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Published in:
Critical and Radical Social Work

DOI:
[10.1332/204986018X15321003809712](https://doi.org/10.1332/204986018X15321003809712)

Published: 01/08/2018

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication on the UWS Academic Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Maitles, H. (2018). The Left, antisemitism and Palestine. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 6(2), 241-245.
<https://doi.org/10.1332/204986018X15321003809712>

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The Left, Antisemitism and Palestine

As a Jewish socialist academic and activist, let me begin this article by saying that rooting out antisemitism wherever we find it is an essential responsibility for the left. Antisemitism, like other forms of racism, is deadly not just for the minority community but for all of us. Not only is it morally unacceptable, but it makes it harder to develop unity and radical alternatives if these ideas take hold. We need to be clear, however, where the real threat comes from.

Recently in Britain, there has been an unrelenting attack on Jeremy Corbyn (the leader of the British Labour Party), the Labour Party and the radical left in general as being antisemitic. It is almost beyond irony to see right wing Conservative MPs who are vehemently anti-immigration and have supported the non-implementation of the Dubbs proposal which would have allowed 3,000 Syrian refugees who were unaccompanied minors to come to Britain, joining a demonstration of British Jews demanding that Corbyn deals with antisemitism in the Labour Party by purging the left. The very people who have targets for expelling immigrants, which has led to people who have lived here for up to 50 years being denied rights, are claiming they are the real friends of the Jews! And, beyond parody to read the Daily Mail, which in 1934 had *'Hurrah for the Blackshirts'* (the virulently antisemitic British Union of Fascists) as its headline, now campaigning for the rooting out of antisemitism in the Labour Party! I observe that the accusations do not usually refer to antisemitic actions but usually to comments, often made on social media. Whilst some of the research into linking Corbyn and the left with antisemitism are of the *'you were on this*

facebook site and so was this antisemite' and are indeed smears, other comments should rightly be condemned, particularly those which are clearly antisemitic and other overt statements about Jews. Some of the messages that Jewish MPs have received are completely unacceptable. Further, we need to be condemnatory towards those conflating Zionist and Jew, or using Zionist when they mean Jew.

It is naïve, however, to think that these attacks on the left have no political agenda. The accusers seem to have some shared aims. Some in the media and on the right, including some Labour Party members, see it as a part of a general foulness of left politics and thus seek to undermine the left in general.

Furthermore, there is an agenda to discredit those of us on the left who make legitimate criticisms of Israeli policy or Zionism as a political ideology by arguing that critique of such is overt or secret antisemitism.

But it is not only in the UK. At a conference I recently attended in Vienna, a number of delegates and speakers were clear in arguing that the main danger to Jews was from the left and Palestinian activists, even claiming that human rights was the 'new language of antisemitism' and that UN resolutions condemning settlement building on occupied territories in the West Bank and Jerusalem were to be ignored as the UN was an Arab controlled institution! There was almost no acknowledgement that in many countries in Europe parties of the far right (infiltrated or led by neo-Nazis) have gained parliamentary and even government positions and march openly through the streets. The conference took place in Austria where the coalition partner Freedom Party has a virulent

anti-immigration policy and is led by someone who defends his youth in a neo-Nazi organization and who is now vice-Chancellor of Austria. In Germany, the AfD is now the official opposition in the Bundestag. And, in Hungary, the anti-immigrant Fidesz party won a large majority in April election, with the slogans 'No immigrants here' and with a hostile anti-Roma agenda. And Jobbik too (also virulently anti-immigrant) won 23 seats. In November 2017 a demonstration in Warsaw calling for an 'Islamic Holocaust' attracted some 50,000 participants. And of course there is the Front Nationale in the French Assembly while, as I write, the far right Swedish Democrats are expected to do very well in the next elections. These islamophobic and racist parties are the real threat to Jews. We need to understand the link between the islamophobia of the right and its impact on Jews, as the events in Charlottesville in USA last year showed. The open Nazis and their supporters marching through the city were clear that their targets were Muslims and Jews. The scenes of Jews in a synagogue being protected by the police from a mob are far too reminiscent of the 1930s. The rise in hate crime is taking place all over Europe and USA and affects Muslims, Roma and Jews. Indeed, all social survey attitudes show much stronger racist, islamophobic and antisemitic views in the parties of the right than of the left. Those who hate Muslims, also hate Jews.

So, it is extremely disturbing that the Jewish establishment all over Europe sees the left as the main danger. It is given legitimacy by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance statement, now adopted in principle by governments all over the world, if not enshrined in law. It gives 11 contemporary examples of antisemitism in public life, the media, schools, the workplace, and in the religious

sphere. Ten are relatively uncontentious, but one *'Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor'* is highly problematic. For many years the left (both Jewish and non-Jewish) has argued that Zionism has been a disaster for the Jewish and non-Jewish peoples in Palestine/Israel and that the solution to the problems is a democratic secular Palestine for all Jews and Palestinians -- not a completely unreasonable demand when one considers movements towards democracy in South Africa and Northern Ireland, for example. However, we are now told that both these contentions are examples of race hate and might be prosecuted as such. This response, I think, is profoundly dangerous and needs to be contested. Firstly, it denies 130 years of Jewish history and debate over the merits of Zionism as a solution to anti-Semitism (more on which below). Secondly, it legitimizes the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian Arabs from their homes in 1948, which has been highlighted by internationally respected Israeli historians with access to the files, such as Ilan Pape. Thirdly, it denies those Palestinians whose families have been in camps for 70 years now any right of return or justice. Fourthly, the alternative to a democratic state – the two state solution – has been made impossible by the illegal actions of the Israeli state through its settlement programme. There are now some 350,000 settlers in the West Bank, armed to the teeth and many determined to fulfill some biblical mission towards a greater Israel. Until there is some recognition of the rights of the Palestinian refugees, peace becomes problematic. To claim that those of us who argue for a potential democratic solution are antisemites and hate criminals will ensure that real hate continues in the Middle East. The cycle of intifada being met by the snipers and the overwhelming fire power of the IDF (as I write this more than 30

Palestinians lie dead and over 1000 injured following the April protests in Gaza) and with even Israel embarrassed by snipers targeting unarmed protestors hundreds of metres away – will continue. The breaking of the deadlock will require justice for the Palestinian refugees, the espousal of which is now deemed to be race hate.

Although there have been urgings that the police should use race hate legislation against those who transgress the IHRA definition, so far there have been no attempts to do this and legal opinion suggests that such attempts would not stand up in court. The definition has though led to temporary suspensions of respected Jewish socialists, such as Moshe Machover and Glyn Seckart, within the British Labour Party for expressing either anti-Zionist and/or anti-Israel positions. The definition is thus being used to silence or at least frighten the left. It has had the immediate effect of muting responses to the April killings in Gaza, as people are frightened of being accused of antisemitism. This is exactly what the attacks and smears on the left are designed to do.

Zionism was developed in the Jewish areas (known as the Pale of Settlement) of the Russian Empire in 1893, the same year as the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party (later to divide into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks) was founded.

Zionism was a reaction to the terrible pogroms and institutional racism perpetrated on the Jews, but it was a response which argued that it was useless to oppose anti-Semitism where one was, but rather the Jews needed to emigrate to a Jewish state. Herzl (the founder of Zionism and its leading thinker) claimed that his guiding understanding was that he *'recognised the emptiness and futility*

of trying to combat anti-Semitism'. (Hertzl, 1956, 6) Leo Pinsker, at the end of the 19th century, summed up jewbaiting as being *'not a quality of a particular race but common to all mankind. Like a psychic affliction, it is hereditary and as a disease has been incurable for 2,000 years'* (Pinsker, 1948, 33); so it can't be fought, the Jews need to get out.

We need to understand, though, that it was a minority of Jews who were attracted to this. Most Jews who were politically involved gravitated to the socialist parties of the RSDLP and the Bund (General League of Jewish Workingmen in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia). Both these organisations were vehemently anti-Zionist. Isaac Deutscher (1969, 67) explains:

In Eastern Europe and especially in Poland, the Yiddish speaking workers who considered themselves Jews without reservation were the most resolute enemies of Zionism. They were determined opponents of emigration to Palestine. These anti-Zionists thought the idea of an evacuation, an exodus from the countries they called home, where their ancestors had lived for ages, amounted to abdicating their rights, yielding to hostile pressure, betraying their struggle and surrendering to anti-Semitism. For them, Zionism seemed to be the triumph of anti-Semitism, legitimising and validating the old cry - 'Jews Out'. The Zionists accepted it; they wanted 'Out'.

To Jacob Dubnow, a Bundist leader, writing in 1898, the danger of Zionism was that anti-Semites *'...would then be able to say to the protesting Jews of the Diaspora, "If you don't like it here, why don't you go away and live in your own state?"'* (Dubnow, 1898, 167). And even when there was mass emigration

following pogroms, the vast majority of those went west to central Europe, Britain and USA. This strong leftist tradition within world Jewry continued. To give an example, it has been estimated that 9,000 of the 50,000 International Brigaders who fought for democracy and against fascism in the Spanish Civil War were Jewish and that 50% of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from USA were Jewish. Indeed, even as late as 1938, Zionist leaders in Germany conceded that they were a minority amongst German Jews. Those Jews who did leave Germany under pressure from the Nazis tended to try to come west rather than to Palestine. And, even today, more Jews who leave France, where there has been a strong campaign to urge Jews to leave, go to Montreal than go to Jerusalem.

The Holocaust – the physical and indeed memory destruction of European Jewry, added to by the immigration policies of Western powers following World War 2, altered Jewish perceptions. For the displaced Jews after the war and for Jews in the rest of the world, the failure of both the western powers and Stalinist USSR to save the Jews, allied to harsh immigration controls before and after the war, suggested that Zionism was no longer just feasible but necessary. This was to become another tragedy of the war – the Palestinians, soon to be displaced and ethnically cleansed, became the victims of the victims of the Nazis. And the Israel we now know, built on the philosophical ideas of right wing Zionism known as the 'Iron Wall', armed to the teeth, massively expanding illegal settlements, supported unreservedly by Trump and a rampant Christian Zionist movement in the USA and behind a real wall, oppresses the human rights of the Palestinians on a daily basis.

This takes me, however, to another point. The brutality of the Israeli regime – epitomized by the April killings – does not make it fascist. This is important as fascism is an historical and present day ideology that comes from our understanding of the Nazi and Fascist regimes of the 1930s and 1940s. Israel is racist, in for example its defence of the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian Arabs in 1948; its policy of ‘Right of Return’ for all Jews around the world but no right of return for those Palestinians who fled in 1948; its policies towards Palestinian Arabs in Israel regarding certain areas they cannot live; the Government’s attempts to deport asylum seekers; the language often used by the religious leaders to describe Arabs; the wall and checkpoints that hamper residents moving around the west bank; the disproportionate punishments meted out to Jews and Arabs for similar crimes. But to define it as ‘fascist’ when many other governments mistreat minorities in a similar way is to suggest that it is the worst regime in the world, a regime that needs to be treated in a way different from any other brutal state. This has led some Palestinian activists to produce banners equating the Star of David with the swastika and in Scotland to demand that Jewish groups which support Israel should not be allowed on demonstrations against racism and antisemitism. This is a profound mistake. This isolates the Palestinian support movement and makes it harder to build a broad campaign in support of the Palestinians.

So, what is the way forward? I think four things stand out for us. Firstly, we need to support struggles in the Arab world. Not only because those events of the Arab Spring of 2010-2013 showed the possibilities of challenging and defeating the dictatorships and developing fairer, more just, democratic societies but because

they all raised support for the Palestinians. They showed the world that the Palestinians had the support of the Arab masses, whilst their governments were complicit with the Israeli regime. Secondly, we need more demonstrations and rallies, involving Palestinian activists, Jews who oppose the violations of Palestinian human rights, and as broad a coalition of trade unions and political parties as can be done, in support of Palestinian defiance and against Israeli oppression. We have to show the Palestinians and our governments that there are people who oppose the discrimination towards and murder of Palestinians. Thirdly, Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions – despite the fact that Zionists make the case for this to be race hate – is crucial. BDS has the potential (as did the campaigns in South Africa in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s) to isolate the regime. But it is not just individual boycott of goods but rather a call to stop sending weapons used to kill Palestinians to the Israeli government, to stop our pension and other funds being invested in industries which benefit Israel. Finally, and this takes us back to where I started. The defence of the left against calls of antisemitism is central, as the attack on the left is to deter people from supporting Palestinian defiance of Israel, the call for a democratic state in the region and BDS. If the pro-Israelis win the argument that BDS is antisemitic, TU support will become very much harder and BDS is not viable without TU support. The power to implement BDS is with the TU movement internationally. For example, the weapons are made by TU members, transported by TU members and maintained by tools made by TU members. Often it is pensions of TU members that are invested in these industries. These essential campaigns are what can built the conditions for peace with justice in the region.

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