

Ben White - FAQ

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Isn't singling out Israel for criticism anti-semitic?

Racism that targets Jews, like all forms of racism, must be condemned and resisted. In fact, it is precisely this opposition to racism that motivates the critique of how Israel treats the Palestinians. Sadly, there are some genuine anti-semites who wish to try and use the peace and justice movement in Palestine/Israel to gain a platform for their ignorant bigotry. But this does not mean that to struggle against Israeli apartheid is anti-semitic.

To complain that Israel is being 'singled out' is at best illogical, and at worst, a deliberate attempt to shield

Israel from criticism (itself a form of 'singling out'). Furthermore, Israel has been exempted from sanction for breaking international legal norms, benefitting from generous aid and preferential trade agreements from the US and EU while doing so.

For the Palestinians, Zionism has meant expulsion, exile, and subjugation – so of course they will 'single out' Israel, as will those who are in sympathy and solidarity with them. You wouldn't hear a Tibetan activist being accused of 'singling out' China – so why should Palestinians or their supporters be treated any differently, just because it's Israel?

Criticising certain Israeli government policies is one thing. But surely demonising Israel, and denying its very right to exist as a Jewish state is anti-semitic?

'Criticise but don't demonise', the defenders of Israeli apartheid will urge, meaning that only they can define the boundaries of acceptable debate. Some pro-Israel advocates try to set limits when it comes to discussing Israel and accusing someone of 'demonising' Israel can be a very effective smear tactic. It discredits their opponent's viewpoint and motivations, and intimidates the undecided.

One of these 'taboo' subjects is the nature of Israel as a Jewish state. In fact, although 'anti-semitism' is often the charge leveled at critics, among Jewish Israelis



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there is also much disagreement about whether a state should be defined in ethno-religious terms. But ultimately, the question of Israel's 'right' to exist as a Jewish state is not simply a matter of debate and controversy. For the Palestinians, it is something far more fundamental:

When you demand that Palestinians acknowledge the 'right' of Israel to exist as a Jewish state, you are asking them...to acknowledge that it was and is morally right to do all the things that were and are necessary for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, even though these necessary things include their own displacement, dispossession and disenfranchisement.

To question the right of a state to exist at the expense of an entire group of people is not 'demonisation', and nor is it 'anti-semitic'. For Israel to be a Jewish state, the Palestinians must accept continued dispossession and second-class status in their own country, which is not a recipe for a lasting peace for either Palestinians or Jewish Israelis.

The English have England, and the French have France. Why deny the right of the Jews to a state of their own?

On the face of it this sounds quite reasonable, but only because of a confusion about the nature of the relationship between the Israeli state and Jews. For example, France is the state of the French, every French person is a citizen of France and all citizens of France are French. Yet with Israel, the self-proclaimed state of all Jews worldwide, the same statement is impossible:

Israel is the state of all the Jews; all Jewish persons are by definition citizens of Israel; and all citizens of Israel are...Jews. The third part of the proposition is clearly empirically wrong; thus the assertion that Israel is as Jewish as France is French cannot be sustained.

The analogy with Islamic states like Pakistan or Saudi Arabia is also a flawed one, even though both have Muslim majority populations and incorporate aspects of interpretations of Islamic law into the state institutions and legal framework. Yet while some states privilege one religion over another, no other country "claims to be the sole global representative of the faith" or "grants citizenship to people solely because of their religion (without regard to place of birth or residence)". Most importantly, the question "Why deny the Jews to a state of their own?" is misleading, as it is not merely a hypothetical discussion. Israel has been established as a state for Jews the world over at the expense of the Palestinians.

Undeniably, you can find racism in Israeli society. But why don't you condemn the hate-preachers and racists in Palestinian society as well?

Of course, there are some Palestinians who hold to racist views, and this is entirely condemnable. Sometimes this can be specifically anti-Jewish racism, which is also unacceptable, even taking into account the fact that Palestinians continue to be occupied, dispossessed and killed by a state that deliberately identifies itself as Jewish, and claims to act in the name of Jews everywhere.

So while any kind of racism is to be opposed and challenged, there is an important distinction to be made. Some people are content to highlight the loud-mouthed bigots that can be found in both Israeli and Palestinian societies, blaming them for preventing the 'moderate' majority from reaching a peaceful agreement. In reality, while there are individual racist Palestinians and Israelis (like any society), an enforced Jewish superiority is intrinsic to the very fabric of a Zionist state in the Middle East. As detailed in Parts I and II of this book, ethnic and religious exclusivity are written into Israeli laws, and expressed every time the bulldozer blade cuts into a Palestinian home. It goes much deeper than the reprehensible beliefs of a few 'extremists'.

Isn't Israel the only democracy in the Middle East?

Israel certainly has many elements of a thriving democracy: the Declaration of Independence includes a pledge of equality for all regardless of race or religion; Palestinians inside Israel have the vote; there is a diverse, varied media. These features and others seem to make a favourable comparison with Israel's neigh-

bours very easy. But scratch beneath the surface, and another picture emerges.

To praise Israel as a democracy is to forget the occupation. For over 40 years, Palestinians living under Israel's military occupation have been denied their right to self-determination, as they watch Jewish Israelis colonise their land. Israelis refer to the Occupied Territories as Judea and Samaria, or 'the Territories', and include the area in official maps of 'Israel'. In which case, under Israel's control are 4 million Palestinians without voting rights or any semblance of dignity. When Palestinians in the occupied territories did vote in parliamentary elections - for a polity with no effective jurisdiction over its territory - Israel's response was to boycott the government.

Moreover, as we have seen in Part II, even for Palestinian citizens of Israel, there is profound, institutionalised discrimination on the basis that they are not Jewish - the same reason why Palestinian refugees can not return home. It's beginning to look like a strange sort of 'democracy'. In fact, it was Avraham Burg, former Knesset speaker and Jewish Agency for Israel chairman, who made clear the stark choice facing Israelis: it is either "Jewish racism or democracy" - you can't have both.

State discrimination against ethnicities and religions, in whatever form, is to be condemned, and most of Israel's Middle East neighbours are dictatorial and repressive. However, Israel can not be spared from critique simply because there are other examples of non-democratic governments. Time and time again, Israel's defenders seek to divert attention by pointing to other human rights issues.

In 2005, Israel actually withdrew from the Gaza Strip. But instead of concentrating on building up an economy and demonstrating a desire for peace, haven't Palestinians responded to this painful concession with rocket fire and terrorism?

With the bitter political infighting, the images of Israelis settlers being physically dragged away by their 'own' soldiers, and the fulsome international praise, many were convinced that Israel's 'disengagement' in the summer of 2005 was a genuine compromise made for the sake of the peace process. International politicians and media commentators marveled at how Ariel Sharon had become the "man of peace" Bush believed him to be.

But in reality, the whole thing was a televised PR stunt. Israel was under international pressure to make a 'painful compromise' in the name of peace, and withdrawing from Gaza also offered the chance to relieve the 'demographic' pressure of controlling 1.4 million Palestinians. Moreover, Israeli leaders had made it perfectly clear that the redeployment meant simultaneously strengthening illegal settlements in the West Bank. In other words, it was more land, fewer Arabs.

Then-PM Ariel Sharon's own advisor later told an Israeli newspaper that the aim had indeed been to freeze the peace process. He boasted, "Sharon can tell the leaders of the settlers that he is evacuating 10,000 settlers and in the future he will be compelled to evacuate another 10,000, but he is strengthening the other 200,000, strengthening their hold in the soil". In the aftermath of the pull out, the Education Minister stressed frankly the importance of the "window of opportunity" Israel had won itself to consolidate the major West Bank colonies.

Sharon himself was also explicit about the strategy, telling the Knesset that "whoever wishes to preserve the large Israeli settlement blocs under our control forever...must support the Disengagement Plan". A couple of months before the disengagement, the PM told an audience that the withdrawal from Gaza was done "in order to strengthen those [areas] with a high strategic value for us". Days later, Sharon confirmed how "at the same time" as withdrawing from Gaza, Israel was focusing its efforts on areas like "greater Jerusalem" and "the settlement blocs".

But even putting aside the real motivation, the Israeli government also tried to claim that now there were no settlers or soldiers with a permanent base in the Strip, there was no occupation, and thus no Israeli responsibility. The Israeli human rights group, B'Tselem, demolished this pretense:

The laws of occupation apply if a state has 'effective control' over the territory in question...The broad scope of Israeli control in the Gaza Strip, which exists despite the lack of a physical presence of IDF soldiers in the territory, creates a reasonable basis for the assumption that this control amounts to 'effective control,' such that the laws of occupation continue to apply. Even if Israel's control in the Gaza Strip does

not amount to 'effective control' and the territory is not considered occupied, Israel still bears certain responsibilities under international humanitarian law.

In fact, Israel retained control over the Strip's borders, air space and territorial waters, the population registry, export and import abilities, and border crossings. Moreover, the Israeli military continued to routinely conduct ground raids inside the Strip, using the airforce for assassinations, spying missions and collective punishment.

During 2006 alone, the IDF fired some 14,000 artillery shells into the Gaza Strip. Many of those shells were fired as part of 'Operation Summer Rain', a wave of Israeli attacks following an operation at the end of June by Palestinian militants that led to the capture of an Israeli soldier. During July, B'Tselem reported that Israel killed 163 Palestinians in the Strip, almost half of whom "were not taking part in the hostilities" when they were killed (including 36 minors).

Since Hamas' success in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections of January 2006, Gaza had been totally isolated, subjected to an economically and socially devastating siege which Israel continues unrelentingly. In March 2008, Amnesty joined the likes of Christian Aid, Oxfam, and Save the Children U.K., to release a report describing the dire humanitarian conditions Israel had created for Palestinians in the Strip.

The report said that more than 1.1 million people, about 80 percent of Gaza's residents, are now dependent on food aid, as opposed to 63 percent in 2006, unemployment is close to 40 percent and close to 70 percent of the 110,000 workers employed in the private sector have lost their jobs. It also said that hospitals are suffering from power cuts of up to 12 hours a day, and the water and sewage systems were close to collapse, with 40-50 million liters of sewage pouring into the sea daily.

The legacy of almost 40 years under occupation, plus a continued siege and punitive military operations; it is disingenuous to point to the giant prison that is the impoverished Gaza Strip, and blame 'the rockets'. Indiscriminate attacks on Israeli civilians by Palestinian armed groups are deplorable, but to consider Palestinian violence in isolation means ignoring both Israel's open intentions for the Gaza 'withdrawal' as well as the collective punishment Israel has inflicted on Gaza's 1.4 million Palestinians ever since.

When the Palestinians voted in 2006, they chose Hamas, a Muslim fundamentalist terror group sworn to Israel's destruction. How can the Israelis be expected to feel like making concessions?

Hamas was formed in 1987, 20 years into Israel's military occupation, and at the start of the First Intifada. Some Palestinians, paralleling regional trends, were disillusioned with leftist or secular parties, and looked for an alternative politics. Hamas' popular support has been typically connected to the buoyancy of the peace process. During the Oslo years, when hopes of progress were high, Hamas' popularity fell. During the brutal Israeli repression of the Second Intifada, however, support for a more militaristic, radical strategy increased.

Sometimes, Hamas is lumped together with al-Qaeda as part of a global Islamic jihad, despite the huge differences in origin, context, social base and aims. This clumsy analogy is often drawn for propaganda purposes, and sometimes made out of ignorance. In fact, Hamas has demonstrated a flexible approach to pragmatic politics similar to other parties and organisations. In the last few years, depending on circumstances, it has held to unilateral ceasefires and key leaders have even expressed a willingness to implicitly recognize Israel's existence as part of a genuine two-state solution.

That is not to say that there aren't individuals within the group who are more focused on a religious agenda than a political one, though unfortunately, the Israel government has chosen to assassinate important Hamas moderates, only strengthening the hand of the hardliners. Some Hamas leaders and affiliated-preachers have also been guilty of anti-semitic rhetoric, while others have noted the anti-semitism of the 1988 Charter. According to leading Hamas expert Khaled Hroub, however, this document has since "become largely obsolete", while even at the time it was the work of one individual. This is not the only shift:

The vague idea of establishing an Islamic state in Palestine as mentioned in the early statements of the movement was quickly sidelined and surpassed... Hamas has developed, and is still developing, into a movement that is more and more preoccupied with current and immediate, and medium-term, goals.

The reasons for the surge in support for Hamas at the ballot box in 2006 were nothing to do with an upswing in the number of Palestinians seeking an 'Islamic state'. Hamas had proven itself to be efficient in providing a number of vital services, such as health care and charitable support, in stark contrast to the corrupt Palestinian Authority. A vote for Hamas was also a rejection of the plans entertained by the international community, Israel, and the Fatah-dominated PA, as well as a symbol of defiance after years of brutal Israeli repression.

People talk about the Palestinian refugees, but weren't a similar number of Jewish refugees kicked out of Arab countries and welcomed by Israel? Couldn't this be seen as a 'fair swap'?

The creation of the state of Israel led to two substantial population movements in the Middle East. Between 700,000 to 800,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes, and forbidden from returning by the new Jewish state, while from 1948 through to the 1970s, around 850,000 Jews left Arab countries, with the majority moving to Israel. But the rough equality in scale is just about the only similarity.

Israeli professor Yehouda Shenhav once wrote that "any reasonable person" must acknowledge the analogy to be "unfounded":

Palestinian refugees did not want to leave Palestine. Many Palestinian communities were destroyed in 1948, and some 700,000 Palestinians were expelled, or fled, from the borders of historic Palestine. Those who left did not do so of their own volition. In contrast, Jews from Arab lands came to this country under the initiative of the State of Israel and Jewish organizations. Some came of their own free will; others arrived against their will. Some lived comfortably and securely in Arab lands; others suffered from fear and oppression.

Some prominent Israeli politicians who themselves come from Arab countries, reject the 'refugee' label. Former Knesset speaker Yisrael Yeshayahu once said "We are not refugees. [Some of us] came to this country before the state was born. We had messianic aspirations." MK Ran Cohen, who emigrated from Iraq, made it clear: "I came at the behest of Zionism, due to the pull that this land exerts, and due to the idea of redemption. Nobody is going to define me as a refugee."

As well as the fact that Jews in Arab countries were actively encouraged by the Zionist movement to move to Israel, there is another big problem with the 'swap' theory – timescale. Dr. Philip Mendes points out how "the Jewish exodus from Iraq and other Arab countries took place over many decades, before and after the Palestinian exodus" and "there is no evidence that the Israeli leadership anticipated a so-called population exchange when they made their arguably harsh decision to prevent the return of Palestinian refugees". Mendes also concludes his analysis by affirming that "the two exoduses... should be considered separately".

But the 'swap' idea is anyway illogical. One refugee's right – in the case of the Palestinians, a right affirmed by UN resolutions – can not be 'cancelled out' by another's misfortune. Furthermore, "the Palestinians were not at all responsible for the expulsion of the Jews from Arab countries" – while "the Palestinian refugee problem was caused by the Zionist refusal to allow the Palestinians to return to their homes".

Given the historical and logical flaws, the only way this analogy can be so tempting for some is its propaganda value. The World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC), for example, claim on their website that their mission is simply "to document the assets Jewish refugees lost as they fled Arab countries". Professor Shenhav, however, describes how WOJAC "was invented as a deterrent to block claims harbored by the Palestinian national movement, particularly claims related to compensation and the right of return".

Dismayingly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the US House of Representatives was persuaded to pass

a bill in April 2008 that not only equated Jewish and Palestinian refugees, but also urged “the administration to raise the issue every time the issue of Palestinian refugees is brought up”. The Economist magazine described the non-binding resolution as having “doubtful value”, as well as showing “once more the power of the pro-Israel lobby in Washington”.

Haven't the Arab countries used the Palestinian refugees as a political football, leaving them to rot in refugee camps?

There is no question that the Palestinian refugees have received often shockingly bad, discriminatory treatment in neighbouring Arab countries such as Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and even the Gulf States. But the question implies that these Arab countries, which themselves still suffer from an under-developed infrastructure and other significant socio-economic problems, should have simply granted citizenship to hundreds of thousands (now millions) of refugees. In Western Europe, many citizens balk at the idea of granting asylum to a proportionately much smaller percentage – and this in countries well-equipped to embrace new immigrants.

Many of the Palestinians displaced from their villages by Israel in 1948 were peasant farmers. Cut off from their land and everything they knew, they were not at all equipped to make a living in an alien country with a scarcity of jobs. Finally, it should be remembered that the reason why so many Palestinian families became, and remain, stateless refugees is because Israel has refused to allow their return, destroyed hundreds of their communities, and confiscated their properties.

Hundreds of thousands of Jews came to live in Israel as survivors of the Holocaust and because there was nowhere else for them to go. How can you simply label them as racist colonisers?

To describe Israel in terms of apartheid is not to dehumanise Israelis. In fact, the struggle for a just peace in Palestine/Israel emerges from insisting on the humanity of both Palestinians and Israelis. It's true that thousands of Jews fled to first Mandate Palestine, and then to Israel, escaping persecution in Europe and Russia. The majority of Jewish Israelis today, moreover, have been born in the land that they have every right to call home.

Anti-Jewish persecution certainly helps to explain how Zionism emerged, but can not justify, or detract from, the realities of Israeli apartheid. It's not about name-calling, or denying how after the Holocaust, many European Jews felt like there was nowhere else for them to go. It is about recognizing that the Palestinians also have a profound and deeply-rooted attachment to their country and the question, then, is whether or not they will share that land as equals. At the same time as it is vital to respect and understand the impact and legacy of the Holocaust, it is also sadly necessary to refuse those who would manipulate and exploit Nazi crimes in order to justify the oppression of the Palestinians.

Why have the Palestinians continued to reject a compromise with Israel, from the very beginning of the state in 1948, to Arafat's 'No' at Camp David?

The myth of 'brave but peace-seeking' Israel always let down by violent, compromise-rejecting Arabs is powerful and enduring. Israel's defenders argue that if only the Palestinians had accepted partition in 1948, rather than seeking 'Israel's destruction', everything would have been different. Likewise, for the propaganda war of the Second Intifada, the Palestinians – and Arafat in particular – were said to have turned down a 'best ever' offer from Israel at Camp David, instead opting for violence.

Let's take a look at 1948 first. As we saw in Part I and II, the real story of Israel's creation – the Nakba – is very different from the sanitized, Zionist narrative. When the UN proposed partition, Jews owned less than 7 per cent of the land, made up a third of the population – yet over half of the land of Palestine was assigned to the Jewish state. Moreover, even in its proposed borders, the Jewish state's population would be almost half Arab.

Ironically, while Palestinians are often accused of 'rejectionism', the Zionist leadership only accepted the idea of partition for tactical reasons. First Prime Minister Ben Gurion described a “‘partial Jewish state’” as just the beginning: “‘a powerful impetus in our historic efforts to redeem the land in its entirety.’” In

a meeting of the Jewish leadership in 1938, Ben Gurion shared his assumption that ““after we build up a strong force following the establishment of the state – we will abolish the partition of the country and we will expand to the whole Land of Israel.””

It should come as no surprise that “the fear of territorial displacement and dispossession was to be the chief motor of Arab antagonism to Zionism”. Palestinian Arabs had seen the Jewish proportion of Palestine’s population triple from around 10 per cent at the end of World War I, while the Zionist leadership in Palestine made no bones about their political aims. A question worth asking then, is whether you or I would simply accept the loss of our country, or if we too would be ‘rejectionists’?

A similar question can be posed about events at the Camp David negotiations of 2000. Contrary to popular assumptions, “Israel never offered the Palestinians 95 percent of the West Bank as reports indicated at the time”. The ‘generous offer’ was just another incarnation of previous Israeli plans to annex huge swathes of the OPT, retaining major settlement blocs “that effectively cut the West Bank into three sections with full Israeli control from Jerusalem to the Jordan River”.

To question why the Palestinians have ‘rejected’ compromise is to look at the region’s past and present from a particularly skewed perspective. Palestine has been wiped off the map, its land colonized, and its people ethnically cleansed. Expecting those on the receiving end to be satisfied with the crumbs from the table is both unjust – and wishful thinking.

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