

The 'Progressive Except Palestine' Problem

The Jewish community has a special responsibility to fight Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian lands, says Marjorie Cohn.

By [Marjorie Cohn](#)

[Truthout](#)



As a progressive Jew, I find that many of my family members and friends are still what we call “PEP,” progressive except Palestine. Amid ever-worsening injustices created by the Israeli system of apartheid and Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian lands, it is past time for this to change.

I am hopeful that the [firestorm](#) sparked by Michelle Alexander's recent *New York Times* [column](#), “Time to Break the Silence on Palestine,” will finally generate the heat necessary to force more people and groups on the left to overcome the fundamental hypocrisy of the “progressive except Palestine” approach.

I was deeply inspired by Alexander's column and her decision to speak so honestly about the difficulty of overcoming the fear of backlash over taking a public stand against the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Striking a comparison between the risk taken by prominent critics of Israel and the risk Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. took by publicly criticizing the Vietnam War, Alexander observes, “Those who speak publicly in support of the liberation of the Palestinian people still risk condemnation

and backlash.”

Invoking Dr. King’s exhortation that “a time comes when silence is betrayal,” Alexander reflects on “the excuses and rationalizations that have kept me largely silent on one of the great moral challenges of our time: the crisis in Israel-Palestine.”

Alexander’s words resonated with me, a Jew who uncritically supported Israel for many years until I saw the parallels between U.S. policy in Vietnam and Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories. My activism and critical writings have followed a trajectory from Vietnam to South Africa to Israel to Iraq to Afghanistan and other countries where the United States continues its imperial military actions.

Although many of my articles are controversial as they criticize the actions of the U.S. government – under both Democratic and Republican regimes – I get the most pushback from my writings about Israel-Palestine. When I analyze Israel’s illegal occupation and crimes against the Palestinians, I am often called a “self-hating” Jew.

My Own Path

I was born in 1948, the year Israel was created out of whole Palestinian cloth. When tasked with finding a destination for Jews displaced by the Holocaust, the United Nations chose Palestine. Thus began a brutal and illegal occupation that continues to this day.

In his book, “Injustice: The Story of the Holy Land Foundation Five,” Israeli-American Miko Peled describes the

1948 “ethnic cleansing campaign that was sweeping through Palestine like wildfire, destroying everything in its path.” Palestinians call it the “Nakba,” Arabic for “catastrophe.”

My family was not religious but we were proud of our Jewish heritage. My father fought the Nazis in World War II and relatives perished in the Holocaust. My paternal grandmother was an activist against the Tsar during the Russian pogroms. On her way to a Siberian prison, she escaped and, at the age of 18, boarded a ship bound for the United States.

We revered Israel as the homeland of the Jews. At the Passover Seder, we would raise our glasses and intone, “Next year in Jerusalem!” At Sunday School, we gathered coins to plant trees in the Holy Land. It wasn’t until I left home that I learned the truth about Israel and became an outspoken critic of its policies.

In 1967, during my freshman year at Stanford, I came to oppose the war in Vietnam and joined The Resistance, a group of draft resisters and their allies. The following year, I signed up for Students for a Democratic Society, where I learned the war was not an isolated event, but rather part of a long history of U.S. imperialism. But I was still unaware that the war Israel launched in 1967 “completed its occupation of Palestine,” in the words of Peled.

The anti-Vietnam War movement at Stanford challenged my long-held assumptions about U.S. foreign policy. My commitment to ending an unjust war against a people fighting for liberation eventually opened my eyes to the plight of the Palestinian people and Israel’s role in repressing them.

After college, I went to law school and became a peoples’

lawyer. I joined the National Lawyers Guild, a progressive political-legal organization which I later served as president. The NLG's guiding motto is, "Human rights are more sacred than property interests." In the NLG, I met many people who criticized Israel's illegal policies and U.S. complicity in them.

In 1977, the NLG sent a delegation to Israel and Palestine. The report they issued was the first comprehensive analysis of Israel's practices published by a nongovernmental organization dedicated to the protection of human rights. It documented violations of the 1949 Geneva Conventions by Israel as a belligerent occupant of the West Bank and Gaza.

The allegations in the report disturbed me greatly. They described Israel's mistreatment of the Palestinians, including house demolitions, administrative detention and torture. The report documented beatings, burning with cigarettes, forced standing while naked for long periods exposed to heat or cold, dousing with hot or cold water, cutting the body with razor blades, biting by dogs, sensory deprivation, sodomizing with bottles or sticks, inserting wires into the penis, electric shocks to sensitive parts of the body, and suspension from the floor with hands or feet tied to a pulley device. Reading the case studies made me physically ill.

Apartheid, from South Africa to Palestine

Alexander, author of "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration the Age of Colorblindness," wrote that some of Israel's practices are "reminiscent of apartheid in South Africa and

Jim Crow segregation in the United States.”

After the Palestinians launched the second intifada, or uprising, NLG members went to the region and published a [report](#) in 2001. It documented a system of apartheid in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as well as the United States’ uncritical support of Israel.

[That report](#) describes illegal settlements and bypass roads, restricted movement of Palestinians, discriminatory land policies, differential treatment of Jews and Palestinian non-Jews, and Israeli policing of Palestinian political expression. It also analyzed indiscriminate and excessive use of lethal force against Palestinians, indiscriminate and excessive use of force against Palestinian property, delay and prevention of medical treatment, and collective punishment against the Palestinians.

South Africa’s Archbishop Desmond Tutu, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, pointed to similarities between apartheid in his country and Israel’s oppression of the Palestinians. “My voice will always be raised in support of Christian-Jewish ties and against the anti-Semitism that all sensible people fear and detest. But this cannot be an excuse for doing nothing and for standing aside as successive Israeli governments colonize the West Bank and advance racist laws,” Tutu wrote in a [Tampa Bay Times](#) article. He noted “Israel’s theft of Palestinian land,” and “Jewish-only colonies built on Palestinian land in violation of international law.”

Tutu cited a 2010 Human Rights Watch report that “describes the two-tier system of laws, rules, and services that Israel operates for the two populations in areas in the West Bank

under its exclusive control, which provide preferential services, development, and benefits for Jewish settlers while imposing harsh conditions on Palestinians.” Tutu wrote, “This, in my book, is apartheid. It is untenable.”

On July 19, 2018, the Israeli Knesset passed [a law](#) that illegally enshrines a system of apartheid. The legislation, which has the force of a constitutional amendment, says, “The State of Israel is the national home of the Jewish people, in which it fulfills its natural, cultural, religious and historical right to self-determination.” It continues, “The right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people.” There is no guarantee of self-determination for the 1.8 million Arabs who make up 20 percent of Israel’s population.

Tutu called on “people and organizations of conscience to divest from . . . Caterpillar, Motorola Solutions and Hewlett Packard,” which profit “from the occupation and subjugation of Palestinians.” He was advocating participation in the non-violent [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement \(BDS\)](#), which Alexander also mentions in her column.

When representatives of Palestinian civil society launched BDS in 2005, they [called](#) upon “international civil society organizations and people of conscience all over the world to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel similar to those applied to South Africa in the apartheid era ... [including] embargoes and sanctions against Israel.”

Israel continues to attack Gaza, described as the world's largest "open air prison" as Israel maintains a tight blockade, restricting all ingress and egress. Headlines in the mainstream media falsely portray an equivalence of firepower between Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza. But Israel's use of force greatly exceeds that of the Palestinians, and the asymmetric warfare continues to escalate.

In 2014, Israel mounted an offensive called "Operation Protective Edge," relentlessly bombing Gaza for nearly two months, killing 2,251 Palestinians, the majority of them civilians. The number of Palestinians wounded was 11,231, including 3,540 women and 3,436 children. On the Israeli side, six civilians and 67 soldiers were killed and 1,600 were injured. Tens of thousands of Palestinians lost their homes and the infrastructure was severely damaged. Israel targeted numerous schools, UN-sanctioned places of refuge, hospitals, ambulances and mosques.

As Operation Protective Edge was winding down, the NLG and other legal organizations sent a letter to the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, urging her to investigate war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity in Gaza committed by Israel and aided and abetted by US leaders. The letter was based on an article I wrote documenting those crimes.

Criticizing Israel is Not Anti-Semitic

I have become sharply critical of Israel. An active member of the NLG's Palestine Subcommittee, I write frequent articles and do media commentary about Israel's violations

of international law. I am also a member of Jewish Voice for Peace and I work in support of BDS.

Years after I first read the 1977 NLG delegation report, I visited Ellis Island, where my grandparents arrived in the United States. It is now a museum. As I walked the route they traveled, I felt very emotional about what they endured. But my deep feelings about the suffering of my ancestors during the Holocaust are not inconsistent with my criticisms of Israel for subjecting the Palestinians to a different kind of oppression.

As stories continue to emerge about Israel's killing of unarmed protesters at the Gaza border during the Great March of Return, it is increasingly difficult to ignore the facts. Yet even those who see the truth about Israel's oppression of the Palestinians worry about reprisals for speaking out.

Alexander describes the silence of many civil rights activists and groups, "not because they lack concern or sympathy for the Palestinian people, but because they fear loss of funding from foundations, and false charges of anti-Semitism." She mentioned the case of Bahia Amawi, a U.S. citizen of Palestinian descent, who lost her Texas elementary school job last year after refusing to pledge in writing that she would not participate in the BDS movement. On Twitter, journalist Glenn Greenwald pointed out the grave danger anti-BDS laws pose to freedom of speech.

The proliferation of these laws – where US citizens are barred from work or contracts unless they vow not to boycott Israel – is the single greatest free speech threat in the US. You're allowed to boycott other US states, but not this one foreign country! <https://t.co/bLfsQbL99B> pic.twitter.com/gRBfNrut8A

– Glenn Greenwald (@ggreenwald) [December 17, 2018](#)

There is a false equivalency between criticizing Israel and being anti-Semitic. Any criticism of Israeli policy is labeled anti-Semitism, even though many Jews—including members of Jewish Voice for Peace, Jewish Center for Nonviolence and IfNotNow—oppose the occupation.

The BDS movement is not anti-Israeli, as it targets the policies, not the people, of Israel. And actions against Israel's policies, including BDS, do not equate to anti-Semitism. Rafeef Ziadah, a spokesperson for the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions National Committee, says, "As a matter of principle, the BDS movement has consistently and categorically opposed all forms of racism, including anti-semitism and Islamophobia."

Palestinian human rights activist Omar Barghouti wrote in the *The New York Times* in 2014, "Arguing that boycotting Israel is intrinsically anti-Semitic is not only false, but it also presumes that Israel and 'the Jews' are one and the same. This is as absurd and bigoted as claiming that a boycott of a self-defined Islamic state like Saudi Arabia, say, because of its horrific human rights record, would of necessity be Islamophobic."

Even though many persist in equating condemnation of Israel with anti-Semitism, groups like Jewish Voice for Peace continue to gain traction. Jews are increasingly willing to examine the facts on the ground in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

And although Congress, dominated by the powerful Israel lobby, continues to give more money to Israel than any other country, two new members of Congress – Representatives Ilhan

Omar (D-Minnesota) and Rashida Tlaib (D-Michigan) – support BDS.

Alexander is optimistic: “There seems to be increased understanding that criticism of the policies and practices of the Israeli government is not, in itself, anti-Semitic.”

We in the Jewish community have a special responsibility to fight against the Israeli system of apartheid and its illegal occupation of Palestinian lands. The BDS movement is an effective weapon in this struggle. I urge my fellow Jews to join BDS and oppose Israel’s illegal and inhumane policies in whatever way they can.

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