

# THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS IN THE STIMULATION OF INTRA-JEWISH CONFLICT OVER ISRAEL AND ANTISEMITISM

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## Introduction

Ethnic, national and religious groups in most countries are rarely internally homogeneous. The British Jewish minority is no exception. No more than an estimated 450,000 strong at its height immediately after World War Two, figures based on the 2011 census show that there are now less than 300,000 ethnically and/or religiously self-identifying Jews in the UK<sup>1</sup>. Including Sephardim, Mizrachim and Ashkenazim, they trace their ancestry from a wide variety of countries, although the majority are now British born. They include secular, reform, conservative, modern orthodox and Haredi Jews (groups which themselves are internally diverse), and they hold a variety of political positions on Jewish issues, antisemitism, Israel and much else.

This internal diversity has only recently started to become visible outside the Jewish minority and to be recognised within it. For many years, the dominant and long-established Jewish ‘representative’ institutions such as the Chief Rabbinate and the Board of Deputies attempted to present an image of a loyal, secure and united British Jewish community – what Ben Gidley and I have called the ‘strategy of security’<sup>2</sup>. This strategy was never uncontested, but in the post-war period it became increasingly unviable as a variety of Jewish groups sought their place at both the public and communal tables.

While this strategy initially developed in a 19th century Britain that required ‘loyal’ citizens who would be publicly British and only privately Jewish, it was sustained longer than might have been expected in the post-war period. However, by the 1990s, Jewish religious diversity at least had become impossible to ignore both internally and externally. The fiction, for example, that the Chief Rabbinate was the religious authority for all British Jews – when he does not represent secular, non-orthodox and ultra-orthodox Jews – was untenable not just inside the Jewish community, where non-orthodox Judaisms fought hard to find a place at the communal table, but also in non-Jewish circles too. For example, it now became routine for non-orthodox as well as orthodox leaders to be invited to national ceremonies and to be consulted by government.

Religious diversity is still a difficult issue today inside the British Jewish community, but it has become much more manageable and accepted as a permanent reality. However, other differences remain much more difficult to navigate. Since 2000, although starting before then, the questions of Israel and

antisemitism have become a source of ever greater conflict in British Jewry, as well as in other diaspora Jewish populations. The problem is less the existence of difference itself, so much as the recognition of that difference and the right of certain groups to be seen as legitimate participants in Jewish communal life.

### **British Jews and Israel**

In my recent work on the Jewish conflict over Israel<sup>3</sup>, I have argued that, between 1967 and 2000, the dominant position that prevailed in the Jewish community on Israel was that diaspora Jews should always support Israel publicly. This position was not uncontested, but it dominated Jewish communal institutions and its leadership. Post-2000, with the collapse of the Oslo process, the second intifada and subsequent wars in Lebanon and Gaza, a host of Jewish positions emerged, whose protagonists asserted their right to speak critically and publicly about Israel. These positions range from Jews who reject contemporary Zionism (in groups such as Jews for Justice for Palestinians), to liberal Zionists who oppose the occupation (in groups such as Yahad and JStreet), to centrist Zionists who nonetheless argue for a degree of pluralism in the Zionist camp, to supporters of the old consensus, to neo-conservatives and right-wing religious Zionists.

The relative size and influence of these different positions varies considerably but is hard to pin down precisely. It is clear that the majority of British Jews are supportive of Israel and the Zionist project: The last major survey to look at British Jews' relationship to Israel<sup>4</sup> found that 82 per cent believed that Israel plays a 'central' or 'important but not central' role in their Jewish identities; 90 per cent believed that Israel is the 'ancestral homeland' of the Jewish people; 95 per cent have visited Israel at some point in the past and 72 per cent categorise themselves as Zionists. Beyond this general support, the majority are broadly 'dovish' in Zionist terms, with 67 per cent favouring giving up territory for peace with the Palestinians; 78 per cent favouring a two-state solution; 74 per cent opposing the expansion of existing settlements and 52 per cent favouring negotiations with Hamas. The same survey found that the more religious the respondents were, the more 'hawkish' their positions were on Israel. What these findings suggest is that while positions that oppose the Zionist project are supported by a small, but not significant minority of Jews, other Jewish positions on Israel can be assured of the support of greater numbers of British Jews.

The relationships between supporters of these various positions range from tolerance to outright conflict. Yet the debates and divisions over Israel that characterise the UK and other diaspora Jewries are made more complex and difficult because they are not entirely 'about' Israel itself. While different visions of what Israel could and should be are of course important in generating these differences, just as important are different visions of what diaspora Jewish communities could and should be – and in particular their boundaries and the responsibilities of their members. At stake in diaspora Jewish conflicts over Israel are profound questions of what Jews owe each other and the Jewish state (what Ilan Baron has called questions of 'transnational political obligation'<sup>5</sup>), and what entitles a Jew to consider themselves part of a Jewish community. These

questions are closely tied into questions of antisemitism – what it is, and how it should be fought – further complicating the conflict.

In many respects then, Jewish conflicts over Israel and antisemitism are conflicts over ‘internal’ issues, in as much as they concern how Jews should relate to each other and how they should organise themselves. Yet boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ are more permeable than ever in today’s world in which mass communication and the internet have eroded the possibility of keeping anything ‘behind closed doors’. One of the results of this is that internal debates cannot stay internal, but are deeply implicated in wider ‘external’ political debates. While debates within Israel, as well as the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict, are significant ‘external’ factors in diaspora Jewish conflicts over Israel, I want to concentrate on the significance of non-Jewish actors outside of Israel-Palestine.

### **Non-Jewish actors in the Israel-Palestine debate**

The politics of Israel-Palestine in the UK, US and many other countries are as heavily contested as the politics of Israel in diaspora Jewish populations or within Israel-Palestine itself. The boundaries between the Jewish debate and the wider debate are repeatedly breached, as non-Jewish actors – both wittingly and unwittingly – make interventions in debates between Jews, further stimulating conflict. The diversity of Jewish and non-Jewish opinion over Israel and antisemitism effectively allows most non-Jewish positions to find some kind of Jewish support and vice versa. Although this process might appear to render Jewish and non-Jewish debates identical, in reality it can often exacerbate the distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish actors. The reason being that Jewish and non-Jewish actors are mobilised for particular purposes in Jewish and non-Jewish spaces.

One way in which this process works can be seen in the case of disputes over the relationship between antisemitism and the Israel debate. ‘Israel-critical’ (to use David Landy’s term<sup>6</sup>) Jewish groups in the UK have made repeated interventions that question accusations of antisemitism directed at those who criticise Israel and Zionism. For example, the founding declaration of Independent Jewish Voices asserted that: ‘The battle against anti-Semitism is vital and is undermined whenever opposition to Israeli government policies is automatically branded as anti-Semitic.’<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the slogan of Jews for Boycotting Israeli Goods – ‘It’s kosher to boycott Israeli goods’<sup>8</sup> – forcefully gives Jewish approval to a practice that other kinds of Jews have deemed antisemitic.

Jewish groups and opinions are often given a prominent position in pro-Palestinian activism. For example, following the August 2014 pro-Palestinian rally against the Gaza war, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign made sure to include in their press release the words of Glyn Secker, of Jews for Justice for Palestinians, from the rally:

Today, an image remains in my mind. It is the image of a Palestinian father carrying the flesh of his son in a plastic bag. As a Jew, I will not ever be associated with these monstrosities. Never in my name, never in my life, never in my children’s life<sup>9</sup>.

In the Palestine Solidarity Campaign's submission to the 'Prevent Duty Guidance' consultation in January 2015, Jews for Justice for Palestinians were liberally quoted:

As Jews for Justice for Palestinians (JfJfP) pointed out in its submission to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Antisemitism in November 2014: 'Criticism of Israel must be taken at face value and assessed on its merits, and not dismissed in advance as essentially antisemitic in its origins.'<sup>10</sup>

Such interventions by Israel-critical Jews are often bitterly resented by other Jews. They have been accused, for example, of being 'new conservatives' who spread a message to non-Jews that they do not need to worry about antisemitism<sup>11</sup>. They are sometimes satirised as 'asaJews' whose only Jewish identity consists of distancing themselves from the Jewish people and/or Israel, ultimately for the purpose of garnering non-Jewish approval<sup>12</sup>. Such accusations, aside from being psychologically crude, ride roughshod over the sincerity and deeply felt Jewish commitment of many Israel-critical Jews. Nonetheless, the mobilisation of Jewish opinion by pro-Palestinian activists does have problematic aspects. The existence of support from one kind of Jew can be used to effectively indemnify oneself from the concerns of another kind of Jew. This in turn often leads to resentment from Jews who have made the accusation towards Jews who have rebutted the accusation, further stimulating and deepening Jewish divisions. There are considerable risks here, both of cynically using Jews against each other and of effectively only taking into consideration the opinions of those Jews with whom one is in agreement.

However, one of the reasons why Jewish criticism of Israel-critical Jews is often highly inaccurate, is that it ignores the similar mobilisation of pro-Israel Jews by pro-Israel non-Jews. For example, the writer Julie Burchill has, in her book *Unchosen*<sup>13</sup> and other writing, expressed enduring love of Jews and of Israel, an affection returned by some Jewish groups. This love goes along with often vicious criticism of Jews who have different opinions on Israel. She appears to use her self-defined philosemitism to grant herself licence to define who Jews should be. More politically significant is the Christian Zionist movement in the USA, whose self-proclaimed love of Israel has indemnified it from scrutiny by at least some Jewish organisations and leaders, despite the presence of arguably antisemitic eschatological theologies in some quarters.

### **Diversity and distinction**

The issues I am drawing attention to here do not only impact on Jews. They are part of a wider phenomenon in which the internal diversity of groups has become increasingly evident. Just as Jewish diversity is exploited for various ends, so Islamic diversity has become open to similar exploitation. The diversity of Islam and Muslim communities is starting to be recognised and that has allowed for Muslim and non-Muslim alliances to be built, which simultaneously marginalise other kinds of Muslims and indemnify against accusations of Islamophobia.

In Ayaan Hirsi Ali's book *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*<sup>14</sup>, she distinguishes between 'Mecca', 'Medina' and 'Modifying' Muslims (with the latter being the only ones worth supporting).

The distinction she makes is between types of Muslims rather than ideological strains within Islam itself. Leaving aside the validity or otherwise of such a typology, when viewed on the back of her considerable popularity in conservative and even Islamophobic circles, together with her own rejection of Islam, one can read into her distinction between kinds of Muslims another distinction: between those Muslims ‘we’ should care about and those that ‘we’ should reject. A similar distinction appears in John Mearsheimer’s contrast between ‘Righteous Jews’ and ‘The New Afrikaners’<sup>15</sup>. Again, the distinction enables a similar division between those Jews worth caring about and those worth rejecting.

It is not that distinctions between types of Jews and types of Muslims are necessarily invalid. The problem is when the existence of a type of Jew or Muslim with whom one is in sympathy is used to justify a rejection of another kind of Jew or Muslim. Note that I am referring to Jews and Muslims here rather than Judaism and Islam – it is the personalisation that is relevant here. This has two problematic effects in particular: One is to stoke intra-communal conflict by supporting one or other protagonist. The other is to create far-reaching changes in what anti-racist/anti-antisemitic/anti-Islamophobic practice can be. If taking the concerns of those who perceive themselves to be victims of antisemitism, Islamophobia or racism is contingent on them being the ‘right’ sort of victim, then any kind of universalist approach to prejudice and discrimination is undermined in favour of supporting particular kinds of people, in particular times and spaces, for particular reasons.

Nonetheless, the alternatives to this kind of practice are also unpalatable: It is neither practical nor desirable to treat communities and minorities as homogeneous. Nor is it practical or desirable for non-Jews or non-Muslims to concern themselves with ‘every’ Jew or Muslim. The increasing awareness of the diversity of Jewish, Muslim and other minority communities has, at the very least, had the advantage of undermining the power of elites within those communities who sought exclusive rights to represent them in the public sphere. What I would suggest, then, are three modest steps that can help scholars and activists, both within and without Jewish and Muslim minorities, to ensure that some of the problematic consequences of internal conflict are managed:

Firstly, it is inadvisable to treat the denials or affirmations by community members that something is or is not racist as ‘the last word’. For example, just because some Jews do not find the campaign for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel antisemitic does not obviate the need to take the concerns of those who do seriously. A vast swathe of contemporary debate over forms of contemporary racism consists of making judgements about whether a certain discourse or practice is racist or not. Such debates cannot be cut off simply by taking the side of one particular protagonist

Secondly, activists and scholars should endeavour to maintain lines of communication and dialogue with members of minority communities beyond personally-favoured sub-sections within it. For example, quiet ‘back channel’ contacts between pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian groups and leaders may, in certain circumstances and given time, allow for some tensions to be mitigated and concerns aired.

Finally, just as those external to minority communities need to try and avoid exacerbating and exploiting them, so members of those communities themselves need to try and avoid exploiting external resources in their internal conflicts. While there is no going back to a time when internal conflict was kept ‘behind closed doors’, it may be possible at least to fight one’s own internal battles without bringing in external supporters who tend to inflame matters.

### ***Postscript***

*In the process of editing this paper, the editors pointed out to me the relationship between people and ideologies: Jews and Judaism, Muslims and Islam and so on. I want to make clear that this paper has been concerned with the former, with the relationship that Jews, Muslims and others have to each other. One common feature of the discourses that I have been exploring, is that attempts are sometimes made to separate people and their religions/ideologies. So, for example, it is common in some circles to clarify that one is criticising Zionism but not Jews and that the conflation of the two is problematic. My argument is that people and ideologies cannot be disentangled completely and that there is no disembodied and purely ideological space within which different ideologies can freely contend.*

### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> D. Graham, J. Boyd and D. Vulkan, *2011 Census: Initial insights about the UK Jewish population*, London, Institute for Jewish Policy Research, 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> K. Kahn-Harris and B. Gidley, *Turbulent Times: The British Jewish Community Today*, London, Continuum, 2010.
- <sup>3i</sup> K. Kahn-Harris, *Uncivil War: The Israel Conflict in the Jewish Community*, London, David Paul Books, 2010.
- <sup>4</sup> D. Graham and J. Boyd, *Committed, Concerned and Conciliatory: The Attitudes of Jews in Britain Towards Israel*, London, Institute for Jewish Policy Research, 2010.
- <sup>5</sup> I.Z. Baron, *Obligation in Exile: The Jewish Diaspora, Israel and Critique* (First Edition), Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2015.
- <sup>6</sup> D. Landy, *Jewish Identity and Palestinian Rights: The Growth of Diaspora Jewish Opposition to Israel*, London, Zed Books, 2011.
- <sup>7</sup> <http://ijv.org.uk/declaration/> (last visited 3 Sep. 2015).
- <sup>8</sup> <https://jews4big.wordpress.com> (last visited 3 Sep. 2015).
- <sup>9</sup> <http://www.palestinecampaign.org/biggest-london-rally-yet-gaza/#sthash.tFxR9k7g.dpuf> (last visited 3 Sep. 2015).
- <sup>10</sup> <http://jffjp.com/?p=66611> (last visited 3 Sep. 2015); <http://www.palestinecampaign.org/palestine-solidarity-campaigns-submission-prevent-duty-guidance-consultation/#sthash.GKBh1AOh.dpuf> (last visited 3 Sep. 2015).
- <sup>11</sup> <http://www.engageonline.org.uk/blog/article.php?id=578> (last visited 3 Sep. 2015).
- <sup>12</sup> <http://ukmediawatch.org/2011/06/23/as-a-jew-explained/> (last visited 3 Sep. 2015).
- <sup>13</sup> J. Burchill, *Unchosen*, London, Unbound, 2014.
- <sup>14</sup> A.H. Ali, *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*, New York, Harper, 2015.
- <sup>15</sup> <http://www.thejerusalemfund.org/ht/display/ContentDetails/i/10418> (last visited 3 Sep. 2015).

## Biographical note

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