

## Special Publication, June 14, 2021

# Anti-Zionism, Antisemitism, and the Fallacy of Bright Lines

## Kenneth S. Stern<sup>1</sup>

What is antisemitism? At heart it is conspiracy theory: seeing Jews as conspiring to harm non-Jews, thus providing an explanation for what goes wrong in the world. Like Jews killing Jesus, or Jews poisoning wells, or Jews stealing Christian children for their blood, or Jews as a secret force behind communism and capitalism, or Jews controlling the media and government, or Jews making up the Holocaust, or Jews being behind the 9/11 attacks. Or more recently, according to a newly elected Republican member of Congress, Jews shooting laser beams from space into California's forests to start wildfires. Who knew?

Here is a more difficult question: "What is the line between legitimate criticism of Israel and antisemitism?" This question is more about our need for lines than what we want to delineate. We want to make the complex simple, stick a statement into a category, and either forget about it or condemn it. Antisemitism, for the most part, does not work that way. It is not like being pregnant—you can actually be a "little bit" antisemitic, or more precisely, have views that are in the gray zone.

#### **Anti-Zionism and Competing Narratives**

Anti-Zionism is the most complex question. Zionism is the Jewish quest for self-determination in a land of their own—Israel. Jews, of course, have always had a connection to the land of Israel, both religiously and culturally. But is opposition to the idea of a Jewish state inherently antisemitic? As a committed Zionist, I find anti-Zionism deeply disturbing. And I understand the arguments of those who claim it is antisemitic—why should Jews be denied their right to self-determination in their historic homeland? Why is no one clamoring to undo the other states created in the late 1940s (Pakistan, India), but only Israel? Why did the UN claim in 1975 that the Jewish ideology of self-determination (Zionism) was a form of racism (no other quest for self-determination has been labeled so), and despite the UN resolution's repeal in 1991, why do people still push that equation? And even if you do not agree with this perspective, is there not logic in seeing anti-Zionism's endpoint as functionally antisemitic? Jews, having achieved

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Kenneth S. Stern is the director of the <u>Bard Center for the Study of Hate</u> and most recently authored <u>The Conflict over The Conflict: The Israel/Palestine Campus Debate</u>. For 25 years, he was the American Jewish Committee's expert on antisemitism, and he was also the lead drafter of the "Working Definition of Antisemitism."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> And I suspect others feel the same way See, for example, the Pew Research Center (2021, May 11).

national self-expression in a Jewish state nearly 75 years ago, will never give up their state without a fight; seeking the end of the Jewish state likely means you are not thinking about how many Jews—and Palestinians—will die in the perpetual conflict that anti-Zionism inevitably invites.<sup>3</sup>

But imagine you are a Palestinian whose family was displaced in 1948—and not merely displaced but also dispossessed from your home and from a sense of control over your own identity and life. The exercise of Jewish self-determination clearly had a negative impact on you and your family, not only on your past but your future. Is your objection to Zionism because you see a Jewish conspiracy, or because someone else's national expression harmed you and your national aspirations?<sup>4</sup>

And what if you are not a Palestinian, but a person who identifies with the left and has decided to embrace the Palestinian cause. Is this because you see Palestinian dispossession as unjust, because you hate Jews and/or see the world awash in Jewish conspiracies, or something in between? If your priority is to support Palestinians, but you then gleefully embrace hateful tropes about Jews (as happened at the UN's World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance<sup>5</sup>), that is antisemitism. But is it antisemitism if you do not consider Jewish claims to the land as having equal merit to the Palestinian ones? Conversely, does that mean that others, also with no "skin in the game," are anti-Palestinian or anti-Arab if they champion the Israeli narrative and ignore or dismiss Palestinian perspectives?

It is the line-drawing question, again defined by an emotional mix of identity, ideals of justice and injustice, and zealotry. And as such, each side wants to draw a line at its maximalist possible position. In drawing that line each side also puts on blinders and dismisses evidence that would make its simple line fuzzy, less certain, and more complex. And each ignores or downplays history to make their claim. The use of sharp lines to exculpate or inculpate anti-Zionism as antisemitism reflects a political agenda, much like when partisans use these maps, suggesting that their map tells the entire story:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Some argue Israel should become a confederation or a state of all its citizens, which would include people in the West Bank and Gaza. I may be wrong, but I do not believe either is a viable option, given the needs of both peoples for control over their own lives, the history of the conflict, and the less-than-stellar experience of countries like the former Yugoslavia and the current Iraq.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Of course, in some cases it might be both. Hamas' founding charter, for example, approvingly cited the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (Federation of American Scientists, n.d.).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Cartoons showed Jews with large, hooked noses and fangs dripping blood. A poster read "Hitler should have finished the job." Jews were told they did not belong to the human race (see Stern, 2020).



Tiny Israel Surrounded by a Sea of Arab and Muslim Countries

Note. Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/AboutIsrael/Maps/Maps/Israel-and-the-Region.jpg.



## Shrinking Palestinian Lands Decade After Decade<sup>6</sup>

Note. Visualizing Palestine, <a href="https://visualizingpalestine.org/visuals/http-visualizingpalestine-org-visuals-shrinking-palestine-static">https://visualizingpalestine.org/visuals/http-visualizingpalestine-org-visuals-shrinking-palestine-static</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> While the map of shrinking Palestine and growing Israel has been critiqued because of the way land was owned during the Ottoman period and before 1948, it certainly shows the impact of settlement activity, including after the 1967 war.

### History—Both Asserted and Ignored—as Political Weapon

Sometimes there is a correlation between distortions of history and bigotry. Holocaust denial, for example, is not about the Holocaust; it is about Jews making up the Holocaust story as part of their alleged nefarious conspiratorial agenda. A Palestinian can rightly say that if the Holocaust had not happened, the political circumstances favoring Israel's post-war creation might not have materialized. But if they add to "this was not fair to us" that "it did not happen," that is antisemitism, despite the fact that it might be a result of their zealous desire to justify anti-Zionism, rather than an outgrowth of their view of Jews. It is antisemitism because one cannot believe in Holocaust denial without positing Jewish conspiracy.

But what about the relationship between historical distortion, anti-Zionism, and antisemitism? The long Jewish connection with the land of Israel is an essential foundation to how most Jews view Zionism. Judaism is a land-linked religion,<sup>7</sup> and that land is Israel; synagogues worldwide are oriented toward Jerusalem (the site of the ancient temples); the language spoken in the land of Israel today is the one spoken there by Jews thousands of years ago; and the names of many towns and cities are those from biblical times (Pearl, 2018). Is it an historical distortion to ignore that history, to say the Zionist story began in the 1880s with Herzl and the immigration of European Jews fleeing antisemitism, coming to Palestine where Arabs—not Jews— were the majority? Some may ignore or discount the history of Jews there because the battles over the land, over Zionism, really did not begin until the late 1800s—the word was not even coined until then. From the Arab perspective, this was not about the Jews with whom they had lived (especially in Jerusalem) for centuries, but about European Jews, with "foreign" ways, supported by Western states, coming to establish "colonies."

So is it antisemitism, like Holocaust denial, when anti-Zionists start this story at a different point than Zionists do, and to omit the history many Jew find fundamental? Certainly, there have been instances reminiscent of Holocaust denial. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat questioned whether the Jewish temples ever existed in Jerusalem (Morris, 2002). And in 2018 the president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, suggested Ashkenazi Jews were not connected to Israel but rather descended from a Turkic people, the Khazars, who had converted to Judaism (Kershner, 2018).

Most pro-Palestinian activists do not go this far; but by ignoring this Jewish history and rendering it as irrelevant, it becomes easier to paint Zionism as a settler-colonialist enterprise cut from the same cloth as white colonialists settling Africa, lands to which whites had no historic, religious, ethnic, cultural, or other connection. The reality is that in some ways Zionism resembled this type of colonialism, and in other ways it did not.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Judaism is a religion, but Jews are also a people. Some Jews are religious, some are secular, some are atheist, but they share an identity rooted in history.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> But pro-Israel advocates have also distorted the history of Palestinians, see Friedman, 2019.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> See the discussion in Stern, 2020, pp. 46–47.

Likewise, some on the pro-Israel side ignore or distort history as they draw their lines. While some pro-Palestinian activists may say that Zionism began in the 1880s, some pro-Israel activists might note that Palestinian national identity (as opposed to pan-Arab identity) is a recent phenomenon too; <sup>10</sup> moreover, they might actively dispute the idea of a Palestinian identity. Doing so means diminishing Arab connections to the land, inviting skepticism toward the justice of Palestinian nationalism, and discounting the human toll of dispossession and occupation. Indeed, if denying Jews their right to self-determination in their historic homeland, and ignoring that history is antisemitism, why is it not bigotry to deny Palestinians the same right too? (Shimoni Stoil & Times of Israel Staff, 2014; see also From Time Immemorial, 2021).

Regardless, in any political battle people try to obscure or deny inconvenient facts, facts that make their advocacy less pure, and their agenda less obviously an avatar of justice. It is like those two maps—each telling a political story steeped in history, each from a different point of view, but ignoring the other. In making their political case, anti-Zionists have no obligation to recognize the long Jewish connection to the land. There is no requirement for Israel's supporters to acknowledge the history of Arabs in the land either. But one wishes each would recognize the importance of these histories not only to their own perspective but also to that of the other side. That being said, when anti-Zionists ignore, discount, or distort Jewish history, that does not necessarily mean that it is being so treated *because* it is Jewish history. It is likely that if any people perceived as outsiders had come into the land and transformed it, they too would have been an object of disdain (see Penslar, 2016).

#### **Maximalist Claims**

In this political debate, there is frequently a desire to draw lines that define the other side as hateful. Each side makes specious claims that are firmly believed. Pro-Palestinian activists sometimes charge that mainstream Jewish groups, in a cynical attempt to silence them, want to label *every* criticism of Israel antisemitism, which is, of course, nonsense.<sup>11</sup> But some on the pro-Israel side also go way too far in claiming pro-Palestinian activists are *always* making up claims that the antisemitism charge is used unfairly in an attempt to silence them. The weaponization of the "working definition" of antisemitism<sup>12</sup> and the assertion that anti-Zionism is antisemitism as US government policy (Kushner, 2019) clearly show that not all such allegations are wrong or made in

<sup>11</sup> This overblown assertion (that pro-Israel organizations label every criticism of Israel antisemitic) sometimes resembles a rhetorical force field, possibly intended to dissuade examining whether any particular criticism might be antisemitic. Yet pro-Israel partisans have a narrower definition of what "legitimate" criticism of Israel is, perhaps limited to complaints about policies and practices, when people on the left and Palestinians may have objections that are deeper and relate to issues of Israel's founding.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> For a history of Palestinian identity, see Khalidi, 2009.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> The "working definition" of antisemitism, written primarily for data collectors (and not to label anyone an antisemite) contains specific examples of antisemitism related to Israel (see Stern, 2020, chapter 7).

bad faith. Let us not forget that this scarlet letter "A" was advocated by the Trump administration against groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (with potential implications for their funding) (Toosi, 2020). Let us not ignore that some pro-Israel activists champion the chilling effect of the antisemitism charge as a good thing (Marcus, 2013). The Simon Wiesenthal Center even says that the "working definition" of antisemitism should be used to bar "Israel Apartheid Week" on college campuses (Simon Wiesenthal Center, 2017). Meanwhile, many mainstream Jewish groups not only remain silent about such efforts but continue to insist that the use of the "working definition" in this witch-hunt fashion does not restrict free speech.

### Symbols, Tropes, Blinders, and Purity Tests

In the fuzzy, gray area in which anti-Zionism may or may not be antisemitism, it is useful to pay attention to whether the expressions are simply about Jews, cutting and pasting the term "Zionist," or "Israel," which sometimes happens, or whether they are about a political conflict between two possibly irreconcilable and justice-soaked national narratives, each positing the other as an obstacle that is more easily vilified than engaged.

To make matters even fuzzier, the symbols of Judaism and Zionism overlap. Israel is the Jewish state, and its flag bears the Jewish star (known as the Star of David). So if a Jewish pride group carries a flag with a Jewish star in a Gay Pride parade and is asked to remove it, does this constitute antisemitism because it is a discriminatory act toward Jews, or a desire not to have the symbol of Israel in the parade, and if the latter, is this antisemitism too? That depends on so many variables—is one looking at how the Jews with the star flag view the episode, especially when they note that no other group has been questioned about their symbol, or from the perspective of those who objected? And if the latter, would they have objected to any other symbol, and if not, is that because the dual use of the Jewish star is unique in political struggles (as compared with flags that sport other religious symbols)? That begs the larger question over another element of the "working definition"—are double standards about Israel antisemitic? Some in the pro-Israel community say if one is singling out Israel for human rights abuses and not China or other countries, then that is antisemitism. But it depends. Some people-including pro-Israel groups—pay more attention to Israel than other countries, because they care more about Israelis or Palestinians. But if there is an international body—like the Human Rights Council—that is supposed to be looking at human rights issues globally, and its agenda has for decades focused disproportionately on Israel, that is another story.

What if the objection to Zionism or Israel is otherwise in the murky area, but the objector employs classic tropes reflecting claims of Jewish conspiracy? Again, it depends. If they could make their case about Israel or Zionism but cite these tropes, there may well be antisemitism at play. But if their assertion is about the power of the pro-Israel lobby—the same claim that some of these groups make in their own fundraising letters—does that reflect antisemitism? Should Israel-opponents be expected to know enough to avoid

these oft-invoked assertions against Jews when similar arguments about the power of a lobby (the gun lobby, the energy lobby, and so forth) might reasonably be employed in other arenas?

What about the tweet of Ilhan Omar that support for Israel was "all about the Benjamins" (Tibon, 2019)? Was this ignorance? She could have made her claim without raising what many saw as the trope of Jews and money. While her intent may have been unclear (others who have used that phrase were not called out for antisemitism), <sup>13</sup> and while she did apologize, <sup>14</sup> afterwards she employed another trope. <sup>15</sup> Certainly some of her defenders would not have given the benefit of the doubt to someone like right-winger Pat Buchanan, who one might imagine writing a similar offending line.

And that's part of the challenge—partisans on either the pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian side of this debate put on blinders and try to deflect or supercharge claims of antisemitism, depending on whether the instant controversy involves someone on their side of the conflict, or the other side.

Take another example. Should a Jew running for student government be asked—if they are active in a group that has a pro-Israel agenda—how they might view a resolution calling for divestment against Israel? Is this a reasonable question that might be posed to another student about a different issue (for example, if they were Catholic and involved in a group that had an anti-abortion position)? Should the Jewish student be exempt from such an examination because people might see it as an assertion of "dual loyalty," an old antisemitic charge? Does it depend on the tone of the questioner (accusatory versus merely curious)?

What if the question was asked innocently, but later the student was bullied by others and harassed to the point where she stepped down from student government (Toh, 2020)? The initial question might still be innocuous, but antisemitism likely played a role in the vilification of the student, and it might be difficult to untangle the two. But at the same time, some who were concerned with the ugly assertion that this student, as a Zionist, was somehow unfit for student government, were silent or perhaps even applauded when a Palestinian student at another university was also bullied, threatened, and even the subject of government resolutions calling for his removal from student government. His sin? When he was younger and living under occupation in the West Bank, he posted harsh things about Jews, for which he apologized as an adult (see Palestine Legal, 2020).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> See Friedman, 2019.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> See Haaretz, 2019.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> See Haaretz, 2019a.

What about the purity tests that strong lines inevitably invite? Some progressive Zionist Jewish students complain that they are excluded from coalitions (like those protesting racism) by their classmates who claim Zionists cannot be progressive. That exclusion is painful, and sometimes punctuated with antisemitic tropes, indicating the objection is not merely political. But can the exclusion of progressive Zionists be defined as antisemitism (even if it is likely felt by those excluded as such)? If pro-Israel speakers on campus were the only ones being shouted down, perhaps such a case could be made. But there have been "no-platforming" efforts against many speakers perceived as conservative who have nothing to do with Israel or Jews, such as Charles Murray or Anne Coulter. Is Zionism excluded because it is Jewish, <sup>16</sup>or because it is seen as conservative on campuses seduced by the idea of righteous line-drawing and intolerant of different points of view? And conversely, there are pro-Israel Zionist organizations, on campus and off, that will not allow groups like Breaking The Silence or IfNotNow—seen as too antagonistic toward Israel—to be under their Jewish umbrella either.

### Not Cheapening the Word "Antisemite"

There are many shades of gray in the gray zone, including those perceived when trying to ascertain an actor's subjective intent. If the question is viewed from the other direction—not wanting to get into a person's brain to label them an antisemite but rather to collect information about the climate of antisemitism at large, that is a different inquiry and perhaps a more important one. The regularity of expressions that invoke canards, even if that is not the questioner's intent, tell us something about the temperature of antisemitism. And if someone selects a Jewish or Jewish-linked target for a hate crime, regardless of whether their motive is political and related to Israel (as in the spring of 2021 when Jews and Jewish institutions around the world were attacked while Israel and Hamas were at war), that deserves to be counted as an antisemitic incident, because the intent is to hold Jews collectively responsible. Too often, after a hate crime, people try to analyze whether the actor really hated. What if a Jew was kidnapped and held for ransom because the criminal thought Jews were rich? What if a Jew was attacked as a stand-in for an Israeli? The "working definition" of antisemitism was created, in part, to change the focus from bias motive to the intent to select a Jew (or someone linked to Jews) as a victim because they were Jewish or linked to Jews. Unlike with matters of Zionism, this was a bright line that was needed and easily drawn. Interestingly, the more recent alternative definitions of antisemitism (the Nexus definition and the Jerusalem

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Indeed, some who see Zionism and progressive ideas as antithetical are Jews (see Jewish Voice for Peace, n.d.).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> In another context, discrimination against Jews—always something to be counted and countered, and relevant to the climate of antisemitism—may or may not be motivated by antisemitism. It hurts, and feels like antisemitism, when Jews are implicitly or explicitly told they are not equal members of society. In some rural communities and other parts of the United States with few Jews, everything may be presumptively white and Christian. Schools may schedule football games on Yom Kippur and pressure Jewish students to participate. But if the blindness to diversity would also lead to the same problems for the few Hindus or Muslims in the same community, the discrimination does not necessarily come from antisemitism.

<u>Declaration</u>)—both intended to diminish the capacity for weaponizing the Israel-related examples against pro-Palestinian speech—address neither hate crimes specifically nor this important distinction between motive and intent.

The challenge in this gray area, where each side wants lines to make it easier to brand the other, is perhaps a reflection that each wants to silence the other. As I wrote, it is painful for me to hear assertions that Israel should not exist as a Jewish state. But the discomfort I feel does not mean that those who assert that position are doing so because they hate Jews or believe in Jewish conspiracy. If I were born in their shoes, I might share their views. Satmar Jews do not believe in Zionism for theological reasons. Some young Jews—including many of those involved with Jewish Voice for Peace, IfNotNow, and Students for Justice in Palestine—do not believe in or are conflicted about Zionism because Israel's treatment of and its discrimination against Palestinians are irreconcilable with their understanding of what Judaism means when it teaches how one should treat the stranger. The Jewish mainstream may wish to write all these people off as self-hating Jews, Jewish antisemites, or Jews who have "internalized their oppression." Maybe some are working out their Jewishness, but clearly it makes no sense to dismiss them all as antisemites. Anecdotally, many of these young objectors to Zionism are from involved Jewish homes, went to Jewish day schools, or had parents and grandparents active as lay or professional leaders in mainstream Jewish organizations. Committed Zionists may disagree with these young activists, but it is too far to say that because of their views on Israel are beyond the tent line of who is a Jew. It is worse when mainstream Jewish organizations encourage government and other institutions to adopt the blanket equation of anti-Zionist with antisemitism, therefore asking these outside forces to decide this internal Jewish communal guestion.<sup>18</sup>

I reserve the term "antisemite" for the clearest of cases. People who claimed Jews were infecting black babies with AIDS, or Holocaust deniers; people like neo-Nazi David Duke, Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, or the Republican who says Jews use laser beams to start wildfires, or the Democrat who says Jews are responsible for snow storms (Jamison & Strauss, 2018), or Hezbollah's Sheik Hassan Nasrallah (Hezbollah called for "the death of the last Jew on earth" and Nasrallah said "if they all gather in Israel, it will save us the trouble of going after them worldwide") (New York Sun, 2005).

In the debate about whether anti-Zionists are antisemites—yes or no—the word "antisemite" does begin to lose its meaning. It is wrong to say anti-Zionism is always antisemitism and to weaponize that assertion. Conversely, it is wrong to say that anti-Zionism is not ever expressed as antisemitism, or comes from an antisemitic motive (just as it is wrong to forget that some who support Zionism are antisemitic<sup>19</sup>).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Of course, while the question of whether a particular view of Israel and Zionism is required to be inside the Jewish tent, the hot debate over this issue has implications for Palestinians and others.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Being a Zionist does not mean one cannot be antisemitic. Some evangelicals (Zausmer 2019) and some white supremacists (Kestenbaum, 2017) are both. It is also worth noting that Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has supported Hungarian leader Viktor Orban and called him a "true friend of Israel,"

It may not be comfortable for people to live in the gray area without clear answers. Religions offer clear answers to complex questions—where life comes from, is there an afterlife, and so forth. But for those who do not require the pure faith of bright lines or want to inhabit a world defined by Hogwarts-like sorting hats, living with gray and uncertainty is acceptable.

In the final analysis, the attempt to draw bright lines only obscures. Lines help when the agenda is to demonize and silence another side in the difficult debate about Israel, the Palestinians, and conflicting national aspirations, and each side's assertions of justice. Lines should not be used to reduce complex matters to talking points or purity tests.

despite the fact that Orban has regularly promoted antisemitic tropes in his political campaigns. And some leaders of the American Jewish community heaped praise on former president Donald Trump for acts seen as pro-Israel, all the while ignoring that his energetic vilification of Muslims and immigrants helped create an environment in which people were poised to see an "us" threatened by a "them," a condition in which antisemitism inevitably grows (see Stern, 2020, p. 171).

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