

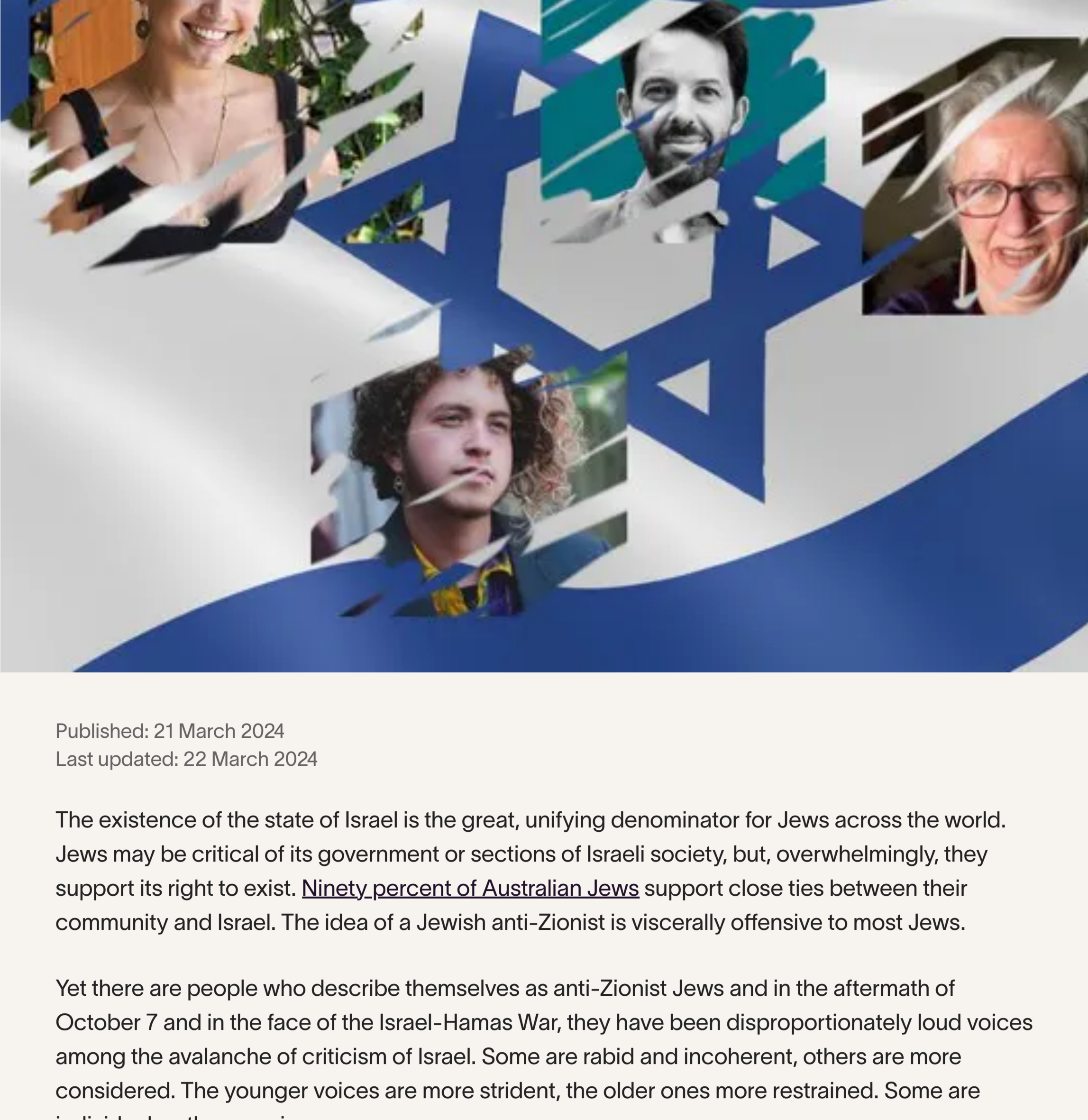
FEATURE AUSTRALIA

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# Who – and what – are the anti-Zionist Jews?

In the avalanche of voices opposing Israel, 'anti-Zionist Jews' are among the most confronting. Who are the Australian anti-Zionist Jews and what do they actually want?

MICHAEL VISONTAY



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The existence of the state of Israel is the great, unifying denominator for Jews across the world. Jews may be critical of its government or sections of Israeli society, but, overwhelmingly, they support its right to exist. Ninety percent of Australian Jews support close ties between their community and Israel. The idea of a Jewish anti-Zionist is viscerally offensive to most Jews.

Yet there are people who describe themselves as anti-Zionist Jews and in the aftermath of October 7 and in the face of the Israel-Hamas War, they have been disproportionately loud voices among the avalanche of criticism of Israel. Some are rabid and incoherent, others are more considered. The younger voices are more strident, the older ones more restrained. Some are individuals, others are in groups.

Though some have articulated common platforms, they do not necessarily share the same views or articulate definitions of what it means to be anti-Zionist. Indeed, the vagueness over what Zionism means has made it easier for people to weaponise the word to suit their views.

"It isn't actually clear what the word Zionism means nowadays – even to most Zionists," says Doodie Ringelblum, leader of the Bundist movement in Melbourne. "The Gen 17 survey of Australian Jews found that 70% of Australian Jews self-define as Zionist. It was the only question in the entire survey which had to explain what the question meant, because otherwise it was going to be too unclear."

But calling oneself an anti-Zionist must mean something more than opposing the war in Gaza or calling for Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, or campaigning for the rights of Palestinians to a state. These are positions shared by many Zionists.

Anti-Zionism implies a rejection of the entire Zionist project: the right of the Jewish people to a state in their ancestral land.

It is easy to dismiss Jewish anti-Zionists as a handful of fringe-dwellers looking for a target on which to project their anti-West world views. Their activities rarely attract more than a couple of dozen participants. But the swelling of their voices suggests a rising tide, particularly among younger Jews.

## Young, Jewish, anti-Zionist

At the vanguard of the young "Israel-phobic" brigade are Elsa Tuet-Rosenberg and Nevo Zisin, activists who use terms like "Zios" and "Zimbos" to describe Zionists, often with curses attached. Their anti-Zionism is part of a package of activist positions, including LGBTQ+, Indigenous and anti-racism activism.

Tuet-Rosenberg describes herself as "a queer, Jewish and Chinese woman of colour". Her mother is Jewish, her father Chinese and Muslim. She has claimed to feel "a huge amount of affection toward my Jewish culture" which she credits with giving her the foundation for her social justice beliefs. She is the founder of Hue, a social-justice and antiracism organisation that runs antiracism training and consulting.

Tuet-Rosenberg gained national notoriety last month when she was named as one of five activists who doxed Jewish creatives and academics, leading to death threats and boycotts.

"Let these f..king Zionists know no f..king peace," she urged her 8,000 social media followers.

She also appears to buy into conspiracy theories about Jewish power. In a social media post in February, she wrote that "Zimbos" maintain their positions due to other Zionists "in management".

## The ongoing occupation and ethnic cleansing of Palestinian people goes against my Jewish values.

Nevo Zisin

Nevo Zisin describes himself "a Jewish, queer, non-binary writer, activist and public speaker". Zisin was raised embedded in the mainstream Jewish community, attending The King David School in Melbourne, and spending a gap year in Israel with Habonim.

Their father is Israeli, their mother an Australian Jew who has lived in Israel and, at a pro-Palestinian rally in Melbourne in November, Zisin described themselves as a "white Jewish settler coloniser on violently stolen Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung land".

Zisin eschews the description of anti-Zionists as self-hating Jews, describing themselves on social media as a "self-loving Jew" and claiming their anti-Zionism springs from Jewish values.

"The ongoing occupation and ethnic cleansing of Palestinian people goes against my Jewish values," they said in a statement released by a group of Jewish anti-Zionist demonstrators who Zisin who stormed the office of Defence Minister Richard Marles' in November, to protest against Israel's attacks on Gaza.

Another member of the group that occupied Marles' office was Noemie Huttner-Koros, a Jewish artist and writer, who also describes her anti-Zionism in the context of her Jewish identity: "As a descendant of Holocaust survivors, I refuse to let Israel's far-right government weaponise our grief, pain and fear for the purpose of war crime, invasion and genocide. We want to show Jewish people in the diaspora that we can speak up. Jews and Palestinians can and do live together. I see it as my ancestral duty to fight for justice, peace and liberation for all," she said.

## Anti-Zionist groups

These individuals come together under several banners campaigning for Palestinians: the Tzedek collective, the Loud Jew collective, and Jews Against Fascism, among them. But it can be difficult to distinguish anti-Zionist groups from those who are vocal in their criticism of Israel and even harder to work out what groups who call themselves anti-Zionist actually mean. It's a term that groups throw around, but individuals often duck when questions are asked.

Jordy Silverstein and Sivan Barak are active campaigners for Palestine. Neither uses the term anti-Zionist to describe themselves but both are leaders in the Tzedek Collective, which describes itself as "an intergenerational leftist anti-Zionist Jewish community and action based in and around Warrang (Sydney)".

Tzedek has been campaigning to stop British political commentator Douglas Murray from speaking at Sydney's Enmore Theatre on March 24, describing him as a "far-right, Zionist ideologue" who "has been providing ideological fodder for Israel's genocide in Gaza since October 7".

## I am against the state of Israel structured as a Zionist state privileging Jews. I am not against the state as such.

Vivienne Porzolt

The Loud Jew Collective told *The Jewish Independent* it is "against all forms of nationalism, including Zionism. We are opposed to Zionism because it is an ideology of Jewish nationalism that has dispossessed Palestinians from their land".

The Collective was formed in 2021 by a group of "over 15 Jews between the ages of 20 and 60", it says, "to be a home and community for inspiring and radicalising Jewish cultures". It does not have a formal membership structure but claims to have hundreds of people on its mailing list and over 7000 followers on Instagram.

The Collective says it doesn't want its members to be identified because "many of us have experienced bullying, harassment and doxing from Zionist members of the Jewish community, including from friends and family".

Jews Against Fascism has called on Jews to quit Zionist youth movements in support of Palestine but avoids using the term anti-Zionist.

None of the Jewish anti-Zionists cited above, except Loud Jew Collective, was willing to explain their positions. Zisin and Huttner-Koros declined to answer questions for this article. Tuet-Rosenberg and Silverstein did not reply to repeated approaches.

## Established voices

Not all Jews see Israel as the centre of Jewish life. Since the 19th Century, the Bund, a social democratic movement, has always promoted the idea of Diaspora Jewish life.

Last month *The Forward* published an article on Bundism which sought to include the Melbourne Bundists within the Jewish anti-Zionist fold. The group firmly rejects the suggestion. "The Bund does not define itself in relation to Zionism. We are not anti-Zionist. We're not interested in debating Zionism. We're interested in debating what is the best outcome for the Jewish people," Doodie Ringelblum told *The Jewish Independent*. "The Bund is defined in terms of Bundism, which is a positive program. We have a view on Jewish identity, activity and cultural autonomy."

In Australia, established activists including Vivienne Porzolt and Antony Loewenstein have long staked a claim to the idea that you can be Jewish without being a Zionist.

## The idea of a Jewish state which gives superior rights to Jews above anybody else is by definition, discriminatory and by definition racist.

Antony Loewenstein

Porzolt is one of the leading voices in Jews Against the Occupation. Porzolt describes herself as anti-Zionist in the following terms: "I am against the state of Israel structured as a Zionist state privileging Jews. I am not against the state as such. Like being against South African apartheid without opposing the existence of the state of South Africa."

Porzolt told *The Jewish Independent* that the group's numbers have grown from about a dozen before October 7 to 30, while the membership of Tzedek, a younger activist group, has "grown absolutely exponentially". According to its Facebook page, Tzedek has 732 followers.

Antony Loewenstein

Independent journalist and author Antony Loewenstein is an outspoken critic of Israel. His most recent book is *The Palestine Laboratory* and he has spent many years writing about the Middle-East, from here and over there. Loewenstein describes himself as an anti-Zionist because he opposes the concept of a Jewish state. "The idea of a Jewish state which gives superior rights to Jews above anybody else is by definition, discriminatory and by definition racist," he told *The Jewish Independent*.

"But this view is not just because it's a Jewish state. I have similar views and have written extensively about the concept of, for example, a Hindu fundamentalist state, which is what India is becoming, or a Christian or Muslim exclusionary state."

Loewenstein rejects the distinction that many Jews make between criticising the occupation and supporting the state. "Of course, you can be opposed to the occupation and many Jews are. But when a state is 75 years old, and a sizeable proportion, arguably the whole population has been discriminating against non-Jews, that is the state. It's in its DNA."

He believes that since October 7, the number of Jews aged 18-35 espousing this view in Australia and the US has exploded because of what they are seeing through the Palestinian. "They are saying that if this is what a Jewish state means, then this is not a Jewish state I can support."

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## About the author

Michael Visontay

Michael Visontay is the Commissioning Editor of TJI. He has worked as a journalist and editor for more than 30 years. Michael is the author of several books, including Who Gave You Permission?, co-authored with child sexual abuse advocate Manny Waks, and Welcome to Wanderland: Western Sydney Wanderers and the Pride of the West.

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## Comments

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MD Fisher

22 March at 3:39:28 am

I think all countries should treat all citizens equally. Citizens of a country based on a religion or ethnicity who do not share the religion or ethnicity on which the country is based are second-class citizens. I oppose all such states and am therefore anti-Zionist.

MD Fisher

22 March at 3:28:07 am

I am an anti-Zionist Jew. I believe every country should be a country for all of its citizens making no distinctions among its citizens on grounds of religion or ethnicity. A Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish or Muslim state makes such distinctions. That is incompatible with democracy.

David Langsam

21 March at 11:58:57 pm

A most interesting and important article, Michael. Clearly, since the 1995 murder of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the ascendancy of the Netanyahu Likud governments "the safe homeland for the Jews from another pogrom or Holocaust" is not safe. Since October 6, 2023, it has become very unsafe. As a former Mt Scopus alumni and Habonim member, I retain a belief that there should be a safe homeland for Jews (living in peace with its neighbors), despite being highly critical of successive Israeli governments. One of the problems for the Australian community has always been the self-appointed 'Rottweilers' stultifying debate. I think we can thank them for the 30% of Gen 17 respondents who described themselves as non-Zionists. I have met many other Jews who say they disagree with the Israeli government but fear to say it publicly. In Australia, I guessed that my views were shared by 5-10% of the community. Living in London, I was delighted to find myself among about 30% of the British Jewish community (including the Board of Deputies). In Israel, my Labour/Marach friends described me as mainstream, even too centrist. As for anti-Zionists, I respect the Bund position, but fail to understand the need to take "football" team sides in the current war with Gaza – which helps no Palestinian, or Israel and no Galut Jews. Shabbat shalom, David Langsam

Rod

21 March at 10:45:39 pm

Michael Gawenda has some interesting things to say about the Bund and Zionism in his recent book My Life as a Jew. He sees the movement as going from Anti-Zionist to Non-Zionist following the creation of the state. I guess that's what Doodie Ringleblum is saying in this article another way.

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