Antisemitism and Israel: The real and the not real in supporting Palestinian rights

By Dr. Lisa Schirch

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Is it antisemitic to support Palestinians, to talk about the occupation of the West Bank, the siege in Gaza, or to criticize Israeli policies? No. In principle, fair criticism reflects a desire to change the status quo in a way that could enable a just peace for both Jews and Palestinians.

But there is real antisemitism in the pro-Palestinian movement, especially among Western peace movements and Christian peace activists. Antisemitism is hostility to, prejudice, or discrimination against Jews. Like racism, it is so deeply engrained in Western thinking that people may be blind to seeing it.

Some in the Israeli government consider any and all criticism of Israeli policy to be antisemitic. The Israeli government cuts funding to any state-funded organization that mentions or acknowledges the Nakba, the term Palestinians use to describe the loss of their homes and villages in 1948. American Rabbis concerned about occupation have been refused entry to Israel. Palestinian activists are right in saying that the Israeli government and some of its public brands any criticism of Israel and of Gaza and the West Bank as antisemitic. The Israeli government takes advantage of antisemitic rhetoric in support of Palestinians to silence those who critique its policies. Israel as a state should be held to the same standards as any other state.

There are three ways that criticism of Israel becomes antisemitic: People delegitimize the rights of Jewish people as a nation entitled to its own state, people demonize Jews and use old antisemitic themes, and people use double standards to judge Israel by a set of standards different than they judge other countries. Each of these three forms of antisemitism is present in Western pro-Palestinian peace movements.

Antisemitism in the struggle for Palestinian rights is real and it is wrong. Pro-Palestinian activists in the West harness legitimate critique of Israeli policies onto a long pattern of blaming and harming Jews.

Activism tinged with antisemitism is an obstacle to Palestinian rights. Antisemitic rhetoric does not aid the liberation of Palestinians. Antisemitism makes it more difficult for most Jewish people to join pro-Palestinian movements and to find a place for legitimate criticism of Israeli policies. Jews that might join the cause for Palestinian rights start reading pro-Palestinian websites and literature and see it full of antisemitism. Building a larger social movement for a just peace in Israel and Palestine is a necessary element to success.

Things that are overstated are easier to deny. Israeli charges of antisemitism are overstated, and thus easier to deny. But pro-Palestinian protestors charges against Israel are also overstated. Israel is not like Syria or some of the other countries in the region that have far more oppressive policies. Israel is not carrying out a genocide. These absurd charges overstate the case against Israeli policies and make it easier for more people to dismiss legitimate grievances.
This article outlines the difference between fair critique of Israeli policies and antisemitism that demonizes, delegitimizes, and uses a double standard in judging Israeli policies.

This article is directed at the Western peace movement, particularly Christian groups that come and only or mostly listen to Palestinians. As a Christian, I feel the responsibility to speak out to those who are “my people.”

I am a Christian married to a Jew and have worked for most of my life to make sure the Jewish call for “never again” after the Holocaust would be applied to everyone in the world. I’ve supported Palestinian human rights for several decades. I have written numerous articles to criticize Israeli policies and advocate for a just solution in Israel and Palestine.

After months of listening to diverse voices in both Israeli and Palestinian communities, here are twelve commitments to combat antisemitism in any conversation about Israel and Palestine.

1. **Listen to multiple voices on all sides.**

Many people who come to Israel and Palestine listen to only one side. Some visit Israel and talk only with Jewish people. These visitors will be amazed at the beauty and accomplishments of Israel, the skyscrapers in Tel Aviv, the culture and democratic progress of Israeli society. They will learn of Israeli victories in the 1948 and 1967 wars against Arabs who were set to destroy them. They will learn nothing of Palestinian history and will ignore the plight of Palestinian people today.

Others will visit Palestinian towns and talk mostly with Palestinian people. These visitors will be amazed at the beauty of Palestinian culture, they will connect with the Biblical stories that took place in the West Bank, and they will hear stories of resilience. They will also hear the stories of how Israeli tanks demolish Palestinian homes, how the Jewish National Fund refuses to mark where Palestinian villages were destroyed to make way for Israeli National Parks, and how Israeli policies aim to push Palestinians off their land. They might even hear about Gaza, which suffers in a completely different magnitude than the West Bank. They will hear nothing from mainstream Jewish people living in Israel, they will not meet Jewish settlers living in the West Bank, they will learn nothing about the history of Christian anti-Semitism or its role in pushing Jews out of Europe, and nothing about how other Arab countries persecute Palestinians and their own citizens.

In our three months of leading a study abroad program in Israel and Palestine, we listened to dozens of different Palestinian narratives, and dozens of Jewish Israeli narratives, including extended conversations (more than an hour) with over a dozen Jewish people living in what they call Judea and Samaria and the rest of the world calls the West Bank. There are narratives that are not heard or understood by most of the world. We heard things we knew to be false from all sides. But mostly, we encountered genuine people – both Jews and Palestinians – who have a perspective that makes sense and is right within their own worldview. There is legitimacy on all sides. And that legitimacy is what makes this a heart-wrenching place to visit or live.

Supporters of Palestinians who have not listened to diverse Israeli voices will argue the situation on the ground is not “balanced” and therefore it is inappropriate to take an approach that listens closely to voices on all sides of the conflict here. Given Israel’s military might in comparison to that of Palestinian’s, they argue that the powerless need to be heard. I agree that Palestinians should be heard. But a power analysis of the situation is more complicated than they suggest.
And recognizing Israeli power over Palestinians still does not justify a lack of attention to Israeli narratives and worldviews.

While it is important to listen to Palestinians, Palestinians have a legitimate right to see the situation only from their own point of view. Outsiders have a different responsibility. Christian peace activists aim to follow Jesus’ call to love others. Loving Palestinians and Jews in Israel and Palestine requires listening and putting yourself in the shoes of others. Anyone who thinks that a “tough love” of Israel requires only criticism and no listening or empathy may be missing the entire point of Jesus’ teaching. The dehumanizing language used to discuss Israel comes in large part because many peace activists have little contact or exposure to Israelis. Saying only negative things about Israel is not a way of illustrating love for Palestinians. And it continues in a long tradition of antisemitism.

*Western activists should not assume they understand the situation in Israel and Palestine unless and until they spend extensive time listening and learning from diverse Israelis and Palestinians.*

2. **Be careful with the use of maps.**

Peace activists often use the map below to illustrate the loss of Palestinian land since 1946. When Israelis see this map, they see several things: 1) there is no acknowledgement that Zionist Jews had begun purchasing land from the Ottoman Empire, including large portions of the West Bank, prior to 1948, and 2) In some versions of this map, the word “Israel” does not even appear, and there is no acknowledgement of any land at all being set aside for the state of Israel. Israelis see the goal of this map as delegitimizing and erasing the state of Israel.

![Palestinian Loss of Land 1946-2010](image-url)

Jewish speakers who talked to our group used a different map of the wider region. Most Jews see themselves as the minority in a much larger Arab and Muslim region that is hostile to them. They
see a world that delegitimizes their right to have a state, delegitimizes their fear, and delegitimizes their connection to the land of Israel. Many Israelis believe that the true desire of Palestinians and other Arabs is to completely remove Jewish people living here.

There are 8 million people living in Israel, including 6 million Jews and 2 million Palestinian Arabs. There are 4.5 million Palestinians living in the West Bank. In comparison, there are 400 million Arabs in the Middle East. While Palestinians may be the minority within Israel and Palestine, Jewish Israelis are a much smaller minority within the wider region.

There are 1.8 billion Muslims in the world. There are 2.2 billion Christians living in the world. There are 12-14 million Jews living in the world.

There are 49 Muslim majority countries. There are about 100 Christian majority countries. There is only 1 Jewish majority country in the world: Israel.

Muslims and Christians used military power to conquer Asia, North and South America and Africa. Jews want only one, relatively small piece of land.

*Instead of showing only the shrinking map of Palestinian land, it is also important to show the size of Israel in relation to the Muslim countries that surround it and the wider view of Israel as the only Jewish country in a world full of Christian and Muslim-majority countries.*

3. **Be careful with words used to describe what is happening to Palestinians.**

Peace activists use words like “apartheid” and “genocide” to describe Israeli policy against Palestinians. These words have real definitions that don’t actually match the situation in Israel and Palestine. Israel has a distinctly different policy toward Palestinians in Gaza, those in the West Bank, and those living as Israeli citizens inside the state. Arab Palestinians living inside the state of Israel may be treated as second-class citizens, but it is not the same type of legal separation and persecution that Black South Africans experienced. Palestinians in the West Bank are being forcibly removed from their land and pressured to leave. But this is not genocide. The Israeli blockade of Gaza is unlike any Western countries policy toward its neighbors, but it is very similar to Saudi Arabia’s policy in Yemen. Palestinians experience repression, discrimination, and military occupation. It is important to make fair comparisons.
Instead of exaggerating and simplifying Israeli policy towards Palestinians, use words that accurately describe policies. Avoid hyperbole in describing what is happening to Palestinians. Instead use accurate and specific words to describe the actual policies that harm Palestinians.

4. Be careful in using the David vs Goliath analogy.

Both Israelis and Palestinians identify as David against Goliath. Palestinians and their supporters frame issues here in terms of the “Israeli-Palestinian conflict.” They see Palestinians as the underdog David; relatively weak against the Goliath of the Israeli state forces.

Israelis use a different frame; the “Arab-Israeli conflict.” Israelis view themselves as David standing up to the Goliath of the Arab world around them.

Western peace activists dismiss Israel’s security concerns as overblown given their military strength. But this oversimplifies the situation. Israelis have a legitimate right to see themselves as a small minority holding a small tract of land in this region. While Israeli forces have overwhelming military power against internal threats from Palestinians, Israeli forces do not have the same military superiority in the regional context.

While traveling from Haifa to the Golan Heights to Eilat, we could see Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon without binoculars. This is a very small country in a very large, and powerful region.

Instead of only viewing the situation from the point of view of Palestinians and speaking of the “Israeli-Palestinian” conflict, recognize the minority status of Israel in the Arab region that surrounds it and also recognize the Israeli point of view on the “Arab-Israeli” conflict.

5. Recognize Jewish and Palestinian need for safety.

Pro-Palestinian activists are right to work for human rights, freedom and dignity for Palestinians. But too often, these activists ignore the Jewish right to safety or the history of persecution of Jews. While I’ve never heard a Palestinian supporter question the reality of the holocaust, I have heard people question the Jewish need to create their own state, what is now Israel. Some suggest Jewish people seeking safety could have gone to the US or stayed in Europe instead of coming to Israel. They insist that the main reason Jews came to then British Mandate for Palestine was a colonial motivation. This is factually untrue and requires ignoring centuries of European persecution of Jewish people.

When peace activists critique the very real experience of the persecution of Jewish people and their fear in both Europe and other Arab countries, this is antisemitic. When peace activists dismiss the very real belief that Jews have been living in exile for thousands of years and wanted to come back to this land, this is antisemitic.

We met the families of Jews and Palestinians who have lost their children. These families feel the same pain. Some peace activists express empathy with and share the stories of Palestinian suffering, including the regular attacks on Palestinian civilians, especially deadly attacks on kids throwing rocks at Israeli forces.

But peace activists are often quiet when Palestinians attack the children of Israeli settlers. Western activists need to acknowledge both Jewish and Palestinian right to safety.

6. Recognize trauma on all sides, including Jewish refugees from Arab countries in addition to Palestinian refugees.
Many Western activists cite the 700,000 Arab Palestinian refugees created in the 1948 war. Few recognize or mention the approximately 850,000 Jewish refugees who were forced to leave their homes, villages and businesses in Arab countries to came to Israel following the 1948 war. Few people understand that Hitler was building concentration camps in Arab countries to carry out the holocaust. While many Arabs helped their Jewish neighbors living in these countries, approximately the same number of Jewish refugees from Arab countries lost their homes as Palestinians.

Some peace activists make it seem like the entire Zionist project to build a state of Israel is only and completely about white colonialism from European Jews. They deny that Jewish people were exiled from what is now Israel over the last three thousand years, and that many prayed to return every single day, as evidenced by Jewish prayers and writings.

Like the Ashkenazi or European Jews, the Mizrahi or “Arab” Jews came to Israel looking for safety and return. Many of the people living in Israel and Palestine today had the experience of losing all of their property and fearing for their lives, both Jews and local Arabs. Our compassion should be for the immense trauma on all sides here. When we don’t acknowledge that trauma on all sides, or the complexity of loss, we erase the pain and dehumanize people.

Western peace activists express sympathy to the Palestinian Nakba, the war in which Palestinians lost their homes and villages in 1948. At the same time, there is an assumption that Jews should somehow “get over” the holocaust, the pogroms, the Inquisition, and the centuries of persecution.

Why is Palestinian memory of loss of homes in 1948 more important than Jewish memory of loss of home and life? These events were both terrible. How can anyone expect either Jews or Palestinians to just “get over” these traumas? This is a double standard.

Western activists should acknowledge the loss and trauma of Arab Palestinians and Jews from both European and Arab countries and beyond.

7. Recognize Jewish and Palestinian connection with the land and nationality.

Pro-Palestinian activists are right to acknowledge Palestinian ties to the land. Some of the Israelis we met questioned whether there were any Arabs living in the region and claim there were very few local Arabs living in British Mandate for Palestine. This is untrue.

But many pro-Palestinian activists mirror this assertion by questioning the validity of Jewish ties to the land. Both sides delegitimize the other by claiming the other’s ties to the land are “false” or “made up.”

Some Christian theologians participate in erasing Jewish ties to the land with supersessionist theology which asserts that the so called “New” Testament replaces the so-called “Old” Testament, and that Christians “superseded” the Jews in being the “chosen people” with a covenant with God. These are antisemitic beliefs. Some pro-Palestinian activists delegitimize Jewish connection to the land with antisemitic tropes long used in Christianity to justify forced conversions, torture, expulsion of Jews from their homes, and the holocaust.

Likewise, many Western activists acknowledge the Palestinian nationalist desire for a state. Yet they hold back on formal recognition of the state of Israel or acknowledging the desire for a Jewish state.

Western activists should acknowledge that both Jews and Palestinians have legitimate ties to the land and claims to statehood.
8. Recognize positive aspects of both Israeli and Palestinian society.

Western peace groups often take a monolithic negative attitude toward Israel. They fail to see any positive aspects of Israeli society. They describe everything Israel does as bad or aimed at manipulation of public opinion. This demonization of everything that Israel does is wrong.

Yes, Israeli policy treats Arab citizens as second-class citizens, and this is wrong. Israeli government is taking land from Palestinians, and this must be addressed. But it is wrong to ignore positive aspects of Israeli society, or to suggest that all the good aspects are simply ways of manipulating public opinion to “wash” over and cover up the treatment of Palestinians.

Israel has a strong democratic system for the Jewish citizens within its 1967 borders. Unlike many other Western democracies, Israel sends out voting registration cards automatically to all Arab and Jewish citizens. This reflects the same values as the kibbutz movement that aimed at social equality. Yes, it is true that Israel’s democracy does not apply to the West Bank and Gaza. Still, there are a number of ways in which Israel’s political system is fairer than the American system.

Israel requires all new houses to have solar hot water heaters and the green movement here is stronger than in most other countries I have visited. Yet peace activists dismiss this as “green washing” the occupation. This is just absurd. There is a movement toward renewable energy throughout the Middle East region because there is immense solar potential and water shortage. Having met many Israelis working in the environmental movement, they are not simply a “front” to cover over treatment of Palestinians. This is a ridiculous and unfair critique.

The monotone if criticism of Israel is antisemitic because Western activists don’t do that for any other country. While activists push to change Israel’s policies toward Palestinians and create a just solution, activists should not ignore and demean every other aspect of Israeli society.

US foreign policy is responsible for far worse policies that affect the lives of far more people. But few people view the US in such a totality of negativity. American music and movies, technology, and other vibrant aspects of American life can be enjoyed and praised, even while criticizing its public and foreign policy.

*Western activists should acknowledge the beauty and depth in both Israeli and Palestinian culture and society.*

9. Don’t ignore the abuses and failures of Palestinian leaders.

Western peace activists are right to criticize the impact of the security wall on the Palestinian economy, the discrimination of Israeli refusal to issue permits for building homes on Palestinian or Bedouin land, and the wrongness of collective punishment through Palestinian home demolitions.

But western activists are strangely silent on the Palestinian Authority’s own abuses. The Palestinian Authority also uses repression on those who speak out against its corruption. And the PLO has made many mistakes in negotiating with Israelis. Palestinian leaders also bear responsibility – and they have turned down offers for statehood time and again.

*The Palestinian Authority gives out money to the families of Palestinians who kill Israeli citizens.* Any attack anywhere on civilians is morally wrong. When disempowered groups use violence, it almost always fails to win freedom and causes more repression. *The data is very
clear that nonviolent civil resistance is far superior (quicker and more effective) than a violent struggle for freedom.

Where is the condemnation for this corruption and violence?

*Western activists should also pressure Palestinian leaders to negotiate in good faith, to end corruption, and to withdraw incentives for terrorism.*

**10. Be proportional in criticism**

Western peace activists focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and criticize Israel’s policies out of proportion to other conflicts and other state’s oppressive policies.

The entire death toll of Israelis and Palestinians who have died over the last hundred years is less than 200,000. Next door in Syria, half a million people have died in less than ten years and there are 12 million Syrian refugees. This absolutely dwarfs the death toll in Israel and Palestine. In neighboring Saudi Arabia, another important US ally, nearly 200 people face public execution each year. Saudi Arabia is waging a brutal war in Yemen. A Yemeni child dies of starvation every ten minutes because of the Saudi blockade of aid.

In Lebanon, Palestinians cannot work, live in far worse poverty than they do in Israel or Palestine, and cannot travel. Why is there no criticism of the treatment of Palestinians in other countries?

Why are there hundreds of Western campus peace groups organizing around Palestinian human rights, when there are few if any mass university-based efforts to lobby the US against its ties to Saudi Arabia? Where is the campus outrage against the weapons industry that is profiting from the Sunni-Shia wars? Why do we express so much concern for Palestinians when far more Muslims are suffering far more in other places? If we care about the life of Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims, we need to speak out on their behalf in many other places. This is a double standard. It singles out Israel for criticism while ignoring the behavior of other countries.

*Efforts to support Palestinians should be made in proportion to the rights of other groups suffering in other places and the severity of the conflict. Efforts to protect Palestinians and other Muslims and Christians in the Middle East should be made in a way that is fair to the various threats they face from countries other than Israel.*

**11. Recognize the hypocrisy of Western Christian criticism of Israel.**

When American activist groups tell the story of Israel and Palestine, they often leave out any mention of the holocaust, the pogroms, the Inquisition or other aspects of the last two thousand years of persecution against Jews. Activists who fail to acknowledge this history are in effect denying that this history of persecution has any relevance to the establishment of the State of Israel and the desire of Jews for a state where they control the security forces.

Too many Western Christians criticize Israel for human rights violations or take a purely pro-Palestinian point of view without any mention of the context in which Jews established the state of Israel. This is antisemitic because it denies the relevance of the history of Christian persecution of Jews.

With the Roman destruction of the Jewish Second Temple in 70CE, early Christians writing the New Testament wanted to distance themselves from Judaism. They also wanted to create a new religion that would invite Gentiles (non-Jews) to follow Jesus without following the Jewish laws.
that Jesus himself followed. Some early Christians downplayed the fact that Jesus and his apostles were all Jewish and followed Jewish law. But Jesus was a Jewish rabbi who echoed the teachings of previous Jewish prophets. Jesus never renounced Judaism or the laws in the Torah.

Christian anti-Semitism became enshrined in the church. The Nazis based their racial laws against Jews on *Christian canonical law*. While Hitler himself was secular, the architects of the holocaust depended upon Christian anti-Semitism to carry out the holocaust. Many (most?) Christians today do not understand or recognize their history of anti-Semitism.

Many Palestinians assert that they are paying for cost for Western Christian persecution of Jews. But Christians in the West shrug their shoulders, and sometimes assert that criticism of Israel should have nothing to do with past Christian behavior. So these Christians and Western activists dismiss their own legacy of oppression and instead focus only on Israeli policy. That type of double standard is antisemitic.

*Western peace activists should recognize their own responsibility for setting in motion the antisemitic forces that fueled the Zionist movement that resulted in the State of Israel.*

**12. Don’t compare harm to Palestinians with the death of Jesus.**

Over the last 1700 years, Christians have blamed Jews for killing Jesus. Hitler went to the Passion Play in Oberammergau, Germany precisely because it gave him more theological ammunition for his plans for death factories. When people portray Palestinians as Jesus, they are intentionally or unintentionally playing off this very old form of antisemitism.

One popular pro-Palestinian conference attended by Western Christian peace activists is called “Christ at the Checkpoint.” The conference aims to give a voice to Palestinian Christians. This, of course, is absolutely valid and necessary. However, the title of the conference seems to equate Palestinians with Jesus. Programs that empathize only or even mostly with Palestinian suffering without giving adequate attention to Jewish history and points of view make it seem as if Christians again are ignoring Jewish suffering and putting all the blame on Palestinians. While the death toll is imbalanced here, we have met with many Jewish Israelis who have lost family and friends to terrorism. Does the suffering of the family of the Jewish boy who is kidnapped, tortured and killed by Palestinians not matter? Drawing on these old antisemitic themes creates an obstacle to justice and reconciliation.

**In Sum**

Western activists will contribute more to a just peace in Israel and Palestine if they work to rid themselves of antisemitic themes in their efforts. By addressing the twelve points identified in this article, Western activists might achieve the following:

- Improve the morality of Western Christianity and secular humanism by addressing the antisemitism long embedded in these belief systems.

- Build a larger movement supporting Palestinian human rights that includes Jewish people that are currently repulsed by the antisemitic themes embedded in the movement.

- Clarify the strategic vision of the movement by recognizing the interdependence between Jewish and Palestinian rights and freedoms.