

How not to craft a motion in support of Palestine.

I wrote this in response to the motion from the Student Committee of the University of Melbourne “[UMSU Stands with Palestine – BDS and Solidarity Policy](#)” of 29 April 2022 and the Academic Solidarity Statement published in Overland Blog

Any discussion of Israel-Palestine leads to the question of one’s allegiances. Like a number of other people in the Australian Jewish community, I have been quite open in opposition to closing down free speech on Palestine/Israel as well as strong advocacy for Palestinians (for example, in [2009](#)). For this I have been frequently attacked by the Israel Lobby. I call myself non, or post-Zionist. Suggestions about Australia’s role in holding Israel accountable to international human rights standards were developed by me for a [submission](#) to the Australian government by the Australian Jewish Democratic Society. More generally, I support a non-Zionist solution, a state of all its peoples, whatever the state formation and strong international intervention to support this. Activists like Jeff Halper have [written](#) far more extensively than I about what might happen to Zionism in the future in one, democratic state.

The use of terms such as colonialist, racist or apartheid state are part and parcel of public debate in Israel itself, and within the Jewish left internationally. There is in fact a long tradition of writing about Israel from this perspective, by Jews themselves going back at least to the 1960s, so in that respect, it is nothing new for many people. The particular form of apartheid in Israel is called ‘hafradah’ in Hebrew. Scholars like Ran Greenstein, an Israeli resident in South Africa for decades, has referred to it as “[apartheid of a special type](#)”. Consequently, people should be able to undertake such political arguments without being embroiled in accusations of antisemitism.

Thus the weaponization of the controversial [IHRA Working Definition](#) by the Israel lobby and the response of the University of Melbourne [against motions from the Student Union](#) is completely unjustified. In this regard, the Australian Union of Jewish Students appears to be as politically conservative on Israeli politics as it was when I was a student in the early 1970s. A much more preferable institutional standard to work by would be [Jerusalem Declaration](#) which clearly allows for speech critical of Israel. For example, at section 14, it states, “Thus, even if contentious, it is not antisemitic, in and of itself, to compare Israel with other historical cases, including settler-colonialism or apartheid.”

However, what I and a number of progressives were shocked by was the crude and messy and a-historical treatment of the relationship between religion, culture and Zionism (summed up in the words Jews, Judaism, Zionism) in the UMSU motion and its apparent endorsement in an [Academic Solidarity Statement](#). The highly problematic language included these words:

1. Zionism is a “racist, colonial ideology”

2. UMSU condemns any and all forms of antisemitism against students of the Jewish faith and stands in solidarity with Jewish students.
3. UMSU recognises that Israel's actions are not representative of the Jewish community. Similarly, Israel's crimes are its responsibility alone and not that of Jewish people worldwide.
4. UMSU strongly endorses that Judaism and Zionism are not to be conflated as one

The fact of the matter is Zionism is a complex and extremely diverse idea with the Israel state project being one, dangerous outcome. To say that does not mean that one is defending it. Far from it. Anti-Zionism is a legitimate position, but it should not be essentialized to any statement about who and what Jews are. Thus even though the motion says that it does not conflate Judaism or the "Jewish faith" in its attack on Zionism, logically, it cannot stand in solidarity with Jewish student, since most in one way or other, are Zionist. The fact is that Zionism encompasses everything from far-right fascist ethno-nationalists colonialists and diaspora apologists to progressive elements such as the [Rabbis for Human Rights](#) who, from a religious and Zionist perspective unreservedly support Palestinian national and human rights and decry oppressive and discriminatory actions of the Israeli government.

From an anti-Zionist perspective which recognizes the reality of Israeli Jews as a community, Ran Greenstein has [written](#) in a discussion of self-determination "...we must recognize that over the years an Israeli-Jewish national identity has developed alongside a Palestinian-Arab national identity, and each can serve as a foundation for the right to self-determination on an equal basis, as a starting point towards solving the issue on all its aspects." What the students should have done is stay from generic statements about Zionism, and just attacked something specific: the crimes of the Israeli government (call it state Zionism) without using a generic term that ends up causing real offense to those who support neither colonization nor racism. As one left friend posted online: "I do not appreciate my identity being erased by others or my history being rewritten for me. Is that antisemitic? Not sure, but it's racist no doubt"

By way of analogy of the dangers of in getting involved in questions of religious and cultural identity, I am sure that the UMSU would never pass a motion that separated between the Muslim religion and its notion of community-- "ummah", or make a simplistic assertion that "jihad" means support for terrorism, in the same way that "Zionism", narrowly construed, means "colonization and racism". In fact, the statement about Zionism results in "sweeping negative generalizations about a given population" (The Jerusalem Declaration point 1).

A line has been crossed here. The apparent attempt to distinguish faith, self-definition and organisations (to which all people are entitled) is all too reminiscent of the antisemitic anti-Zionist line in the USSR which denied a sense of peoplehood to Jews and which continues to be advocated.

Locally, however, for [the Loud Jew Collective](#), the student motion is "just like any other political statement. [It] has its flaws" I assume that they are referring to the confused and insulting set of axioms about Jews, Judaism and Zionism. If the Collective was referring to something else in the motion but has missed these problems, I see this as a serious omission. For Jews who make a great thing of identity politics, ignoring the flaws in the student motion is a very serious matter.

In the desire to cut out Zionists, we end up with antinormalization politics which refuses to deal with all but very few Israelis who have committed themselves to a kind of loyalty oath

by labelling themselves as antizionist. As Rafi Ellinson [writes](#), particularly referencing self-proclaimed anti-Zionist Jews who wish to divorce themselves from connection with anything Israeli. --"There are many Jews who simply wish to rid any relation to Israel from their vocabulary and Judaism. .. To be clear, I think radical diasporism is a theoretically tenable position, but it's also divorced from a reality in which our collective hands are stained by the occupation. To end this fifty-years-too-long era, we need all hands on deck. Rejecting any connection with Israel may seem to solve the problem of the occupation, but it really only makes it a problem for others to solve — namely, the Palestinians. This ultimately harms those we seek to help by placing the onus on native Hebrew speakers and Palestinians to solve a collective Jewish problem"

More disturbingly, the support for armed struggle (which of course, is a right under international law) in the student motion is in no way qualified. Is this against the Israeli army, and settlers? Is it to occur within the 67 boundaries? Are all Israeli Jews potential targets? What about Australian Jews since they are by and large Zionists? Does the motion support the kind of undifferentiated theory of revolutionary violence developed by George Habash founder of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) in which ALL Israelis and Zionists, as agents of imperialism, are legitimate targets? I think we all know where that leads to. More violence from the Israeli state.

I am not speaking theoretically when it comes to revolutionary violence. Part of the motivation for the terrorist planning of Abdul Nacer Benbrika and his gang in Melbourne was the desire to wipe out all Zionists and unbelievers (don't believe me? look at the law reports). And then there is the case of the Australian Islamist convert Robert/ Musa Cerantonio who became a key propagandist for ISIS. In Indonesia, Malaysia and Bangladesh, three countries with large Muslim population, the words Jew and Zionist are seen as one and the same with all sorts of propaganda circulating. Words coming out of Australia DO have agency.

We are all concerned how neo-Nazi propaganda gets picked up around the world through social media. We should be just as alarmed when confused statements about Jews and their relationship to Zionism or generalized calls for armed struggle by Palestinians are made. The student motion should have just stuck with criticizing Israeli state politics and not got into the explosive area of telling Jews who they are and who should be protected.

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