

Anti-Semitism: A Proper Reckoning

Michael de Young

Assessing accusations of anti-Semitism against Corbyn and the Left

The renewed allegations of endemic anti-Semitism within the British Labour Party, and the growth of anti-Semitism in the Western world, coincide with the revelation that the non-Jewish population of greater Israel-Palestine now exceeds the Jewish population. These allegations also coincide with the indefensible murder of Palestinians in Gaza by the Israeli Defense Forces, a situation that has degenerated into a moral depravity that includes the Australian government and some local Australian Zionists. Although this is largely a debate about the situation in the United Kingdom, articles by critics of Jeremy Corbyn were published in the *Guardian Online* in April, and Julie Szego joined the debate in the *Melbourne Age* on 14 April with her piece 'Anti-Semitism Rears Its Ugly Head Once Again'.

Norman Finkelstein has argued that claims of a 'new anti-Semitism' recur whenever Israel is facing a public-relations crisis. Gavin Lewis in a previous issue of *Arena Magazine* ('Anti-Semitism Moral Panics', issue no. 149) and in *Counterpunch* ('McCarthyite Anti-Semitism Smears and Racism at the *Guardian Observer*, March 2017), has examined the opportunism, and even the dishonesty, of elements of this campaign. However, the Left does have an obligation to expose and campaign against anti-Semitism at the same time as exposing and campaigning against Israeli criminality and propaganda. Richard Seymour in *Jacobin* has argued for this position ('Labour's Anti-Semitism Affair', 6 April 2018). But this is not to suggest that any activity or discourse about one can never proceed without the qualification of the other.

The two issues appear to be at odds with each other, but each must be confronted. One of the realities that must be dealt with is that not only are Jewish communities around the world haunted by the Holocaust but many are convinced that Israel has been under a perpetual, continual and imminent existential military threat since its foundation. Although this has been demonstrably false for decades, Zionist propaganda, the history of terrorist activity and the adoption of anti-Semitic tropes by some Palestinian factions and other actors reinforce the narrative.

The sense of siege is amplified by fanciful allegations of media bias against Israel. One example of this is Zionism Victoria's website, with statements like: 'Unfortunately the media has been plagued with bias to the Palestinian cause' and 'Unfortunately, there are a great many examples of media bias about Israel'. The alleged bias in most cases comes down to an objection to the reporting of any inconvenient fact or any statement by a Palestinian advocate. The argu-

ment runs that any alleged suffering of the Palestinians must be balanced by a report on a Jewish victim; any Israeli violence must be balanced by a report of Palestinian violence; any statement by a Palestinian must be accompanied by reference to his or her association with terrorism, or some prior statement advocating violence or anti-Semitism.

This position exhibits a state of denial. If each and every incident of violence and suffering were to be reported, the scale is so heavily weighted towards the Palestinian side that the case for the Israeli side would be diminished, not strengthened. The allegation that anti-Semitic statements or teachings in the territories and Gaza is underreported is similarly deceptive. It may well be true that anti-Semitic statements are not always reported, but violent statements by Israeli politicians and extremist rabbis do not receive any attention whatsoever. The last thing the Zionist movement needs is detailed and accurate reporting of this and other aspects of the conflict.

Anti-Semitism is a reality

There has been an increase in reported anti-Semitic incidents in the United States, the United Kingdom and continental Europe, where there have also been terrorist attacks on Jewish targets. Although some of the organisations compiling these statistics habitually fabricate charges of anti-Semitism against critics of Israel, the statistics are substantial and refer to actual assaults, abuse and vandalism. These anti-Semitic activities accompany an increase in extreme right-wing activity generally, as well as hostility towards Jews among disenfranchised Muslim and Arab youth in Europe. Jewish communities in France and Belgium are living in fear, with Jewish institutions and Jewish schools protected by walls and armed guards.

However, anti-Islamic activity is probably occurring on an even larger scale, including terrorist attacks in Germany. The traditional lunatic and extreme Right finds itself in an ambivalent situation. Israel now

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• 06 2018-07 2018

• N° 154

has the support of some social groups that historically provided the reserve army of anti-Semitism. The most vivid example is the Christian Zionists, heirs to the tradition of Protestant fundamentalist bigotry. Some white supremacists call themselves 'White Zionists'. This contradiction is reflected not only in Trump's base but also in some of his appointments.

Some British Labour MPs have given passionate speeches about anti-Semitic threats against themselves. Luciana Berger, from Liverpool, recounted a history of threats over the years from right-wing groups, leading to criminal charges against four men. She is currently receiving similar abuse, centring on anti-Israel themes. She believes this is coming from the Left, or people within the Labour Party. Other Labour Party figures complain about dead animals sent in the mail and threats of sexual and other violence against them and their families. One woman was called a 'child-killing pig' on social media.

It is not clear how these attacks can be attributed to the Left, let alone Labour Party members. We know that in Australia some right-wing activists have been trolled with rape threats and other abuse—people who regard themselves as left wing are quite capable of this activity. However, traditional anti-Semites will also cling to criticisms of Israel and Zionism as they emerge.

One of the concerns of this group in the British Labour Party is that Jews in the party, in student organisations and even in society generally are being confronted and asked about their attitude towards Israel. Berger says that some of the attacks on her suggest that she is loyal to Israel before Britain. Apart from the larger debate, there have been distressing and acrimonious interpersonal confrontations within the Labour Party, with both sides driven by a sense of indignation. As in continental Europe, the Jewish community in the United Kingdom does believe that there has been an increase in anti-Semitism in recent years.

It is a truism that the Israel lobby conflates criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism, but merely stating this does not take the issue any further. One aim of this lobby is to wedge the Left. It is necessary to both be aware of and educate people about traditional anti-Semitic tropes. There is also a need to expose those anti-Semitic groups that latch onto valid criticisms of Israel and Zionist themes before sliding into the Holocaust denial and variations of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* that one often finds on their websites.

This conflation of criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism presents a number of problems. Both anti-Semites and the Israel lobby can exploit parallels between valid criticisms of

Israel and Zionism and traditional tropes. But the conflation of criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism is disingenuous and may well direct attention away from the most dangerous anti-Semites. The allegation of a left tradition of anti-Semitism is part of this disingenuous approach and characteristic of the campaign being conducted by the Blairites in the British Labour Party and the *Guardian*.

The Left and anti-Semitism?

Philip Spencer's article 'The Shame of Anti-Semitism on the Left has a Long, Malign History' in the *Guardian* of 1 April this year contains a number of historical distortions. Spencer claims that 'the Left' has had a long-term, endemic preoccupation with 'the Jewish question' that goes back a century at least. Let us examine this history.

During the Russian Civil War, the White Russians massacred thousands of Jews in areas they controlled. They received assistance from the United States, Britain and other European powers. There were even some Australian troops sent there. According to Brendan McGeever in *Jacobin* ('The Bolsheviks and Anti-Semitism', 22 June 2017), the Bolsheviks had to confront ingrained anti-Semitism even among the revolutionary working class. In 1918 local cadres were involved in anti-Semitic violence in Ukraine before the Party stepped in.

Spencer's claim that the socialists and communists did not direct attention to Nazi anti-Semitism is spurious. There were always a disproportionate number of Jews in the communist parties, who were well aware of the problem. I only had to search two issues of the magazine *Fight War and Fascism* (dib.nyu.edu)—published by the front group American League Against War and Fascism—both chosen at random, to find relevant material. In the September 1934 issue there was an article by Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein entitled 'Hitler and the Jews'. The other issue, from 1937, had an article about Polish anti-Semitism.

Stalin used anti-Semitic innuendos against Trotsky, Kamev, Zinoviev, Radek and other opponents. After the Second World War there was the notorious 'doctor's plot' and the campaign against 'rootless cosmopolitans'. Vassily Grossman's great historical novel *Life and Fate* shows the level of vulnerability of Jews in Soviet life. However, there is no basis for Spencer's claim that Stalin was about to launch a new genocide before he died.

A crisis arose for Soviet and Polish Jews after the 1967 war, with Warsaw Pact countries committed to the 'Arab side' of the conflict in the Middle East. In 1968, hundreds of people of Jewish background were expelled from the Party, the army, government, and academic positions, accused of Zionism. The position of Soviet Jews became an issue in the Cold War. This ended up being quite fortuitous for Israel, as an influx of Soviet Jews helped preserve a Jewish majority in greater Israel—Palestine, despite the dubious Jewish background of many of these immigrants.

One problem with Spencer's argument is that the contemporary Left does not identify with the Soviet tradition. His repetition of the circuitous argument that criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic is no more than that.

Howard Jacobson

Howard Jacobson is a long-term critic of those who attack Israel, including 'self-hating Jews'. I accept not only that he is genuinely distressed by the extravagant language sometimes employed in this debate but also that some of his criticism may be justified. I also accept that he genuinely believes that he is operating within a framework of liberal values. Many people with these views have a genuine belief that Israel is under a constant existential military threat and their wilful blindness in relation to Israeli breaches of human rights is so entrenched that they are barely, any longer, responsible for it.

Jacobson joined the most recent debate in the *Guardian* with his 'Anti-Semitism: Jews Know what Anti-Semitism Is and What It Isn't: To Invent It Would Be Sacrilege'. In this he struggles to comprehend the

Left's changed attitude to Israel, which arose consequent to an:

illusion from the occupation...this made no sense to me. If the left could have understood the necessity and sung the praises of Zionism once, why did it have to junk it completely now? A thing doesn't all at once become evil because it loses its way.

It is not clear what alleged misdemeanours he would include or exclude from 'loses its way'.

He goes on:

The incantatory repetition of the charge that Jews cry anti-Semitism only in order to subvert criticism of Israel or discredit Corbyn is more than fatuous or lazy, and it is more than painful to those many Jews who own an old allegiance to the Labour party and who are not strangers to criticising Israel.

But he again fails to elucidate the legitimate and illegitimate areas of criticism.

Unfortunately, Jacobson himself provides an example of what may well be seen as the use of charges of anti-Semitism to subvert criticism of Israel. This is in an article in the *Independent* of January 2009, 'Let's See Criticism of Israel for What It Really Is'. This article is a defence of the indefensible: Israel's 2008-09 Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. Jacobson objects to the use of the term 'massacre' instead of 'conflict'. His criticism of extravagant language employed by activists in the United Kingdom to describe Palestinian organisations and the rockets fired from Gaza may be valid, but the sheer disproportion between the resources and casualties on each side speaks for itself.

The aftermath of Operation Cast Lead and the campaign against Justice Goldstone's report on the 2008-09 attack on Gaza is a high point of the misuse of an accusation of anti-Semitism to deflect criticism of Israel.

The Goldstone report

The Goldstone report on the Gaza conflict was published by the United Nations on 25 September 2009. The mission had been led by Richard Goldstone, a former judge of the Constitutional Court of South Africa and prosecutor at the International Criminal Court. The report was over 400 pages long and put the conflict in the context of the occupation and the blockade of Gaza. As well as reaching a conclusion about Israeli actions, the report condemned the Palestinian factions for their oppression of political opponents and rocket fire into Israel.

In regard to Israeli action, the mission concluded: 1883. The Gaza military operations were, according to the Israeli Government, thoroughly and extensively planned. While the Israeli government has sought to portray its actions as essentially a response to rocket attacks in the exercise of its right to self-defence, the Mission considers the plan to have been directed, at least in part, at a different target: the people of Gaza as a whole.

1884. In this respect, the operations were in furtherance of an overall policy of punishing the population of Gaza for its resilience and its apparent support for Hamas, and possibly with the intent of forcing a change in such support.

1889. The repeated failure to distinguish between combatants and civilians appears to the Mission to have been the result of deliberate guidance issued to soldiers, as described by some of them, and not the result of occasional lapses.

The Israeli government and its supporters launched a vicious and mendacious campaign against Richard Goldstone and the report. Goldstone was accused of repeating the medieval 'blood libel' that the Jews carried out blood sacrifices of Christian children. This campaign set out to threaten Goldstone with ostracism from the Jewish community. There were threats to ban him from attending his grandson's bar mitzvah. The campaign also placed unconscionable pressure on Goldstone's family, including a daughter living in Israel.

Goldstone issued a retraction of the report under this pressure. As Finkelstein has pointed out, this vicious campaign has had a broader effect. Human rights organisations that joined in the condemnation and exposure of Operation Cast Lead were reticent to do the same for its 2014 repetition in Operation Protective Edge.

Goldstone would write in the *Washington Post*, on the appropriate date of 1 April 2011, 'If I had known then what I know now, the Goldstone report would have been a different document'. He cited a final UN report chaired by US judge Mary McGowan Davis that found that 'Israel had dedicated resources to investigating over 400 allegations of operational misconduct in Gaza' while 'the de facto authorities (i.e. Hamas) have not conducted any investigations into the launching of rocket and mortar attacks into Israel'.

Goldstone concluded that 'civilians were not intentionally targeted as a matter of policy', largely on the basis that Israel had set up an investigation of the allegations, despite the fact that none of these had yet concluded, while Hamas had not investigated the rocket and mortar attacks.

There are a number of problems with this retraction. The first is that, in any case, some evidence is not rebuttable at large. Here this problem was amplified by the sheer scale of civilian deaths and destruction of civilian resources. Any contrary evidence would have to have been on a significant, if not a commensurate, scale. The available evidence—say of occasions when Hamas operated in proximity to civilians, in crowded Gaza—could not do this. An internet search will show a plethora of reports dated 2011 reporting that Goldstone recanted on the basis of 'new evidence'. There was no 'new evidence', only the claim that Israel was now investigating the claims.

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06 2018-07 2018

Nº 154

FEATURE

Secondly, the word 'targeted' suggests that a specific intent is required for each and every victim. A man who fires a gun into a crowded room without aiming at anyone in particular is guilty of the murder of anyone he kills. When the Western press said that Gaddafi was 'targeting civilians in Misrata', nobody quibbled that his artillery men could not possibly know where individual civilians were located in order to 'target' them.

There is ample evidence of a general intent in the very scale of the casualties, not to mention the testimony of Israeli soldiers. The latter was mentioned in the initial report and was amplified by the Breaking the Silence movement. These soldiers incurred the same abuse as Goldstone.

Further, it was never an issue that Hamas' rocket and mortar fire into Israel was not directed at military targets. The fact that Hamas did not investigate itself is an irrelevant and a collateral reputational issue.

It cannot be denied that Hamas, on occasion, exhibits a reckless indifference to its own people and that it helps Israel perpetuate the myth of its military significance.

The dilemma remains

An examination of the complaints against Jeremy Corbyn provides some insight into the issues. In January Corbyn was attacked for not mentioning Jews in his Holocaust Memorial Day. This is his statement:

Today is Holocaust Memorial Day, which marks the anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death and concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. I've signed the Holocaust Educational Trust Book of Commitment.

To remember the Holocaust is a vital way of saying to all generations that the tragedy and brutality and loss must never be repeated. We must ensure all understand this and we can all play a role in preventing future tragedies.

As the term Holocaust is synonymous with the Judeocide, this complaint has no basis and says more about the integrity of those who make it than it does about Corbyn.

Corbyn has been taken to task for, six years ago, criticising the removal of a mural by Mear One. This painting portrayed a number of Jewish and non-Jewish bankers oppressing the workers. Mear claims that it was anti-capitalist but admits that some residents complained to him about its anti-Semitic insinuations while he was working on it. Corbyn probably only saw the work in miniature on social media, but he later admitted that he should have taken more care—which he should have done.

Another accusation against Corbyn is that he

was associated, until 2013, with an organisation called Deir Yassin Remembered, which, according to the *Daily Telegraph* 'was riddled with Holocaust deniers'. Corbyn dissociated himself from the organisation after he became aware of this. At first glance the allegation seems surprising, as the organisation has a number of Jewish members, but a closer examination shows that it is true. One member, Paul Eisen, claims that he is a revisionist, not a denier of Holocaust studies, but he supports outright Nazi apologists who have been prosecuted for Holocaust denial in Europe.

The website also contains an article by a charlatan known as Israel Shamir (among several identities). The website dated 2012 lists directors who include Ilhan Pappé and Sonja Karkar of Australians for Palestine and Women for Palestine. Any continued association with this organisation is unacceptable.

Deir Yassin Remembered is part of a larger problem of nutters, contrarians and querulants who can be attracted to not only the Palestinian cause but other left movements. As far as parliamentary politics are concerned, politicians 'network'. The Left of the British Labour Party feels an obligation to support and network with all underresourced groups fighting for the oppressed. Often these groups are loosely structured, with nebulous membership and policies. As the obnoxious views expressed by some Deir Yassin Remembered supporters are anathema to Corbyn, it is safe to assume that this is the explanation for his past association with the group. It is also a warning for all to take care.

What is to be done?

This is a problem for the Left in general, and it is not simply a 'public relations' issue. The issue goes to the efficacy and integrity of our work at large. The Left must always be prepared to adopt positions that are not immediately popular, but it must not follow the self-indulgent path of moral indignation. Demonisation of Israel can reach the point where it is objectively anti-Semitic if it provides red meat for anti-Semites and reinforces the siege mentality of Jewish communities.

A perusal of the comments attached to YouTube videos critical of Israel will show openly anti-Semitic views—this is less so for sites like *Democracy Now!* but increasingly the case for more strident commentators like George Galloway. This does not mean that criticism of Israel should stop, but, apart from the need to avoid inflammatory language, this is a situation where pitching the case too high does not advance the case. It plays into the hands of those who want to make criticism of Israel the issue rather than matters of substance.

Characters like Gilad Atzmon and Miko Peled have made themselves the subject of the debate. Others like US professor Francis Boyle and Stuart Rees of *New Matilda* make extravagant and redundant claims of Israeli genocide. Why make your credibility depend on all this? People should take care what they circulate on social media. I am not sure how much of this is forwarded by algorithms, but I often get material about the Rothschilds that is obviously anti-Semitic, and other conspiracy theories about banks, which are less so. This rubbish does not enlighten us about the realities of financialised capitalism. If you are going to recirculate material in sensitive areas, which includes criticism of US Middle East policies, check other material produced by the source.

Although the US and Australian governments offer uncritical support for Israel, there is a movement the other way among the public. There is evidence, certainly in the United States, of a similar development within the Jewish community. This situation has come about largely because the facts speak for themselves. Vitriolic language and personal confrontations are not going to take the matter any further; indeed, they only reinforce the wilful blindness that grips otherwise liberal or progressive Jews. What is more, they make it easier to attack the right to free speech by critics of Israel, in universities or elsewhere, on the basis that it is anti-Semitic or threatening. [E]



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