



Saying Israel Has No Right to a « Jewish State » Is Not Anti-Semitic

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As you surely know, the British Labour Party is today embroiled in a controversy over whether certain criticisms of the state of Israel can be considered anti-Semitic. The controversy is sure to come to the United States, even during this political cycle; and without wading into the statements and personalities involved, we need to point out that one aspect of the dispute is the claim that it is anti-Semitic to say- as many advocates for Palestinians do- that Israel does not have the right to exist as a Jewish state.

The “Jewish state” language is a key element of the English debate, and of the Israel conversation globally. As Robert Mackey [has written at the Intercept](#):

When the debate is unpacked, however, it becomes clear that what’s at stake is something much broader: whether critics of Israel, who question its government’s policies or its right to exist as a Jewish state, are engaged in a form of coded anti-Semitism.

And this is not just in the UK. The U.S. State Department maintains just such a view as well. It has [endorsed a definition](#) of anti-Semitism that includes efforts to:

DELEGITIMIZE ISRAEL [by] Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, and denying Israel the right to exist

The State Department language has helped to shift the discourse in the U.S. For example, the California Board of Regents [has also recently accepted a definition of anti-Semitism](#) that includes anti-Zionism:

Anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism and other forms of discrimination have no place at the University of California.

This same trend can be seen in the presidential race. Hillary Clinton [has said](#) that the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement meets this definition of anti-Semitism. She links anti-Semitism with:

all efforts to malign, isolate and undermine Israel and the Jewish people.

This is obviously a battle ground; and we have a clear position: We think it is legitimate and not anti-Semitic for critics to make such an argument. Given the principle of separation of church and state, such an argument has a long pedigree in modern political philosophy. Moreover, Israel's history shows that creating and maintaining a "Jewish state" has entailed ethnic cleansing of Palestinians on a regular basis, including in East Jerusalem and broad portions of the West Bank to this day, in order to maintain a Jewish majority in certain areas. In practice, the Jewish State in Israel/Palestine has meant an [ethnocracy](#) where Jews are given special and exclusive rights over other citizens and non-citizens under the sovereignty of the Israeli government. This is a system that we (Horowitz and Weiss) reject for political, personal and moral reasons that are in no way connected to vilifying or discriminating against Jews, the traditional definition of anti-Semitism.



The wall at Bethlehem, photo by « Delayed Gratification » on Flickr

Of course, many other people oppose these definitions of anti-Semitism as well.

Palestine Legal has an excellent [FAQ on the State Department definition](#) that notes that it blurs criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism. The FAQ addresses the "right to exist" idea:

Likewise, any criticism of Zionism—which questions Israel's definition as a state that premises citizenship on race, ethnicity, and religion — is considered anti-Semitic under this redefinition, because such speech can be seen as "denying Israel the right to exist" as a "Jewish state" that privileges its Jewish citizens over others

Palestine Legal points out that blurring Jewishness and Zionism are essential tactics of Israel

supporters:

[C]riticism of the Israeli state is not based on the Jewish identity of most Israeli citizens or leaders; it is based on the nation state's historical and present day actions. Despite these important distinctions, some go to great lengths to lump Jewish people and the Israeli state together, arguing that Jews and Israel are inherently connected, and that any attack on one is an attack on the other.

In response to the possible UC policy the [Stanford Students for Justice in Palestine chapter directly addressed the](#) danger of the "right to exist" qualification and said that such a definition of anti-Semitism has chilled speakers who might stand up for Palestine:

To provide some context: recently, a bill to condemn anti-Semitism has been introduced to the Stanford Undergraduate Senate. We fully support the passing of a bill to condemn anti-Semitism; however, the proposed bill contains the U.S. State Department definition of anti-Semitism which states that "demonization, delegitimization, and double standards" against Israel are anti-Semitism. This includes saying that Israel has no "right to exist". (see <http://palestinelegalsupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/FAQ-onDefinition-of-Anti-Semitism-3-9-15.pdf>) We have been concerned about this section of the bill as well as some other portions of the bill that also conflate anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. Unfortunately, the bill has made some members of Stanford SJP feel intimidated about speaking out against Zionism and the existence of an exclusive Jewish state in Palestine.

And there has been some official pushback as well. Three years ago the [EU's organization for combating racism dropped a definition](#) of anti-Semitism that included a provision aimed at the existence of Israel:

it lists the vilification of Israel or Israelis, which some scholars call "new anti-Semitism." The definition lists "claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor" and drawing comparisons between Israel and Nazis as examples of anti-Semitism.

But those very terms are the battleground in the English case. The Labour Party is in an uproar over anti-Zionism on the eve of elections in Britain. Lest the left fall into the "gutter" of antisemitism, political writer Gaby Hinsliff [in the Guardian offers what](#) she believes is a good definition of anti-Semitism as it touches on Israel. But notice her own confusion:

Here's a clue, for those confused about how to champion Palestinian rights or condemn an oppressive regime without overstepping the line: just treat Israel as you would any other country guilty of human rights abuses.

There's nothing inherently antisemitic about seeking economic sanctions against Israel, supporting an oppressed minority's right to self determination, condemning a government, or anything else you'd do if this was Burma.

But calling for its people to be swept into the sea, or forcibly transplanted somewhere else, or in any other way denying Israel's right to exist, is crossing a line because that simply doesn't happen to other countries no matter how oppressive their regime. No other nation state on the planet is constantly

asked to prove itself morally worthy merely of being allowed to exist.

Notice the bait and switch (writes Donald Johnson, who shared the Hinsliff). "Israel's right to exist" in this context is always understood to mean Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, which could only happen if Palestinians were forcibly expelled somewhere else. This writer doesn't even seem to realize the contradiction.

There is no way Palestinians should allow people like this writer to set the framework in which the issue should be discussed.

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