

# Israel's Anti-Semitism Smear Campaign

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September 21, 2018

Donald Trump is devoted to his bottom line and to a belief in his own greatness. Beyond that, he has no fixed convictions.

He does have instincts and attitudes, however. Some of them are less odious, at least in theory, than the fixed convictions of neoliberal and liberal imperialist Democrats. Most are worse; and, because the Donald is “special,” nearly all of them are in a state of constant flux.

The more permanent ones have mainly to do with keeping brown and black people, and women of all hues, down and in their place.

The general idea is to maintain patriarchy and, above all, to make America white again – or rather, since it still is mighty white, as white as it used to be.

Trump doesn't much care for Muslims or Hispanics. He is happy to deal with them, though – if they are rich and far away and if there is some percentage in it for him. Otherwise, like many of his supporters, he holds them in contempt and wishes them ill.

Whenever he can, he harms them as well – often with gratuitous cruelty.

He seems to hold Palestinians in especially low regard. This comes from working with and living among real estate moguls like himself and the politicians, lawyers, accountants, and other shady characters who serve their interests. Many of them, the Jewish ones especially, do have fixed, anti-Palestinian convictions. In our time and place, this goes with being of a certain age.

Were we living in a healthier political environment, the kind that existed before the Democratic Party gave itself over to corporate-friendly identity politics, I'd call aging members of the tribe for whom Israel is everything and Palestinians are nothing “elders of Zion.” A quip like that is ahistorical but on point and, in a snarky way, even funny.

However, it is no longer kosher to joke around in ways like that. The problem is not just that the dominant tone in politics nowadays is humorless and self-absorbed. It is also that on the surface, politics has come to have little to do with how the class struggle is going, or with who is doing what to whom, or with where societal benefits and burdens are going.

That was all so sixties and seventies. Politics today is about not offending peoples' identities.

Overwrought identity politics does address the interests of subaltern groups in positive ways. However, the situation is more complicated than that.

Black and brown people and victims of patriarchal attitudes are asserting themselves – boldly and to good effect. But, despite how things may appear, the class struggle has not gone missing.

Quite to the contrary, American politics today is about what it has always been about: furthering the interests of still mostly white, still mostly male, titans of commerce, industry, and finance. It is about securing their power and wealth, and the

capitalist system that makes their good fortune possible, from hostile political contestation.

To that end, it helps that identity politics is all, or nearly all, there is.

And so, the action nowadays, at least on the surface, is on what Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) called “trifles . . . a word, a smile . . . and any other sign of undervalue . . .” Democrats, and Republicans too, have seen to that.

This is why nowadays only the foolhardy dare say anything that could be construed as hurtful by those who have forgotten what they ought to have learned in nursery school — that “sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me.”

Jokes about classic anti-Semitic tracts, like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, are therefore best left unmade.

But what the hell! “Elders,” straight out of central casting, who have shaped the Donald's “thinking,” deserve all the disparagement and all the ridicule they get.

For all I know, there are Jewish Trump cronies who are religious or, what comes to the same thing, observant; they may even pray three times a day, keep kosher, and abstain from work on Jewish holidays and on the Sabbath. It is a good bet, though, that, if there are people in Trump's life who fit that description, that, even for them, Zionism, Jewish nationalism, matters more than Judaism, the Jewish religion.

Were the Prophetic tradition still alive, there would be religious Jews now calling Zionism a false idol. Instead, there are religious (observant) Jews who see it as the fulfillment of Judaism, and therefore as a suitable replacement for it.

Since it emerged in the late nineteenth century, Zionism has come in many versions — some liberal, some not. The kinds Trump knows are virulently rightwing. It comes with the territory.

His cronies, and their co-thinkers in Israel and around the world, want Palestine ethnically cleansed of Palestinians – to make room for the *Herrenvolk*, and to guarantee that no “population bomb” will ever jeopardize the Jewish character of what Benjamin Netanyahu, in defiance of logic and history, calls “the nation state of the Jewish people.”

Trump's presidency has been a godsend for Zionists like that.

It would give our Commander-in-Chief too much credit to say that he has policy objectives in mind. But some of the people he has empowered do. They want to give rightwing Israelis whatever they want, and otherwise to do all they can for them.

Trump put his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, a not-too-bright graduate of a Zionist day school and the gzillionaire son of a felonious Trump-like New Jersey real estate mogul, in charge of Middle East diplomacy. He made a Trump Organization lawyer, Jason Greenblatt, an “Assistant to the President and Special Representative for International Negotiations.” His bankruptcy lawyer, David Friedman, is his Ambassador to Israel. All three

are in way over their heads; and all three are zealous ethnocrats.

Trump also appointed Nikki Haley his Ambassador to the United Nations and John Bolton his National Security Advisor. Haley might as well be angling for the title “Whore of AIPAC.” Bolton is arguably the most execrable neocon in creation. This is just the tip of the iceberg; the rot goes all the way down.

And so, the Trump administration moved the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and cut the entire U.S. aid budget to UNRWA, the UN agency that has been addressing the needs of Palestinian refugees, victims of U.S. backed Israeli ethnic cleansing, since 1949.

Who knows what his rationale for that bit of gratuitous cruelty might be? Perhaps he wants to be able to say that the humanitarian disasters he causes are bigger than the ones Netanyahu can boast of.

The nicest thing to say about these and other, less spectacularly egregious anti-Palestinian Team Trump initiatives is that they have delivered the *coup de grace* to the long defunct “two state solution,” and to the pretense that the United States is an “honest broker” with whom Palestinians can deal.

It would be fair to say too that Trump has all but given the keys to the White House to Netanyahu and to even more noxious Israeli politicians farther to his right.

With the House and Senate in the pocket of the Israel lobby, this has always been the course of least resistance for American presidents, especially in recent decades, as Christian Zionists have become a mighty political force.

Those benighted souls are hell bent (literally) on bringing on the End Times – and, with it, the conversion or eternal damnation of each and every Jew. Jewish Zionists with a modicum of self-respect would therefore tell them to go to hell.

But because they realize how important Christian Zionists can be for keeping the Republican Party on board, they pander to them shamelessly. The Trump administration does too.

Thus, under Trump, American policy towards Israel and Palestine has become worse, but not qualitatively different than it used to be. This is par for the course; Trump makes everything worse, while nothing fundamental ever changes.

Before Trump, there used to be at least a pretense of evenhandedness, and, when pushed too hard, American presidents would sometimes timidly, but decisively, show the Israelis who is boss.

In principle, this has never been hard to do because Israel, as we know it, could not survive for long without massive American support, and because the vaunted Israel lobby – the Jewish, not the Christian, part of it — has always been a Paper Tiger.

It is too bad that the American political class and the media that reflect its thinking have never been able to wrap their heads around that simple fact. Many in the media are Zionists too. Many are simply obtuse.

But with liberal Zionism in its death throes, thanks largely to the evolution of Israeli politics and society in the Netanyahu era, this could soon change.

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Liberal Zionism is, after all, a contradictory project; a liberal state is a state of its citizens, not of a particular religious or ethnic group, especially one scattered around the world with no real connection to the land, the language, or, religion apart, the culture of the country with which they are supposed to identify.

Even so, liberal Zionism was once a flourishing ideology, grounded in the realities of Israeli society. Israel could never become quite what it claimed to be – “Jewish and democratic” –

but it did become a functioning liberal democracy for the roughly eighty percent of its population that is Jewish.

For the other twenty percent, it was a flawed, but not entirely failed, democracy; not much to boast of, but not bad for the region either.

Had a Palestinian state been established alongside Israel, as was supposed to happen after Oslo, the liberal Zionist idea might even now be viable.

However, successive Israeli governments kept that from happening, even while nominally endorsing the idea of a Palestinian state.

What they were really doing was buying time for the settlement movement to grow in power and extent. They were establishing “facts on the ground.”

Even so, Oslo’s failure was not entirely Israel’s fault; Palestinian leaders deserve blame too. However, Israel is by far the more culpable party – if only because it has always held nearly all the cards.

Liberal Zionism is among the casualties of Israeli intransigence, and of the sheer inhumanity of “the only democracy in the Middle East” and “the most moral army in the world.”

It was hanging by a thread a decade ago. But now that the occupation of the West Bank has been going on for more than half a century, and now that the government of Israel has turned Gaza into an open-air prison and waged three savage wars against its basically unarmed population, liberal Zionism has become a dead letter.

But this is not the only reason why so many younger American Jews are uninterested in or embarrassed by the state that is supposed to be theirs by “birthright.”

The passage of time is a factor too. Even apart from Israel’s violations of international law and the brutality of the occupation regime it has installed, younger American Jews would still be drifting away from the Zionist sympathies of their parents and grandparents.

Too bad that the American political class and its counterparts in other Western countries have no appetite for taking this plain fact into account.

Therefore, now as in the past, Israel gets more or less what it wants from the United States; it seldom even has to ask.

The tail wags the dog, but sometimes the dog does try to set the situation straight. At first, Obama sorely wanted to do the right thing, but, in the end, he didn’t have the backbone. Bush 41 pushed back a little in 1991, when Yitzhak Shamir all but forced him to make America less abject again. And there were other, even lamer, attempts over the past half-century at putting the dog, not the tail, in charge.

Even so, Eisenhower was the only real exception to the rule. When necessary, as it was during the Suez crisis, he was not shy about making it clear to the Israelis who the boss really is.

But that was more than seven decades ago. Now we have Trump – a president who shamelessly gives the ethnocratic settler state all that it wants – and then some.

And yet the conventional wisdom has it that Trump and his people are working on, dare I say, a “final solution” to “the Palestine Question.” They even parrot the risible Trump-Netanyahu contention that Palestinians are at fault for not being “a partner for peace.”

It isn’t just nasty, over-the-hill Jewish men, and Jared Kushner, who are the problem; it isn’t even them plus the Bible thumpers in the Trump base.

It is also the much ballyhooed MBS, Mohammad bin Salman, and the entire ruling cohort in Saudi Arabia, the most retrograde state in the world. And it is the leaders of smaller and slightly less noxious feudal regimes in the Persian Gulf, along with others in the Sunni Muslim world who are, in varying degrees, in thrall to Saudi money.

Thus the injustice that the Trump administration exacerbates is an abomination of regional, if not quite global, dimensions, in which the Palestinian people are up against have some of the world's most malign and most powerful forces, and in which their friends, such as they are, are unable or unwilling to do much of anything to help them.

Undoubtedly, MBS is an even worse moral monster than Trump – witness what the Saudis have done and continue to do to the people of Yemen. But, for Palestinians, Trump's afflictions are the cruelest of the lot.

Not only has he cut off the U.S. contribution to UN efforts to provide vital life services to Palestinian refugees – in other words, to mitigate some of the worst consequences of U.S. backed Israeli ethnic cleansing – but now, probably at John Bolton's direction, he is closing down the PLO's diplomatic mission in Washington, and cutting off all U.S. aid to Palestinians period.

He is also moving against Palestine solidarity activists. Indeed, it seems that this is what the latest flurry of anti-Palestinian Trump machinations is all about.

At the direction of the Israeli government, the Israel lobby in the United States and other countries is now taking full aim at the large and growing Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement.

Modeled on forms of struggle developed against Apartheid South Africa, BDS was called into being by civil society forces in Occupied Palestine and abroad in 2005. Despite the best efforts of Israel and its supporters around the world, it has been growing mightily, especially in recent years.

In Netanyahu's eyes, this amounts to an "existential threat." But, because BDS is non-violent, and because it does not physically threaten Israeli Jews, what can he say against it that could possibly move anyone who is not a willfully blind Zionist ideologue?

The answer: that BDS is anti-Semitic.

The charge is manifestly illogical and ahistorical, but there is nothing else that could serve the purpose, and Zionists nowadays need what American football fans call "a Hail Mary pass."

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It was to combat the specter of BDS that the Trump administration, with the support of pro-Israel legislators in Congress, has now adopted the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) definition of anti-Semitism, according to which saying that Zionism is racist or likening Israeli policies to Nazi policies is deemed anti-Semitic.

Partly on the basis of the IHRA definition, Kenneth Marcus, a longtime Israel advocate who heads the Office of Civil Rights in the Trump – Betsy DeVos Education Department is now reopening a case that the Obama administration dismissed in which the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) and others accused Palestinian solidarity activists of anti-Semitism for an incident that occurred at Rutgers University in 2011.

The offending activists are supposed to have discriminated against Jewish students by charging a fee to attend an event on the Nakba after scores of pro-Israel students arrived to protest and presumably disrupt the event.

The ZOA then filed a Title VI complaint saying that the pro-Israel students experienced a hostile environment because they are Jews. In fact, the organizers of the event requested a fee from everyone to cover not just the costs of the venue, but also increased security costs stemming from the presence of the protestors.

The alleged smoking gun was an email from an organizer saying that "150 Zionists" had shown up at the event. Marcus claims "Zionists" meant "Jews".

His letter to the ZOA reopening the case said: "The visual perception of '150 Zionists' referenced in the email could have been rooted in a perception of Jewish ancestry or ethnic characteristics common to the groups." The argument then was that in cases such as this, "Zionist" is code for "Jewish."

Since, according to the IHRA definition, if you deny the right of Jews to self-determination in historic Palestine or apply a "double standard" to Israel's actions and those of other nations or compare Israeli policies to Nazi policies, you are an anti-Semite. QED.

This is plainly indefensible conceptually; it is also a subterfuge – cut from the same cloth as charges leveled against Jeremy Corbyn and others in the British Labor Party.

The UK has an Israel lobby too, but there is more to the anti-Corbyn smear campaign in Britain than that; there is a specter haunting the ruling class and its allies.

It is not the specter of communism that Marx and Engels had in mind in *The Communist Manifesto* (1847), nor even the specter of as much socialism as the British enjoyed in the pre-Thatcher era. The fear is that, before long, Corbyn, a genuine socialist and internationalist, will become Prime Minister – putting the UK back onto a progressive track for the first time in decades.

Elections are not imminent, but neither is it a sure thing that they can be put off for long. And while a Labor victory is far from assured, it is not impossible.

For one thing, the Conservative Party in the UK is a rotting hulk — though, in its favor, unlike our GOP, it is merely retrograde and, not withstanding the presence of its many miscreants, not also the party of anyone as viciously awful as Donald Trump. Still there is little doubt that quite a few Brits would be happy to see the back of it.

For another, while the UK electoral system is flawed and undemocratic, it is less so than its U.S. counterpart. The Labor Party's parliamentary wing is as bad, or nearly as bad, as our Democrats, but Labor is also a membership party with a rank-and-file solidly behind Corbyn, the party leader. Thanks to him, it is now, by far, the largest party in the UK, and one of the largest in Europe.

To be sure, what ultimately matters is not how many members a party has; it is how many votes it gets. The growth in Labor Party membership may have more to do with the extent of popular discontent with the status quo than with the course of future elections. Even so, the power elites are worried.

There is little evidence, so far, that, in these scoundrel times, those elites, in alliance with UK Zionist organizations and with the support of the Israeli government, are getting much traction, outside media circles, by charging one of the most principled anti-racist – and anti-anti-Semitic – politicians in the world with anti-Semitism.

Still, it is a dangerous game that they are playing in much the way that the Trump administration's unabashed adoption of rightwing Zionist policies and propaganda is dangerous. Not only are such machinations immoral and stupid; they are also

“bad for the Jews.”

For the most part, anti-Semites still avoid calling themselves what they are; the word “anti-Semite,” like the word “racist” still has bad connotations. How much, if at all, this affects real world anti-Semitism and racism is debatable, but even if it doesn’t affect it much, it does serve a worthwhile purpose.

Hypocrisy always does; it is, as the saying goes, the compliment vice pays to virtue. It helps maintain a state of affairs in which, in theory if not in practice, anti-Semitism, along with other forms of racism, is delegitimized.

But how long can that way of thinking be maintained when the word is illogically and relentlessly applied to positions to which right-thinking, morally decent people of all faiths and ethnicities are drawn?

The question answers itself.

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Not to belabor the obvious, but to be clear: one can be critical of Israel without being anti-Zionist; even the IHRA definition concedes that. In the United States and other Western countries, there are probably more Zionists critical of Israel, and also critics who have no position on Zionism, than there are anti-Zionists.

Even more obviously, anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism are not just logically distinct, but also historically and, even today, for some of the most extreme Orthodox Jews, theologically at odds.

Before the Nazis took power in Germany, and indeed even until the end of World War II, most American Jews were non- or anti-Zionist – not because they were “self-hating,” but because they were true to Jewish traditions.

It is only slightly less obvious that when anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism do shade off into one another, that incidents are rare and that they mainly occur within poorly off subaltern immigrant Muslim communities in Western countries. If there is a problem, that is where it lies.

The far Right in Europe and North America loves Israel; and the Israeli far Right loves them back. The endemic anti-Semitism of rightwing political movements in our time can survive in this mutual admiration society, but it is dampened

somewhat, especially when trumped by the hardcore Right’s blatant Islamophobia.

It is telling, though, that, in the circumstances, it is anti-Semitism and Zionism, not anti-Zionism, that run together.

This is not the only thing that proponents of the anti-BDS smear campaign prefer not to acknowledge. They also take care not to point out that the expressions of anti-Semitic attitudes that they do dwell on have little, if any, connection either to classical anti-Semitism or to Islamic traditions.

Bona fide anti-Semitism is a descendant of Christian anti-Judaism; it is not a Muslim thing. Muslims and Jews have had a very different and generally more amicable relationship.

To be sure, Muslims have never treated Jews, or members of any non-Muslim religious community, as full-fledged equals. But they have nearly always treated the “people of the book” decently and with respect.

However, nowadays, fine points such as these are deliberately overlooked. For a state not acting at all like the “light unto the nations” that it purports to be, a state that long ago exhausted all the moral capital it could squeeze out of the Holocaust, these are all just inconvenient facts.

The Israeli propaganda machine, like Trump’s mind, latches on to whatever works. Lately, with boycotts, divestment, and perhaps some day even sanctions looming, it is pushing all the buttons.

But the buttons aren’t working like before. For most people alive today, the Holocaust is not a living memory. And except for those who think, as many older Zionists do, that Jews can only be safe in a Jewish state, its relevance is obscure. It was, after all, the work of Europeans, not Palestinians; and it took place before the state of Israel even existed.

Nevertheless, except for the force of arms and the acquiescence of American and other Western governments, it is all that Zionists, the kind that want historic Palestine ethnically cleansed of Palestinians, have going for them.

Therefore now, with significant parts of world – and Jewish – public opinion coming around to the conclusion that enough is enough, apologists for Israel are becoming desperate.

Too bad that they just don’t get it: that their desperation is doing Jews around the world, and in Israel too, no favors.

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