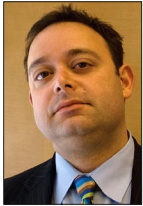


Is anti-Zionism a cover-up for anti-Semitism?



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anti-Zionism has gained greater visibility over the last decade, but it is not an unknown phenomenon historically. In communist Europe, remnants of Jewish communities that perished during the Nazi Holocaust were frequently persecuted in the name of anti-Zionism.

These days, anti-Zionist views are heavily concentrated among the educated elite. If you regard anti-Zionism as one more expression of hatred towards Jews, this is somewhat puzzling, because anti-Semitism — particularly after the Holocaust — is widely perceived to be more beer hall than bistro.

Anti-Semites regard Jews as a malign social force that controls the banks, media and governments. But most of Zionism's mainstream critics say they are only concerned with the Jewish state, not demented fantasies about what Jews are up to.

So can we construct an unbreachable partition between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism? The answer is "No," and here is why:

- You can't disavow anti-Semitism as a vulgar form of bigotry and then invoke the age-old themes of anti-Semitic conspiracy theory. After assuring us their arguments were not anti-Semitic, U.S. academics John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt upended decades of political science research by advancing a monocausal theory of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East: The powerful "Israel Lobby" cajoles the United States into doing things it otherwise wouldn't do.
- Anti-Zionism is founded upon a caricature of Israel as the apartheid-like child of a colonial enterprise. But Zionism's goal is to guarantee, after centuries of horrendous persecution, the freedom and security of Jews, not the subjugation of non-Jews.
- Before Israel's creation in 1948, there was a vibrant debate about the desirability of a Jewish state. But to be an anti-Zionist now is to question the legitimacy of only Israel, out of nearly 200 states worldwide. In a world of disintegrating polities from Iraq to the Democratic Republic of Congo, why should only Israel's existence be subject to debate?

No serious supporter of Israel claims that mere criticism is anti-Semitism. There is, however, a vital distinction between a rational critique of Israeli policies and demonization, which too often is stimulated by or evokes anti-Semitism.



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anti-Zionism and hostility to Israel can be anti-Semitic if they are expressed using the symbols of the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew or of Jewry as a whole. For example, if Zionism is characterized as a worldwide Jewish conspiracy, or a plan straight out of the forged, anti-Semitic "Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion," that is anti-Semitism.

But to believe that anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism are one and the same ignores the history of Zionism.

For decades Zionism was supported only by a minority of Jews. The rest were either indifferent or manifestly opposed to the whole idea of the establishment of a Jewish state. Anti-Zionism was therefore a perfectly respectable position to hold, and one that continues to be held today by hundreds of thousands of strictly orthodox Jews and many secular Jews with left-liberal perspectives.

Equating anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism — what has become known as the "new anti-Semitism" — fundamentally subverts the shared understanding of what anti-Semitism is, built up painstakingly through research and study by scholars over many years: It drains the word anti-Semitism of any useful meaning. The advocates of the concept of a new anti-Semitism argue that it is anti-Semitic to either criticize Israeli policies or deny Israel's right to exist, even if one does not hold beliefs historians have traditionally regarded as an anti-Semitic view: hatred of Jews per se, belief in a worldwide Jewish conspiracy, belief that Jews created communism and control capitalism, belief that Jews are racially inferior and so on.

Those who argue that anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism are one claim they don't say criticism of Israeli policies is illegitimate. However, in practice this view virtually proscribes any such thing.

As the Oxford academic Brian Klug has written, anti-Zionism and hostility to Israel — if based on a political cause or moral code that is not anti-Jewish per se — is not anti-Semitic. And arguing that it is harms the all-important struggle to combat anti-Semitism. If people feel unfairly stigmatized as anti-Semitic simply for speaking out about the plight of the Palestinians and the Israeli government's role in causing their suffering, they could become cynical and alienated whenever the problem of anti-Semitism is raised.