

Israel and the Critics

by Samuel Hux (April 2016)

A recent article (11/30/2015) in the *Jerusalem Post* asks “Should Your Child Go To A College Whose Faculty Supports The Anti-Semitic Boycott Against Israel?” I take it “A Significant Number of Whose faculty . . . ” would make an already long headline too long, so I will accept “Whose Faculty . . . ” I have no offspring still young enough to be choosing a college, but had I it would not be easy to find a reputable college free of the disgrace of the BDS movement (boycott, divestment, sanctions). But since I have spent most of my professional career attached to one of the institutions the article mentions, The City University of New York, third in BDS members behind NYU and Princeton, the question has a certain resonance for me. While I doubt that most BDS members in American universities would endorse the position of Professor As’ad AbuKhalil quoted in the *Post*, “The real aim of BDS is to bring down the state of Israel . . . Justice and freedom for the Palestinians are incompatible with the existence of the state of Israel,” would deny that BDS is anti-Semitic, and would insist that their reason for involvement with the movement is simply their principled anti-Zionism . . . I find it hard to finish that sentence. This is not the first time I am confronted with gross ignorance—both philosophical and historical—parading as intellectual bravery in the groves (graves?) of academe.

I have become used to the follies of the university over the last few years: female and liberal professors at Harvard going berserk over the suggestion that little girls may naturally prefer playing with dolls rather than toy tow-trucks, students seeking “safe spaces” where they are not endangered by possibly offensive ideas, and you-name-it. But there has generally been the comforting knowledge that such inanities were not shared, indeed were scoffed at, off campus. While my colleagues grew embarrassing, my cousins remained sane. But the intellectual carelessness (putting an unearned best face on things) toward Israel is not confined to the university sand boxes. When the president of the United States effectively abandons Israel, condemns her to the doubtful comfort

of knowing she has probably/maybe ten to fifteen years before the Jew-hating regime in Iran has the nuclear capability to realize its fondest dreams, and his appointed sycophants in cabinet and the vast majority of his elected ones as well commit the largest political party in the U.S. to support of his betrayal of a friend to trust an avowed enemy . . . then fools on campuses can feel their folly is wisdom instead endorsed at the highest levels. So perhaps, then, there is a need—I feel a need at any rate—to return to an old and persistent question.

Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism. I do not think the latter is *necessarily* a form of the first, nor does the first *necessitate* the second. But there is something wrong and obscurantist about the way the two anti-isms are usually conceived, especially by those who claim defensively that anti-Zionism *quite simply is not* anti-Semitic. For when one says, as critics of Israel so often characteristically do, “I am not an anti-Semite; I am anti-Zionist: I do not approve of Israel’s *policy*,” this makes no sense. To achieve any logical consistency one has to say, “I am not an anti-Semite; I am anti-Zionist: I do not approve of *Israel*.” That is, anti-Zionism cannot be the disapproval of the policies of Israel, but disapproval of the *raison-d’-être* of Israel without which it would not exist to have policies: Zionism. And that amounts to a disapproval of Israel’s *existence*. While to disapprove of Israeli policies implies merely a preference for other policies, which implies approval of that *raison-d’-être* and that existence without which there can be no other policies. Perhaps for some “anti-Zionism” may be a way of avoiding the cumbersome but more logical “non-anti-Semitic-anti-some-Israeli-policies.” For some. But I suspect I am taking a fool’s confusions too seriously.

It seems to me that when a person says that he or she is not A-S but rather A-Z that person is either

1. an anti-Semite too tasteful for direct admission,
2. not an anti-Semite but confused, unable to distinguish between particular policies of Israel and the being of Israel,
3. someone perhaps anti-Semitic or perhaps not, who wants to object to policy as a safe disguise for objecting to Israel’s being,

4. someone either anti-Semitic or not who candidly objects to Israel's being, or
5. "other": the permutations are generous.

I don't have time or inclination to pursue number 5. I'm not interested in number 1 as my sermon is not about liars who watch their manners—and not much interested in number 2 as I'm not concerned with *unintended* political confusion. But numbers 3 and 4 intrigue me as they are kindred and protean, separated only by the question of candor.

That is, there are certain "principled" objections to specific Israeli policies which shade off when you pursue them far enough into objections to Israel's surly insistence upon survival. And sometimes you don't have to pursue them very far, as if some of the "principled" can hardly wait before dropping their barbs. We know that for instance the late Gore Vidal's characterization of Israelis as a "predatory people . . . busy stealing other people's land in the name of an alien theocracy" was no mere aberration.

What are the possible "principled" objections to Israel? It is possible to object to a "religious" state on principle. You notice many objections to Britain with its established church? Of course not. Admittedly Israel is a great deal more complicated than that—although not the theocracy Vidal insisted on. In some way Israel is an anomaly just as Jewishness is. What is a Jew? (1) Faithful of a religion? (2) An ethnic human fact? (3) Inheritor and subject of an historical experience? Ask a Jerusalem rabbi. Then ask a secular Labor Zionist.

But, with rabbinic rulings on who may take advantage of the Law of Return, and with Orthodox Sabbath restrictions binding upon a nation, etc., Israel is in the broadest sense (1) a *religious* state. So for the sake of argument imagine the extraordinarily improbable: that a Labor regime might disestablish Judaism. Would that remove the objection? I do not think it would.

For the objection could easily be transformed into an objection to (2) an *ethnic* state on principle—even if that takes some ingenuity to pull off talking about the Middle East. One could of course argue that the existence of Arab ethnic states is no excuse for yet another kind and to stand upon principle at all cost. Whose cost? It would be a most Olympian view, nothing less than cruel in its ultramontane purity. Consider the Dutch or any other similar for-instance that comes to mind. There is no imaginable objection to a Netherlands once carved from a foreign empire, although the Dutch have never needed a Dutch state precisely to offer protection to the Dutch for *being Dutch*.

If one despairs of “principled” arguments against *religious* and *ethnic* states one is left with the objection to the political union of (3) a people with a common *historical experience*. In that case one can simply object to states.

This too absurd, where you find yourself if you push the principled objections to Israel far enough. So it’s best for critics of Israel to rest arguments on the assertion that Israel “takes advantage of” the Palestinian Arabs, and that, along the way, she “takes advantage of *us*.”

Amos Oz as far back as 1983, *In the Land of Israel*, admitted that Israel has often “played on the heartstrings of decent people, even making ingenious use of the guilt feelings that were current in the Christian West.” But on the other hand, why should that matter? Why should heartstrings *have* to be played upon, if they belong to people with decent hearts? And if they are played upon, why not take that as a compliment, the assumption of decent hearts? Because—I assume—one fears one is being courted to forget the Palestinian Arabs.

After serialization in the Israeli newspaper *Davar* in '82 and '83 of the essays that were to become *In the Land of Israel*, Ziad Abu Ziad, editor of the Arab West Bank daily *Al Fajr*, saw fit (and one can assume without too much cynicism felt pressure) to distance himself and his journal from conversations Oz

recalled with the staff. One journalist, Abu Haled, has thought about a Palestinian Arab state affiliated with Israel. Why not with Jordan, Oz asks. Abu Haled: "Look, we've learned something from you. We want to be an open, pluralistic, democratic society. And that is not about to happen so soon with Jordan." And he continues (I assume): "I, for one, am willing to state openly and out loud today: The Jews have a historical claim to part of Palestine. Your forefathers were here, along with our forefathers. Your suffering grants you rights, as does our suffering . . . You are our destiny. We are your destiny . . . There's nothing we can do about it: here in this land we are welded together, Jews and Arabs, forever."

The fact that Ziad later claimed his journal's position had been "softened" by "an Israeli writer who stands to the right of center" (Oz of course was a Labor Zionist) reminds one that the hardline Arab position has always rejected the notion of a parity of forefathers. And so has much of the "principled" West: the Arabs were "there first." Joan Peters' *From Time Immemorial: The Origins of the Arab-Jewish Conflict Over Palestine* should have settled the question when it appeared in 1984. Should have. But didn't. The book was subject to predictable debate from the beginning. If *debate* is the right word. It was violently attacked by the usual crew: Norman Finkelstein, Noam Chomsky, and—of course, no surprise—Edward Said. I cast my lot, however, with Barbara Tuchman, Daniel Pipes, T.H. White, Lucy Dawidowicz, Elie Wiesel.

The going argument: The Arabs "displaced" by the state of Israel had been there "from time immemorial." From the late nineteenth century on the steady immigration of Jews threatened the position of long-time Arab landmen. And . . . the rest is common knowledge. Peters' argument: Population statistics seldom considered reveal a different story. Most the Arabs in western Palestine (roughly present Israel) in the twentieth century have themselves been "immigrants" or descendants of. In the 1890s there were approximately 60,000 Jews in western Palestine, approximately 94,000 Arabs. By 1948 the Arab population had increased 400 percent. In those areas of Palestine with little Jewish presence—Transjordan, Gaza, the West Bank—the Arab population had only doubled. One can assume, I suppose, that the proximity of Jews made Arabs more

lusty. Or one can note—as Peters does—the economic vitality of those areas with heavy Jewish numbers and the consequent opportunities which attracted Arabs from Transjordan, etc.

But these figures are profoundly irrelevant unless one uses them with sufficient modesty. They do modify the notion that Arabs were “there first”; they don’t, and aren’t meant to, suggest that Jews were “there first.” There is no question but that for the longest time (a more modest phrase than “time immemorial”) there had been more Arabs than Jews in Palestine. And there is no question that’s no argument against a significant and legitimate Jewish presence later—which of course is different from a Jewish state. The point is: what moment in historical time do you want to focus on? Biblical? Medieval? 1700? 1890? 1947? When do you want to start counting minutes and tabulating population? That’s an impossible question—although there are, such is polemical ingenuity, many ready answers. But cut history as you like, Abu Haled remains correct. Forefathers, suffering—they add up to a mutual destiny. Mutuality. Well

The most sophisticated formulation of “principled” judgment against Israel goes something like this: What Israelis do not appreciate sufficiently, although they should, is that Arab longing for Palestine is a kind of “Zionism” too. But this is sophistical, because the “too” is seldom meant. The argument is hopelessly inane, unless one adds that that *Zionism*, first of all, is a “Zionism” too. It’s dishonest to borrow the frame of reference for a minute’s polemical use. You have to buy the frame of reference.

But I would guess—as I read and listen—that many have made at least a down payment. But many buy with a conditional option. That is, they are comfortable with Arab “Zionism”—no strings to speak of attached—but not comfortable with Zionist Zionism unless Israel shows itself to be what it originally promised (or hoped) to be, “a light unto the nations.” And when it doesn’t seem to be, many feel that Israel is “taking advantage of *us*.” If the *goyim* are to be just Gentiles, why should not the Israelis be just Jews, citizens of a moral

republic?

There is justice in this question. And there's also an impertinence of selective demand as well. Arab "Zionism" is justified by perceived need, which justifies any behavior, or at least renders it "understandable." Zionist Zionism is justified by behavior alone. It is hopeless to try to convince the "principled" that Israeli behavior in the main is high. For they will mention this episode and that and insist that exceptions to just behavior don't *prove* but *are* the rule, and then will argue that Arab exceptions are merely exceptions, given Arab need.

The point is that in many cases I prefer *other* policies. But I am not inclined to defend Israel by saying that other nations are just as bad: "You're another!" For I think that most (if any) other nations do not have Israel's earned moral authority. I am sure this confession is convincing only to the already-convinced. I merely wish to make my position as clear as possible. I think we have reached a point in Middle Eastern history when a serious person cannot have a completely neutral view, cannot begin each day at zero and say "My mind on this issue is absolutely uncommitted; my judgment responds to each single event in terms of its unique merit alone." A mind can be so "open" only if it's above history and has no enveloping values. Such a mind is a cat's paw.

Other nations don't have equal moral authority? I know that for some in Israel the question of moral authority can be turned upside down: why should we be different? Oz lectured Gush Emunim activists on their lust—ironically inspired by their fundamentalist fanaticism—for the ordinary, on their "sniveling complaint against the 'outside world'" and their desire for "license for savagery and a permit for cruelty and oppression, 'like everyone else.'" To be a light unto the nations was not, of course, a unanimous ambition in Israel ever. There were thousands inspired by no other light than that in a comforting window—and who should have the gall to look askance at them? (Well, as a matter of fact, I know who.)

Nevertheless, there's no question but that Israel, as Oz put it, "Waved very high-flown moral arguments" (even if she had to for birth and survival). So the tendency to hold Israel to high standards of ethical performance need not be simply an exercise in Gentile arrogance and presumption (Let there be a state such as We could never make); Israel as light unto nations may have been only an exercise in Jewish foolishness. But I don't think so. I think the West misunderstood all along, while the Israelis did not, what a light could mean.

From a powerful nation what moral behavior might be requested? A modest use of its power, a refusal to do the damage it well could do—"They that have the pow'r to hurt and will do none" (Shakespeare). That's a first step at any rate. There's no question of turning the other cheek, since most nations can't reach the first cheek to slap it. From a harried and precariously erect nation what moral behavior could be asked? Certainly not turning cheeks when it's trying to remain erect. Even passive suicide, I think, is accounted a mortal sin.

If there is one thing that marks the essential morality of Israeli behavior it is that one thing that makes its experience among nations unique: the *in-gathering*. The very thing that most offended British Labour stupidity, most enraged Arab opinion, and fed the anger of Western pro-PL0 ideologues, was the one thing Israel would not forego. And this is tantamount to saying that a most basic objection to Israel's behavior is an objection to her most basic moral principle. It seems that much of the West is morally incapable of appreciating a morality that is not individualistic, or at its most expansive familial. The British under the Mandate surely were, and their legacy abides. If some Jews, admitted to Palestine, had been willing to say "Well, I'm here; I'm all right Jake," then well and good, we can understand that. But the need to share one's great good luck with those trapped by history elsewhere, the notion of "If I am for myself alone . ." seems to have been incomprehensible.

But probably I only reveal what I've already admitted—that one can't be neutral in these matters. (But why should one assume that neutrality and morality sit well together?) Assume what by now promises to become self-evident: that no settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict will ever be equally pleasing and equally offensive to both Arabs and Israelis, that we will never be able to say, beyond mere back-slapping, an equal blessing on both your houses. Then to which house would it be more just to give priority blessing? My choice I'm sure is clear, my reasons only apparently so.

Granted Aristotle wasn't talking about foreign affairs in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but his question is suggestive: "as regards morally good men, should we have as many in number as possible as our friends? Or is there some limit?" He can't suggest a specific number, simply "the largest number with which a man might be able to live together, for . . . living together is the surest indication of friendship." And: "Furthermore, one's friends should be the friends of one another." How sad. Because we're not talking about a large number, only three (Israeli, Arab, us), and two cannot make it to be friends of one another. It is absurd to think the third can practice perfect diplomacy, beyond the most necessary gestures of that public art.

And there's a child's appeal to justice which in its way (mouths of babes) is as profound as Aristotle's earthy moral realism: "You started it!" It is absurd for adults to temporize at the expense of truth, for someone *did* start it.

Nothing I say will make sense unless I am right that Abu Haled (in Oz's book) was right: "Your forefathers were here, along with our forefathers." Had the British been successful in offering Theodor Herzl a Jewish National Home in Uganda (!) or somewhere in East Africa (it was never very certain) we would have a different case altogether. And the persistent question—Why in the Middle East, since the establishment of a Jewish state was in part compensation for recent European, not Arabic, crimes?—has another side to it. That is: when we are reminded that historically it was in Islamic Spain that Jewry experienced one of its periods of relative cultural freedom and that that period ended with the

European reconquest, or when Arabs say that Jews had been (relatively!) well treated in Middle Eastern lands, that's at least as good an argument for Israel to have been established where it is as it is an argument against.

But, assuming what it's probably hopeless ever to expect universal agreement upon, that after World War II there could no longer be any question that one of the human race's most remarkable people would finally *have* to have a nation-state, the absence of which had cost it a greater price than any people had ever paid, and the logic of *where* was clear even to those who hated the logic—then, in modern Palestine *who started it?*

The British Mandate over Palestine, after the dismemberment of the Turkish empire, encompassed what is now Jordan, the West Bank, and Israel. The 1947 partition plan approved by the U.N. gave the Arabs over 80 percent of mandated Palestine, the Jews the rest. Some will say the Jews got half. *But:* the '47 partition was actually a second partition, the Arab state of Transjordan having been created from land east of the Jordan River for Abdullah ibn-Hussein in 1922 (Winston Churchill: "I created Transjordan with a stroke of a pen on a Sunday afternoon in Cairo"), with that land west of the Jordan retaining the now inappropriate name "Palestine," a truncated version of the original Mandate area. So the '47 partition meant an even further slice for Palestinian Arabs. This left the Jews a little more than a sixth of the original mandated Palestine: a considerable diminution of what the more optimistic Jews might have expected from the 1917 Balfour Declaration to create a National Jewish Home. (And the Balfour Declaration, remember, became an integral part of the Mandate approved by the League of Nations.)

The Jews accepted the second partition nonetheless. Somewhat hesitantly they did. For the Revisionist Zionists wished a state extending beyond the Jordan. For all would have preferred that Jerusalem not be set off as an international city about sixteen miles from the closest Jewish border. But the realism of the Labor Zionists ruled. Now or never, David Ben Gurion said. And he was right. A Jewish state may have been an idea whose time had come, but

historical actors are often oblivious of or resistant to the apparent logic of history. But one sixth for the Jews was offensive to the majority of the Palestinian Arabs and to all the Arab regimes, with the ambiguous exception of Transjordan, whose King Abdullah would have accepted a Jewish state in exchange for his incorporation of Jerusalem and the West Bank—ironically, roughly the same expanse his grandson Hussein was to rule as part of Jordan until 1967.

When the U.N. on November 29, 1947, ratified the partition plan to take place May 15, 1948, and war broke out upon Arab rejection of it, it can hardly be said the Haganah was more hesitant to take up arms than the Arab forces. But it can be said the Jews were up against a hard place—Churchill no longer Prime Minister, the Labour Foreign Office of Ernest Bevan was clearly pro-Arab and wished to see partition, which Britain had washed its hands of in the U.N., fail (the U.K. abstained in the U.N. vote); the U.S. was publicly considering reversal of its approval of partition; the big powers refused the Israeli request for an international peace-keeping force in the international-city-to-be—and the Jews had no place to go. The Mufti, Haj Amin Hussein, was calling for *jihād* to drive the Jews into the sea; and it was too much to expect Jews in 1947 to have thought this mere rhetorical excess. And even now it requires an extraordinary nicety of manners to ignore the fact that the Mufti had been responsible for several bloodbaths in the '20s and '30s, had spent World War II in Germany where, among other things, he helped raise two Balkan Moslem divisions for the *Waffen SS*, personally threw his weight to see that 4,000 Bulgarian Jewish children did not emigrate for Palestine in 1943, and after the war escaped consideration for Nuremberg thanks to British and French concern for Arab sensibilities. The '47-'48 war established the boundaries until the '67 and '73 wars. The occasional reminders that those borders did not conform to the partition plan ignored the fact that only a desire for suicide would have compelled Jews to respect the precise lines of a partition which Arabs had already rejected because they wished *all* of Palestine. Backs against the sea, the Jews fought for a strategic geographic shape, although it can hardly be said they achieved it.

The Arab refugee problem (so much more famous than the Jewish one) commenced

with hostilities. And it is strange to think that so many think this strange, assuming apparently that in a war the devil must be at work before there will be refugees. The perceived devil is generally the Israelis, the moment of his strike April 9, 1948, the Arab village of Deir Yassin, where a swinish contingent of Irgun and Stern Gang massacred the population. It is little to say that the murderers escaped retribution because a Haganah officer refused the order to gun them down—for they could have been “court-martialed” if the Israelis had been willing to risk a civil war within a war. And it is only a relativist brand of morality to say that atrocity was an exception for the Israelis but not for the Arabs, who’d had practice in it for thirty years: Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed, etc. But in any case Arabs had begun to flee even before Irgun and Lehi (Stern Gang) left their bloody mark on Israeli history, encouraged to do so here, discouraged from doing so there: no consistent policy from the Jews. Nor was the Arab League high command and Mufti policy consistent: stay and fight the Jews; run for your lives. And in spite of the latter counsel, the ’48 refugees were met with the double standard of Arab contempt. One instance: the Syrian radio broadcast in 1948 that the Palestinian Arabs were responsible for Arab military losses—“They ran away in the face of a threat by a small minority and spend more time talking over their own affairs than fighting for their country.” And they and their descendants have seldom been accorded normal status in the Arab states they fled to, most being kept in camps and special areas as a reminder of Israeli “usurpation.” Which is to take a refugee problem and insure that it remains a refugee problem.

The refugees are not a fiction—the Arabs have insured that. (Israel solved the problem of Jewish refugees from Arab states . . . by giving them citizenship.) But much of the attendant politics is a fiction. All the Arab states, with the exception of Sadat’s Egypt, refused *de jure* recognition of Israel, while recognizing the claims of the PLO and such as a kind of government-in-exile—in spite of the fact that the PLO could not represent in exile a state that *never* existed, as Republican Spain and pre-World War II Poland for instance did—and insisted that such a “government” of a phantom state should be accorded international recognition. Fictive diplomacy.

The major claim, of course, aside from charges that Israel (which accepted its U.N. birthing while the Palestinian Arabs rejected theirs) is an illegal entity, is that the Palestinian Arabs must have a *Palestinian* state. Most Arab states agreed, arguing that it's not justice that Palestinian Arabs be expected to become citizens of just any Arab state, or that just any Arab state be expected to absorb them; for just as Syrians are *Syrian*, and Iraqis are *Iraqi*, Palestinians are *Palestinian*.

Such particularistic nationalist logic contradicts history and tradition. Until the Mandate established one, there had not been a Palestinian political or national entity since the Roman conquest (at which time of course Jews were as at home in the area as anyone). And under Turkish rule Palestine was not a province but a part of the province of Syria, and was considered, especially by Syrians, as just "southern Syria"—a point now conveniently forgotten.

Nor does this particularistic logic lead to acceptance of the fact that there is *already* a Palestinian Arab state: the Jordan that once was Transjordan, the greater part by far of Mandate Palestine. Although only those who came from west of the river are called in Jordan "Palestinian," so that even *the* Palestinian Arab state can keep alive the fiction that there is no Palestinian Arab state, except in exile.

And such particularism, by which even X-Arab is not expected to dwell in commonweal and citizenship with Y-Arab, makes the occasional Arab piety that all they want in place of the "Zionist entity" is a secular bi-national state sound . . . what? Hollow? Facetious?

The occasional protest that the Jews, clever devils of Zionists, expropriated the best lands, leaving the wastes to the dispossessed, is absurd. First: Rather than "expropriation," Jewish immigrants before and after the Balfour Declaration *bought* lands from mostly absentee Arab owners out of their own pockets or with

money from the Jewish National Fund and similar organizations, often at exorbitant prices; and any Arab tenants displaced by land sales were, at least after 1922, required by Mandate law to be compensated after a year's notice with cash or land—required compensation the Jews often exceeded in order to ease the way to purchases. Of course Arab land abandoned during the '47-'48 war is another matter, although *expropriation* is hardly the word. The absentee owners whose lands were distributed by the 1950 Absentees' Property Law were assigned the right to compensation would there be an overall peace settlement with the Arab states they fled to. If that right is merely "theoretical" there is of course a good way to test Israeli intentions and promises! Second: All accounts agree that before the waves of Jewish immigration beginning late nineteenth century the area that became Palestine, including the part that's now Israel, was a wasteland, desolate, with a shrinking population. Zionist labor before and after statehood turned it into an oasis while, after the '47-'48 war, Arab states encouraged Palestinian Arab refugees to camp and wait, ignoring a labor force and U.N. funds available by decree to put it to work making other oases.

"The creation of our State would be beneficial to adjacent countries, because the cultivation of a strip of land increases the value of its surrounding districts in innumerable ways." And that now-ironic profession of faith from Herzl's *Der Judenstaat* (1896), which could make one weep, is as good a place as any to conclude this brief historical recapitulation, since it underlines so horribly the waste of decades and decades.

I am sure that with a shift of emphasis here and there this recapitulation could go a different way—although I think that different way would tell a false story. I could focus on the Arab citizens of Israel who—although they enjoy better education, economic well-being, and social and medical services than Arabs elsewhere in the Middle East (a misplaced comparison of course!), for which they express very little appreciation—are not (except for the Druse) trusted by their government enough for military conscription. (I skip the fact that they have more electoral rights than Arabs elsewhere because it makes no sense to compare *something* with *next to zero*.) And I could admit there's something distasteful about the way I introduced the recapitulation: "who

started it?" But although I don't think any other case for the "who" could honestly be made than the one I've made, a better question is "how to end it?" But the question of *how* to end it is not foreign to the question of why the Israeli Arabs are not quite trusted and why the more hardline factions of Israelis should have gained so much power and prestige after multiple wars of national defense. Can anyone *seriously* argue that Arab mainstream leaders in the area, from Arafat to the present holocaust-denying "moderate" leader in the Palestine Authority, have tried or wished to contribute to an end? Other than Sadat, who tried—and paid the price. (Of course there was the sitting duck Hussein, who periodically seemed to *wish*, his memories fixed on his assassinated predecessor grandfather.) Rather: all concessions must come from Israel, even unto the ultimate one. And if it's argued that PL-Whatsit leaders have their hands tied by their followers, it doesn't take much memory to know that their words over the years have insured their hands would be tied.

Arab irredentism should be common knowledge—and such rhetoric is never innocent of substantive result. Arab rejection of most of a loaf at the 1947 U.N. is historical fact. And. And. And. The British tried to wash their hands of the Balfour Declaration sponsorship of a Jewish National Home eight years before they effectively could in the U.N. partition debates. The "White Paper" of May 1939 provided that in five years' time Jewish immigration would not be allowed without Arab acquiescence, that there would be no partition and no Jewish state, that within ten years' time there would be an independent Palestinian state. But there were also these two provisions: within the five year period 75,000 Jews would be admitted, and the Palestinian state would insure safeguards for its Jewish community. The provisions of the White Paper, in other words, did not even amount to a bi-national state. The Arabs rejected it out of hand. How much has changed? That seems to me a question for Arabs to answer.

It is also a question for Israel's critics—so many of them academics whether officially BDSers or not—to answer. But they can't, because the chances are that they are totally and shamefully ignorant of the historical background of a geopolitical situation on which they pontificate with such asinine confidence.

I confess that the historical recapitulation I have offered was written with them in mind—that is, as if they were my intended readers—while I know that their listening (I mean reading me, of course) is unlikely in the extreme. But I can imagine that if they were they might tell me that I have relied heavily on old scholarship, 1980s stuff like Oz and Peters, instead of the newest. (As if they knew any of the newest.) Well, yes . . . just my point, as a matter of fact. The information I have been providing has been around for a long time. A long time. So there is no excuse for the critics of Israel to be so bloody ignorant of what's been in clear view for such a long time!

It's unnecessary for me to admit again that I pretend to no hard-nosed-neutrality-but, as I think Israel's hardest critics often do pretend. Since I expose myself as they do not, a few personal notes follow.

I know a few Arabs. Some of my best friends . . . ? No. Matter of fact, only one of my very best has ever been: when I was a kid, a kid named Anwar, with whom I marched to church on Sundays singing "Onward Christian Soldiers," which every other verse I would change to the like cadenced "Anwar Richard Joseph." Joseph? In the small town of my childhood there were two Arab clans: *Yusuf* had become the surname *Joseph*, and it along with *Saieed* (rhyming with *Wade*) sounded really quite ordinary. The "Syrians" as we called these Lebanese were either Baptist or Catholic, although I recall an ecumenical wedding with a *Thorburn* in the Episcopal Church. There was an out-of-towner from thirty miles away, a tennis player named *Hallow* at our local teachers' college (where a cousin of the same name anchored the offensive line) who used me for practice on weekends when I was in high school. He was the first person I ever heard refer to himself as a Palestinian, but I remember him best for his favorite joke, "Hallow-tosis is better than no breath at all." Given my association with Arabs I cannot easily imagine let's say the Bedouin: I have to force myself to. Tennis no longer a concern of mine, having graduated to intellectual considerations, I'm more likely to think of Edward Said.

When one makes the choice—Israel or Arab front? *Israel!*—one is often suspected of “racism,” or whatever the word might be. Anti-*that*-Semitism? Or there’s the suspicion that pro-Israeli sentiments are informed quite simply by a pro-Western disposition (as if there were something wrong with that)—and in spite of North African Sephardim and “Orientals” from Yemen and such, who doesn’t think of Israelis as Western? I know I do. And then follows the suspicion that pro-Israeli sentiments are informed by a casual assumption that we Westerners gotta stick together, y’ know.

But it’s my peculiar form of ignorance not to be able to think of Arabs from the Palestinian vicinity as not, somehow, “Western.” A form of parochialism, given the Josephs, Saieeds, and Hallows? And Said? A form of mental colonialism, with all that French and English in the region, the blue-eyed red-haired Mufti of times past, the spiffy British-style uniforms that Sir John Grubb’s Arab Legion seems to have made mandatory in the region, and so on? I suppose so. It’s not reasonable; I don’t think of Saudis in Cadillacs as *Western*. But there it is, my warped view—which I am not trying to pass off as some ironically profound political point.

Rather, the point is that the assumption that pro-Israeli sentiments are easily explained as pro-Western loyalties disguised is just as superficial as my experience. But I would guess that anti-Israeli sentiments among Westerners can often be explained in part by the perceived European-ness of Israel. That is, I suspect rather strongly that a great deal of the objection to Israel, ignoring or distorting as it does the history of the conflict, is not so much an embrace of moral principles as it is fashion disguised: for some people what used to be called the Third World everywhere possesses an innate virtue it is reactionary to question.

It is very easy to become thoughtlessly impatient with the Israelis. They can be made to look bad. In part because there’s an obvious will to do so. But beyond that the Israelis can be made to look bad ironically because of the virtues of the Israeli state. Militarily they can move with precision and resolve. But on

diplomatic issues they can be, or appear to be, cumbersome. Sadat came to Israel, not Begin or his predecessors/successors to Egypt—although to deal credit where it is due, Sadat could know that he'd be safe in Israel. (Oh that he could've been at home.) They can be cumbersome because no *one* runs things, no monarch, no president of long or dictatorial tenure, no one party. Which means debate and deliberation even in the best of circumstances, which will raise the charge by some that the Israelis are stiff-necked and stalling. Which charge is tantamount to saying it's an encumbrance that Israel is that rarity in the Middle East, a parliamentary democracy.

I realize that's not an overriding consideration for everyone—parliamentary democracy, *elsewhere*. That's nothing new. What's new, I suspect, are the rich temptations of flip anti-Zionism now that Israel is no longer an underdog, or *seems* no longer to be. Some of the thrill is gone from being pro-Israel as in the early days. And thrill is probably a stronger motivation for many people than we would like to think.

Look. There's a cunning thrill in making anti-Israeli noises, a pleasing sort of self-advertisement. I put you the following. It is just to be enraged at evil: Apartheid, death squads, the murder of hostages, beheadings, whatever. It's also very easy. Even the unimaginative can do it. No thrill, no self-congratulation—nor should there be. But talking about the Israelis one can display and flex one's "courage" for all the world to see and marvel at: one can advertise how complicated one is, how willing to edge right up next to the unspeakable, unlike lesser types who aren't Big Thinkers Taking Risks.

Sympathy for Palestinian refugees condemned to camp life isn't enough—even the unimaginative can have it. But placing the blame on *Konzentrationslager* victims, their descendants and relatives, instead of on concerted Arab policy where it belongs—now that's risky. There's also a certain thrill in having questionable friends—as any studious kid admiring the class tough guy knows, or any crooner enamored of *Mafiosi*. Stalinoids out of fashion, there's something appealing about *Fedayeen*.

And the thrill of tragico-moral attitudinizing must be enormous. "Of course the Jews suffered," one can say; "you think I do not see that?" one may ask, swelling indignantly. "But," the voice grows firm, "there are principles involved here, and one has to stick to them hell or high water, not swayed by dramatic conditions. If Jewry suffers again, you think that would not hurt me?" One looks hurt. "But when we start cutting our principles to suit contingencies . . . now that is cowardly. That may seem harsh to you, and I understand," patronizing glance, "but some of us must bear the burden of conviction." One can get a high on such high-mindedness. But I suspect that when principles become so thrilling it's the intoxication that matters. Slippery games.

Israel may no longer be an underdog and may have the most efficient military in the Middle East. But to assume invincibility is presumption, and a-historical. No nation so tiny and so hated by neighbors fueling their hatred generation after generation is truly assured of its existence, even if it has one large friend. A state which exists without the unconditional endorsement of its right to exist (a *state*, that is, not a regime), and without the active support of a great power, exists to some degree by sufferance of its enemies. There is no more reason to assume permanent support—*think of the Obama effect, you might call it*—than to assume continued sufferance. The "Jewish lobby" may look fairly omnipotent from Damascus, and can be exaggerated in New York, Chicago, and other metropolitan areas. But in Greenville it's not a "lobby" that accounts for pro-Israeli sympathies; rather, the *Fedayeen* look from there like a bunch o' Commies. The U.S. has never been oblivious for long to *Realpolitik*. And Israel is an enormous burden. What actual strategic benefit does the U.S. enjoy from Israel that it would not from a grateful Arab Palestine? So it is terribly ironic that the one American foreign policy commitment that has for decades been generated much more by moral obligation than by crass estimates of national self-interest is the one commitment that generates so much distaste among people proud to think themselves "principled." How dare these academic swine be so casual in their stupidity.

If one *is* principled, there's another consideration that ought to move one even if the precarious position of the state of Israel in its political particulars doesn't. I mean this quite seriously, even if it's impossible to prove (and I pray it never is proved) and the way I put it vaguely metaphysical: Given the great crime of the Holocaust, this earth cannot bear another wound even reminiscent. Human life would be desperate and pointless. And I would not wish upon generations to come the dishonor of relationship with my own.

If such a notion—that history passes on transcendent moral obligations, and that life itself can be wounded—is meaningless, then we can scrap whatever civilized pretensions we may have, and say that we are a miserable beast who has the capacity to *talk* ethics because it once heard that was a polished thing to do.

Samuel Hux is Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at York College of the City University of New York. He has published in *Dissent*, *The New Republic*, *Saturday Review*, *Moment*, *Antioch Review*, *Commonweal*, *New Oxford Review*, *Midstream*, *Commentary*, *Modern Age*, *Worldview*, *The New Criterion* and many others.

Donate to *New English Review* [here](#)!

More by Samuel Hux [here](#).