

Hating Jews and Anti-Semitism



ANTI-SEMITISM lingers on the left in an unexamined hatred of Zionism, and in widespread opposition to the existence of the Jewish state.

There are also stagnant pools of traditional anti-Semitism puddled throughout the left, which never quite evaporate. They are regularly topped up by socialist suggestions that Jews make use of the holocaust to prevent or deflect criticism of Israel, that Jews sustain a powerful lobby staffed by their rich and influential co-religionists.

This idea: that the Jews hide behind victimhood in order to promote, often surreptitiously, their own narrow Zionist interests, certainly form part of an easily recognised anti-Semitic trope, which is often reinforced by the idea that Jewish capitalists, bankers and the like, play a prominent role in lobbying, behind closed doors, for Jewish and Israeli interests.

Such ideas are undoubtedly common on the left and are actively promoted by prominent figures like Ken Livingstone, George Galloway, and many others. Certainly, 'Jewish Lobby' is an epithet to conjure with along with 'Zionist', a political trend said to be so

reactionary that its leaders flirted with the Nazis in the 'thirties concerning the removal of Jews from Europe.

So, left wing attitudes towards Zionism, inescapably feeds implicit anti-Semitism on the left, because the distinction between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, irately insisted upon by most socialists, is never entirely convincing. No amount of "awareness training" by Momentum, or special conferences canvassed for by Lord Michael Martin are going to solve anti-Semitism in the Labour Party because discrimination against Jews is built into the political assumptions of most modern socialists.

The reason for this is to be found in the blanket rejection of Jewish nationalism. Pakistanis, Kurds, Catalans, Scots, and Venezuelans, can be nationalists, can found states, fight for statehood, and defend their states, but Jews must not, because Jewish nationalism unlike most other nationalisms is simply beyond the pale. From most socialist perspectives nationalism is regrettable, a necessary evil, or a legitimate means of fighting against national oppression, except when it comes to Jews. Jews, alone amongst all the peoples on the planet should not have founded a nationalist movement; they should not have created a state.

It is true, of course, that in common with states like, Turkey, Pakistan, or post-war Czechoslovakia and Poland, Israel was founded upon the removal or expulsion of a large number of its territory's former inhabitants. But unlike the systematic killing or expulsion of millions of ethnic Germans, Greeks, Armenians, and Hindus, from their ancestral homes, within broadly the same historical period, the expulsion of Palestinians was, and remains for many people on the left, a unique and unparalleled Zionist crime,

The Jewish state gradually came into existence – commencing with the first election of the Assembly of Representatives and of the Jewish National Council in Jaffa in 1920. The following years were marked by Arab riots and the wholesale killing of Jews, by struggles between Arab notables and the British, and

by guerrilla war between the British and the Jews, culminating finally in the proclamation of Israel's independence in May 1948. The announcement of Israel's foundation was preceded by the massacre of some 600 Palestinians at Deir Yassin by Jewish militia on April 9, 1948, and the subsequent displacement in the war between Israel and a coalition of Arab states of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians before Israel's decisive victory in July 1949.

Now, according to many on the left this foundational or 'original' crime of the Jewish state can only be rectified by the wholesale return of the Palestinians expelled in the war and mayhem of 1948 – and their millions of descendants – to what is now Israel.

Palestine solidarity campaigners, and many others on the left, call for this 'right of return' in the full knowledge that such a move would inevitably result in the dissolution of Israel and of Jewish statehood. There is, of course, much talk about the foundation of "a single state" in which all – Palestinian Arabs and Jewish Israelis – could live harmoniously together. But this is merely a pipedream canvassed on the left in order to conceal the explicitly anti-Jewish policies and sentiment of Hamas, Hezbollah, and all those who call for the liquidation of the Jewish state.

It is also usual on the left for advocates of Palestinian rights to rail against the specific policies and practices of the state of Israel, regarding the settlement and occupation of the West Bank. Much use is made of the "disproportionate force" in suppressing Palestinian attacks upon the territory and sovereignty of Israel, like the recent killing of 15 Palestinians and the injuring of hundreds more by Israel Defence Force soldiers during Hamas-organised attacks upon the country's border with Gaza.

It is this standpoint that lies at the heart of the left's implicit anti-Semitism, because it is this posture that always slips effortlessly into challenging the legitimacy of Jewish nationalism and of the Zionist project in its entirety. It results in the notion, widespread on the left,

that Jewish nationalism is uniquely vile and reprehensible, and alone among all the nationalisms of the world is the one whose condemnation must occupy pride of place in socialist rejection of colonialism and imperialism. Israel is, so the argument goes, an apartheid state, one committed for all time to the oppression of Palestinian Arabs, and as such only its liquidation will do. As the slogan says, “From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free.”

To criticise the policies and conduct of Israel’s government is of course perfectly reasonable. Yet to challenge the existence of the Jewish state, or to demand its dissolution is inescapably anti-Semitic. It is anti-Semitic to demand the “right of return” of all Palestinians and their descendants, because this would destroy the Jewish state.

If the left restricted itself to attacks upon the policies and actions of Likud, Tkuma, or Yisrael Beiteinu, it would be entirely reasonable – it goes without saying that it is necessary for socialists to attack the reactionary, and at times, the racist and oppressive policies of Israel’s right wing political parties and governments, particularly with regard to the occupation of the West Bank since the war of 1967. However, people on the left are rarely detained by the need for precision – they invariably prefer simply to attack Jewish nationalism and the existence of the Jewish state.

For many on the left, Zionism is a colonial enterprise, backed by imperialist powers like Britain and the United States, not merely to deprive the Palestinian people of their homeland, but as a malign outpost planted in the heart of the Middle East in order to disrupt and undermine Arab and Iranian struggles against imperialism.

The broad left’s desire to depict the Zionist enterprise as merely another European colonial venture which aimed at the dispossession and oppression of a ‘native population’ amounts, if not to a denial of the holocaust, then to a desire to remove it from the issues surrounding the birth of Jewish

nationalism or the foundation of the Jewish state in British Mandate Palestine.

Zionism arose in the late nineteenth century as most of Europe's Jews found themselves jammed up against the emerging nationalism of Hungarians, Romanians, Latvians, Estonians, Lithuanians – and most sharply – stranded amidst the bitter rivalries, which marked the struggle between Ukrainian and Polish nationalists. This together with the savage anti-Semitism of Tsar Nicolas II and the anti-Jewish traditions of his empire, found millions of Jews in the territories that now form the three Baltic states, and also Poland, Russia, and Ukraine, in an unsustainable situation.

Jews were no strangers to pogroms and periodic outbreaks of murderous violence, but in the opening years of the twentieth century with revolutionary upheaval in Russia and the centrifugal forces at work in the Hapsburg Empire of Austria-Hungary, outbursts of anti-Jewish violence came thick and fast and were marked by increasingly ferocious violence.

Different responses emerged within Jewish communities, running from the renewed isolationism of ultra-orthodoxy and religious particularism of one kind or another, to integrationist arguments of a broadly conservative kind, or even to radical socialist and communist solutions to anti-Semitism. This was the context in which, Jewish nationalism in the form of Zionism became increasingly persuasive.

Things came to a head with the outbreak of the world war in 1914 – it was then that it began to be 'normal' for Jews to be murdered, robbed and raped with impunity. The to-and-fro between the armies of Russia and Austria-Hungary across Eastern Galicia resulted in pogroms of unprecedented violence, which were complicated and intensified by the virulent anti-Semitism of Polish and Ukrainian nationalism popular amongst both the peasantry and in intellectual circles in towns and cities throughout the region.

With the Wehrmacht's attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 the systematic murder of 1.5m Jews – the

entire Jewish population of numerous towns and cities – was initiated by local police formations in association with German paramilitaries. These mass shootings were accomplished with comparative ease because the killing grounds of the holocaust in Poland, the Baltic States and Ukraine had been well prepared by the anti-Semitic violence endemic in nationalist and Catholic circles between the wars. In this sense we can understand the holocaust, in which a further 4.5m Jews were starved or gassed to death, occurred over a broader historical period than that of 1941-5.

It was the widespread and popular character of anti-Semitism in Central and Eastern Europe which rose to a lethal crescendo during the nineteen forties that resulted in recourse to Zionism and the mass emigration of Jews to Mandate Palestine – underpinned and made unavoidable during the thirties and forties by the refusal of the United States, Britain and her Dominions, to admit more than a tiny fraction of Jewish refugees.

Zionism – Jewish nationalism – and the state of Israel are undeniably the product of this tragic history – and those who seek other explanations for the establishment of Israel are without doubt anti-Semites.

The maintenance of the permanent refugee status of millions of Palestinians for seventy years by the refusal of Israel's Arab neighbours to grant citizenship to displaced Palestinians, and the refusal of Palestinian organisations to seek or accept citizenship of neighbouring Arab states, has ensured the maintenance of millions of stateless refugees who demand 'the right of return' to the home towns and villages of their grandparents and great grandparents in what is now Israel.

It is the left's refusal to accept the result of the Israel-Arab War of 1947-9 by supporting Palestinian demands for the restoration of the *status quo ante* that amounts to calls for the dissolution of the Jewish state. It is this blanket anti-Zionism which is implicitly anti-Semitic because the left singles out Jewish nationalism in particular for condemnation, while the

depredations of the state against national minorities in Pakistan, India, Myanmar, China, Turkey, Russia, Sri Lanka, and many others, passes most socialists by almost without comment. It is this peculiar concentration upon the Jewish state, and upon left-wing calls for its dissolution, which inevitably gives rise to charges of anti-Semitism.

There can be no reason at all to believe that Jeremy Corbyn personally hates Jews or believes in civil or cultural discrimination against Jews, and I'm sure that this goes for most people on the left. Yet allegations of anti-Semitism will continue to stick until socialists can come up with ideas and solutions that both accept the legitimacy of the Jewish state, and guarantee its security. Without this, the left's enthusiasm for 'Palestinian solidarity' and support for Hamas and Hezbollah will continue to reinforce the idea that most socialist opinion is, as a matter of course, anti-Jewish.