

THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT AND ANTI-SEMITISM: WHY IS IT SO CONFUSING?

In the same way that anti-Semitism has been confusing to many people, the issue of Israel has also been confusing to many of our allies—especially in progressive movements—and increasingly to some Jews. While it is beyond the scope of this discussion to explore all of the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we will address a few key points.

It is important to make a distinction between the policies and actions of the Israeli government and the Israeli people. We can, and do need to take a clear stand against the oppressive policies of the government, while remembering and holding out the goodness of the people.

For many Jews, the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948 promised to fulfill the hope of ending centuries of persecution, which had reached an extreme level of destruction and violence only a few years earlier, in the Nazi Holocaust. Jews had been without a homeland for thousands of years, subject to the cycles of anti-Semitism in the countries in which they lived. It was hoped that with Israel as a national homeland, the Jewish people would finally have a safe place to build unity and exercise self-determination.

For Palestinians, the Israeli War of Independence in 1948 is often called *Nakba* or “the tragedy.” It was a devastating moment, one that led to their families’ being exiled and ripped from their homes in Palestine. Here were two oppressed peoples set up against each other, in competition for the same land and resources.

The Israeli and Palestinian peoples can be—and need to be—strong allies for each other in solving the problems facing that region of the world. The existence of the state of Israel is crucial to Jewish liberation, and the establishment of a Palestinian state is crucial to the liberation of the Palestinian people. Jewish liberation and Palestinian liberation are not in conflict. They can, and must, move forward together so that both peoples can experience full security and self-determination.

INCREASING THE ISOLATION OF ISRAEL AND SINGLING ISRAEL OUT FOR BLAME CAN ALSO BE ANTI-SEMITISM

Singling out Israel for blame for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be an example of contemporary anti-Semitism if all of the blame for the conflict is placed on Israel.

Many Israeli Jews have battled heroically to build cooperative relationships with Palestinians, and many Palestinians have battled heroically to build cooperative relationships with Israeli Jews. Some groups vilify Israel and communicate that Israel, or the policies of the Israeli government, are the sole cause of all of the current difficulties in the region. Others vilify the Palestinian people, claiming that there is “no one on the other side to talk to,” and that peace would be possible except for Palestinian intransigence.

Singling out Israel for blame reinforces the fears of the Israeli people and pushes them to support right-wing policies and militaristic solutions even more. Singling out the Palestinian people for blame ignores the very real daily oppression they endure and leaves them feeling even more isolated and in despair, which has sometimes led to increased violence.

The Occupation in the West Bank and Gaza needs to end. The current policies of the Israeli government (increased settlement programs, checkpoints, house demolitions, on-the-ground violations of Palestinian rights, and legal attacks on progressive organizations that challenge the status quo) are wrong and further increase the isolation of Israel from the world’s peoples and, in the end, open Jews to increased anti-Semitism worldwide.

The isolation of Israel from its natural allies, the Palestinian people, continues to be a key part of locking anti-Semitism in place. No matter how difficult it might appear in the present moment to achieve a policy of two peoples, two homelands, it is in the best long-term interest of both the Israeli Jewish people and the Palestinian people. Both peoples have a right to national self-determination.

Another important, often-overlooked factor in perpetuating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the use of the region to support a continued arms race. Russian, and now U.S., interests have been served by continually supplying a vast amount of arms in the Middle East. On the pretext of “supporting” Israel, the United States maintains control of the oil in the region by offering arms to Israel, Saudi Arabia, and others.

It is also important to acknowledge that racism toward the Mizrachim (Jews originally from Arab countries) by white Ashkenazi Jews has strongly contributed to the difficulty in building unity between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. Systemic, ongoing racism in Israel over decades toward the Mizrachim, including within the Israeli peace movement, has made it difficult to have Mizrahi leadership in the center of the alliance-building work that goes on between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. The Mizrachim need to be in the center of the leadership on Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts. They can also be a natural bridge between Palestinians and Israeli Jews.