

Canada: Not in my name

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The violence in the Middle East is being met with a global reaction calling for a ceasefire. Protesters also voice opposition to antisemitism and Islamophobia.

The world has turned upside down in the last month. I don't know about you, but I have been sad, angry, inspired, and terrified at different times. I've been to four demonstrations, speaking at one. First the slaughter of more than 1,500 civilians in Israel, a terrible slaughter that would provoke an even worse one. The body count in Gaza continues to rise. After refusing even humanitarian pauses, Israel has now agreed to only brief four-hour pauses to allow aid in and some people out. Every Western government is supporting Israel whatever horrors the right-wing Israeli government decides to inflict on the Palestinians. Antisemitism and Islamophobia is on the rise and anyone who speaks out against Israel fears reprisals for their speech.

Doug Ford viciously attacked former Ontario NDP MPP Sarah Jama for her steadfast defense of Palestinian rights and then removed her right to speak in the legislature through censure. Instead of standing in solidarity with her, ONDP leader Marit Stiles kicked her out of caucus. There are numerous attempts to silence pro-Palestinian views especially on campuses. While pro-Israel Jews are not being fired or silenced, there is a fear of rising antisemitism. On the positive side, there has been an uprising of support for the Palestinian people around the world. Within a week, a massive peace movement has arisen around the world and is still growing. Most inspiring to me, thousands of Jews marched in the US and Canada calling for a ceasefire and crying out against the genocidal blockade and bombing of Gaza, saying "Not in my name."

I am Jewish and have been involved in working in solidarity with Palestine for decades. In 2002, I went to Israel and Palestine on a fact-finding mission organized by [Alternatives](#), a Quebec NGO specializing in international solidarity. On that trip I met leaders of the non-violent opposition in the West Bank, including Mustafa Barghouti who today is often seen as a Palestinian spokesperson on Western media. I met feminists in Gaza who were trying to counter the influence of Hamas. That non-violent opposition got no support from Israel. On the contrary, they called the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), a non-violent strategy to struggle against Israel's occupation, antisemitism. I experienced no more antisemitism in Palestine than I did in Toronto. People were surprised that a Jew was supporting Palestinians, but I was welcomed with open arms. Anyone who has visited Palestine will tell you that they are among the most hospitable people in the world.

There is no excuse for antisemitism no matter what Israel does. Often antisemitism is not taken seriously on the Left, both because Israel is an ally of Western imperialism and because Jews are mostly white. North America has a large population of Jews, most of whose ancestors fled Nazis, Russian Cossacks, or eastern European pogroms. They have been well integrated into our society and rarely face discrimination. There is a lot of fear in the Jewish community today of antisemitism. So far, the only incidents reported upon are the attempted firebombing of a Jewish community centre in Montreal, guns shot at Jewish schools at night and an imam at a rally in Montreal who made antisemitic remarks. If we are to build a broad ceasefire movement, we must ensure there is no antisemitism, Islamophobia or any other form of racism expressed at rallies or other events and

denounce any expressions of antisemitism in whatever form.

I have experienced antisemitism in my life. When I needed financial support to pay my tuition at McGill in 1967 because my father had gone bankrupt, the loan officer said to me, "How can you need money? You're Jewish." Working with Dr. Henry Morgentaler to legalize abortion in Canada was a deep dive into antisemitism. The Toronto Sun had a cartoon of Morgentaler making him look like an evil hook-nosed Jew reminiscent of Nazi propaganda. Protesters in the front of his abortion clinic used to tell people, "They only kill Christian babies in there." He taught me that hate should not provoke hate. A holocaust survivor, his philosophy was, "I who could have been a grain of sand, survived so that I could devote my life to helping women." I was also one of "12 prominent Jews" to get a live bullet in the mail in 2009 threatening to kill me. When I was the host of a TV show on CBC in the 1990's, there were occasionally "get that Jew off the air" phone calls. Antisemites don't distinguish between pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli Jews and from my experience often use a rise in anger against Israel as a moment to spread their hate.

If we accept that Indigenous people suffer multi-generational trauma, then certainly Jews experience it. The Hamas slaughter triggered that trauma because it was the first mass slaughter of Jews since the Holocaust. Israel was created to prevent such a slaughter and most Jews believe it succeeded. So, the Hamas attack was triggering on many levels. Even if we don't agree that Israel was the right solution to protect Jews, it's important to express empathy for those who experience it that way.

That said, we cannot accept that criticism of Israel is antisemitic. There are many anti-Zionist Jews. In fact, it is an historic debate among Jews going back almost 2 centuries. After I visited Israel in 1970 and found a deeply militarist, racist country that had nothing to do with my experience of being Jewish, I started reading about Zionism and the debate among Jews prior to WWII. The book *The Jewish Question* by Abram Leon written in 1942 framed the debate in a way that made sense to me. He said Zionism would ally Jews with the oppressor, the imperialists, not with other oppressed people. That's when I became an anti-Zionist. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) tried to define anti-Zionism as anti-Semitism in 2016 and many governments accepted it despite [serious arguments](#) against it.

I was one of eight Jewish women who occupied the Israeli consulate to protest their attack on Gaza in 2009. We didn't get much publicity in Canada, but it was big news in the Middle East. I was quoted in the *Toronto Star* of the day "We call on all Jews to speak out against this massacre and demand that Israel stop the bombing, pull out of Gaza and make a just peace with the Palestinians." Sound familiar?

Back then it was rare for Jews to protest Israel's treatment of Palestinians. We were few but today we are many. Five-hundred people, wearing shirts that said "Not in My Name," were arrested during a sit-in at the US Congress organized by [Jewish Voices for Peace](#). Five-thousand more people, mostly Jews, demonstrated in the streets of Washington DC at the same time. Even more demonstrated in the streets of New York a few days before. In Toronto, I was moved to tears by the presence of hundreds of pro-Palestinian Jews protesting at the Israeli Consulate at 8AM on October 25, organized by several groups including [Independent Jewish Voices](#). I feel that the strong presence of Jewish supporters at Palestinian events and in coalition with others for a ceasefire helps to ensure that anger at Israel does not spill over into antisemitism.

Despite or perhaps because of the unquestioning support of Western governments, thousands upon thousands of people have hit the streets in every city from Toronto to Seoul. The most recent march in Toronto was the biggest mobilization I've seen in many years. There were Jews for Palestine, Sikhs for Palestine, Queers for Palestine, Artists for Palestine, and a crowd reflective of Toronto's multiracial population.

Israel's story of a tiny plucky country of Jews fleeing the Holocaust and establishing a great modern democracy is wearing thin for a lot of young people when they learn about the daily violence and restrictions Israel inflicts on Palestinians and the extreme right-wing government now in place, using genocidal language like calling the Palestinians human animals or threatening to "crush and destroy Hamas," which every Palestinian knows means Palestinians.

I have been working with a broad coalition of groups, including unions, churches and NGO's that recently circulated an [open letter](#), calling for a ceasefire and an end to the brutal blockade Israel has imposed on Gaza stopping food, water, electricity and fuel from getting in. Now they have called for a [Ceasefire Now](#) demonstration on November 12 across the country.

For the first time in many years, I feel a peace movement arising internationally that is profoundly challenging the status quo. Many are comparing these protests to those against the war in Iraq, which convinced then Prime Minister Jean Chrétien to refuse to join the US in that fight. But to me it feels more like the mobilization against the Vietnam war. Youth led that uprising against US imperial might and for a brave Vietnamese people that stood up to it. A whole generation of youth mobilized then and are mobilizing these actions today. Perhaps a similar kind of youth movement will arise out of this struggle that will also transform society for the better.

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