



The Third Narrative:
Progressive Answers To The
Far Left's Critiques of Israel

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Introduction

Anyone interested in the Middle East these days will be subjected to a relentless barrage of accusations against Israel on the Web, on campus and in other settings. Some of these attacks come from the far left, from activists trying to appeal to Jews and non-Jews who are committed to human rights and social justice.

Often, these critics are not just attacking specific, objectionable Israeli policies and behavior. They treat Israel as the epitome of evil. They portray the entire Zionist enterprise, from the 19th century to the present, as nothing more than a racist, colonialist and immoral land theft. Many are active in the movement of Boycotts, Divestments and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel, although not everyone who favors BDS agrees with them.

As a result, a popular litmus test for being accepted into the progressive community is to say something nasty about Israel.

At Ameinu, a North American Jewish organization that supports progressive causes in Israel, the U.S. and Canada, we have often criticized Israeli policies and behavior, including settlement expansion, racism against Arabs and crony capitalism. But we believe too many of Israel's left-wing critics cross the line that separates legitimate, productive criticism from polemical, inaccurate and unfair attacks.

This booklet is our response to some of their most common assertions. It is meant for people on the left who suspect that it is wrong to lay all blame for the Arab-Israeli conflict at the feet of Israeli Jews...but aren't sure how to respond to Israel's most vitriolic critics. Some of what these critics say is true, some of their accusations are justified. Some of what Israel's traditional defenders say is also accurate. When it comes to this conflict, the truth is rarely black or white; it resides in a gray area where advocates on either side typically don't like to venture. That is where we try to go in this booklet.

We feel a deep connection to the Jewish state and the Jewish people. We are also committed to social justice and human rights for everyone. Some say those commitments are contradictory, that particularist attachments to a state or a

people can't be reconciled with universal values. Our response is that belonging to a people, a community larger than ourselves, is a basic human need –indeed, it is our right. And balancing our communal attachments with a commitment to humanity as a whole is our responsibility.

In fact, our ties to Israel might make us even more disturbed by its current direction than those have no ties to it. But we are alarmed by the increasingly widespread rhetoric that refuses to recognize any justification whatsoever for Israeli positions or the Jewish state. And we think the American left –Jewish and non-Jewish—could use a third narrative, one that neither reflexively attacks nor reflexively justifies Israeli policies and actions.

This booklet does not delve very deeply into each of the far left's critiques; each one deserves a book or at least a long, scholarly essay to cover what needs to be covered. Rather, it provides an overview of these accusations and the basis of a progressive response to them. It also presumes a basic knowledge of the most well-known points of contention, e.g., what people mean when they refer to the Palestinian right of return, the West Bank, etc.

The Third Narrative was written by Dan Fleshler. For more information, check out www.thirdnarrative.org.

Is Israel An “Apartheid State?”

It is a mistake to call Israel an apartheid state...right now. It is also a mistake to ignore the fact that the current situation in the occupied territories is morally unsustainable.

Many of Israel's critics throw around the term “apartheid” too loosely, as if Israel practiced the same kind of systematic, racial exclusion that Afrikaners imposed on South African blacks. When “Israel Apartheid Week”¹ is marked on college campuses, its organizers apply the “a-word” to both Israel proper—a deeply flawed but decidedly democratic state—and the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In response, here is Benjamin Pogrund, a South African journalist who campaigned against apartheid:

The difference between the current Israeli situation and apartheid South Africa is emphasized at a very human level: Jewish and Arab babies are born in the same delivery room, with the same facilities, attended by the same doctors and nurses, with the mothers recovering in adjoining beds in a ward. Two years ago I had major surgery in a Jerusalem hospital: the surgeon was Jewish, the anaesthetist was Arab, the doctors and nurses who looked after me were Jews and Arabs. Jews and Arabs share meals in restaurants and travel on the same trains, buses and taxis, and visit each other's homes.

Could any of this possibly have happened under apartheid? Of course not.²

Appalling, but not apartheid

Israel's Arab citizens, about 1/5th of its population, can vote and have the same civil rights under the law as Israeli Jews. They also suffer from economic inequities and serious—sometimes systematic—discrimination when it comes to housing, employment and municipal services. That is an appalling situation and it needs to be fixed. But those who deem Israel guilty of apartheid—a “crime against humanity,” according to international law—are distorting reality.

Even Richard Goldstone, the South African jurist who has forcefully condemned Israel for some of its behavior, says that

“in Israel, there is no apartheid,” and the situation there “does not come close” to the internationally accepted definition of the term.³

On the other hand, the plight of Palestinians in the occupied territories—what Peter Beinart calls “undemocratic Israel”⁴—is a different matter.

Some pro-Israel advocates argue that the term “apartheid” doesn’t apply to the occupied territories. Whether it does or it doesn’t, that is a distinction without a difference to Palestinians under occupation. They can’t vote in Israeli elections, drive on some roads that crisscross the West Bank. They can be imprisoned—via “administrative detention”—without charges or trials. These and many other indignities might not be apartheid *per se*, but they are wrong.

The ominous future

Without a diplomatic solution, it is only a matter of time before there is essentially one state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. It is hard to believe that Israeli Jews will opt to say goodbye to the Jewish state by giving voting rights to millions of Palestinians in the West Bank or Gaza Strip. And if that happens, those who now compare Israel to South Africa will be proven right.

Former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who is hardly a leftist, has said as much: “As long as in this territory west of the Jordan River there is only one political entity called Israel, it is going to be either non-Jewish, or non-democratic. If this bloc of millions of Palestinians cannot vote, that will be an apartheid state.”

Is One, Binational State A Solution To The Israel-Palestinian Conflict?

People who say Israel and the territories it conquered in 1967 should be a single state include those who reject the notion of a Jewish state,⁵ and who won't acknowledge that Jews have any legitimate ties to their national homeland. Other "one-staters," though, are Israeli and Palestinian moderates who once endorsed the two state solution⁶ and had high hopes for the Oslo peace process, but now say that a viable Palestinian state is impossible.

It is not easy to refute their arguments, e.g., Jewish settlements in the West Bank are now so entrenched that a contiguous Palestinian state is impossible; extremists on both sides have veto power over a workable negotiated settlement; the Israeli public lacks the political will to end the occupation, and Palestinians are hopelessly divided.

The outlook is indeed grim. But those who want to help end this tragic conflict need to ask themselves, "Which outcome is more likely to be accepted by both peoples, one state or two? Which goal can be the basis of a practical political program?"

The answer is a negotiated two state-solution. Despite the odds, it is still possible, with enough political will on both sides, and with active, creative diplomacy from the U.S. and other mediators. Key Israeli and Palestinian diplomats, politicians, and activists⁷ have not given up on it. Most importantly, majorities of both Israelis and Palestinians consistently endorse the goal of two states. As Hussein Ibish of the American Task Force on Palestine puts it:

At some point a two state agreement could become practically impossible, although this has not yet occurred. The moment at which such a state of "impossibility..." will emerge is, contrary to many arguments by one-state advocates, not the function of a critical mass of administrative, topographical and infrastructural changes constructed by Israel in the occupied territories. Rather, it is that moment when a critical mass of Israelis and Palestinians become convinced that such a peace agreement is no longer feasible or desirable."⁸

That moment hasn't come. So despite the daunting obstacles, practical leftists living abroad should do what they can to support diplomatic efforts to reach the two-state goal.

One state and the real world

On the other hand, while it is certainly possible to imagine a one-state solution and write theoretical essays about it, in the real world it will be exponentially more difficult to implement than two states. If a single, binational state were created, it would be based on an unhealthy dynamic in which Hebrew-speaking, Jewish Israelis become a minority, outnumbered by Arabic-speaking, mostly Muslim Palestinians.

That is an open invitation to the kind of violence that erupted in the former Yugoslavia and other places where people were crammed together in one political space, and expected to ignore past grievances and profound ethnic, religious and linguistic differences. That is probably one reason why 68 percent of West Bank and Gaza Palestinians told pollsters in September, 2012 that they were against one state "in which Arabs and Jews enjoy equality."⁹ Keep in mind that those pushing for the one-state solution are going against the will of most of the Palestinians in the occupied territories who would be forced to live in it.

The sensitivities of people who bear intense psychic scars from their families' histories of persecution should not be underestimated when proposing a solution that might look reasonable to outsiders. That applies to Jews as well as Arabs.

Many Jewish Israelis are the children and grandchildren of people who came to Israel because they desperately needed a place of refuge. Some escaped the Nazis or were displaced by World War II. Some were forced to flee Arab states after Israel's founding. Some could not practice their religion or escape anti-Semitism in the former Soviet Union, Yemen, Ethiopia and elsewhere. They found their way to the only state in the world where Jews were the majority.

If current Israeli Jews became a minority in a binational state, it is difficult to imagine that they would trust its government to safeguard their rights and physical security. And it is **impossible** to persuade most of them to put themselves in that position.

Is Pro-Israel And Progressive An Oxymoron?

“Pro-Israel” is a term that is too often linked to reflexive support for Israeli policies. People who call themselves progressive and pro-Israel have a different view of what it means to support Israel.

To them, it is pro-Israel to help Israeli Jews and Palestinians who protest the occupation on the streets and in court, and to urge the U.S. to stop being an enabler of Israel's settlement addiction. It is pro-Israel to support Israeli groups that protect and promote the rights of Palestinian citizens, the LGBT community, women and immigrants.

Although it might be hard to believe, given Israel's wretched reputation in the progressive community, there was a time when people on the left loved Israel.¹⁰ They sympathized with the suffering of Jewish Holocaust survivors and, especially during Israel's first few decades, they admired its brand of democratic socialism, its powerful trade union movement and its kibbutzim.

Israel has changed dramatically since then, clinging to occupied territories and lurching to the right in ways that sadden and dismay its left-leaning supporters abroad. But the idealistic spirit and concern for social welfare that once animated its mainstream institutions has not vanished. It still exists in many Israeli grassroots groups and some politicians. Encouraging them, and trying to fix what is broken in Israel, is a vitally important task.

What about Israel's military actions and the behavior of its security services? Reconciling a commitment to human rights and social justice with a commitment to the personal safety of Israelis is not always easy. But it can and must be done. Israelis live in a tough neighborhood. You might believe they had no right to be there in the first place, but now they are there to stay. Yes, sometimes right-wing Israelis use security concerns as a pretext for the oppression of Palestinians, but that should not stop people on the left from being concerned about the safety of Jews as well as Arabs in the region.

Legitimate questions can be raised about Israel's military activities and whether some of its responses to Palestinian violence have been disproportionate. But it is not right wing propaganda that more than a thousand Israeli civilians were killed during the second Palestinian intifada; or that missiles from Lebanon, the Gaza Strip and Iran threaten Israeli lives. Even if you believe Israelis are more to blame than Palestinians, it is important to remember that many Israelis who want to end the occupation are reluctant to cede territory without iron-clad security guarantees. And ignoring Israelis' legitimate fears or dismissing their security concerns as overblown—as some on the left unfortunately do—is not just impractical; it is inhumane.¹¹

Still, while Israel must have the right to protect itself, in the long run there is clearly no military solution to the conflict. Israelis cannot rely on their armed forces, border police and intelligence services alone. A negotiated agreement is necessary to end the occupation, create a Palestinian state and ensure the security of both peoples. And steps by either party that make an agreement more difficult should be condemned by people who want peace.

Should Palestinian Refugees And Their Descendants Be Granted The “Right Of Return?”

The Palestinian “right of return” is one of the most complex, emotional issues of our time. If you weigh all the historical and legal arguments about whether or not Palestinians refugees from the 1948 and 1967 wars have this right, both sides make a powerful case.

Leonard Fein’s take on the entire conflict provides a helpful way to look at the question of Palestinian refugees:

It’s conventional, these days, to talk about the “competing narratives” that inform the ongoing debate, but the problem is neither choosing the “right” narrative nor, for that matter, reconciling the two. The Palestinians narrative is right. The Israeli narrative is right. History plays differently for the two peoples, now both stuck in a status quo that satisfies no one. Right against right; a recipe for tragedy.

No, the problem is how to grab hold of history and turn it in a direction that offers both peoples life, security, hope -- an end to the debilitating animosity, an end to the bloodshed, a new day.¹²

A cruel delusion

United Nations Resolution 194, passed in December 1948 near the end of the Arab-Israeli war, resolves that “the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return.”

But even if you think a Palestinian resident of Toronto or a refugee camp in Lebanon has the moral right to return to her great-grandparents’ home in Jaffa, the cold, practical realities of the conflict should not be ignored: the overwhelming majority of Israelis do not accept the Palestinian right of return to their homes in Israel. They believe it will mean the end of Israel.

Thus, people on the left who treat the right of return as a vitally important goal are not just engaging in wishful thinking; they are engaging in magical thinking. And they are perpetuating a cruel delusion in the Palestinian diaspora by encouraging refugees to believe in the possibility of returning to live in Israel someday.

It is possible to believe that the Palestinians have a “right” to return and still understand that implementing it would be impractical, and that insisting upon it creates an insurmountable obstacle to peace. That is why Palestinian and Israeli negotiators have discussed an end-game in which Palestinian refugees would be able to immigrate to their own state or receive compensation, but not settle in Israel. Some would be able to return to Israel for family reunifications.

Clearly, for many Palestinians to accept that solution, they will need to relinquish a long-held and understandable ideal. But this conflict cannot be resolved without fulfilling the national aspirations of both peoples. That means carving out two states, and it means unless both sides compromise, the nightmare will never end. Clinging to the right of return is clinging to the nightmare.

Should Boycotts, Divestment And Sanctions (BDS) Against Israel Be Encouraged?

The global BDS movement is understandably appealing to people who are frustrated with Israeli policies and want to take tangible steps to end Palestinian suffering. Nothing else seems to be working, so why not pressure Israel by boycotting its products, preventing cooperation with its academic and cultural institutions, and divesting from corporations that contribute to the occupation? Why not try it?

Pro-Israel advocates who paint the entire BDS movement as a deliberate effort to destroy Israel are over-simplifying. Not everyone who advocates boycotting or divesting from Israel wants it to disappear. Some just want Israel to stop expanding settlements, end discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel, and take other steps that pro-Israel progressives endorse. Indeed, there are self-described Zionists calling for a boycott of products from West Bank settlements; they do so partly because partly because they love Israel.¹³

That said, prominent leaders of the BDS movement do not hide their antipathy to the Jewish state and some have publicly called for its dismantling.¹⁴ Even Norman Finkelstein, a well-known, harsh critic of Israel, has denounced the organized international BDS movement because it aims for “the end of Israel,” which is why one of its explicit goals is the Palestinian right of return.¹⁵ That should give pause to left-leaning people who are tempted by BDS but don’t want to encourage the end of the Jewish state.

Another problem with BDS is that it undermines progressive forces in Israel who are working for social justice and human rights. The BDS movement plays into the hands of right wingers in Israel who cultivate an “us against them, Israel vs. the world” mentality. They gain more, not less political influence, when they can lump all leftists into the same “anti-Israel” category. They raise fears that activists protesting against government policies are aiding people who want to destroy Israel.

No political path

When pressed, BDS advocates can offer no practical political path, no route from A to B. They rely on a vague dream in which the Israeli people will someday feel so isolated and under so much pressure that they will demand an end to the occupation and other changes.

Israel has one of the world's strongest and most stable economies. So even if economic boycotts and related measures grew more popular, it would take many years before they had a significant impact on Israelis' daily lives or changed Israeli policies. Neither Palestinians nor Israelis can afford to wait that long.

Finally, the BDS movement incorrectly assumes there is one guilty party in this conflict, that Israel is entirely responsible for the lack of progress towards peace and co-existence. In fact, both sides have been responsible, both have made mistakes. Applying international pressure on just one side is not only counterproductive; it is unfair.

Does Zionism = Racism?

In 1975, the United Nations passed a resolution equating Zionism with racism. The UN did the right thing when it voted overwhelmingly to rescind the resolution in 1991.

Racism generally refers to the belief that certain races or ethnic groups are intrinsically superior to others. Sometimes the term is also applied to discrimination against people based on their race or ethnic group. Sadly, it is not hard to tick off instances of overt, anti-Arab racism by some Israelis, including Knesset members, or discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel.

But at its core, Zionism *per se*—the movement to create and sustain a national home for the Jewish people— is not inherently racist, as some on the left claim.¹⁶

To European Jews confronted by pogroms and vicious discrimination in the 19th and 20th century, Zionism was a national liberation movement that was a **response** to racism. Pre-state Zionists wanted what was considered to be a fundamental human right and remains one today: national self-determination.

There were and are many forms of Zionism. One influential early Zionist, Ahad Ha'am,¹⁷ argued that Palestine should be the spiritual and cultural center of the modern Jewish people, but not a homeland absorbing all Jews from the diaspora. He railed against anti-Arab racism. Some progressive pre-state Zionists, such as Martin Buber and Judah Magnes¹⁸—the President of Hebrew University—favored a binational state that is similar to the one endorsed by some on the left today. They didn't win the ideological battle. But their insistence on protecting the rights of Palestinian Arabs was shared by the socialist Labor Zionists who led Israel during its early years.

Israel's egalitarian founders

Israel's founders did not want to inflict on their Arab neighbors the same racist oppression that the Jews had suffered. That was an important reason why, in 1948, Zionist leaders went out of their way to call for a non-racist state in Israel's Declaration of Independence, which asserts that:

The State of Israel...will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the Prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions."

The claim that Zionism is racist is sometimes made by critics who object to the very idea of nationalism and nation states, which are considered to be racist anachronisms. In fact, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 15) declares that "everyone has the right to a nationality" and "no one should be arbitrarily deprived of a nationality."

For Jews in the mid-20th century, exercising national rights in a Jewish homeland was also necessary for sheer survival. Amos Oz, a lifelong critic of Israel's settlement policies, defends Zionism with a stirring metaphor:

The Zionist enterprise has no other objective justification than the right of a drowning man to grasp the only plank that can save him... [T]here is a vast moral difference between the drowning man who grasps a plank and makes room for himself by pushing the others who are sitting on it to one side... and the drowning man who grabs the whole plank for himself.¹⁹

Jewish national identity

Some critics of Israel and Zionism go so far as to claim that Jews are not a people with any national rights, that an observant Jew from Yemen has nothing in common with a secular, self-described Jew in Boston or London. Elias Baumgarten has a good answer:

What unites a "people" is a complex matter and obviously differs from nation to nation. Palestinians, dispersed throughout the world like Jews, no longer share a language and never shared one common religion. Yet it would be presumptuous to tell someone who *experiences herself* as Palestinian that she is really an "American" or a "Jordanian" or even, as Israeli leaders used to insist, simply an "Arab" with no more distinctive identity. Ultimately, whether or not someone

is a member of a “people” seems most reasonably answered by whether she is a member of a group that *experiences* itself as sharing an identity.²⁰

Ideals vs. reality

Has Israel lived up to the egalitarian ideals of its founders? No. Far from it. Palestinian citizens of Israel have the right to vote and the other civil rights afforded to Jews, but of course Jews get a host of special privileges and advantages. The Law of Return gives automatic citizenship to Jews from anywhere in the world, but to no other people. As described in our discussion of apartheid, Arabs in Israel face widespread discrimination. In recent years, the Israelis' treatment of African refugees seeking asylum has sometimes been shameful.

But many other democracies have distinct ethnic cultures analogous to Israel's Jewish culture and face similar challenges. They celebrate their distinct histories, customs and cultural traditions. Their immigration laws are often restrictive and favor specific nationalities, e.g., people born outside of France can be automatic citizens if one parent is French. Within these countries, as in Israel, liberal nationalists are trying to preserve and shape their evolving national identities while ensuring that religious and cultural minorities are granted equal rights, equal opportunities and a stake in the future. (See note 21 for further discussion).

Zionism, like Israel itself, is a work in progress. Israel's founders were more committed to the universal values of human rights and social justice than most political leaders of their time. Israeli racism is a betrayal of their vision, not its fulfillment.

Is “Ethnic Cleansing” Inherent To Zionism?

One oft-made charge is that Zionists relied on systematic “ethnic cleansing” in order to create Israel. We are told that European Jews came to Palestine fully intending to throw out the indigenous population, and that is what they did. Some claim that ethnic cleansing is routinely practiced by Israeli Jews today.

Ethnic cleansing is “a policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to purposely remove by violent or terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographical areas,” according to Wikipedia. It is a volatile, explosive term, and people who apply it to the Zionists can marshal troubling historical facts that need to be acknowledged.

Those making the case for ethnic cleansing, such as the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé,²² often cite statements by pre-state Zionist leaders in favor of the voluntary transfer of Palestinian Arabs. For example, Theodor Herzl mentioned the transfer idea in his diary (just once), and the notion was endorsed at other junctures by prominent Zionists before Israel was founded. But it is possible to acknowledge that and still dispute the charge that the Zionists had a pre-meditated plan to violently expel their Arab neighbors.

Proposals to share the land

One way to answer the ethnic cleansing charge is to cite the many statements by pre-state Zionists expressing a desire to share the land with the Arabs, and the many times they proposed political arrangements that would enable peaceful co-existence. Some of these proposals were made by the same leaders who later advocated the transfer option.²³

In fact, in 1929 David Ben-Gurion –who would become Israel's first Prime Minister—called for a single, binational state, although he soon rejected the idea as unrealistic.²⁴ In 1931, he wrote, “The Arab community in Palestine is an organic, inseparable part of the landscape. It is embedded in the country. The Arabs work the land, and will remain.”²⁵

Some of the Jews' proposals to share the land were offered in private meetings, so they were clearly not public relations gestures. Had there been a longstanding, secret commitment to kick out the Arabs, why would the Jews have spent so much time and energy coming up with plans for living together with them? All suggestions for rapprochement were summarily rejected by local Palestinian Arab leaders—with a few isolated exceptions.

...and to transfer Arabs

It is true that the idea of a peaceful, voluntary population transfer as part of a diplomatic settlement became more popular among Zionist leaders in the mid- to late-1930s. But the context was ongoing violence initiated by Palestinian Arabs (the so-called "Arab Revolt") and their refusal—as the Nazis grew in power—to agree to any Jewish immigration. At that point, a continued, violent confrontation between Arabs and Jews seemed almost inevitable. So an arrangement in which a portion of the Arab population settled outside of Palestine's borders was considered a way to stave off ethnic conflict, to **prevent** war.²⁶

That idea seems inhumane and heartless now; at the time, separating warring ethnic and religious groups via population transfers or exchanges seemed perfectly reasonable, and it remained a popular idea among moderate world leaders before and after World War II.²⁷ The large population exchange of Muslims and Hindus to stave off bloodshed and create Pakistan was just one example.

A tragedy with many authors

What about the 700,000 Palestinian Arabs who lost their homes in 1947 and 1948, during the military confrontation that Israelis call the "War of Independence," and Palestinians call the "Nakba" (catastrophe)?

What happened to those Palestinians was a terrible tragedy that had many authors. But the traditional Zionist narrative is correct in its most important claim: local Palestinian Arabs and invading armies from Arab states initiated the war that created the Palestinian refugee problem. The Jews did not want that war. It is impossible to know whether a refugee problem would have existed without it.

It was a brutal war. Fighters from **both** sides committed atrocities. A portion of the Arab population was forcibly expelled from villages and neighborhoods that were used as bases to attack Jews; many fled in fear. Palestinian refugees were prevented from returning. And almost all traces of hundreds of Arab villages were erased by the Israelis after the war. However, it is also true that Arab villages whose residents did not attack the Israelis were, by and large, left alone.²⁸

Some of the Jewish combatants' behavior during Israel's violent birth was morally indefensible, but that doesn't mean they implemented a policy of ethnic cleansing. That term is usually associated with the kind of vicious slaughter of civilians perpetrated by Serbs and other groups in the former Yugoslavia, or with the savage murders of Hutus by Tutsis in Rwanda. When people put Zionist fighters in 1947 and 1948 into the same category, they are distorting a very complex historical record.

Historian Benny Morris has written unvarnished accounts of Israeli behavior, including violent expulsions of Palestinians, during that war. He has concluded that when Palestinians were expelled it was generally done because of purely military considerations, based on tactical judgments of what was necessary to win a war that the Jews did not start and could not afford to lose. And he believes "there was no Zionist plan or blanket policy of evicting the Arab population, or of `ethnic cleansing.'"^{*}

^{*}Those who charge the Zionists with ethnic cleansing often cite "Plan Dalet." Created in late 1947 by the Hagana (the underground Zionist army), it was a contingency plan for defending the Jewish state from an anticipated invasion by Arab armies in May, 1948. Addressing this claim is beyond the scope of this booklet, but to learn why Plan Dalet was **not** a recipe for ethnic cleansing, check out <http://www.mideastweb.org/pland.htm>

Does The Pro-Israel Lobby Have A Stranglehold On The U.S. Government?

The charge that pro-Israel American Jews “control” U.S. policies in the Middle East sometimes accompanies accusations that are openly anti-Semitic (“The Jews control the media” or “Jewish bankers and investors control the economy”). But it is not anti-Semitic to say that people who want unqualified American support for every Israeli action are very powerful. Of course they are.

They have created a political dynamo that can be defined as the “conventional Israel lobby.” There is a great deal of fear in Congress about this lobby’s purse and power, justified or not. The same fear has caused some American presidents to be hesitant about openly disagreeing with Israel, pressing it to stop settlement expansion or engaging in creative, balanced diplomacy on the Israeli-Palestinian front.

The myth of the 800-pound gorilla

But this lobby is not the fearsome 800-pound gorilla that is commonly described by its detractors. It does not have the ability to get whatever it wants. Those who disagree with it need an accurate assessment of its strength and tactics.

The most powerful organization in the conventional Israel lobby is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). It mostly targets Congress. But Congress has only a limited ability to control foreign policy. That is the prerogative of the President. Samuel Lewis, former U.S. Ambassador to Israel and Egypt says, “History shows that when presidents are determined to do something in U.S. interests, the lobby folds.”²⁹

Citing President George H.W. Bush’s confrontations with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Jimmy Carter’s unpopular advocacy of Palestinian aspirations, Lewis indicates, “The White House can win the fight. Presidents actually have a lot more freedom than they feel like they have. If a president wants to stand up to the lobby, he can.”³⁰

AIPAC and allied Jewish organizations have thrived partly due to the widespread belief that their money controls the political system, and that any politician who disagrees with

them will be verbally and financially pummeled by well-organized American Jews. In the past, there have indeed been campaigns waged by the conventional Israel lobby against legislators who took issue with Israel. Political donations have poured into the coffers of those running against those legislators.

But the amount of political contributions by the conventional Israel lobby to most Congressional incumbents and candidates is not nearly as large as is often claimed. The Center for Responsive Politics ranks donations to Congress according to "industries." In the 2012 elections, the so-called "pro-Israel" industry ranked 29th. It contributed only \$7.1 million, hardly large enough to control government policy. Lawyers and law firms, on the other hand, contributed more than \$43 million.³¹

Individual right-wing donors, like Sheldon Adelson in the 2012 elections, have tried to use political donations to change American policy towards Israel. Adelson failed; almost all of his candidates lost.

The pro-Israel, pro peace alternative

The best way to challenge the conventional Israel lobby is to organize a tangible political alternative, not carp and complain about its power. Fortunately, a solid bloc of American Jewish voters and donors who want to change the political context of America's Middle East policies has emerged in recent years. Pro-Israel, pro-peace organizations like J Street, Americans for Peace Now and Ameinu have growing clout in Washington. They often work in tandem with Christian groups like Churches for Middle East Peace and Arab groups like the Arab American Institute.

Some anti-Israel left-wingers disparage the Jewish groups for calling themselves supporters of Israel. That is short-sighted. If you want American policy in the Middle East to play a positive role and encourage peace, then it makes sense to support efforts to give American officials more political wiggle room to disagree with Israel sometimes. That means helping or rooting for pro-Israel, pro-peace groups to gain more political power and be a counter-weight to the conventional Israel lobby.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, <http://itisapartheid.org/facts01.html>
- 2 Benjamin Pogrud: "Apartheid? Israel is a democracy in which Arabs vote," *Focus 40*, Dec. 2005 (http://www.mideastweb.org/israel_apartheid.htm)
- 3 Richard Goldstone: "Israel and the Apartheid Slander," *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 2011, (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/01/opinion/israel-and-the-apartheid-slander.html?_r=2&ref=opinion&)
- 4 Peter Beinart: "To Save Israel, Boycott the Settlements," *New York Times*, March 18, 2012, (http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/19/opinion/to-save-israel-boycott-the-settlements.html?_r=3&ref=opinion)
- 5 See, for example, "The One State Declaration," *Electronic Intifada*, Nov. 29, 2007, (<http://electronicintifada.net/content/one-state-declaration/793>)
- 6 Carlos Strenger: "We've lost: It's time to think about one state," *Haaretz*, 9/7/2012, (<http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/strenger-than-fiction/we-ve-lost-it-s-time-to-think-about-a-one-state-1.463460>)
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- 14 See, for example, "An Interview with Omar Barghouti": "I am completely and categorically against binationalism because it assumes that there are two nations with equal moral claims to the land and therefore, we have to accommodate both national rights. I am completely opposed to that, but it would take me too long to explain why, so I will stick to the model I support, which is a secular, democratic state: one person, one vote — regardless of ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, and so on and so forth," *The Electronic Intifada*, May 30, 2009, (<http://electronicintifada.net/content/boycotts-work-interview-omar-barghouti/8263>)
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- 27 Joseph B. Schechtman: *European Population Transfers, 1939-1945* (Oxford University Press: 1947)
- 28 There are scores of books about the first Arab-Israeli war, and many contradictory accounts of what happened and why. A good place to start is: Benny Morris: *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (Yale University Press, 2008). Another is: Sami Adwan et. al.: *Side by Side: Parallel Histories of Israel-Palestine* (New Press, 2011)
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About Ameinu

Ameinu, Hebrew for “Our People”, is a national, multi-generational community of progressive Zionist North American Jews. Recognizing the unbreakable bond between the Jewish people and Israel, as well as the commitment to make our own country better, we mobilize Jews who seek opportunities to foster social and economic justice in Israel, the United States and Canada.

We understand that a secure peace between Israel and its neighbors is essential to the survival of democratic Jewish state. With this in mind, we build support within the North American Jewish community for a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



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