoman and then British Empire or as an independent nation. And they debated whether such a nation should be binational or Jewish.

Ultimately, in the wake of the Holocaust, following decades of violence between Palestinians and Jews and between both groups and the British, and as Great Britain sought to divest itself of the territory, the United Nations proposed a partition plan that would have established independent Arab and Jewish states.

After Israel declared its independence, the neighboring Arab countries attacked, and the war that followed — known as the War of Independence to Israelis and the Nakba to Palestinians — resulted in more than 700,000 Palestinians being expelled or fleeing.

Many other national movements have led to the establishment of nation-states, and Israel is not the only one whose creation included partition, population transfer, and human rights violations. Israel, like other countries forged in blood — including the United States — must come to terms with this history, and seek a long-term solution that ensures the human rights of Palestinians as well.

The specifics of this history are subjects for another article (or for the hundreds of books written on the topic). Today, though, the State of Israel is a full member of the United Nations, and has been for over 75 years. Like other countries, Israel does not lose its status as a result of its bloody history.

The vast majority of Jews in the United States and in the world have a deep emotional attachment to Israel, and often close relations with family and friends who live there. For



most Jews, Israel represents the fulfillment of a 2,000-year-long dream to return to the Jewish ancestral homeland, a place where Hebrew and Jewish culture can flourish, and a safe haven for Jews, who have continued to seek refuge there when their countries of birth become unsafe.

Many of those who consider themselves Zionists today and in the past, myself included, are also committed to Palestinians realizing their own national aspirations through a state of their own.

“Zionist” and “anti-Zionist” mean too many different things to too many different people. Perhaps it is time to retire them and start stating and asking each other what we actually mean and believe, and why.

Opponents of Israel’s existence sometimes use the term “Zionist” as a means of denying the reality of the state, or of reducing a country full of living, breathing human beings to a political theory. It’s common in these circles to refer to Israel as “the Zionist Entity” or to Israelis as “Zionists.”

Other times, “Zionist” becomes a stand-in for “Jews,” as when a well-known political activist tweeted, “Realizing how many American doctors and nurses are Zionists and genuinely terrified for Palestinian, Arab, Muslim, South Asian and Black patients.” Presumably this tweeter did not survey American doctors about their political positions. In its lurid suggestion that Jewish doctors would abuse and harm their patients, it draws upon the trope of the “blood libel,” an accusation that Jews murder Christian children and use their blood for ritual purposes. It is also reminiscent of the infamous “doctors’ plot,” in which Stalin, who led a brutal campaign against Jews for being “Zionists” and therefore disloyal to the Soviet Union, accused Jewish doctors of planning to murder Soviet officials.

Right-wing antisemites, ranging from David Duke raving about the “Zio masters of the media” and “globalist Zionist supremacism” to white supremacists describing the United States as a “Zionist Occupied Government,” have rarely hesitated to blur the lines between Zionist and Jew.

Given that the [vast majority](#) of Jews have a deep relationship with the State of Israel, announcements that “Zionists” are [not welcome](#) are reasonably interpreted as banning Jews — and certainly have the impact of banning the majority of Jews.

We do not see similar public demands that Indian Americans reject ties to India because of the anti-Muslim policies of Prime Minister Modi, or that Chinese Americans renounce ties



to China because of the internment of Uyghurs before being welcome in certain spaces or in progressive movements.

Similarly, language declaring that all Zionists are evil, or that one can't be a Zionist and a feminist, serves as a rejection of all Israelis by virtue of their place of birth, and a dismissal of the vast majority of Jews, as well as Jewish community groups and synagogues, from the public spheres of coalition work, professional associations, cultural life, and democratic society.

### **3. Denying Jewish history**

Too often, debates about Israel and Palestine devolve into zero-sum arguments about which people have a legitimate connection to the land, ignoring the fact that some 14 million Israelis and Palestinians call the region home. Some deny the very existence of Palestinians as a national identity group or suggest that Palestinians should go live in any number of other Arab countries. This is anti-Palestinian racism.

Others deny that Jews have any history in the land, classify all Israeli Jews as European colonizers (regardless of their family origin), or even repeat the antisemitic canard that modern-day Jews are not “real” Jews, but rather descendants of Khazar converts from medieval Caucasia.

This discourse ignores the realities of Jewish history, which includes sovereignty in the Land of Israel prior to the Roman conquest in 70 CE, millennia of praying and fasting for a return to the land, and the consistent presence of small Jewish communities in the land throughout history. No matter where they were born, where they live, or when their families arrived in Israel, Jews have always understood themselves as a people, with not only a diaspora but also a historic homeland to which they have always been tied.

Zionism did not invent the connection between Jews and Israel. Rather, the innovation of Zionism was to assert that this return could be achieved through modern political means rather than divine intervention.

### **4. Denying the humanity of Israelis**

For much of the Jewish community, the initial shock of October 7 was compounded by the willingness of some on the left to justify or deny the murder, rape, and kidnapping of Israelis. This has included protest signs declaring “all resistance is justified,” “by any means necessary,” and arguments that there are no civilians in Israel, only colonizers and past





and future soldiers, and therefore every Israeli from baby to elder is a legitimate target for assault.

Likewise, too many statements and resolutions simply ignore or gloss over the death and displacement of Israeli Jews, choosing to condemn and to mourn only Palestinian suffering. And too many progressives are unwilling or unable to see, much less to lift up or partner with, Israelis who protest their government and organize for democracy, peace, and human rights.

Dehumanizing Israeli Jews or treating their lives as disposable is antisemitic. We do not see such language in relation to residents of other countries, no matter how extreme the human rights violations of their governments. One can protest the scale of death and suffering in Gaza without dismissing the value of Israeli lives.

Today's Israelis include descendants of families with centuries of presence in the land, as well as families who arrived as refugees from Nazi Europe, who were pushed out of North Africa and the Arab world, and who fled antisemitic persecution in the former Soviet Union — as well as immigrants who came for ideological, family, or professional reasons, just like immigrants to any other country. Calls for Israelis to “go back to Poland” ignore this history and cynically diminish the Holocaust.

Furthermore, most Israeli Jews were born in the country and have no other passport. Demands for “decolonization” that would create a refugee crisis of 7 million Jews, like calls for violence against Jews or justification of such violence, certainly meet the criteria for antisemitism.

## **5. Assuming that the Israeli government speaks for all Jews**

Since October 7, we have seen an uptick in antisemitic attacks against Jewish institutions, including synagogues, schools, grocery stores, and cultural centers. Online, Jews who post photos as innocuous as that of a challah they just baked are inundated with comments like “Free Palestine.” The phrase “Free Palestine” on its own is not antisemitic. But it is antisemitic to spray paint these words on a synagogue, to write them in a response to any social media post by a Jew or a Jewish organization, or to take out one's anger about Israel against any identifiable Jew.

American Jews, just like Americans of any ethnic or religious background, should be able to celebrate their heritage, participate in ritual practices, and participate in coalitions working on other issues without being asked to answer for the actions of a foreign



government, even when they have personal connections or emotional attachments to that country.

## **6. Demanding that Jews disavow Israel or Zionism**

While Jews, as noted above, should not be asked to answer for Israel, it is also inappropriate to ask Jews to disassociate entirely from Israel. Yet increasingly, progressive coalitions and campus clubs ask Jews and Jewish organizations to disavow any connection to Israel or Zionism before joining. Given that the [vast majority of Jews](#) feel strongly connected to Israel and many American Jews have friends and family living there, this has the impact of severely limiting Jewish engagement.

While the small minority of self-identified anti-Zionist Jews can have legitimate and thoughtful reasons for their political stance, they may be used as tokens and as shields against accusations of antisemitism by those who deem them to meet spurious criteria for being “the good Jews.”

Because Judaism comprises not only a religion, but also a people, Jews have long accepted particular obligations toward Jewish communities elsewhere in the world, whether that has meant redeeming those taken captive from far-away Jewish communities, sending money to support impoverished Jewish communities in Ottoman Palestine in the 19th century, or rallying for the freedom of Soviet Jews in the 20th century.

It is unreasonable and antisemitic to demand that American Jews sever their ties with nearly half of the Jews in the world.

## **Gray areas: Terms that need further conversation**

Some of the fiercest battles over language have concerned terms that may be defined quite differently depending who you ask. These include “anti-Zionism,” “From the River to the Sea,” and “Intifada.” Ideally, the use of these terms should serve as an opening for conversation among people with different perspectives, though dialogue can feel almost impossible in this charged moment.

### **Anti-Zionism**

As with the term Zionist, Anti-Zionist means different things to different people. Some who use this term equate Zionism with the actual policies of Israel, under governments present



and past, in regard to Palestinians. Meanwhile, some of the fiercest critics of Israeli policy are Israeli citizens who believe that it is an expression of Zionism to criticize Israeli policy, just as many Americans believe that it is patriotic to criticize U.S. policy. Still, it is not antisemitic to call oneself an anti-Zionist out of opposition to Israeli policy past or present.

Others, particularly Jews who consider themselves anti-Zionist, point to the history of Jewish opposition to Zionism in the pre-state and early state period, including among the Reform Movement, the Bund, many Orthodox communities, and major American Jewish organizations.

This opposition happened in a context in which the State of Israel did not yet exist, and when Jews were debating whether they would more easily find safety in a homeland of their own, through collective political and cultural autonomy in the places where they lived, or through individual citizenship in liberal democracies.

Rehashing 100-year-old arguments does not take account of the 7 million Jewish citizens of Israel, but it is not antisemitic to have critical conversations about history.

Some anti-Zionists do not object to a flourishing Jewish society in the historic Land of Israel, but do object to a Jewish state, and instead support a single democratic state for Jews and Palestinians.

This possibility has very little support from either Israelis or Palestinians in the region and seems even less realistic after October 7. Nor does such a solution have a good track record for Jews in previous settings such as Enlightenment Europe or the Soviet Union. But it is not an antisemitic position if one truly wishes for a state in which Jews and Palestinians can live safely, with equal rights — both as individuals and collectives — with no one being forced to leave. (By the way, some people who identify as Zionists hold a similar vision.)

There are, however, some anti-Zionists who consider all Israeli Jews colonizers who should leave, or who claim that Jews “only” constitute a religion and nothing more. Jews have long been defined, and defined ourselves, as a people and a community with a collective identity and a claim on collective rights, not solely as a religious group. Calls for Jews to “go back to Poland” ignore the fact that pre-war Jews were not considered Poles, but rather a separate national and ethnic group.

Israeli Jews certainly must come to terms with the impact on Palestinians of the creation of the state, including the Nakba which displaced more than 700,000 Palestinians. And



Palestinians and their supporters must recognize that most Israelis descend from refugees, not only from Europe but also from North Africa and Arab states, as well as from the historic communities in the Land of Israel.

Both Israelis and Palestinians have an authentic connection and deep commitment to the place they live, and neither of them should be expected to leave.

### **“From the River to the Sea”**

Some proponents of the slogan “From the River to the Sea, Palestine Will be Free” argue that a free Palestine will also include Jewish citizens in a single democratic state. As noted above, this belief is not antisemitic, as long as one is sincere about protecting Jews within such a state.

However, most Jews hear this slogan as a call to expel Jews from Israel. The fact that this slogan appears in Hamas’s 2017 charter makes it difficult for Jews to understand the words otherwise. The term also echoes Syrian leader Hafez el-Assad’s 1966 [declaration](#), “We shall only accept war... We have resolved to drench this land with our blood, to oust you, aggressors, and throw you into the sea for good.”

Therefore, it is advisable for anyone who does not want to be viewed as antisemitic to avoid this phrase or use it only when there is an opportunity to clarify their meaning.

As is the case in other situations of potential prejudice, the impact is often more important than the intent. And there are many other ways to declare one’s commitment to the freedom of Palestinians without suggesting that Israeli Jews should leave.

### **Intifada**

Some who use the term “intifada” understand it by its original meaning as an uprising or “shaking off” of oppression, including by non-violent means. These activists will argue that “globalize the intifada” is a call for worldwide solidarity with Palestinians.

Jews, however, most often hear this term in the context of the Second Intifada (2000–2004), characterized by suicide bombings of civilians in buses, cafes, a hotel Passover seder, a disco, a university cafeteria, and other places chosen to kill large numbers of Israelis. And for many Jews, this term brings up memories of actions carried out by Palestinian groups or Iranian proxies outside of Israel, including the hijackings of the 1960s and 70s and the bombing of the Amia Jewish community center in Argentina in 1994.



Especially in a moment when Jewish institutions in several countries have experienced violent attacks and threats, “globalize the intifada” is most easily understood as a call for violence against Jews across the world and can reasonably be understood by Jews as antisemitic, and a lethal threat.

It is entirely possible to protest the war in Gaza, to criticize Israel’s actions, or to support Palestinians without engaging in antisemitism. One key question activists can ask themselves is whether they would use the same types of language or the same tactics if protesting the actions of a different country. Calling for an end to the war, mourning Palestinian lives lost, protesting at the Israeli embassy or consulate, criticizing Israeli policy, advocating for an end to arms sales or other changes in U.S. policy toward Israel, or boycotting Israeli companies are not inherently antisemitic.

But employing antisemitic stereotypes, dehumanizing Israelis, taking out anger about Israel on Jews or Jewish institutions, and advocating or justifying violence against civilians or the expulsion of Israeli Jews do constitute antisemitism and put Jews at risk.

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