



## REFLECTIONS ON THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT IN U.S. PUBLIC DISCOURSE: LEGITIMIZING DISSENT

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*This essay argues that the climate of intimidation and fear surrounding a more critical discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the United States has begun to change. Despite the obstacles that still remain, a counterdiscourse challenging dominant conceptualizations and understandings of the conflict, particularly Israel's role, has not only emerged but also gained growing legitimacy and weight. These changes can be found in academia (at all levels of the educational hierarchy), civil society, and policy circles. Some of the most dramatic changes have occurred within the U.S. Jewish community in which an oppositional movement—in part, generational—has grown increasingly strong and well organized, ending any notion of a Jewish consensus on Israel.*

But if the designing of the future and the proclamation of ready-made solutions for all time is not our affair, then we realize all the more clearly what we have to accomplish in the present—I am speaking of a ruthless criticism of everything existing, ruthless in two senses: The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be.

—Karl Marx, *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* (1844)<sup>1</sup>

IN THE FALL OF 2006, I was invited to speak at an elite private secondary school in the Boston area. According to the faculty member who had invited me, whom I shall call Dr. Smith, the invitation—issued months before my scheduled appearance—had been approved and was welcomed by many school officials. About one week before I was to appear, the invitation was rescinded. Dr. Smith, who had the unpleasant task of disinviting me, was clearly embarrassed and ashamed. At my request, he sent me a detailed explanation of what had transpired, portions of which I quote here:

On Tuesday, a colleague from the alumni office saw me in the hall and told me that I could not really invite you to the school because we were going to “alienate” the Jewish population of the school. We had a discussion about this and she promised

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she would invite “fair” speakers to talk about Israel/Palestine; by “fair,” she meant the [Jewish] Anti-Defamation League [ADL] or the [right-wing pro-Israeli] David Project. . . . On Thursday, I was told that there would be a meeting on Friday. [Two of the school’s directors] both told me that although they agreed to have you at [our school], it had to be postponed in order to better prepare the students . . . because if they wanted to challenge you . . . they would not be able to because they do not know much about the issue.

I replied that I had never had a meeting before to talk about preparing students to challenge speakers and I thought that preparation was done in class every day . . . I was told that the topic was a sensitive one . . . because of religion. I replied that you were not coming to talk about religion but politics. This meeting lasted for forty-five minutes in which the exchanges were quite heated.

After the meeting, [senior school officials] decided that they did not want to censor you. We met again and they asked me to tell you that they wanted to invite you on an evening (never heard of such a thing at [our school] before) to talk and debate another speaker in front of an audience . . . [which] would have meant parents present and ready to debate. It looked to me like a set up. They also asked me to be part of a committee that would, from now on, deal with all speakers and organize activities to prepare students before and after [individual] talks. I refused both propositions—to invite you for an evening talk and the committee. . . . I am even supposed to meet with the two school counselors about this whole issue.

My experience with this school is certainly not unique nor is it the worst encounter I have had in my academic career. That said, the climate of intimidation and censorship surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, both inside (at all levels of the education hierarchy) and outside the U.S. academy, is real and longstanding.<sup>2</sup> However, as I will argue in this essay, this context of fear—in which critical scholarship and other forms of criticism on this issue are often treated as a zero-sum game—has slowly but steadily been weakening. Despite the obstacles that remain, some very important changes have been taking place, including within the U.S. Jewish community, that bear directly on fostering more critical and informed scrutiny of the conflict, making it harder to suppress intellectual “deviance” that refuses silence and conformity.<sup>3</sup>

#### **A DEFINING MOMENT OF CHANGE?**

Historically, the dominant framework for understanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was—and for the most part continues to be—imposed by the U.S. policy mainstream supported by mainstream Jewish institutions, including the Israel

lobby. Opposing frameworks have been around for a long time but have been effectively marginalized. With the 9/11 attacks, widespread (mis)understandings of the region in general, and of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict specifically, were deepened and dissenting views largely silenced.<sup>4</sup> Both Israel and the United States were able to rebrand Palestinian resistance as terrorism, arguing with great effect that it is not Israel's occupation that causes terrorism but terrorism that necessitates the occupation.

Although it is impossible to pinpoint a defining moment of change in the United States similar to 1989 for Europe,<sup>5</sup> it was not until the 2003 Iraq war that the tenor of the debate on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict began to alter perceptibly. Changes were tied to perceptions of declining U.S. credibility in the region coupled with rising domestic and international criticism of the war and of the Bush administration's deceptions. In March 2007, the *Economist* observed in an article on the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC): "The Iraq debacle has produced a fierce backlash against pro-war hawks, of which AIPAC was certainly one. It has also encouraged serious people to ask awkward questions about America's alliance with Israel."<sup>6</sup>

The disaster that became the Middle East demanded greater scrutiny, including of the United States' unconditional embrace of Israel and of policies increasingly seen as perpetuating a cycle of violence and political stalemate. In this regard, the Internet and access to the information it provides have been absolutely critical, making it impossible to suppress countervailing research and delegitimize information. And while these changes were not dramatic and encompassing, they underlined the complexities of the region, making facile denial—both inside academia and in the public sphere—more difficult. This in turn widened and legitimized the space, however limited, for a more critical and nuanced discourse on Israel/Palestine (including the root causes of the conflict) and other regional issues that has involved political figures, academics, journalists, and theologians.<sup>7</sup>

### SOME KEY EVENTS

It would be misleading to argue that no context existed prior to the Iraq war for challenging dominant understandings of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The work of Israel's "New Historians," for example, long ago presented a counternarrative for understanding the birth of Israel, and their meticulous research continues to provide alternative historical paradigms. Over the last two decades or more, many Israeli, Arab, U.S., and European academics, journalists, professionals, and diplomats have exposed the harsh realities of the Israeli occupation and the violations of law and human rights that daily sustain it. Certain Israeli public figures (in the political and military spheres), such as Avraham Burg, the former speaker of the Knesset, have raised serious questions about the nature of Israeli democracy and Israel's political abuse of the Holocaust.<sup>8</sup> Undeniably, their work has been essential to creating a substantive foundation for subsequent intellectual and political challenges. It also has given U.S. Jews who care about Israel permission to criticize it.

In the years since the Iraq war, certain events have elevated the counter-discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to new levels of legitimacy and controversy, reflected in part by a growing ambivalence toward Israel among important sectors of U.S. society. In 2005, for example, a poll revealed that a majority of U.S. opinion leaders view support for Israel as a “major reason

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for discontent with the U.S.” globally.<sup>9</sup> In January 2007, M. J. Rosenberg, the former director of policy analysis for the Israel Policy Forum, wrote, “the days when Americans had only warm, sentimental and uncomplicated feelings about Israel are over. Israel is part of the Middle East problem and, as such, it evokes more anxiety than admiration.”<sup>10</sup> In 2007, former national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, worried that America was seen as “acting increasingly on behalf of Israel,” while then secretary of state Condoleezza Rice compared conditions in the occupied territories to segregation, stating that there could “be no greater legacy for America than to help bring into being a Palestinian

state.”<sup>11</sup> Hence, concludes Rosenberg, “contrary to Binyamin Netanyahu’s suggestion that 9/11 turned Americans into Israelis, 9/11 made Americans realize that while they sympathize with Israel, they do not want the United States to become Israel.”<sup>12</sup>

A 2009 Pew Research Center survey on “America’s Place in the World” taken of 642 members of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) reveals similar and rather unexpected findings.<sup>13</sup> For example, when asked, “In the future, what countries in the world, if any, do you think will be most important as America’s allies and partners?” only 4 out of 96 respondents cited Israel, placing it below China (58), India (55), Brazil (37), the European Union (19), Russia (17), Japan (16), Britain (10), Turkey (10), Germany (9), Mexico (8), and Canada/Indonesia/Pakistan/ Australia/France (each at 5). In another question, “In the dispute between Israel and the Palestinians, which side do you sympathize with more. . . ?” 26 percent sided with Israel compared with 51 percent of 2,000 people polled in the general public over the same period, while 41 percent of CFR members said they sympathized with both equally (compared with 4 percent of the general public). Perhaps most strikingly, 67 percent of CFR members believe that historically, U.S. policies in the Middle East “favored Israel too much” compared with 30 percent of the general public. Only 2 percent of CFR members and 15 percent of the general public believe that U.S. policies “favored the Palestinians too much.”

Other, perhaps better known, examples of changing perceptions in U.S. political society include former president Jimmy Carter’s 2006 book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* (Simon and Schuster). Although critiqued by supporters and detractors alike, Carter’s book was vitally important in focusing attention on the nature of the Israeli occupation and the Palestinians’ consequent deprivation. (Carter also argued that Israel’s role in obstructing the peace process

is central.) His very use of the word “apartheid” in association with Israel—arguably the most controversial aspect of the book and one reason why fourteen members of the Carter Center advisory board resigned in protest—made it possible to use that term in a manner that had no precedent. Although Carter was branded an anti-Semite and even a Nazi sympathizer and was shunned by the political establishment for some time, his book sold around 300,000 copies in hardcover and was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for several months.

In the same year as President Carter’s book, Professors John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, political scientists at the University of Chicago and Harvard University, respectively, published an article titled “The Israel Lobby” in the *London Review of Books* (after the *Atlantic* withdrew its agreement to publish it) that subsequently became a best-selling book, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007). In it, they dispassionately exposed the massive power of the pro-Israel political action committees and their associated coalition of organizations (including Christian fundamentalist groups) and individuals (together, the Israel lobby) that secure U.S. support for Israel in a manner, they argue, that is contrary to U.S. national security interests. They further asserted that the resulting conflation of U.S. and Israeli interests encouraged by the Israel lobby has led the United States into foreign policy decisions, including the war on Iraq, that have proved disastrous and that the United States might not have taken in the absence of the lobby’s influence.<sup>14</sup>

Public awareness of the political minefield surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was heightened by a number of increasingly malevolent attempts by pro-Israeli advocates to silence critics of Israeli (and U.S.) policy, particularly within the academy. Among the most noted was the attack on New York University professor Tony Judt, who became a target of the Israel lobby for his outspoken criticism of Israel.<sup>15</sup> Although in 2006 the lobby succeeded in having several public presentations by Judt canceled,<sup>16</sup> their efforts backfired: Judt became an icon of free speech in U.S. intellectual circles, while his defamers such as Abraham Foxman, the national director of ADL, were dismissed as “anachronism[s].”<sup>17</sup>

These battles—fundamentally over freedom of speech<sup>18</sup>—were most often waged over tenure but also over the right to publicly criticize Israel in the classroom. They involved, among others, Professors Norman Finkelstein at DePaul University,<sup>19</sup> Joseph Massad and Nadia Abu El-Haj at Columbia University, Wadie Said at Wayne State University, and William Robinson at the University of California, Santa Barbara. In most, if not all cases, the battles were pitched, often vicious, and quite visible. Finkelstein lost his battle for tenure while Massad and Abu El-Haj won theirs. Robinson was also exonerated of faculty misconduct after he introduced materials criticizing the Israeli invasion of Gaza that included an admittedly offensive photo essay he obtained from the Internet juxtaposing images of Israeli abuse against Palestinians with Nazi attacks against Jews during the Holocaust. Protests by two students

encouraged pro-Israel groups to pressure the university to levy charges of anti-Semitism against Robinson.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, it is important to remember that many (perhaps most) efforts to silence criticism of Israel are, in fact, successful. One case of institutionalized censorship is that of Margo Ramlal-Nankoe, a former professor of sociology at Ithaca College who was denied tenure in 2007. Ramlal-Nankoe claimed that after she began publicly addressing Palestinian human rights abuses, she had been warned by some faculty members that she was “risking” her career—one faculty member openly threatened her with death—and “would suffer repercussions from the administration.”<sup>21</sup>

Yet, in all these cases a national (and at times, international) campaign was mobilized within the academy—among faculty and students—and beyond in support of individual scholars that made it clear that intellectual silence over perceived abuses is no longer the option it once was. And while abuses will no doubt continue—often at a level that remains unseen—and decisions will be made against principled objections, there will also be continued and strengthened opposition to such decisions in the future, particularly as the very real costs of silence increase. People can still lose their jobs in academia or government for speaking critically of Israeli policies, but it is no longer as axiomatic as it once was. The capacity and willingness to resist and defend have grown enormously.

Furthermore, and perhaps more crucially, in some of the cases cited above (e.g., Massad at Columbia and Robinson at the University of California), it was the violation of university procedures in the tenure review process and in the conduct of an investigation—in short, the university’s violation of academic freedom in the mishandling of its own due process (arguably for political reasons)—that mobilized other faculty members against the violations, with some even threatening to resign. There is no better example, in my view, of the academy’s ability to self-monitor.

The cultural sector—media, film, theater—has increasingly provided a venue for nonmainstream interpretations of the conflict despite public campaigns against them. In January 2009, the preeminent television program in America, CBS’s *60 Minutes*, ran a segment called “Is Peace Out of Reach?” a highly critical examination of the Israeli occupation that focused on the settlement project and other aspects of Israeli control and Palestinian oppression. The reporter, Bob Simon, who is Jewish, was unsurprisingly attacked by noted members of the U.S. Jewish community, and CBS received over twenty-five thousand emails of support and condemnation. And while it would be incorrect to say that Simon’s piece represents a turning point in media representations of the conflict, it does signal an unusual willingness to engage alternative perspectives (although precedents do exist). In a similar vein was the appearance of Mustafa Barghouti and Anna Baltzer on the popular *Daily Show* with Jon Stewart on 28 October 2009. Barghouti, a well-known Palestinian figure and former minister of information in the Palestinian Authority, and Baltzer, a Jewish-American peace activist and author, spoke critically of the



occupation and of the possibilities for peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians.

Furthermore, the United States has for many years hosted a variety of film festivals, both Jewish and Palestinian, that have shown films highly critical of the Israeli occupation and open to Palestinian points of view. One of the most recent festivals included a film titled *Rachel* by Simone Bitton, a Moroccan-born citizen of both Israel and France, focusing on Rachel Corrie, the twenty-three-year-old U.S. peace activist who was run over and killed by an Israeli bulldozer in March 2003 while she was trying to defend a Palestinian home against demolition, a finding the Israeli authorities have consistently disputed, arguing that her death was accidental. The film was shown at the twenty-nine-year-old San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, the oldest and arguably the most prestigious Jewish film festival in the United States, drawing Jewish audiences from across the political spectrum. The festival was originally founded to promote independent Jewish films that “contest the conventional Hollywood depiction of Jewish life, particularly its lachrymose over-concentration on Jewish victimhood, and regularly presented ‘alternatives to the often uncritical view of life and politics in Israel available in the established American Jewish community’.”<sup>22</sup> To this end, the festival has screened Hany Abu-Assad’s *Paradise Now* (2005), a human portrayal of Palestinian suicide bombers; Simone Bitton’s *Wall* (2005), a critical examination of Israel’s separation barrier; and Shai Carmeli Pollak’s *Bil’in Habibti* (Bil’in, My Love) (2008), an Israeli film about the Palestinian nonviolent struggle.

When *Rachel* was screened, however, it generated “strident, even hysterical, objections of the official organizations of the Bay Area Jewish community”<sup>23</sup> although it was well received by the 1,200 people who viewed it, many, if not most of them, Jews. According to Professor Joel Beinin:

[I]t is difficult to imagine that these organizations were exercised primarily by the content of the film. Indeed they saved their strongest language for the “virulently anti-Israel, anti-Semitic” co-sponsors of the screening, Jewish Voice for Peace and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and the decision of the festival organizers to invite Rachel’s mother, Cindy Corrie, whom they dubbed an “Israel basher” to take part in a question-and-answer session after the lights went up.

But generic anger at “Israel bashing” is an unsatisfying explanation for the Jewish organizations’ ire, since Jewish Voice for Peace had previously co-sponsored films at the festival and Carmeli Pollak and other Jewish filmmakers had criticized Israel’s occupation policies in much sharper terms than anything anyone in the Corrie family has said on the record. Perhaps the problem was that the festival organizers brought non-Jews—AFSC and Cindy Corrie—under the community tent to witness something of which many members of the community are ashamed.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, the fundamental issue fueling the debate within the San Francisco Jewish community was less the fact of exposing Israel's egregious policies toward the Palestinians than exposing them to non-Jews. The real conflict centered on "how broadly Jews can discuss Israel within their own community—and how Jews represent Israel to the broader world."<sup>25</sup> For purposes of this discussion, I raise the issue of *Rachel* not so much for the particulars of the controversy but because it is an excellent illustration—one of growing numbers—of two significant and relatively recent realities that increasingly characterize the U.S. Jewish community. The first is the profound and growing divisions within that community over Israel and Palestine, shattering any appearance of consensus on the issue. The second is that the organized (mainstream) Jewish community no longer controls the debate as completely and uncritically as it once did. These changes, among others, arguably represent some of the most important factors in the way the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is addressed in the United States, including within the academy.

#### A CHANGING U.S. JEWISH COMMUNITY

Today, unlike in the recent past, the U.S. Jewish community is characterized by a range of political views, more and more of which veer outside the established consensus (this dissenting trend is also seen among Jewish communities elsewhere, particularly in Britain, Canada, and Germany, where, recently, a group of German Jews translated the Goldstone report into German).<sup>26</sup> Indeed, according to a 2005 poll carried out by Steven M. Cohen, a sociologist and pollster who has researched the attitudes of U.S. Jews toward Israel and Israelis for over 25 years, only 17 percent of U.S. Jews called themselves Zionists.<sup>27</sup> Cohen reveals that "[t]he attachment of American Jews to Israel has weakened measurably in the last two years . . . continuing a long-term trend visible during the past decade and a half,"<sup>28</sup> arguing that this attachment, particularly among young adult Jews, "may well be changing, as warmth gives way to indifference, and indifference may even give way to downright alienation."<sup>29</sup>

For example, in a 2007 study for the Bronfman Philanthropies coauthored with Professor Ari Kelman, a sociologist at the University of California, Davis, Cohen found that while nearly 40 percent of Jews over age 65 were strongly attached to Israel, just over 20 percent of Jews under 35 (and between 35 and 49) expressed the same close attachment, a finding echoed in a 2007 American Jewish Committee poll<sup>30</sup> and in the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute's 2008 "Annual Assessment."<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, over 40 percent of Jews under 35 indicated low levels of attachment to Israel (although caring for Israel still remains strong among a majority in this age group) compared with 20 percent of U.S. Jews over 65.<sup>32</sup>

When I began my research nearly twenty-five years ago, the number of Jews speaking out publicly against Israeli policies was extremely small and probably tallied in the hundreds. Today, dissenting Jews number, by some accounts,



in the hundreds of thousands and have gained legitimacy and position in U.S. society, primarily civil society; in some U.S. cities, dissenters outnumber the organized mainstream according to public opinion polls. (Again, it is important not to overstate their influence and position, but relatively speaking, the gains have been enormous.) Some confront the injustice of the occupation with great caution while others express their outrage in clear and principled terms. Some support the notion of a Jewish state while others oppose it. What is commonly understood, however, is that Israel's self-perception as a victim is no longer widely shared.

A significant achievement of the Jewish opposition over the last decade in particular has been to challenge, albeit with varying degrees of success, the hegemony of the mainstream Jewish community over the political discourse that defines the way Americans understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Jewish opposition is well educated, organized, and unafraid, with growing but still limited access to political power. Today, there are many Jewish opposition organizations, both national and local, some a decade old or more and some more recent, and their membership is growing. They include the following: Tikkun, J Street,<sup>33</sup> Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, Americans for Peace Now, Meretz USA, Jewish Voice for Peace, American Jews for a Just Peace, Jews Against the Occupation/ NYC, Jews for Peace in Palestine and Israel (DC), Jews for a Free Palestine (Bay Area), No Time to Celebrate, Jews Say No, and Jewish Women's Committee to End the Occupation. Furthermore, in 2008 the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem opened an office in Washington, DC, "in order to foster greater attention to human rights within the Washington debate on Israel-Palestine, and to inform and mobilize the American Jewish community regarding human rights."<sup>34</sup>

Not only are these organizations increasingly able to provide an alternative Jewish and Israeli viewpoint, they can also reach and mobilize people on a large scale. (The Oakland-based Jewish Voice for Peace, for example, reports that its mailing list has doubled to 90,000 with up to 6,000 people signing on monthly.)<sup>35</sup> They are reaching beyond the Jewish community to forge links with non-Jewish organizations around specific issues and programs, widening the space for nonmainstream positions.

Undeniably, public debate about Israel's place in the Jewish community, once shrouded in fear and uncertainty, has become open, candid, and subject to growing scrutiny, animated by a refusal to be silent. (In part, the willingness of U.S. Jews to criticize Israel derives from Israel's position of overwhelming military superiority and from long-term security fears if Israel persists in its present path.) This appears to be particularly true in the aftermath of Israel's 2008-2009 assault on Gaza, which was a critical turning point for many Jews. For much too long, the prospect of being labeled a traitor or self-hating Jew, as I have often been called, was more than enough to ensure silence and conformity within the Jewish community. Among non-Jews, the fear of being labeled an anti-Semite when discussing Israel or the Palestinians ensured the same silence. This has undeniably changed, and today such threats carry less weight, with fewer people intimidated into silence.

Perhaps the most striking feature that has slowly emerged to distinguish Jewish dissent is a strengthening identification with Judaism, not Zionism, as a moral reference point and framework for understanding and assessing the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Younger (under thirty-five) adult Jews

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especially (regardless of whether they define themselves as liberal Democrats, conservative Republicans, or other),<sup>36</sup> notably the generation born after 1974, “draw upon memories and impressions less likely to cast Israel in a positive, let alone heroic light. The First Lebanon War in 1982, the First Intifada, the Second Intifada and the Second Lebanon War are all perceived as far more morally and politically complex than the wars Israel fought between 1948 and 1974, casting Israel in a more troubling light.”<sup>37</sup> This generation of U.S. Jews finds it increasingly difficult to relate Jewish

values to a project of aggression, dispossession, and colonization, suggesting a growing polarization within the community.<sup>38</sup> Inspired by the moral commitments embodied in Jewish values, they are not as vulnerable to pressure group tactics that silence dissent on Israel’s violation of human rights.

In this regard, Cohen found in his 2005 survey that “[m]ore than two-thirds [of U.S. Jews]”<sup>39</sup> said they are at least sometimes “disturbed” by Israel’s policies or actions and nearly as many said they are “confused.” Almost half said they are at least sometimes “ashamed,” and 39 percent said they are at least sometimes “alienated” by Israel.<sup>40</sup> “Respondents were less likely than in comparable earlier surveys to say they care about Israel, talk about Israel with others or engage in a range of pro-Israel activities. Strikingly, there was no parallel decline in other measures of Jewish identification including religious observance and communal affiliation.”<sup>41</sup>

Two years later in the Bronfman survey, Cohen revealed that declining attachment to Israel also derives from the changing character of U.S. Jewish identity:

The loci of Jewish identity have shifted from the public to the private, from ethnicity and politics to religion, culture and spirituality. . . . Jews are more thoroughly integrated with non-Jews, and intermarriage is both a symptom and a cause of this re-formulation of Jewish identities in a direction that makes attachment to Israel specifically, and identification with collective loyalties generally, less intuitively obvious. Many American Jews are claiming or reclaiming their identities as proud, equal, Diaspora Jews who do not necessarily believe that Israel is the center and America the periphery of a global Judaism.<sup>42</sup>

Writing in the *Nation* in 2009, Adam Horowitz and Philip Weiss observed:

This year has seen a dramatic shift in American Jews’ attitudes toward Israel. In January many liberal Jews were shocked by

the Gaza war. . . . Then came the rise to power of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, whose explicitly anti-Arab platform was at odds with an American Jewish electorate that had just voted 4 to 1 for a minority president. Throw in angry Israelis who write about the “rot in the Diaspora,” and it’s little wonder young American Jews feel increasingly indifferent about a country that has been at the center of Jewish identity for four decades.<sup>43</sup>

Incrementally, a trend is emerging within the U.S. Jewish community (that is in good part generational) whereby personal Jewish identity is no longer based on an attachment to Israel but on an emerging detachment from it.<sup>44</sup>

Hence, another slowly rising trend among progressive Jews is the appearance of a discourse that not only criticizes Israeli policies toward the Palestinians but also raises critical questions about the whole Zionist enterprise, something the organized mainstream has characterized as a Jewish war against the Jewish state. In the aftermath of the Goldstone report, for example, Ari Shavit of *Ha’Aretz* referred to Jewish critics of Israel as “Goldstoners,” a new class of threat that has “brought us closer to bloodshed . . . [T]he Goldstoners are not driven by an honest attempt to divide the land, create peace and establish universal justice that would apply to all nations. They are driven by a deep need to isolate Israel, condemn it and destroy it.”<sup>45</sup>

Although dissent around Zionism has characterized Jewish thought since before the establishment of the State of Israel, it is now labeled by some in the mainstream and right wing of the Jewish community as anti-Semitic.<sup>46</sup> Anti-Zionism is now equated with anti-Semitism, thereby conflating real anti-Semitism with legitimate criticism of Israel, a cynical manipulation that many Jews (and non-Jews) find unacceptable.

Despite this, the debate has opened up—and cannot be closed—demanding and legitimizing a more critical examination of the issues surrounding Israel and the Palestinians that has found expression within the academy and beyond. The widening of the debate, which has effectively ended unquestioning support of Israel, has also precipitated a crisis of sorts—one might even call it a kind of panic or desperation—within the Jewish mainstream, both U.S. and Israeli. This panic derives in part from the fact that the mainstream cannot win the debate—which, critically, has grown more public—based on facts. This is seen in a clear pattern of response that consistently refuses to address the substance of critiques of Israel and its policies but instead focuses on attacking the legitimacy and character of the critic, a tactic that has grown more vicious as the criticism of Israeli policies has gained more legitimacy and exposure. This tactic has sometimes been used with particular virulence on American college campuses as was seen, for example, in the campaigns against Professors Finkelstein and Massad, and more recently against the former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (and former president of

Ireland), Mary Robinson, a critic of the Israeli occupation, when she received the Congressional Medal of Honor.<sup>47</sup>

Another response was articulated by the World Union of Jewish Students (WUJS). Discussing the principles of pro-Israel advocacy on campus and elsewhere, WUJS published the "Hasbara Handbook: Promoting Israel on Campus"<sup>48</sup> in which it advocates a variety of tactics for defending Israel in public forums. Arguing that "[l]isteners have deep-seated fears of violence and disorder, which can be tapped into by creating false dichotomies,"<sup>49</sup> the handbook outlines seven propaganda devices, among them name calling:

Through the careful choice of words, the name calling technique links a person or an idea to a negative symbol. Creating negative connotations by name calling is done to try and get the audience to reject a person or idea on the basis of negative associations, without allowing a real examination of that person or idea. . . . For the Israel activist, it is important to be aware of the subtly different meanings that well chosen words give. Call 'demonstrations' "riots", many Palestinian political organizations "terror organizations", and so on.

Listeners are too preoccupied by the threat of terrible things to think critically about the speaker's message.<sup>50</sup>

## A CONCLUDING NOTE

The debate over Israel is often confused—and often deliberately so—with a debate over Israel's right to exist. The latter is not being questioned. What is in question are Israel's policies, the most recent being the horrendous attack on Gaza. There is no doubt that "the mood" toward Israel in the United States is changing. In an interview with the *Jerusalem Post*, Charles Kupchan, a professor at Georgetown University and a senior fellow at CFR, stated: "I think that 10 years ago, the center of gravity was to give Israel the benefit of the doubt, and I don't think that's true anymore. I would say that at least in the classroom—and I think this is reflective of the country as a whole—US policy in this part of the world is now up for grabs in a way that it was not until recently. I think the US is still going to be a very stalwart ally of Israel, but the terms of that relationship are changing."<sup>51</sup>

There are, in my view, two other important trends that have slowly emerged challenging the conventional discourse on Israel. The first draws a greater distinction between U.S. and Israeli interests in assessing U.S. policy toward Israel and the Middle East. Especially in the aftermath of the assault on Gaza, questions are being inserted into mainstream conversations that ask: Is Israel prepared to pursue diplomatic alternatives to violence? Why is occupation an acceptable default position? The second trend, which is related to the first, is beginning to frame opposition to Israeli policies in political and cultural terms

that are familiar to, and resonate with, Americans (both Jewish and other), potentially normalizing the discourse challenging Israel.<sup>52</sup>

As for the U.S. Jewish community, the changes within have been dramatic. However, the strength of the organized mainstream remains formidable in terms of resources and access to power. No fewer than thirty-three organizations including AIPAC, the Zionist Organization of America, and the Jewish National Fund have a stated presence on U.S. college campuses.<sup>53</sup> I do not want to create the impression that the dissenting community enjoys parity, far from it. But the Jewish opposition is now a recognized, well-organized, and increasingly legitimate institutional player, a far cry from the days when even the mildest public criticism of Israeli policies was refused and could entail major consequences. Ultimately, this is in the interest of everyone: Israel, the United States, and the region. Perhaps most important, all parties to the conflict recognize that a return to the status quo ante—of silent conformity with power—is no longer an option. Thankfully, those days are over.

## NOTES

1. Quoted in Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), p. 13.

2. See, for example, Beshara Doumani (ed.), *Academic Freedom after September 11* (New York: Zone Books, 2006). Some classic works on the subject of academic freedom include Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955); and Ellen W. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

3. There are, of course, other factors contributing to the widening of the discourse that derive from changes within the field of Middle East studies and within the academy itself that are not addressed here. Yet it is also important to note the structural changes within the academy, such as reduction in tenured positions and conditions attached to grants by donors that actively discourage intellectual critiques and the risks associated with them, including critiques on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

4. See Irene Gendzier, "The Risk of Knowing," in "Academic Freedom and Intellectual Activism in the Post-9/11 University," ed. Edward J. Carvalho and David B. Downing, special issue, *Works and Days* 51–54, vol. 26/27 (2008–09).

5. See Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

6. Kevin Kallaugh, "Taming Leviathan," *The Economist*, 15 March 2007.

7. See a particularly moving talk by Susanah Heschel, "The Meaning and Purpose of Scholarship," University of St. Michael's College, Convocation, Toronto, 14 November 2009. Although Professor Heschel does not deal with political issues in this address, she writes, "I learned that scholarship can be dangerous if it is not tied to moral commitments and redemptive goals."

8. See Avraham Burg, *The Holocaust Is Over: We Must Rise from Its Ashes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

9. Pew Research Center for the People & the Press in association with the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), "America's Place in the World 2005: An Investigation of the Attitudes of American Opinion Leaders and the American Public about International Affairs," November 2005, pp. 6, 11, 74. For other studies looking at different (nonmainstream) trends within U.S. society on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, see ADL, "American Attitudes towards Israel, the Palestinians and Prospects for Peace in the Middle East: An Anti-Defamation League Survey," 19 October 2007; Andrew Kohut, "American Views of the Mideast

Conflict," *New York Times*, 14 May 2002; and WorldPublicOpinion.org Staff, "World Public Opinion on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," 1 July 2008. See also Glenn Greenwald, "Jeffrey Goldberg's Gasping, Dying Smear Tactics," *Salon.com*, 20 February 2009.

10. M. J. Rosenberg, "Israel's Increased Isolation," *Israel Policy Forum*, 19 January 2007.

11. Kallaugher, "Taming Leviathan."

12. Rosenberg, "Israel's Increased Isolation." For different findings, see ADL, "American Attitudes toward Israel, the Palestinians and Prospects for Peace in the Middle East: An Anti-Defamation League Survey—1200 Interviews," October 2009.

13. Pew Research Center for the People & the Press in association with CFR, "America's Place in the World, V Survey of CFR Members," Final Topline, 2 October–16 November 2009. See also Jeffrey Blankfort, "Surprising Results of CFR Survey: What the U.S. Elite Really Thinks about Israel," *Counterpunch.org*, 7 December 2009.

14. A separate but important issue that is beyond the scope of this piece concerns the following question: would the lobby be so successful if the United States did not have interests in which Israel collaborated?

15. Tony Judt, "Israel: The Alternative," *New York Review of Books* 50, no. 16 (23 October 2003).

16. See Michael Powell, "In N.Y., Sparks Fly over Israel Criticism—Polish Consulate Says Jewish Groups Called to Oppose Historian," *Washington Post*, 9 October 2006.

17. James Traub, "Does Abe Foxman Have an Anti-Semite Problem?" *New York Times*, 14 January 2007. See also Norman G. Finkelstein, *This Time We Went Too Far: Truth & Consequences of the Gaza Invasion* (New York: OR Books, 2010).

18. For example, see Mark Lilla and Richard Sennett, "The Case of Tony Judt: An Open Letter to the ADL," *New York Review of Books* 53, no. 18 (16 November 2006).

19. See Norman G. Finkelstein, "Civility and Academic Life," in "Academic Freedom and Intellectual Activism in the Post-9/11 University," ed. Edward J. Carvalho and David B. Downing, special issue, *Works and Days* 51–54, vol. 26/27 (2008–09).

20. For an excellent analysis of the

problem, see David Theo Goldberg and Saree Makdissi, "The Trial of Israel's Campus Critics," *Tikkun Magazine*, 14 August 2009. See also Scott Jaschik, "Middle East Tensions Flare Again (in U.S.)," *Insidehighered.com*, 5 September 2007; and Scott Jaschik, "Pessimistic Views on Academic Freedom," *Insidehighered.com*, 15 August 2007. For an alternative viewpoint, see Daniel Pipes, "Outsiders Should Influence Faculty Hires," *The Detroit News*, 6 December 2006.

21. Cecile Surasky, "Academic Freedom, CampusWatch Goes after Columbia's Rashid Khalidi and PARC," *Muzzelwatch.com*, 13 January 2010. Surasky also cites the case of Professor Terri Ginsburg, who in 2008 was fired by North Carolina State University for what she claims was her outspoken criticism of "Zionism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and US Middle East policy." See also J. Lorand Matory, "What Do Critics of Israel Have to Fear?" *The Harvard Crimson*, 5 June 2008.

22. Joel Beinin, "Rachel Corrie in Palestine . . . and in San Francisco," *Middle East Report Online*, August 2009. See also Lori Allen, "Paradise Now's Understated Power," *Middle East Report Online*, January 2006; and Ursula Lindsey, "Shooting Film and Crying," *Middle East Report Online*, March 2009.

23. Beinin, "Rachel Corrie."

24. Beinin, "Rachel Corrie."

25. Matthai Kuruvila, "Rachel Corrie Documentary Sparks Uproar at Jewish Film Festival," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 July 2009. Another controversy erupted at the Toronto International Film Festival after 1,500 artists and writers signed a letter, "The Toronto Declaration: No Celebration of Occupation," protesting the festival's decision to highlight the city of Tel Aviv, which activists claimed was an attempt by Israel to improve its international image after the war on Gaza and its ongoing occupation. See "No Celebration of Occupation: 1,500 Artists and Writers Sign Letter Protesting Toronto Film Festival Decision to Spotlight Tel Aviv," *Democracy Now!*, 14 September 2009. See also Sakhr al-Makhadi, "Jewish Directors Challenge Israel," *Al-Jazeera*, 2 November 2009, focusing on a series of Israeli films shown at the London Film Festival that created controversy. One particularly controversial film, *Defamation*, which



received the best documentary award, is an exposé of ADL in which the filmmaker, Yoav Shamir, claims anti-Semitism is being exploited and exaggerated by the organization to promote a pro-Israeli political agenda.

26. The German translation was scheduled to be released on the first anniversary of the beginning of the war on Gaza.

27. "Second Thoughts about the Promised Land," *The Economist*, 11 January 2007. The article also states that "America has provided a mere 120,000 Israelis since 1948."

28. Steven M. Cohen, "Poll: Attachment of U.S. Jews to Israel Falls in Past 2 years: Loving the Homeland," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, 4 March 2005.

29. Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, "Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel," *The Jewish Identity Project of Reboot*, Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, September 2007, p. 2.

30. American Jewish Committee, "2007 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion," 6–25 November 2007. Although this survey was not broken down by age group, it showed that 29 percent of respondents indicated a "fairly distant" (21 percent) and "very distant" (8 percent) relationship with Israel.

31. The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute (JPPPI), "Annual Assessment 2008," Executive Report No. 5, Jerusalem, 2008, pp. 34–35. The JPPPI was established by the Jewish Agency for Israel.

32. Cohen and Kelman "Beyond Distancing," p. 10; see pp. 8–13 for findings. See also Anthony Weiss, "Attachment to Israel Declining among Young American Jews," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, 5 September 2007; and Finkelstein, *This Time We Went Too Far*.

33. J Street held its first national conference in Washington, DC, in October 2009, attended by 1,500 Jewish progressives and peace activists. See James Traub, "The New Israel Lobby," *New York Times Magazine*, 13 September 2009; Gershon Gorenberg, "A Liberal Israel Lobby," *Prospect Magazine*, 27 April 2008; "J Street Fills Gap in Washington Map," *BBC*, 28 October 2009; Ben Sales, "J Street Journal," *New Voices: National Jewish Student Magazine*, 28 October 2009; Philip Weiss, "Impressions from the 1st Full Day at J Street Conference," *Mondoweiss.net*,

26 October 2009; Richard Silverstein, "2½ Cheers for Historic J Street National Conference," *Tikun Olam*, 28 October 2009; Joshua Holland, "Is the End Near for Right-Wing's Vice Grip on U.S. Israeli Policy?," *AlterNet*, 26 October 2009; Larry Derfner, "Rattling the Cage: 'Die, J Street, Die!'" *The Jerusalem Post*, 21 October 2009; Chris McGreal, "Who Speaks for America's Jews? J Street Lobby Group Works to Loosen Big Beasts' Grip on Congress," *The Guardian*, 24 October 2009.

34. [www.btselem.org/Download/20080401\\_BTselem\\_USA\\_Position.doc](http://www.btselem.org/Download/20080401_BTselem_USA_Position.doc)

35. Adam Horowitz and Philip Weiss, "American Jews Rethink Israel," *The Nation*, 14 October 2009. See also Dorothy Zellner, "Why It Is Essential for Jews to Speak Out, as Jews, on Israel," *Mondoweiss.net*, 23 August 2009.

36. Cohen and Kelman "Beyond Distancing," pp. 12–13.

37. Cohen and Kelman "Beyond Distancing," pp. 3, 8–11.

38. In this regard see the powerful piece by Jay Michaelson, "How I'm Losing My Love for Israel," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, 16 September 2009; Daniel Lange Levitsky, "Jews Confront Zionism," *Monthly Review*, June 2009; Jeremy Siegan, "States of Denial," *New Voices: National Jewish Student Magazine*, 31 December 2009; The Magnes Zionist, "Alan Dershowitz, Richard Goldstone, Naomi Chazan, Jeremy Ben-Ami, Michael Oren, Andrew Sullivan, and Leon Wieseltier—What Does It All Mean?" *Themagneszionist.blogspot.com*, 10 February 2010; and "Diaspora Blues," *The Economist*, 11 January 2007. See also Michael Paulson, "Push on to Bolster Israel's Image: Calls for Reaching Out in New Ways to Young Jews," *Boston Globe*, 26 September 2008; and Joseph Glatzer, "A Few Years Ago I Used McCarthy Tactics against a Professor Who Criticized Israel. Now I'm Going on the Gaza Freedom March," *Mondoweiss.net*, 15 December 2009.

39. Cohen surveyed 1,448 U.S. Jewish households and the survey was sponsored by the Jewish-Zionist Education Department of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

40. Cohen, "Loving the Homeland."

41. Cohen, "Loving the Homeland." For a different view, see Anthony Weiss, "Are Jews Less Attached to Israel? Maybe Not," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, 5 March 2008.

42. Cohen and Kelman "Beyond Distancing," p. 3.

43. Horowitz and Weiss "American Jews Rethink Israel." See also Frank Luntz, "Israel in the Age of Eminem: A Creative Brief for Israel Messaging," Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, March 2003.

44. In this regard see Michelle Goldberg, "Same As It Ever Was? The Pro-Israel Lobby, Long Seen as an Immutable Part of American Politics, May Be Headed toward Obsolescence," *The American Prospect*, 7 August 2009. She cites a warning made by Hannah Arendt about a future rift between "Palestinian Jewry" and other Jews under the pressures of unabated conflict. The former would degenerate into a "warrior tribe. . . . Their relations with world Jewry would become problematic, since their defense interests might clash at any moment with those of other countries where large numbers of Jews lived. Palestinian Jewry would eventually separate itself from the larger body of world Jewry and in its isolation develop into an entirely new people."

45. Ari Shavit, "Watch Out for the Goldstoners," *Ha'Aretz*, 8 October 2009.

46. For example, see Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "Progressive Jewish Thought and the New Anti-Semitism," American Jewish Committee, December 2006; Shulamit Reinharz, "Fighting Jewish Anti-Semitism," *The Jewish Advocate*, 21 December 2006. Dr. Reinharz writes, "Jewish anti-Semitism/Zionism has major mouthpieces in England (Jacqueline Rose), Canada (Michael Neumann), the United States (Tony Judt, Alisa Solomon, Seth Farber, Joel Kovel and Sara Roy), and Israel (Yuval Yonay and Ilan Pappé), countries that protect freedom of expression"; Abraham H. Foxman, *Never Again? The Threat of the New Anti-Semitism* (New

York: HarperOne, 2003); and Steven Plaut, "Collaborators in the War against the Jews: Sara Roy," *Frontpagemag.com*, 18 November 2009. For a counterpoint, see Norman G. Finkelstein, *Beyond Chutzpah: On the Misuse of Anti-Semitism and the Abuse of History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), chapters 1–3; Brian Klug, "The Myth of the New Anti-Semitism," *The Nation*, 15 January 2004; Rabbi Michael Lerner, "There Is No New Anti-Semitism," *Portside.org*, 3 February 2007; "The New Jewish Question," *The Observer*, 11 February 2007.

47. See Rami G. Khouri, "A Pro-Israel Panic," *Agence Global*, 10 August 2009.

48. In Hebrew, *hasbara* literally means "explanation." It is more commonly understood as "propaganda."

49. WUJS, "Hasbara Handbook: Promoting Israel on Campus," Jerusalem, 2002, p. 25.

50. WUJS, "Hasbara Handbook," pp. 22, 25. The handbook does advocate general debate under certain circumstances: when the audience is mature and interested in constructive engagement.

51. Abe Selig, "US Professors: Support for Israel Eroded," *The Jerusalem Post*, 29 June 2009.

52. In this regard, Hannah Schwarzschild of American Jews for a Just Peace stated: "Younger people don't have the baggage of 1967. They are applying what they've been taught about human rights, equality, democracy and liberal American Jewish values to Israel and Israel-Palestine is moving to the center of their political world." Horowitz and Weiss, "American Jews Rethink Israel." See also David Bromwich, "The Break on Palestine," *The Huffington Post*, 17 March 2010.

53. Goldberg and Makdissi, "The Trial of Israel's Campus Critics."