



Why anti-Zionism is inherently anti-Semitic

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Anti-Zionism is an inherently anti-Semitic doctrine. In calling for the fall of the Jewish state, anti-Zionists are engaged in a racist endeavour. Jews should feel no hesitation whatsoever in calling out those who challenge Israel's right to exist as anti-Semites, with all the attendant implications.

None of this should be controversial. [“Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination”](#) is part of the EU's working definition of anti-Semitism ([or was, until the EU inexplicably dropped it](#)). This article is concerned with articulating the intellectual foundations for this proposition, rather than somehow presenting a new idea.

Zionism is, at its core, the belief that the Jewish people have a right to self-determine in the Land of Israel.

Zionism does not, strictly speaking, require the belief in a Greater Israel, nor toleration of any degree of civil or political inequality between Jews and others in the Jewish state. Criticism of practical manifestations of Zionism that are not logically entailed by the Zionist ideal (e.g., the Occupation) is not necessarily anti-Semitic, if only because it is not aimed at the principle of Zionism itself as the simple belief in the self-determination of the Jewish people in Israel.

Anti-Zionism is then, strictly speaking, the denial of a right of the Jewish people to self-determine in Israel. This may involve a denial that Jews have a right to self-determine at all, such that a fortiori no such right can exist in Israel, or a denial that this right could apply to political association in Israel specifically: anti-Zionists could maintain that [this right should be exercised elsewhere](#).

The anti-Zionist credo can take two forms. What I term Philosophical Anti-Zionism is the position that Israel should never have been created, but now that it already exists, it has a right to continue existing. Programmatic Anti-Zionism, in contrast, insists that the creation of the State of Israel was a historic injustice, and since injustice must be always be rectified, the illegitimate Israeli state must be dissolved or destroyed forthwith.

This latter form is the more common in anti-Israel discourse, certainly in the Middle East, and it is gathering support through those who endorse the euphemistically named one-state solution, or even more circumlocutiously call for a return of the descendants of Palestinian refugees to their homes in Israel-proper, which would turn Israel into an Arab-majority state and terminate Jewish self-determination by stealth. John Mearsheimer, for one, agrees that the one-state solution would constitute [“national suicide” for Israel](#). The Palestine Solidarity Campaign and the [BDS Movement](#) both fall in this Programmatic camp, which is trying to pressure Israel into commit national suicide: the only difference with Hamas and Hezbollah, for example, is that these groups are willing to pull the trigger themselves.

If justice may be restored through the reversal of injustice, and if the campaign of delegitimation is expected to reverse a historic injustice by bringing the Jewish state down, then it is unsurprising that Programmatic Anti-Zionism is the dominant paradigm in anti-Israel discourse. It is to this hegemonic position that I now turn my attention: this criticism is narrowly tailored against those who believe that an iniquitous status quo can only be remedied by the disappearance of Israel from

the map, and that the only thing Israel can do to improve itself is to vanish. Whether Philosophical Anti-Zionism, on the margins of mainstream anti-Zionist discourse, is inherently anti-Semitic is a question for another day. For the sake of brevity, 'anti-Zionism' will be used as a shorthand for the Programmatic kind.

Why is anti-Zionism anti-Semitic?

There are three principal reasons why anti-Zionism is inherently anti-Semitic.

Firstly, **anti-Zionism is the position that the Jewish people should be dispossessed, against their will, of a fundamental right that they currently enjoy: namely, the right of self-determination.** Whatever one believes about whether the Jewish people had a moral right to self-determine in 1948, this right is now a fact of international law, which states that [“all peoples have the right freely to \[self-\]determine”](#), recognises that the [Jewish people constitute a people](#) and, although the law does not require self-determination to be manifested through political independence (of which more anon), accepts that the [creation of the State of Israel was the valid manifestation of this right](#).

Anti-Zionists may claim that the international community was wrong to grant Jews a legal right that had no moral basis, but anti-Zionism today is the demand that Jewish people should be deprived of their internationally recognised legal right to self-determine, and that Jews worldwide should be divested of a right that they already lawfully possess as Jews.

Anti-Zionists may argue that Zionism has deprived the Palestinians of *their* political rights, and self-determination exercised in a repressive form has neither legal nor moral basis: Israel is a racist regime, and has no more right to exist than did the white supremacist Apartheid regime in South Africa. The fine distinction, however, is between those who seek justice by accommodating Jewish and Palestinian claims for self-determination through a pragmatic partition of the land, helpfully suggesting adjustments to bring the practice of Jewish self-determination closer to liberal ideals, and between those who believe that justice can only be attained if the rights of one community are allowed to override those of another: *fiat justitia, ruat caelum*, as the old saying goes.

The selective deprivation of fundamental rights is the essence of discrimination. There is simply no conceivable sense in which attempts to retroactively strip Jews, and only Jews, of fundamental rights can be anything other than anti-Semitic.

Secondly, **anti-Zionism is a stance that necessarily fails to treat Jews as political equals.** It is the insistence that Jews should return to being permanent minorities, restored to an irreversibly weaker and more vulnerable position vis-à-vis other groups. It is the demand that Jews, and only Jews, should be forcibly subordinated against their will to other majorities, having already been given their freedom.

Anti-Zionism may be accompanied by a caveat that Jews should have full and equal civil rights wherever they live, but this operates against the implicit understanding that the majority will determine the cultural fabric of the state: the flag, the anthem and its dominant values. In denying Israel's legitimacy, anti-Zionists tell Jews that they wish to treat them as equals, but only on their terms. Jews have rights only as individuals, but not as a collective. For those anti-Zionists who are members of national majorities in their respective states, the claim is that while they may enjoy individual and collective rights, Jews may only entertain the former.

There is no way that this assertion of political supremacy over Jews can fail to constitute anti-Semitism.

Thirdly, and most gravely, **anti-Zionism is complacent with exposing Jews to dangers for which the anti-Zionists have no answer**. Zionism was first conceived as an answer to the Jewish Question: the controversy around the political status of Jews as an anomalous, transnational, religious-cum-national minority. Zionism is, at its core, the belief that self-determination in Israel is the answer to this Jewish Question and to millennia of persecution. Anti-Zionism not only rejects as irrelevant Jews' desires for the determination of their own fate, but crucially fails to articulate a better alternative.

Anti-Zionists are simply not bothered with formulating an answer to the Jewish Question that takes into account the agency, aspirations or basic security of Jews who either live in Israel or depend on it as a safe haven. They implicitly recognise that if Israel were to disappear, Jews would face a problem as Jews, but this is none of their concern. Anti-Zionists may promise that Jews will be safe as minorities in other countries, but Israel exists precisely because Jews learnt that they could never trust these promises. The anti-Zionists' insensitivity to Jewish existential fears is, ironically, part of the problem that Zionism is meant to address!

Anti-Zionism logically requires that anti-Semitism – an acute problem for vulnerable Jewish minorities – will have to be solved in a context in which Jews are once more vulnerable minorities. If Israel were forced to swallow a one-state solution, it would have an Arab majority either immediately or very shortly after. Those who chant, with venom in their eyes, that from the river to the sea, Palestine must be free, either simply presume that Jews would be safe as Jews in such a state, or they just do not care.

If Israel were to cease to exist, the question of how to protect Jews from anti-Semitism the day after is not the anti-Zionists' problem. The outburst of late White House correspondent Helen Thomas that Jews should [“get the hell out of Palestine”](#) and [“go home”](#) to Germany or Poland, is just one such example.

In a post-Israel world, anti-Semitism would continue. Anti-Zionists refuse to elaborate a vision of how this should be combatted, while rejecting point blank the Jewish people's preferred solution to anti-Semitism: self-determination in Israel. Anti-Zionists are content to throw Jews under a bus, and only then turn their attention to how to stop the bus running them over.

This callous insensitivity to Jews' concerns for their own basic security as Jews, given the dangers they would face in a post-Israel world as Jews, and the willingness to put Jews in this precarious position, is unambiguously anti-Semitic.

Answering Objections to “Anti-Zionism is Racism”

Anti-Zionism often draws on [classical anti-Semitic tropes](#), but this is mere embellishment for an inherently anti-Semitic agenda. The problem is with the political position more than simply its presentation.

Critics will no doubt say that the equation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism is a sinister attempt to silence legitimate political discourse. It should be self-evident, however, that there is no room in civilised debate for singling out Jews for the deprivation of fundamental, internationally recognised rights.

It may be objected that there are many nations without corresponding nation-states, so to deny the Jewish nation a right to its own state is not to single it out: the Kurds, Basques and Tibetans lack their own states too. If the denial of Kurdish statehood is not expressive of anti-Kurdish prejudice, the argument might go, then the denial of the Jewish statehood cannot be anti-Semitic.

This objection, however, overlooks the uniquely retroactive nature of anti-Zionism, which is a demand to revoke certain rights, rather than a refusal to grant them. As indicated in the above distinction between Philosophical and Programmatic varieties of anti-Zionism, the question is not whether it is racist to deny a certain people the right to self-determine as a nation-state. The answer to that is probably 'no': international law, at least, does not recognise a right for minorities to secede "[because it is their wish... \[as this\] would be to destroy order and stability within States and inaugurate anarchy in international life](#)".

Anti-Zionism, however, is not rooted in this reluctance to destabilise the international order, for it represents an explicit challenge to the norm of sovereignty and the present order. Whether the Jewish right to self-determination should have been recognised in 1947 is a different matter from whether this right, once recognised, should be revoked. The fact that the international community refuses to entertain certain further claims to statehood is no defence for those who want to retroactively revoke a right to statehood once exercised.

Far from Zionism being a form of racism, anti-Zionism is racist to boot. Advocates of the Palestinian cause too often couple a defence of Palestinian rights with a denial of Jewish rights, as if the two are in zero-sum competition: justice for Palestinians must come at the expense of justice for Jews, but since the Jews never had any legitimate rights to self-determine in the first place, nobody's rights would be violated by the elimination of Israel anyway. Israel's detractors are not interested in reconciling Jewish and Palestinian right where they appear to clash, instead treating the latter as a trump card. Zionism is reconcilable with Palestinian statehood: but anti-Zionism, of the kind I describe, is not reconcilable with Jewish statehood.

The tragedy of the situation is that Zionism gets routinely denounced as racist by the very states whose racism against Jews generated this demand for Jewish self-determination in the first place. The irony is that in [denouncing this ideal as necessarily racist](#), rather than merely attacking what has been done in its name, these detractors are engaging in racist discourse themselves.

This framework raises the curious question of Jewish anti-Zionism: are Jews who oppose the existence of the State of Israel also *anti-Semites*? Well, yes and no. There is certainly no logical contradiction in the idea of a Jewish anti-Semite: [the self-hating Jew is well-rehearsed trope](#). But whereas non-Jewish anti-Zionists demand that Jews be stripped of their rights, Jewish anti-Zionists seek to decline to exercise rights they already have. Jewish anti-Zionists do indeed want to deprive fellow Jews of their right to self-determine, but the fact that they also wish to surrender their own rights should somewhat blunt allegations that they are singling out other people for discriminatory treatment.

The proposition that anti-Zionism is inherently anti-Semitic does not mean that anti-Zionists necessarily hold classically anti-Semitic beliefs: anti-Zionism is a *variant* of anti-Semitism, even if it sometimes also manifests itself as a cover for a more traditional variety of anti-Semitism. Many anti-Zionists are probably sincere, therefore, when they deny accusations of anti-Semitism. That is irrelevant, however, because their agenda can be anti-Semitic in deed if not in intent. The bearer of prejudiced views may still be prejudiced even while ignorant of the nature of his offence: one need not be a wife-beater to be a misogynist, if one also believes that a woman's place is in the home.

Once one accepts that anti-Zionism is inherently anti-Semitic, the world presents itself as a much darker and more sinister place. It means that people to whom we were previously willing to give the benefit of the doubt should now be taken to task. It requires the sober realisation that colleagues whose anti-Israel prejudice we could previously isolate as a merely political difference, are part of a malicious historical trend of treating Jews as politically inferior, whether they know it or not.

There is no reason to tolerate the illusion that challenges to Israel's existence are only anti-Israel rather than clearly anti-Semitic. It's time to call a racist spade a racist spade, and to refuse to be

beaten with it.

I thank readers for their feedback and constructive criticism; my response may be found here: [“Why anti-Zionism is still anti-Semitic: a reply to critics”](#).

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