

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Middle East & N. Africa > Palestine & Israel > Movements, Left forces, solidarities (Palestine) > **Book Review: Israel's West Bank Inferno & the Responsibility of Socialists**

Book Review: Israel's West Bank Inferno & the Responsibility of Socialists

Thursday 7 December 2023, by [WALD Alan](#) (Date first published: 6 December 2023).

A Day in the Life of Abed Salama:

Anatomy of a Jerusalem Tragedy

By Nathan Thrall

New York: Metropolitan Books, 2023. 255 pages. \$29.99 hardback.

Contents

- [Abandon All Hope](#)
- [The Heart of the Story](#)
- [Mizrahim and Ashkenazi](#)
- [Feats of Omission](#)
- [The Right of Resistance](#)
- [The Zionist War Against \(...\)](#)
- [A Reconstruction of the \(...\)](#)

For those readers unfamiliar with the universe of suffering that structures Palestinian life on the West Bank, prepare yourself for a journey into a human-made political hell as you plunge into the pages of Nathan Thrall's *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama*. The term "West Bank" refers to a land-locked area the size of Delaware near the Mediterranean Sea that has been militarily commanded by the Israeli state ever since it was captured from Jordan in the 1967 "Six Day War."

From that time on, the three million Palestinian residents of the West Bank have endured a subjugation that circumscribes their everyday lives through laws governing the right to movement and regulating everything from where one can live to what personal identification cards one can hold; families who reside just a mile away from each other are separated by checkpoints and partitions.



A Palestinian funeral in the West Bank — in 2023 a daily occurrence.

Added to this is an ever-tightening control of Palestinian quotidian existence through violent night raids, arrests, shootings, air strikes, military dividing lines, torching of fields, vandalization of property, and the building of more and more Israeli settlements. Due to the alteration of demographics and transferring of populations, these settlements are considered illegal under Article

49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention and many declarations of the United Nations Security Council.

By now we have all the ingredients for a pressure cooker destined to explode, and it is impossible to predict what will happen in the coming weeks and months in connection with the situation in Gaza. There is an uptick in settler violence with hundreds of Palestinians being killed and fear of a wider war.

Most people have only a hazy picture of the West Bank, which came under partial civil control of the Palestinian National Authority (run by Fatah, a nationalist and social democratic political party) in certain areas (those known as “A” and “B”) following the 1993-95 Oslo Accords. The landscape consists of 165 “islands” of Palestinian towns and refugee camps surrounded by a contiguous area of 230 Israeli “settlements;” the latter include armed Jewish supremacists fanatically devoted to a complete takeover of what they insist are their ancient biblical homelands of “Judea” and “Samaria.”

In the new millennium, Israel built a barrier, which they call the “Separation Fence” and that Palestinians have named a “Wall of Apartheid;” it is now 440 miles long cutting through, encircling, and imprisoning the Palestinian territory under occupation. Two sets of rules exist: one for the settlers, who are treated with all the rights of full Israeli citizens, and another for the Palestinians, who face a draconian array of protocols for the occupied.

The situation has many similarities to the Gaza strip, although Israel has controlled all access to Gaza through a blockade since 2005 and Hamas (a spin-off of the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood) has governed it since 2007.



One of the hundreds of West Bank checkpoints.

Abandon All Hope

After the wall was built, Palestinians have had to spend hours waiting at barriers to get from Bethlehem to East Jerusalem, a part of occupied Palestine with 361,700 Palestinians and 234,000 Israeli Jewish settlers, just six miles away.

This bureaucratic nightmare is in the context of an Israeli state of 9.73 million inhabitants (73.5% Jewish) that is an economic success, the world’s leading start-up nation with a GDP per capita surpassing France and the UK. It is a wealthy, nuclear-armed military super-power sitting right next to five million dispossessed and stateless Palestinians who exist in abject poverty and hopelessness.

As we near the end of the sixth decade of this illegal West Bank occupation, one might well expect to see “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here” inscribed on any entrance gate of what amounts to nothing less than Israel’s grotesque enactment of Foucault’s “biopolitics.” Foucault used this term to describe how states exercise control over a subjugated, large population through institutions that regulate individual bodies and aggregate them into groups, which must be managed.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to see Nathan Thrall’s non-fiction narrative as simply a trauma dump. There are, after all, moments of family and comradely affection, joyful cultural celebrations, and actions of resistance.

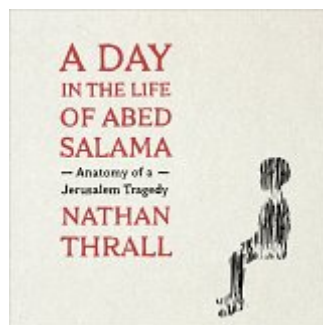
True, your guide through numerous Dantean circles of dread and distress in *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama* won't be the poet Virgil of *The Divine Comedy*. Thrall, the Jewish American writer, however, is a skilled journalist and author of the acclaimed *The Only Language They Understand: Forcing Compromise in Israel and Palestine* (2017).

He is also the former director of the Arab-Israeli Project of the left-leaning global think tank, the International Crisis Group. Through his 250 pages of well-crafted and often understated prose, one descends to the fiendish center of a realm of many hurts and humiliations, but the narrative is rooted in compelling and enlightening family backstories.

The method is to present granular and nuanced biographical portraits of Palestinians and Jews alike that are recreated with an eye for complexities and contradictions on all sides. Perhaps it's an approach that can reach people who otherwise seem to have fingers in their ears, or respond with knee-jerk defensiveness in a self-righteous manner, when one raises even the mildest critique of the brutality of the Israeli state.

The Heart of the Story

At the heart of *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama* is the account of a terrible bus accident that was not simply "an accident," but closer to a predictable outcome due to a history of inequality and discrimination. The calamitous event happened in 2012, resulting in the death and maiming of dozens of Palestinian children who were on a school trip, including Milad Salama, the five-year-old son of Abed and Haifa Salama.



The bus itself was illegally registered, twenty-seven years old, and its route was on neglected, congested roads consigned to Palestinians and inferior to those used by settlers — ones termed "bypass roads" or "apartheid roads." Those used by Milad's bus were devoid of lighting, any kind of police presence, or even a barrier separating the lane of oncoming traffic.

After being hit by a trailer truck, the aging vehicle flipped and burst into flames. Still, no Israeli or Palestinian rescue personnel showed up in time to assist and save lives: "When a Palestinian ambulance finally arrived, most of the injured children had already been evacuated [in the private cars of Palestinian passers-by] The bus was still crackling with flames and there was much shouting and commotion. Not a single firefighter, police officer, or soldier had come." (101)

According to Thrall, the death of Milad and six others was the likely result of these and other socio-economic circumstances faced by the Palestinian population of Anata, a West Bank town of the Salama family that was mostly encircled by a separation barrier.

Obstacles to the rescue include partitions that did not allow the Palestinian Authority access to the road where the accident took place; an Israeli police force that habitually ignored Palestinians in distress; the system of special passes that prevented Palestinian parents from traveling to the

diverse hospitals in different zones where the children had been driven by other Palestinians in their own cars; and much more.

Nevertheless, the ambitions of the book go far beyond the origins of the horrific event to slowly unravel a larger history of this architecture of separation; one that ultimately stems from the Nakba. This was the “catastrophe” of mass dispossession and displacement of Palestinians by the Jewish fighters in the 1948 war, followed by the all-important denial of the “right of return” that ensued.

After the death of Milad, the first sixty-seven pages retrospectively flesh out the daily lives of Abed, Haifa, and more than a dozen other Palestinians to create a fuller picture that achieves an uncommon depth of perception and understanding.

Thrall puts the reader at eye level and uses real names of all but a few individuals. This allows us to see how specific features of ethnic oppression by design render far worse what are ordinary problems of humanity: the thwarting of romantic love, unrealized ambition, jealousy, local rivalries, problematic local customs, and health.

As the book progresses to the occurrence of the “accident” and what follows, Thrall uses this technique to implicitly expose the lies that make up the elaborate myths now sustaining the pro-Israel state of mind in the United States. Full documentation for his claims is presented at the end of the volume in the section called “Sources.”

For example, the narrative of Huda Dahbour, the mother of another victim, Hadi, and a doctor employed by the United Nations Relief and Work Agency, provides a harrowing description of the Nakba experienced by her family:

“Through Arabic radio broadcasts and vans equipped with loudspeakers, the Jewish forces blared instructions to evacuate immediately. The conquering battalion had been ordered to firebomb ‘all objectives that can be set alight’ and ‘kill every Arab encountered.’ Barrels stuffed with kerosene-soaked rags and fitted with ignition devices were sent hurtling downhill into the Palestinian areas....Much of the city was ethnically cleansed by the time Passover began.” (89)

Mizrahim and Ashkenazi

Then there is a history of the Adam settlement, near Anek’s Anata, which had been created on the West Bank for poor Mizrahi (Middle Eastern and Sephardic) Jews by the Israeli government and taxpayer-funded World Zionist Organization. In contrast to the miserable conditions of the Palestinians of Anata, who mostly live in a walled ghetto, the residents of Adam had spacious single-family villas with yards and bucolic views.

But the tale told through the life of founder Beber Vanunu, is far from idyllic. While a small proportion of Israeli Jews have a long history in Palestine (11% of the population was Jewish by the 1920s), over 50% of the present Israeli population is of Middle Eastern and North African descent who were frequently refugees from Arab persecution, and even expulsion from their native countries.

Beber himself was born in Casablanca in 1952, and his family relocated from Morocco to Israel two years later. There they found themselves in a densely-packed transit camp, fenced-in and guarded by police, without running water and adequate sanitation:

“Israel’s elite treated the Mizrahim with contempt...Parents of more than a thousand Mizrahi children accused the government of falsely reporting their babies’ deaths and then secretly handing

them to Ashkenazi [of European background] parents wishing to adopt....Israeli officials had justified the deceit on the grounds that the Mizrahim were 'backward' and the abductions were in 'the best interests of the children'" (150).

After leaving the camps, some of Beber's relatives moved into houses stolen from Palestinians, while he lived with nine others in a single room in a crime-and-drug ridden Jerusalem tenement. Then came a period of activism in the Israeli Black Panthers, a Mizrahi radical group inspired by the African American Black Panther Party, that protested ethnic and class discrimination. It also evidenced some sympathy with the Palestine Liberation Organization, a secular national movement founded in 1964 to represent the Palestinian people.

Beber subsequently developed a proposal to establish a Mizrahi settlement on the West Bank land that officially belonged to the Palestinian village of Jaba. In a dubious effort to establish good relations with their neighbors, villagers from Jaba were given jobs as domestic workers and laborers (not as professionals) as the illegal settlement continued to expand Eastward. At the time of the bus accident Beber offered condolences by posting a large banner expressing sympathy at the Jaba checkpoint.

Ashkenazi Jews, whose ancestors had settled in Central and Eastern Europe and comprise close to one-third of the Israeli population, are partially represented by the story of Dany Tirza. Dany, former head of the Israeli Defense Force's strategic planning for the West Bank (the IDF Rainbow Administration), and then architect of the separation barrier, was at the time of the bus crash the leader of the Jewish settlement built on land confiscated from Anata. He had been born in Galicia (then in Western Ukraine) into a family divided between various political and religious loyalties.

Those committed to Haredi (ultra-orthodox) Judaism, and who rejected Zionism, died in the Holocaust; those aligned with his grandfather, a Marxist-Zionist of Hashomer Hatzair, moved to Palestine and thrived. His family history reminds us that contemporary Zionism cannot be understood without considering the murder of Jews from the time even before the Czarist pogroms to the German concentration camps with their industrial genocide.

That is, Zionism was not born of ancient Judaism of the Middle East, but of European Ashkenazi Jews in Eastern and Central Europe in the context of its competing racial and ethnic nationalisms.

This memory of antisemitic attacks and extermination was built into the Zionist DNA of the hundreds of thousands of survivors who poured into the majority Arab, multi-religious Palestine from Europe with the dream of turning it into a nationalist Jewish state. It has now been passed on to their descendants, especially after allusions to the Holocaust became a major rhetorical tool for the Zionist government in the 1980s as it tried to depict the resistance of the indigenous population as the reincarnation of Europe's demonic, antisemitic past.

The accurate invocation of this earlier victimization of Jews was now used to rationalize the Israeli state's post-1948 role as the victimizer of Palestinians.

Other stories fill in the picture from many angles. References to the ill effects of the Oslo Accords are peppered throughout the narrative. Early on, we are told: "In fact, Oslo had furthered Israel's goal of holding on to maximal land with minimal Palestinians on it." (55)

Later, Thrall explains: "...the lives of the insiders [local Palestinians] only got worse after Oslo. On top of greater restrictions on movement, employment plummeted as Israel replaced Palestinian laborers with foreign workers, recruited mostly from Asia....The figures close to [Yasir] Arafat pocketed tens of millions of dollars of public money, much of it funneled through a Tel Aviv bank

account, and some even profited from the building of [Jewish] settlements.” (91)

Thrall concludes by reporting that, for a long while after the bus accident, Abed and his family closed themselves off from any social interaction. Their nearest relations rarely saw them. Then, seven months following the funeral of Milad, Abed deleted all videos of his son, as well as practically all photos. The community itself was traumatized; every Palestinian in the area knew where they were on the day that the “Jaba bus accident” happened.

Yet this trauma was also felt in circumstances of growing repression where most Palestinians, including children, who are arrested for any number of small infractions, are judged in military courts. They are then handed lengthy sentences in what critics call sham military trials as many Palestinians are deprived of defense lawyers and due process.

Israeli citizens, of course, are tried in civil courts, highlighting the two-tier justice system. Still, throughout these interpolations of personal history and political context, Thrall is less focused on ultimate solutions than lived realities.

Feats of Omission

In following Thrall’s process of rendering these lives in *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama*, I continually felt provoked to pursue the question raised at the outset of this review.

How does one reach those of our fellow citizens who are still deluded into thinking of the Israeli state as a democratic model of “Jewish self-determination”? Their nationalist bias prevents them from seeing this state form as a callous apartheid regime dedicated to supplanting the Arab population with a settler colonial presence through a familiar process, even if different in specifics.

Thrall doesn’t say it explicitly, but any informed reader can see the ugly parallels to white supremacist South Africa in the Occupied Territories, and to the Jim Crow system of the U.S. South within the infamous “Green Line” that has defined the Israeli state’s internationally recognized borders (supposedly temporarily) since 1949. As Edward Said and others have pointed out, this is not simply a conflict of two national minorities but also a “unique colonialism.”

How does one break through the feats of historical omission in the wide-spread pro-Israeli propaganda that perpetuates a fictional Israeli past? A falsification that omits the ethnic cleansing of the indigenous population to proclaim instead the miraculous 1948 founding of a moral and peace-loving state, above all beleaguered by a Nazi-like antisemitism among Arabs.

This constant invocation of Hitler is a willful mischaracterization of complex issues to score political points, but the upshot in practice is to make Palestinians pay the price for fascist crimes they did not perpetrate. It promotes the premise that the ongoing crisis must be contained by force without being resolved by justice; that Israel, threatened by another Holocaust, has the right to do anything to survive.

The resulting mentality seems like a puzzle without a solution to those of us with a socialist-international perspective: How can people whose ancestors were so hideously oppressed by the Nazis be so oblivious to human rights and lives? How can one understand their moral universe? It seems a painful and brain-stretching paradox, suggesting that one is not dealing with reason.

Yes, antisemitism of the past was horrific, and new manifestations remain a real threat in the world that must be opposed; but the foundation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is different. The Holocaust was about a marginalized, powerless group facing an all-powerful army and state

violence; today it is the Palestinians who are stateless and the Israelis who have the advanced military that places the Palestinians under siege and occupation.

Moreover, anyone with access to maps can see that creeping annexation has been unfolding for generations along with a continuum of violent destruction against what was the majority indigenous population.

The issue of educating the public about Zionist expansion and apartheid has achieved only greater urgency following the brutally shocking October 7 attack by Hamas that Israel declares to have included 70% civilians among the approximately 1200 people slain. Uncertainty remains about some details of the massacre; claims of beheadings by Hamas are in dispute but evidence for horrific rapes and despicable sexual torture by Hamas or other factions seem credible according to *New York Times* reporting on December 5.

Whatever is ultimately concluded, the assault on civilians was an atrocity, and then was immediately followed by a far bloodier revenge fest of the Israeli state that has crossed a death toll of 15,500 and displaced 1.8 million Palestinians (80% of Gaza) as I write.

Marxists certainly do not have a shared world-outlook with Hamas, but for pro-Israel partisans to denounce Hamas for committing war crimes against humanity and then turn around and endorse Israel's committing the same crimes tenfold is enough to make any hypocrisy meter zoom to the max. In neither case can one evade confronting the issue of killing civilians.

It makes no difference whether this reality of annihilating families is dodged under the declaration that those attacked in Israel were *all* "occupiers" (including perhaps two dozen workers and agricultural students from Thailand, Naipaul, and the Philippines, along with Bedouins), or that those being murdered in Gaza are not the intended targets because they are being *used* by Hamas as "human shields." This is just clever phrasemaking in both instances.

Civilian deaths are civilian deaths, whether from hand-grenades thrown into shelters or 2000-pound bombs dropped on a city and refugee camps. Intentionally targeting civilians to frighten a population is a definition of "terrorism," regardless of whether it is carried out by those who are desperate and who have few options, or by the mightiest state in the region. That does not mean, of course, that any Palestinian who fights back is a "terrorist."

One needs to explain the context of settler-colonialism that brought about this kind of ruthless conduct by a group, and emphasize that violent oppression produces violent reaction when non-violent efforts are harshly crushed and delegitimized. Nevertheless, clarification is not the same as backing specific behavior that any socialist ought to abhor.

The ghastly asymmetry on the side of Israeli violence is obvious, but the killing of Jewish babies in the name of "resistance" and "liberation" is not what we stand for. Nor does the fact that Zionist cruelty set the stage for ferocious retaliation — which is seen in most colonial rebellions — mean that Palestinians allied with Hamas lack human agency.

It is condescending and paternalistic to describe Hamas as not at all responsible for October 7, as merely Pavlovian vectors of a rage induced by Israel. That there is evidence that the rule of Hamas in Gaza was propped up by the Israeli state, and not supported by most Palestinians, is a critical part of the picture.

The Right of Resistance

Radicals know that the right of armed struggle, which the Palestinians surely have, does not translate into “anything goes.” Palestinian resistance is necessary, and a willingness to fight back should be championed. Nevertheless, robotically approving what Hamas did after its stunning breakout from the imprisonment of Gaza is as insupportable as endorsing the Hamas suicide bombings of buses during the Second intifada of 2000-2005.

On the other hand, West Bank Palestinians arming themselves for self-defense against the settlers and soldiers who are destroying their homes and livelihoods is perfectly reasonable; and many activists have made compelling arguments that the tactics used in the first Intifada of 1987-93 and the 2018-19 Great March of Return were far more successful in gaining much-needed world sympathy than any terrorist assaults.

Yes, bombings and kidnappings reap immediate attention and are headline-grabbing, but can be straightaway exploited to reinforce the racist image that the West always aspires to create of the colonially oppressed as immoral, irrational, and luridly inhumane.

For socialists, the aim is to win a massive number of supporters to the goal of permanently dismantling the political and economic structures of oppression. It is not to follow the Israeli state strategy of trying to kill one’s way out of this challenging situation, especially where the relationship of military force is so uneven.

We cannot make the Zionist mistake of closing our eyes to human suffering that one thinks is not ideologically useful. Only deluded zealots expunge ethical concerns and reduce everything to what they try to spin as immediate political gains.

The demand for a permanent ceasefire in the current Israeli slaughter in Gaza, and halting the escalating settler violence in the West bank, are now the paramount *public* priority — slogans, petitions, mass actions. Still, the Left within its *own* venues sorely needs to think about the future. What should be the *next step* in terms of our demands around which to mobilize and educate?

This surely means our discussing whether this type of violence — killing civilians, claiming they are occupiers — really moves the needle forward toward Palestinian liberation in some way. Or does it strengthen the hardline Zionist fanatics and weaken elements of the Israeli Left — the Peace Camp favoring dialogue, the Human Rights NGOs — who need to grow and become more militant?

In discussing what might be *effective* resistance, one is not talking about offering “moral instruction” from afar or blaming the victims for not coming up with one’s preferred political leadership. The germane and indispensable history of the Left is filled with informative debates examining and evaluating the various factions in national liberation struggles.

For example, in the Irish national struggle as it unfolded in the late 20th century, socialists were split in support of the “Official” Irish Republican Army, the “Provisional” Irish Republican Army, Peoples Democracy, and many other groups claiming to represent resistance.

During the Algerian Revolution of 1954-62, many on the Marxist Left were divided between support for the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the National Algerian Movement (MNA). In the case of Iraq, almost everyone on the Left was against the U.S. occupation but no one in their right mind supported ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).

Those who mistakenly believe that support for “resistance” translates into uncritical acceptance of

the Hamas ideology and strategy are ignoring this rich legacy of Left debate and effectively trying to silence the discussion of crucial issues.

Nonetheless this discussion is essential, especially because we need to hear the voices of the many on the Palestinian Left who do not support Hamas, and other fully informed people; and they must be able to forward alternatives without being smeared as shills of Zionism.

For example, this is a crucial moment to read and discuss Rashid Khaledi's indispensable *The Hundred Years War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017* (2020), with its careful critique of the strengths and weaknesses of past resistance strategies by various organizations and movements, as well as the duplicitous role of the authoritarian Arab states in the region. And also, to take another look at the references to Palestinian resistance in *Confronting Empire* (2000) and *The Selected Writings of Eqbal Ahmad* (2006), works by a Pakistani political scientist active in the Algerian revolution and associated with anti-Zionism.

It is elementary Marxism, elaborated clearly by Lenin, that to *unconditionally* support the *content* of a liberation struggle in principle does not mean to *uncritically* support every strategy or tactic that emerges.

In the case of Hamas, there is also the matter of assessing its overall ideology; Hamas may, of course, evolve and certainly has contradictions among its statements, but can we simply shut our eyes when confronted with evidence that its past has been socially reactionary, brutal and antisemitic? Solidarity should not mean suppressing hard truths.

The alternative view, that support for a liberation or resistance movement requires that one refrain from criticizing its various leaderships only eliminates from consideration those constructive and honest opinions that are based on careful analysis. The result is uncritical cheerleading from the safety and comfort of social media, which is more in the style of the "useful idiots" of Zionist nationalism than critical-minded Marxist internationalism.

Moreover, unnecessarily inflammatory, cavalier and performative rhetoric to bolster one's revolutionary credentials can be as unhelpful to building a mass movement now as the slogans "Burn Baby Burn" and "Bring the War Home" were during the Vietnam War. "Community Control of Police" and "Bring the Troops Home Now" were far more effective in reaching those not yet radicalized.

The Zionist War Against the Jews

However, the talking points of ready-made phrases promoted by pro-Israel partisans are a genre of cynical deception unto themselves. The constant iteration that Israel has the right to "defend" itself is an excuse for an indiscriminate massacre that will blot the reputation of the Israeli state for eternity, and its actual aim is to humiliate, demoralize and ethnically cleanse the Palestinian population.

The Biden administration's claim that it has pressured Israel to "do more to protect innocent lives" cannot be taken seriously. In fact, the constant mouthing of such pious platitudes is a sharp reminder that liberalism is not enough.

The "human shield" argument about Hamas has been shown to be a fig leaf to justify making everything in Gaza a legitimate target. The greatest no-brainer of all no-brainers is to fail to see that Israel's slaughtering thousands of civilians is the surest way to *recruit* to Hamas, and guaranteed to drive the population into the arms of successor groups that will be even *more* desperate to revenge

the human suffering imposed on them by the Israeli state.

Organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) have long placed defending the Israeli state from criticisms of anti-racist activists above the fighting of the real, existing antisemitism of white supremacists. In their warped calculus, it is acceptable to hate Jews as long as one loves the Israeli state.

While allowing the antisemitic televangelist John Hagee to address their November 14 “March for Israel,” and praising the neo-Nazi conspiracist Elon Musk for “fighting hate,” they include among their main targets the mostly young Jewish supporters of Jewish Voice for Peace and If Not Now.

Knowing that these Jews, in collaboration with Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pro-Palestinian social justice organizations, are anti-racists who revile antisemitism, these pro-Israel groups cynically use the threat of this accusation of antisemitism to intimidate and silence. The insistence that certain phrases, chants, or slogans — usually ripped out of context — constitute Jew-hatred are now so widespread on campuses, in businesses, within the Democratic and Republican parties, and even in the art world, that a resemblance to the blacklisting of the 1950s anti-radical witch-hunt is hard to miss.

At the same time, it is not quite accurate to say that the ADL and other pro-Israel forces declare “any critique of Israel to be antisemitic.” After all, liberal Zionists have many disagreements with the Netanyahu government, and some are opposed to expanding the settlements.

Even Senator Chuck Schumer made the point in the *New York Times* on November 29 that “criticizing the Israeli government isn’t inherently antisemitic,” and instead pointed his finger at “the denial of a Jewish state in any form.” Thus, the main (but not exclusive) focus for the accusation of antisemitism has been the call for some form of a “democratic” state in Palestine/Israel, precisely because the evidence is now so overwhelming that the ethno-state of Israel cannot be that.

This Zionist war against internationalist Jews is among the many reasons why Jews on the Left must fight back against the defamatory slanders propagated by those who falsely claim to be carrying out their monstrous activities in our name — thereby joining the future of Jews to Zionism’s iniquitous project. Here we must be aware of the language game carried out by Schumer and others to obfuscate our goals and values.

Our arguments to transform Israel as a modern secular state that treats all citizens alike are caricatured as “uniquely signaling out” and “demonizing.” And our appeal for a de-Zionized transformation of the Israeli state is regularly “interpreted” as “destruction of Israel” in a manner implying the elimination of the Jewish population.

This is a topic well-addressed in Marc Lamont Hill and Mitchell Plitnick’s *Except for Palestine: The Limits of Progressive Politics* (2021). The gist can be summarized in this complete sentence: Israel does not have “the right to exist” *in the form of an expansionist ethno-nationalist state that is based on the dispossession of and denial of equal rights for the indigenous majority*. To equate this specific state form with “Jewish self-determination” is similar to claiming “states’ rights” as a cover for maintaining the Jim Crow South.

Of course, socialists are certainly not opposed to a Jewish state in principle, but, as with any other nationalist demand, the question is *where* and *how*. A colonial project of removal and deprivation of the indigenous people, who in this case were the greater part of the inhabitants, crosses the line *anyplace* it has occurred.

Moreover, the prospect for future Jewish security, dependent on an expansionist ethnostate, is very

much in doubt because of what the present situation of Zionist hegemony has brought about. It's no secret that, as the Zionist juggernaut continues to ruthlessly charge forward toward a "Greater Israel," Israel is more controversial than ever before; the claim that Jews are safer there than elsewhere is less and less convincing.

Here I can recommend the fine 1969 pamphlet by Trotskyist George Novack, *How Can the Jews Survive? A Socialist Answer to Zionism*: "If the Israelis are not to be caught in a bloody trap of Zionist devising, they will have to abandon the exclusive and aggressive Jewish state and opt for a Middle East federation of the Arab and Jewish peoples."

While the branding of anti-Zionism as antisemitism is an outrageous smear, socialists must acknowledge that an abhorrence of Israel's Zionist behavior can slip into actual Jew hatred. This is something Zionists are doing their best to promote by equating Jewish identity with the self-proclaimed "Jewish nation-state." Their goal is to make the public think that to be Jewish is to support the crimes of the Israeli state and especially the current killing campaign in Gaza and the West Bank.

Of course, *Jew hatred anywhere* must be aggressively opposed. If individuals or groups infiltrate pro-Palestinian activities with signs, memes, or chants like "Gas the Jews" or "The Jews Had It Coming," we should categorically ban them — and remove them by force, if necessary. Holocaust-deniers, even ones who claim to be Jewish, should be cordoned off.

The false argument that Jews control U.S. government policy is a standard trope of white supremacists' conspiracy theory and must be intellectually defeated. The United States has its own reasons for wanting an imperialist outpost in the region and would abandon Israel if a better option appeared.

When choosing a site for protest, there should be an effort to select ones that the public can understand as clearly tied to the Israeli state, such as the many embassies and consulates across the U.S.; one should not give the false impression that Jews per se are the target. One may think one has good reasons for an action against a pro-Zionist individual or business, but the result can be a very bad look when the national climate is so hostile and demagogic politicians are everywhere.

Nevertheless, the basis of Left unity during the invasion and bombing of Gaza ought to be to permanently stop Israel's onslaught, reaching out to as many people as possible to build mass action. Personally, I dislike acceding to any demands of the pro-Israel partisans and am dubious about their dictating various political litmus tests for what language is acceptable on petitions and protest letters, when just about every sharp criticism is declared to be "demonization of Israel."

While everyone's situation is different, depending on their political community, it seems to me that characterizing Israeli policies as "genocide" (as defined by the United Nations in 1948) is appropriate, even if it raises hackles. On the other hand, anything suggestive of political support for Hamas would, for me, be out of the question, even as explicit condemnations of Hamas may not be necessary depending on the purpose of the statement.

A Reconstruction of the Entire Society

Finally, we might consider the fate of Thrall's admirable *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama*. Would minds be changed if pro-Israel supporters could just see more of what the Palestinian reality is all about?

Although his book began to receive laudable reviews in several nationally respected publications,

this attention dwindled after October 7 and at least a quarter of his scheduled public appearances and readings in London, New York, Los Angeles, and Washington were cancelled.



Ads were pulled for the book, and Thrall felt forced to withdraw from at least one university-sponsored event when it was demanded that he sign a pledge opposing any boycotts of Israel. Yes, his effort shows that another approach to this controversy is possible, one without invective, harsh denunciations of Zionism, references to settler-colonialism, or genocide. Still, activists may be justified in wondering if it can really make any difference.

In the end, activists must focus on building a social movement that can move us forward. Independent of the question of state forms that can be devised, both the Palestinian and Israeli *populations* are there to stay and significantly intertwined.

So, resolving the conflict in a lasting manner demands a transferal of perspective to some qualitatively new plan: whether two states (one Palestinian, one Jewish), one state (democratic and secular), or some sort of federation (with culturally autonomous regions), as long as Palestinians achieve self-determination and are no longer the stateless dependents of a hostile state power.

Peace and security for *all* is the goal, but these can't come with the retention of Israeli colonial privilege, something that some liberal Zionists and two-staters seem loathe to acknowledge. Nevertheless, the Jewish population of Israel must be reached and won over on the grounds that equality is sounder for all; the Israeli-Jewish population cannot be coupled with its ruling group any more than can Palestinians be coupled with Hamas.

It won't be easy, but an effort must be made to split the Israeli majority from its militaristic government and the present form of Zionist ideology. Simultaneously, a campaign for democratic revolution in the numerous dictatorships in the Middle East is also vital to the process.

As Martin Luther King pointed out in relation to the still-relevant U.S. civil rights movement, there are situations where a more dramatic transformation is required: "For years I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of the South, a little change here, a little change there," King told the journalist David Halberstam in April 1967. "Now I feel quite differently. I think you've got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values."

We need a post-Zionist world so that there can be a post-Hamas, fully liberated Palestinian population. "Never Again — for *Anyone!*" should be the watchword of the day.

Alan Wald

P.S.

- Against the Current, January-February 2024, ATC 228:
<https://againstthecurrent.org/israels-west-bank-inferno-the-responsibility-of-socialists/>
- Alan Wald is an editor of Against the Current and a member of the Academic Advisory Council of Jewish Voice for Peace since 2016.