



Being Jewish, a Good Neighbour, and Abhorring War

Paul Hedges



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By Paul Hedges

SYNOPSIS

Antisemitism is a rising problem in many parts of the world, including in Southeast Asia. Israel's latest conflicts in Gaza and with its neighbours have exacerbated the problem. Distinctions must be preserved between people of the Jewish faith and those who support a particular Israeli political agenda.

COMMENTARY

Antisemitic incidents in the United States of America have increased [astronomically](#) over recent years. These events should [be of concern](#) in [Southeast Asia](#) and globally. Tensions have heightened ever since Hamas and other attackers launched their terrorist attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023.

While the atrocities of 7 October are indefensible, many have seen them in a wider context. Militant Israeli settlers have been enlarging settlements that are illegal under [international law](#) and often harassing and even killing Palestinians who have lived there for millennia. At the same time, the present two-tier legal system between Israelis and Palestinians, as enforced by the Israeli government, [amounts to apartheid](#) in the eyes of a growing number of people in and out of Israel.

It is, in most cases, a simple distinction that the actions of a government are separate from the people of the country. Indeed, before the 7 October attacks, there were [mass protests](#) against the current Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, with legal proceedings [ongoing](#) against him. That Netanyahu's regime does [not represent](#) the will of all the Israeli people was clear.

Moreover, inside Israel, there have always been [advocates for peace](#) and [interreligious dialogue](#), while many were horrified by the plight of the Palestinian

people living in the Occupied Territories as second-class citizens in their own homeland. Even strong advocates of Israel in many ways, such as the Israeli historian Benny Morris, acknowledged the human tragedy of [Palestinian dispossession](#) that had accompanied Israel's foundation. This is termed [the Nakba](#), or "Disaster/ Catastrophe" by Palestinians.

Following 7 October, though, it was natural that a solidarity would unify behind Israel's response against the attack on its people. Yet there has been [heavy criticism](#) of the way that Netanyahu has conducted the Gaza war, seen in [Israeli media](#) and in [dissension in government](#) ranks. There is no single Israeli position on what is happening.

A Jewish State and Zionism

In modern times, the nation-state has [in one model](#) been identified with ethnic groups. Greece, for instance, sought independence from the Ottoman Empire on the grounds that the Greek people deserved their own country. If we accept the principle that ethnic groups can relate to national identity, then Jews, as much as any other group, are entitled to a country.

We may term this the basic principle of Zionism: recognising the Jewish right to national autonomy as equivalent to that of other ethnic groups, though Zionism is a term with much [history](#) and [many meanings](#). Due to the actions by certain Israeli governments, and also the actions of the most [extreme militant](#) ultra-Zionist settlers, with attacks on Palestinians, and even [calls for ethnic cleansing](#), Zionism has gained amongst some [critics of Israel](#) an utterly [toxic status](#).

But not all claims for Zionism are the same. Many Zionists believe that Jews and Palestinians can live in one state, or in an equitable two-state solution. For some critics of the Israeli government though, anti-Zionism is seen as a requirement for viewing not just the current conflict, but even [Israel's very legitimacy](#).

In short, any critique of Israel's very legitimacy, given its status as a Jewish state, becomes by nature antisemitic. Importantly, [criticism of Israeli policy](#) and actions is not inherently antisemitic, though some are seeking to [weaponise antisemitism](#) against any critique of Israel, making some afraid to speak out. But the claim that of all countries, only a Jewish state has no right to exist is antisemitic. It is the denial of a Jewish homeland. We can critique Israel, we can critique, as a [former Prime Minister](#) of that country, Ehud Olmert, has done, its current [identified war crimes](#), but when we cross over to denying Jews a fundamental right to statehood that is a very different claim.

It should be obvious that not all Jews are Israelis. Certainly not all support Israel. Moreover, many Israeli Jews do not support the current methods of war. Though, as we have noted, feeling besieged and attacked, a certain solidarity has emerged, while many are still heavily critical of Netanyahu's seemingly endless war and failure to return the hostages. Yet, in many places in the world, even non-Israeli Jews find themselves called upon to condemn both Israel's actions and Zionism.

For Jews, the choice is, arguably, hard! Deny the very option of their own people

having a homeland, i.e., to deny they are Zionists, and hence to be complicit in an antisemitic claim, or to be forever labelled a Bad Jew. The assumption being that supporting a Jewish state, in any form, means supporting every illegal act of militant settlers and endorsing Israeli war crimes. Nor can we forget that the charge of [genocide is still being considered](#), so invoking what may seem the [most heinous crime](#) within the equation. The stakes are high for anybody wanting to be seen as a Good Jew.

Jews as Neighbours Like All Others

One may be a Zionist, whether one is Jewish or not, and utterly condemn the way Israel has conducted its war in Gaza, which has involved heinous atrocities. Indeed, believing in a different Israel based upon an inclusive, biblical, and Rabbinic [Judaism](#) may be one reason to oppose the current Israeli regime. Concern for the oppressed in the land is what Judaism calls for, alongside repairing the world ([tikkun olam](#)).

Many Jewish people have relatives and friends in Israel, and the prayers about, and memories of Jerusalem give them an intense connection. But Jews are not tied inherently to the Israeli nation-state, just as Muslims are not tied to Saudi Arabia because of its sacred sites; yet [both face backlash](#) due to [events in the Middle East](#).

Given global antisemitism, our Jewish neighbours – our colleagues and our fellow citizens – need our support and not to be faced with a quandary of the Good Jew, Bad Jew option before we accept them as people. Despite current tensions, emotional trauma, and political differences, we must not lose sight of every Jew as a distinct individual, as much as anyone else.

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