

## Focus on Palestinians

By Blake Alcott

Speaking to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on 16 July 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron repeated the popular formula that [anti-Zionism is anti-Semitic](#). According to Macron, anti-Zionist and anti-Israel expressions are “[a new type of anti-Semitism](#).” We hear this almost daily, and pretty soon one of us anti-Zionists will land in jail for arguing that only a democratic, Palestinian state in Palestine has a right to exist there.

Only a few decades ago, and only for a few decades, [Zionism was racist](#), but now, according to the head of Security Council member France, the allegation is that it is *anti-Zionism* that is racist.

There is however a large logical flaw in this argument that believing Israel should be replaced by a democracy is antisemitic: The anti-Zionist position denies only the right of a Jewish state to exist *in Palestine, at the expense of the indigenous Palestinians*. It does not deny the right of Jews, or ‘the Jews’, to a state of their own somewhere, at nobody’s expense. Nor does it necessarily affirm it. This pro-Palestinian position simply denies the right of any state, whether Jewish or anything else, to impose itself on Palestine against the will of the indigenous Palestinians.

The issue, that is, has never been Yes or No to the question of Jewish self-determination as such, embodied in a state. Even if the answer is Yes, a Yes to Israel does not follow: the claim of some Jews, or Zionist Jews, or European Jews, or Christian Zionists, that ‘the Jews’ own Palestine does not stand up. The land belonged and still belongs to the flesh-and-blood twentieth-century inhabitants whose ancestors had lived there for centuries or millennia.

Instead, the issue has always been on whose land and at whose cost a Jewish state could justly be established. Palestine could always be ruled out because on any rational moral standard the property rights and political rights of the Palestinians – be they Moslem, Christian, Jewish or atheist – had precedence.

These are the problems that make it impossible for Zionism – which insists its state must be in Palestine – to have any ethical justification. That the imposed state is *Jewish* is not relevant. Relevant is only that it is imposed, necessarily through military force.

Anti-Zionism – better, pro-Palestinianism – thus takes no stand at all on the general question of Jewish self-determination. It can even, in spite of strong arguments in principle against ethno-religiously defined states, hold great sympathy for the wish of many Jews for a haven where they are safe from European persecution. But not at others’ existential expense.

For this discussion it is not even necessary to define what one means by 'Jewish state'. Whether it is something cuddly, with a flag showing the Star of David and Hanukkah instead of Christmas, or the real Zionist entity which [legally privileges](#) Jews and refuses ethnically-cleansed Palestinians their right of return, is of no relevance. Either state, if rejected by a majority of Palestine's indigenous people, is illegitimate.

This is in fact what it means to reject Israel's legitimacy: it is a British-enabled, European colony. A necessary condition of the Zionist state was and is the eradication of the Palestinians' right to self-determination. The case for Israel's illegitimacy thus has nothing to do intrinsically with Judaism or Jews, but only with the fact that Zionism threw the first stone of aggressive colonialism. The rightful polity never wanted Israel, period.

That is to say, that from a moral point of view Zionism's problem is that Israel is in the wrong place. Any place would be wrong if the state's existence presupposed military conquest and ethnic cleansing. That the antisemitism that gave rise to Zionism in the first place was European, having nothing to do with Palestinians, merely rubs salt in the wounds of Palestinians and of justice.

Thus, we can say that Israel has no right to exist (it is *not right* that it exists), *where* it is and *in the manner that* it maintains itself, without saying a single word about Jews, a Jewish collective, Jewish statehood or Jewish self-determination. We are talking about Palestine and Palestinians.

We should in fact start any discussion of Palestine and Israel with Palestine, not with philo- or anti-semitism or with the ins and outs of the Zionist endeavour or with the historical claims of some long-ago residents. In the beginning of modern political Zionism were indigenous Palestinians, and their enduring and inalienable rights should be our focus, a positive focus in no need of defense against far-fetched accusations concerning one or the other attitude towards Jews and their national aspirations.

Our arguments for the sole legitimacy of a state determined by the majority of the Palestinians – wherever they now live – do in fact entail the negatively-expressed conclusion that Israel is illegitimate. But the argument for Palestinian self-determination, in Palestine, makes no necessary mention of the particular non-indigenous ethnic or religious group in terms of which Israel defines itself. Thus, the claim that the anti-Zionism entailed by full recognition of Palestinian rights is antisemitic simply falls flat for lack of an object.

### ***The IHRA definition***

The conflation of opposition to Israel with opposition to Jews is thus embarrassingly illogical. Yet we see the President of France doing exactly that, and likewise the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), but before looking at that organisation's definition, what is antisemitism? It is not all that complicated. It is

antipathy or violence towards Jews, or any other abuse of them, because of their descent or religion. (Without this motive, violence and abuse remain crimes, but not racist ones.) Nobody can help who their ancestors are, so such attitudes and actions are criminal and racist.

The definition of antisemitism now being used to shift the term away from Jews as such over on to Zionism and Israel has [a long history](#), but [here it is](#), black-on-white, in its influential IHRA version: “Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”

Although the formulation “hatred toward Jews” leaves out the decisive phrase ‘because they are Jews’, let’s accept this so-called “non-legally binding working definition” adopted by the IHRA on 26 May 2016.

Then come the illogical parts: “Manifestations might include the targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity. ... Contemporary examples of antisemitism in public life... include... denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour.”

But of course anti-Zionism doesn’t target Israel because it is a “*Jewish* collectivity” (whatever that means) and it doesn’t deny the abstract right of any ethnic or religious group to try to peacefully set up its own state. It does identify Zionism as racist against the non-Jews of Palestine.

Again, you can shout from the rooftops for the right of the Jewish people to self-determination in the form of a sovereign state – if done without violence on land purchased fair and square – and still reject Zionism and Israel. Saying that the wrong of European persecution of Jews does not justify the wrong of Palestinian dispossession is an ethical stand independent of the ethnicities or religions involved. Where is the antisemitism?

Baffling, at first sight, is the IHRA’s use of the phrase “a state of Israel” in place of “*the* state of Israel”. My guess is that the authors of the definition know very well that there are sufficient non-antisemitic reasons to reject Israel – mainly that it is in Palestine, paid for by the Palestinians. Through this elision I think they are trying to pin on us anti-Zionists opposition to *any* Jewish state, anywhere. But we have seen that this isn’t true. With full sympathy for any ethnic or religious groups under persecution, we are agnostic on this point.

***J. Freedland weighs in***

Next we have the same conflation committed by J. Freedland, the *Guardian's* house apologist for the violent colonial entity in Palestine and who, to the discredit of that paper's editors-in-chief, was and perhaps still is entrusted with overseeing the paper's foreign-affairs editorial policy.

On 29 April 2016 Freedland explained in an elaborate, if not baroque, [piece](#) in his newspaper why returning Palestine to its rightful owners – why affirming the Palestinians' right to self-determination – is racist against Jews.

He sets the stage for the conflation by drawing an analogy with a theoretical black state, rather than a Jewish one – “the only place in the world where the majority of the population... were black.” He then imagines there are a lot of people who reject this state, want it replaced. Disingenuously omitting mention of any *reasons for* this rejection (for instance the state's discrimination against non-blacks), he then asserts that such an attitude would obviously be anti-black racism, parallel to antisemitism: All good people “on the left... would be suspicious of this insistence that loathing of the world's only black country was separate from attitudes to black people in general, especially because most black people had a strong affinity with this country, seeing it as a constitutive part of their own identity.”

The *non-sequitur* is obvious. To oppose Jewish or Aryan or Moslem or Hindu or Martian country X because it eliminates, expels and discriminates against other ethnic groups is *not* to oppose Jews, Aryans, Moslems, Hindus or Martians, respectively.

The argument is empty enough, but arguing from black people's “strong affinity with this country” reduces it to a mere point about the subjective feelings of some ethnic or religious group. And in fact Freedland then leaves his analogy with the hypothetical black state to attest that Jews have “this connection to – this need for – Israel. ... 93% [of British Jews] told a 2015 survey that Israel forms some part of their identity as Jews. ... Though Israel's creation came at a desperately high price for Palestinians... it is impossible for most Jews to see it as a mistake that should be undone.”

One can only ask, Since when do the feelings of any group override ethical principles and historical context? Using the obvious analogy, since when would the “affinity” of southern U.S. whites for a slave-owning polity override the rights of blacks in that territory? Surely such whites were heartbroken upon the demise of the Confederate States of America.

Freedland next detaches the discussion from fact or ethics altogether by claiming, with a straight face, that “when Jews call out something to be antisemitic”, it is antisemitic. This is Alice-in-Wonderland logic.

He then three times says that that “something” which “Jews” subjectively declare to be antisemitic is opposition to Israel's “right to exist”. “Most Jews will defend Israel's

existence”, although it was “forged in bloodshed”. Yes, this is chilling right-wing stuff, but the general problem is that if such group feelings are the only compass, disagreements can only be settled by violence.

Freedland also rides hard the fact that Israel is “the world’s only Jewish country” – implying I suppose that were there several Jewish states, it would not be antisemitic to fundamentally oppose one or the other of them. But whether there is one ethnocracy of type X, or many, is irrelevant to the point that it is the racist violation of others’ rights in any one of them that motivates fundamental opposition.

Finally, Freedland graciously allows us to criticise Israel “for this or that policy”, but if we feel it is “better that this one black [Jewish] country had never been created”, we are OK with the “periodic persecution and slaughter” of a black/Jewish “minority”. Opposing British imposition of Zionism in the 1930s, as we oppose it now, we “would have denied those 6 million [Jewish victims] the one lifeline that might have saved them.” And if that isn’t antisemitic, what is?

This seems to be the ‘lifeboat ethics’ argument of soft Zionism – it was either us or them. But Freedland is making the further claim that taking the side of the Palestinians in the lifeboat necessarily entails racial prejudice towards the Jews in the lifeboat. Again, a non-sequitur. But what is noteworthy is that since all Palestinians, ever since Zionism was put to paper, opposed the politicide it entailed, all Palestinians are, according to J. Freedland, anti-Jewish racists. A more slanderous, historically ignorant and generalised assertion, more devoid of empathy for the dispossessed and cleansed Palestinians, is not imaginable.

### ***Go to jail***

Macron, Freedland and the IHRA don’t get the point because they don’t take Palestinians seriously. Palestinians are simply not relevant to their stories, which begin and end with the Jewish experience. Because the indigenous Palestinians are the monkey wrench ruining their conflationary arguments, they don’t count. Orientalism is alive.

Our immediate cause of concern however, due to the power of these Zionists, is now to stay out of jail. The IHRA, which has equated anti-Zionism and antisemitism, is not nobody. It is made up of *countries*, namely all EU countries except Bulgaria and Portugal plus Argentina, Israel, Switzerland and the US. The European Parliament Working Group On Antisemitism [has adopted](#) the IHRA definition word for word, as has the Austrian Government and the UK Government, albeit not as law but only as policy guidance, and it has been [recommended by the EU Parliament](#) for adoption by all EU states.

We have seen that the President of France has a solo part in the IHRA choir, and it so happens that France has a recent history of [trying to criminalise](#) fundamental opposition to Israel and even to the rights-based Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. Concerns about freedom of expression aside, the attempt is to criminalise as Jew-hatred the well-argued identification of Israel as a racist and usurpatory state.

In the US as well, the [Anti-Semitism Awareness Act](#) passed the Senate unanimously on 1 December 2016. The Act's Section 3 defines antisemitism by reference to the US State Department's [Fact Sheet](#) of 8 June 2010, which in turn, you guessed it, adopts as its definition of antisemitism the IHRA definition. Under the Fact Sheet's heading "What is Anti-Semitism Relative to Israel?" we find our old chestnut: "Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, and denying Israel the right to exist." Don't forget, antisemitism is a violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The IHRA definition has, to be sure, recently been rejected in an essay in the [London Review of Books](#) and by a [legal opinion](#) refuting the definition's allegation that "claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour" is antisemitic: "Unless such a claim was informed by hatred to Jews, it would not be antisemitic to assert that as Israel defines itself as a Jewish state and thereby by race, and that because non-Jewish Israelis and non-Jews under its jurisdiction are discriminated against, the State of Israel is currently a racist endeavour." To date, fortunately, the Macrons and Freedlands do not openly assert that racist states have a right to exist.

In light of such refutations of the definition, [a bill](#) was unanimously passed by the U.S. House of Representatives on 17 May 2017 seeking implicitly to unite all concerned behind the IHRA's absurd definition.

My point about the definition's basic fallacy is not new. Already forty-two years ago Palestinian liberationist Shafiq al-Hout gave a lecture in Ottawa soon after the General Assembly had passed its resolution condemning Zionism as racist: "There was an intense discussion after my speech, with one rabbi asking: 'You have talked about the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, but don't the people of Israel also have the right to live by themselves in their own state?' I answered: 'Yes, they do – as long as it is on land that legitimately belongs to them, and not over land that they have annexed.' He then metaphorically cut his own throat by saying: 'But that means less than 10 percent of the land.' I smiled, as I fine-tuned his answer: 'Yes, 6.4 percent, to be precise.'" (Al-Hout, *My Life in the PLO*, p 136)

### ***Clear language***

I'm suggesting it is a good defensive argument to explain that denying Israel in no way implies denying the Jewish people's right to self-determination. Israel is a particular way in which (some) Jews can self-determine, and it is of necessity in a particular place, Palestine. There might be other places, and other ways of self-determining that do not

require murder, dispossession and humiliation of another 'self'. However, how and where the real Israel was 'done', and is still done, is immoral.

However, such defensive work is necessary only because Zionism has succeeded in setting the agenda of the debate. It has started with the Jewish, rather than the Palestinian, experience, and ridden on Western sympathy for persecuted Jews, enabling libelous accusations of antisemitism to seem legitimate. Anti-Zionists end up in the dock.

In reality, though, the burden of proof is on the person who accuses another person of something as horrible as racism. Supporters of all the rights of all the Palestinians are innocent until proven guilty. Proof of guilt requires demonstration of a *necessary* connection between wanting the removal of the state of Israel in favour of a Palestinian state comprised of all Palestinians, and ill-will towards Jews as Jews. This necessary connection cannot of course be found because it is not there.

I think we should simply say that when we are talking about who should rule the land of Palestine, we are first and foremost talking about just that – not about Jews, or Moslems, or Christians. Yes, it was Zionism which entered the picture through British power, uninvited, but it could have been anybody of any ethnicity. On the other hand it wasn't just anybody who got expelled and degraded, but by necessity the Palestinians who were living there.

In other words, I think we should shift the focus onto the rights of Palestinians. The end of the state presently occupying (all of) Palestine is not the point. It is only a consequence of justice. The entire argument which leads to a Palestinian successor state to Israel can and should be made without having to mention the specific ethnicity or religion by which Israel defines itself. If justice for Palestine leaves no choice but rejecting Israel, so be it. It has nothing to do with Israel's being a *Jewish* state.

It might be a blessing in disguise that the Zionists have gone out on such an illogical limb, because it opens space for re-framing the debate from negative to positive: What? Anti-Jewishness? We only want to redress injustices to the population of a colonised country. We are looking for a state to function in a de-partitioned Palestinian homeland which achieves redress. There is no room for any state entity not chosen by the colonised and expelled, whatever its ethno-religious self-definition.

Macron's statements to Netanyahu with which this article began have drawn a [reply](#) from Israeli writer Shlomo Sand, who balks when Macron says that "Anti-Zionism... is the reinvented form of anti-Semitism." After first pointing out that Zionism is not Judaism and that many Jews were and are anti-Zionists, he fingers the ethical problem, namely the fact of the overwhelming anti-Zionist majority of indigenous Palestinians, and incisively wonders of Macron "if [he] seriously expect[s] of the Palestinians that they should not be anti-Zionists!" He says of himself, not as an anti-Semite, but "as a democrat and a republican... I cannot support a Jewish State."

There is no need to beat around the bush any longer over Israel's 'right to exist'. Anti-Zionism is not just criticism of this or that Israeli policy but of the very idea of an ethno-religious state in violation of the wishes of Palestine's rightful citizenry. It is a no-brainer that the Zionist state should give way to a democracy in Palestine. Yet many supporters of Palestinian rights often fudge this issue, claiming that a state in Palestine that is somehow 'Jewish' is somehow tolerable.

This includes supporters of the two-state solution such as Barack Obama or Jeremy Corbyn, a Zionist solution tautologically, because one of the two advocated states is, alas, an intruded Jewish state in Palestine. But there is no reason to fear charges of racism when rejecting Israel. That rejection follows logically from the positive rights of the Palestinians, absent all connection to the antisemitic type of racism.

We can thus confidently dissociate anti-Zionism from antisemitism. To do this we need only stress that what must be corrected – the usurpation of Palestine, against the will of the people of Palestine – has nothing to do necessarily with Israel's Jewishness, only with its colonialism and racism. But we can go one better by retaining a Palestinian orientation. That is, the whole discussion is first and foremost a question of justice for the dispossessed, from which the illegitimacy of Israel simply follows. It is a question of Palestine, not of Israel.