



How the state of Israel became ‘the Jew’ writ large

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It has long been well-known that interest in Israel and its conflict with Palestinians and with Arabs and Muslims in the region is extremely high and also highly polarising. Many people inside and outside the region have strong opinions, and discussions are often fraught and controversial. However, interest in the conflict starting with Hamas’s attack on 7 October 2023 has reached unprecedented levels of intensity worldwide.

The high interest of Jews and Palestinians in the conflict is easy to explain because of their ties to the region or religious or communal affiliations. However, there is rarely any discussion about the reasons for why this issue—a distant conflict, directly affecting few people—uniquely prompts such widespread bitterness and rancor among those far from and without a direct stake in it. Why do so many people and organisations (such as American [school boards](#) and [city councils](#), [labor unions](#), and [mainline churches](#)) seem to care so deeply and speak so vociferously about the conflict, despite having no connection to it? What influences their views? These are meta-questions, concerned not with actions in the conflict but rather with the nature of the parties to and interest in the conflict itself.

Palestinians undeniably have suffered much for decades. Yet there is little evidence of Western popular sympathy for or even interest in Palestinians as such. For example, few Americans protested when President Trump drastically cut U.S. support to the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees in 2018. More often, as at some universities and churches, pro-Palestinian advocacy means advocacy of punitive actions against Israel.

Another possible explanation for massive levels of interest in the conflict is the involvement of Israel. The only Jewish state, founded in the wake of genocide and currently in control of major religious sites, Israel has long drawn much international attention. Lately that has risen to a raging flood. Some posit antisemitism, or argue that Israel’s actions are so egregious that strong critique is justified, or point to Israel’s receipt of large amounts of American aid. Without rejecting these explanations, I want to consider deeper explanations, reflecting not contemporary political or economic events but historical patterns and ways of thinking about Jews in Western and Christian societies. These, I believe, at least partly shape the discourse, especially among those critical of Israel.

The Western Imagination

I suggest that the current intense, often hostile, focus on Israel is a contemporary manifestation of a long-lasting, historical trend: *Jews have for centuries occupied an especially prominent place in the Western and Christian imaginations, and the intense present-day focus on Israel is at least partly explicable as a continuation of that trend.* Looking back over these centuries—from antiquity to modernity—we consistently find Jews and Judaism receiving disproportionate levels of attention and distorted representations. Despite the small size of Jewish communities; their lack of political power; the barriers limiting their economic and social options; and the low likelihood that non-Jews ever even met Jews, over the centuries Jews were nonetheless the object of an enormous amount of Western and Christian theorising, much of it antagonistic. Christians often expressed their fears, their doubts, and their insecurities in terms that referred to and incorporated (ideas about) Jews, from whom Christians could be distinguished or (favorably) contrasted. This was possible because

Christians' views of Jews were largely Christian creations—heavily symbolic, ambiguous, unstable, and influenced more by religious and secular ideas than by actual knowledge, above all by theological polemic. David Nirenberg, in his [Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition](#), summarises these trends: Christians 'encoded the threat of Judaism into some of the basic concepts of Western thought.'

The experiences and perceptions of Jews over many centuries may seem distant from the present, but I believe they have profound and enduring influence on contemporary views of Israel. This is true even among those who know little of this history or admit to being influenced by it, for such ideas have deep roots and have been nearly universally diffused in Western society. They displace normal judgments, based on general moral and pragmatic assessments, when Jews then, and Israel now, are thought about in typically exaggerated terms based on polemical or fantastical assumptions and given lopsided attention.

I want to propose a series of parallels between historical views of Jews and contemporary views of Israel, the Jewish state. In each section below, I first present the historical views, summarising some of the dominant ways that Jews were seen in Western and Christian societies. Second, I present contemporary views that, I argue, illuminate noteworthy parallels to the historical views, which have been surveyed in [important works](#). I generally refrain from giving specific quotations of either historical or contemporary views; that would distract from my main goal, which is to demonstrate the possibility, relevance, and benefit of such an analysis across centuries for making sense of some contemporary discourse about Israel. Not surprisingly, nearly all the historical views are hostile or unflattering, for they were influenced by antagonistic theological, social, and economic beliefs about Jews. However, they are for this reason relevant to contemporary views, for many of these too are largely antagonistic to Israel and by extension, even if not explicitly, to the Jews who live there (and sometimes toward Jews living elsewhere). It is these views I will focus on, in four categories. Notably, I avoid speculating about critics' motives, which are presumably diverse and easily misrepresented. My claims are more modest but also hopefully more compelling about the apparent continuing influence of historical views of Jews.

First Parallel: Jews / Israel as the Apex of Evil

Christians long held irrational and fantastical beliefs about Jewish malevolence toward them. Some saw Jews not just as holding hostile attitudes toward Christians. They were accused of martyring Christians; of murdering Christian children; of poisoning wells; of spreading disease; of desecrating ritual objects; and of covertly undermining Christian and later secular Western societies in which they lived. They were falsely accused of the most dreadful acts one could imagine, threatening their lives and their deepest religious convictions. These tropes rested on terrible assumptions about Jewish motives, that, if given the chance, Jews wanted to do (and sometimes successfully did) awful things against Christians.

Likewise, some accuse Israel today not just of bad policies and of transgressing legal and moral norms. Rather, accusations of malevolence are ratcheted up to the highest possible level. For example, after tragic combat situations that led to the deaths of innocents, Israelis have regularly been accused of *intentionally* committing murder. Food shortages in Gaza, rightly deserving attention and redress, are said to be a *deliberate* Israeli policy to starve civilians amongst whom Hamas hides. There is an oft-heard claim that dreadful acts with deadly results, sometimes caused by Israelis' unacceptable carelessness and even negligence, are in fact *intended* outcomes. This attributes an inhuman level of deliberate malevolence to Israelis and to Israeli policy, far beyond that attributed to other Western militaries implicated in the tragic deaths of innocents. (For example, I do not recall anyone saying American military bombings in Afghanistan of wedding halls or children walking in the street were intentional murder.)

Similarly, accusations of genocide have been brought against Israel regularly in the United Nations (starting in 1982), in international tribunals, and by organisations (e.g. The World Conference against Racism in 2001). This claim—naturally recalling the Shoah—constitutes what Francesca Albanese, the highly controversial U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, characterised as 'the [crime of crimes](#).' The introduction of the most extreme terminology immediately forecloses dispassionate analysis according to conventional means of assessing state actions. In the face of such murderous evil, it seems almost absurd to ask for nuance and balance in a discussion of Israel's military and political actions. The genocide charge signals a moral harm of the highest order, raising questions about the state's legitimacy and not just the state's policies.

Accusations that Israel is a Western colonialist project have a similar effect, given widespread perceptions of colonialism as one of the great modern acts of injustice. The noxious mix of racism, exploitation, authoritarianism, and subjugation inherent in the traditional colonial enterprise have come to represent for many the apex of Western evil, so that those who are said to engage in colonialism trample on nearly all contemporary moral norms simultaneously. Again, reasonable and nuanced discussion, in this case of the history of the region, seems like a distraction when Israel's creation is cast as beyond the pale.

Second Parallel: Jews' / Israel's Original Sin is False Theology / Ideology

Historically, Christians and Westerners nearly universally held that Judaism is irrational and that Jews willfully reject majority (i.e., Christian / Western) norms and beliefs. Jews were said to stubbornly cling to a false and outdated worldview despite the undeniable truth of Christianity. While other religions and heresies provoked sometimes violent opposition, Judaism alone across the centuries was unique in its status as a present, even visceral manifestation of a supposed inversion of Christian values. Jews did not, of course, face unremitting hostility in all times and places, but antipathy toward Judaism was nearly constant, especially when Christians sought to define the boundaries of their communities by assuring that Jews fell outside them.

Likewise, modern critics of Israel claim that its ideological foundation is qualitatively different from that of other countries. The claim is that Zionism—Israel's founding ideology of Jewish self-determination and sovereignty in the biblical homeland—is *inherently* racist and discriminatory and therefore without legitimacy. Of course, other political and national movements buttress a wide variety of states, some peaceful and inclusive, some violent and exclusive. Some nations have official churches or state religions and a religious identity enshrined or privileged in their founding texts. Some also were born in conflict, including large-scale population transfers and disruptions to entire regions; this is certainly the case for Israel. The point is that its experience is far from unique. Yet there is no parallel phrase for hostility to other national movements, no anti-Kurdism, anti-Pakistanism, or anti-Bangladeshism alongside anti-Zionism, for there is no other national ideology (and state) evaluated so harshly as to justify its elimination. Only Israel's Jewish character provokes widespread resistance as uniquely atavistic and immoral. Specifically, its complex amalgam of nationalism, religion, and an intimate connection with the land upon which the country stands leads some to deprecate Zionism as a 'blood and soil' ideology, with its echo of Nazi Germany. Israel is uniquely tarred with this sort of 'original sin,' with any justification for its establishment undermined by events at the time of its founding even eight decades later.

Third Parallel: Jews / Israelis as the Ultimate Interlopers

Over the years, Jews were repeatedly expelled from regions in Europe (e.g. in 1290, 1306, 1492, 1569, 1742). Some were territories where they had dwelled for centuries, though without any sovereignty and dependent on the goodwill of non-Jews. Because of deteriorating social situations, shifting economic trends, accusations that Jews were an unassimilable 'other,' and increases in

religious fervor and hostility to non-believers, Christian rulers upended Jewish communities and, sometimes with little warning, demanded they leave. Their motives were a mix of the practical and theological, though the latter influence had deep roots in older Christian religious views of Jews. As unbelievers, they were to be scattered abroad from their biblical homeland, without political or military strength. They were to be kept weak and ruled by non-Jews, with the Jewish diaspora and powerlessness serving as vivid symbols of Christianity's triumph over Judaism.

Likewise, the Jews of Israel have long been portrayed as interlopers, temporary residents of the region, and destined for (or deserving of) expulsion. Among their neighbors, this sentiment is perhaps understandable; Arabs and Muslims in the region resent the changes and disruptions that occurred with the creation of the state of Israel. For many outside the region, however, for whom Israel's presence has no practical implications, there is nonetheless a rejection of Jewish sovereignty and self-rule. Anti-Zionism, the belief that the state of Israel has no legitimacy, necessarily entails a loss of self-rule and presumably flight from the land of Israel (assuming few would accept the risks of living as a political minority). The idea, whether based on the injustices of Israel's creation and / or Israel's policies, has strong echoes of the punitive view of the Jews' historical exile: Jews should remain a weak minority dependent on the fair treatment and goodwill of others for their safety. Israel's nationalistic ethos and frequent reliance on military force especially threaten this perception.

Fourth Parallel: Jews / Israel Reduced to Symbols

Though historically few Christians had substantive interactions with them, Jews served as symbols for claims and beliefs that Christians rejected or despised. One could deprecate one's opponents as 'Jews,' relying on widespread ignorance of actual Jews and the seemingly limitless plasticity of such images. The so-called Judaizers who clashed with Paul over biblical law; the Jews supposedly tempting Christians to neglect or abandon Christianity; the Jews who allegedly exemplify anti-Christian qualities such as legalism; the Jews as symbols of debased worldliness rather than vital spirituality—all were at least partly creations of the Christian imagination. Without any real-world reasons, Jews (or 'Jews') were enlisted in inner-Christian disputes about what social and religious life should and should not look like. According to Nirenberg, such Christian perceptions 'about Jews were weapons forged for service in conflicts with other Christians.'

The decision to treat Jews as symbols was not random; it reflected the murky process of Christian self-definition out of and against Judaism and the paradigmatic 'othering' of Jews in society for many centuries. It also reflected a long history of anti-Jewish hostility. As malleable symbols, Jews were enlisted into broader Christian disputes only tangentially related to actual Jews. Also, traditionally hostility to Jews was capacious enough to include groups otherwise opposed to each other. It is well known that rich and poor Christians alike saw Jews as the enemy, even when no Jews were present. This is also true for Catholics and Protestants, elites and non-elites, and secularists / rationalists and traditionalists. Despite otherwise mistrusting and even hating each other, diverse groups shared a symbolic enemy to whom they could attribute the beliefs and qualities they disdained in their foes.

Likewise, the issues raised by the Israel-Gaza conflict are often framed as claims about Israel but sometimes seem to reflect other disputes. Israel is a vessel for these disputes, serving as a symbol of that which is objectionable, outdated, immoral, or ambiguous. For example, as noted above, there is much discussion about Israel and colonialism. While some of this discussion engages substantively with Israel's history, more often the dispute appears to provide an opportunity for rejecting colonialism itself. This makes sense given that most Western examples of colonialism are in the past, leaving few opportunities for residents of Western countries to confront contemporary colonialism. Israel can serve as the superlative, ongoing example of a terrible, historical injustice previously but not currently committed by non-Jews.

Relatedly, one could note the emergence in many settings of contentious disputes about just war raised by this conflict. The conflict between Israel and Hamas is of course one of numerous recent conflicts. However, with the exception of wars in which Americans (or Westerners) were directly involved (above all, Vietnam), no other conflict provokes such a broad and passionate discussion about the goals of war and how war in general is fought. Of course, this is an important discussion, but uniquely with the Israel-Gaza conflict does the topic get taken up in vigorous public and academic discourse, much of it critical of Israel. And the subsequent claims that the war is not only wrong but philosophically and morally unjust again foreclose discussion and raise profound doubts about the war and the nation fighting it.

Another example of Israel's serving as a means to channel other controversies is the view that Israel is in conflict with Islam. Resisting the 'clash of civilisations' model, opponents of Israel demonstrate a willingness to work with Muslim groups and advocate for non-Westerners. Rather than shun or fear the 'other,' opposition to Israel is used to signal an openness to Islam in the face of Western anti-Muslim views. This hostility serves to unite an unprecedentedly diverse mix of groups. Most notably, Muslims and progressives, despite profoundly different worldviews (eg. regarding gender, religion, gay rights, and politics), are together at the forefront of activism about the war in Gaza.

Israel functions symbolically in other ways. Mainline Protestant groups clash with evangelical groups regarding Christian Zionism. Though ostensibly about how much support (if any) to give to Israel, underneath this dispute is a major inner-Christian rift about interpreting Scripture, political activism, and Christian values not directly related to Israel. Stark cultural divides about who can be considered oppressed and thus worthy of special treatment lurk within this dispute as well, given the contentious disagreements about whether Jews qualify as an oppressed group. Likewise, discussions about Israel surface deep tensions in organisations. Disagreements about Israel have divided the Democratic party like no other issue, revealing a simmering fault line between the center and the left. University faculty in large numbers pick sides in the conflict. Many sign letters that reflect deep anger and disappointment with those who disagree with them about Israel but also about the mission of the university, academic freedom, activism, and moral obligations.

Again, it is difficult to think of another conflict, let alone a foreign conflict, that unites or engages such a disparate range of activists or that raises so many (sometimes unrelated) issues. I mention this not to question whether activists have genuine concerns with the conflict itself. Rather, I want to underscore the unique characteristics of the activism engendered by criticism of Israel and their parallels with historical views of Jews.

Israel: The Jew Writ Large

These historical parallels point to a striking development: the state of Israel has become the Jew writ large. Many of the historical claims about Jews are paralleled by contemporary claims about Israel. The reasons for the historical claims vary, though most rest upon well-known theological and secular beliefs about Jews. Bracketing the (perhaps unknowable) motives behind contemporary claims and avoiding pejorative terms such as antisemitism and anti-Judaism, I suggest that Zygmunt Bauman's concept of '[allosemitism](#)' (Jews as 'others') is more useful here. In short, he posits that Christians obsessively used an image of Jews to demarcate religious and social norms, especially at unsettling times of ambivalence. Jews could be assigned abstract roles as the 'other' against whom Christians could define their own identities. This model applies well to many contemporary views of the State of Israel. Israel is marked off by many as unique among the nations, much as Jews over time were treated as the consummate other, and the discourse demonstrates strong continuities between past and present. Only now the focus has shifted: from the Jews as a people to the Jews of Israel as a polity.

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