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**Strategies to confront the discriminatory discourse of Israel**

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After the recent massacre at a synagogue in Pittsburgh, USA, where 11 people were slaughtered by a right-wing extremist for being Jewish, the Israeli government saw an opportunity. Its ambassador to the US, Ron Dermer, went on national television and compared the killer to left-wing activists advocating for Palestine. He refused to condemn Donald Trump’s rhetoric despite the President endorsing and enacting many white nationalist talking points and policies since he took office, emboldening anti-Muslim, anti-black, anti-women, anti-refugee and anti-Jewish bigotry.

Israel’s Minister of Education, Naftali Bennett, flew to Pittsburgh and compared the mass murderer of Jews in a synagogue to protestors for Palestinian rights. “From Sderot, in Israel, to Pittsburgh, in Pennsylvania”, he said, “the hand that fires missiles is the same hand that shoots worshippers. We will fight against the hatred of Jews and anti-Semitism wherever it raises its head, and we will prevail.”

It was a despicable attempt to link a violent onslaught against Jews, the worst anti-Semitic attack in US history, to non-violent protestors seeking freedom in Gaza. Too few journalists commented on the offensive comparison or noted the disgust felt by many Jews around the world.

However, none of this should have been surprising. The Netanyahu government has deepened the Israeli government’s divorce from liberal values and aligned itself with anti-Semitic regimes, Christian fundamentalists and right-wing demagogues. On the face of it, this seems strange; why would a self-declared Jewish state want to befriend these people? Surely such actions endanger Jews worldwide and the democratic values that Israel claims to represent?

Jewish writer Mairav Zonszein recently [wrote](https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/06/trump-first-jews-later-pittsburgh-attack-white-supremacy-adl-netanyahu-israel-ron-dermer-antisemitism/) in Foreign Policy magazine that there was a “deep-rooted ideological and political bond between Israel and the Christian right in the United States and Europe - a bond that willingly overlooks and downplays white nationalism and Christian anti-Semitism in exchange for the promotion of Israeli political interests and dominance in the Middle East.”

Israel has a long history of colluding with regimes and individuals with extremist backgrounds and Netanyahu has accelerated this trend. From apartheid South Africa to Viktor Orban in Hungary to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, hateful rhetoric and policies against refugees and Muslims are welcomed by Israel because they’re sympathetic to its aims and ideology.

Israel is also selling its technology, surveillance and military hardware to nations and individuals that want to control what they view as an unruly population. Whether it’s Myanmar using Israeli arms to repress the Rohingya people or the Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte harnessing Israeli weapons to kill civilians in its brutal war on drugs, Israel is selling so-called “battle-tested” armaments to willing recipients. The Israeli occupation has been monetised.

Any nation that backs Israel’s 50-plus occupation of Palestinian lands is a good friend to Netanyahu, his political allies and much of the Israeli media, a largely right-wing and uncritical grouping of journalists and media companies that barely mention the occupation of Palestine except in the context of security and threats. It is only the liberal, Jewish paper, Haaretz, that regularly reports from Palestine, particularly the fine journalists Gideon Levy and Amira Hass.

I still regularly read in the Western press that Israel is known for its vibrant debate and disagreement on matters of national importance. This is a convenient myth that masks the darker reality; there’s little public outcry against the occupation within Israel and the major, Jewish opposition parties support its continuation.

I’ve been visiting and reporting from Israel and Palestine since 2005, I now live in occupied, East Jerusalem, and the public mood against Palestinians has never been uglier. Donald Trump may be deeply unpopular around the world but in a recent [global survey](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israelis-remain-largely-isolated-in-praise-for-trump-and-us-policy-poll-shows/), Israelis overwhelmingly expressed support for the US President. His hatred of minorities and migrants and warm embrace of Israel’s right-wing government was seen as positive amongst the Israeli, Jewish population.

Israel journalist Oren Cohen [says](https://972mag.com/journalist-first-intifada-learned-believe-idf-says/138505/) that the Jewish, Israeli media “wants to align itself with what it thinks the public wants to hear…We look at all the Arabs, including the Palestinians, as a single, menacing bloc, unable to assess the power relations: who supports whom, who is with us and who is against us?” Too often, Cohen explains, the Israeli media blindly accepts the lies given to them by the defence establishment. What the army says is obediently reported without comment. It’s embedded journalism of the worst kind. Independent journalism is still rare in Israel.

Many Palestinian journalists also face constant harassment by Israeli and Palestinian security forces. Over 80 percent of Palestinian journalists self-censor in their reporting, [according](https://www.timesofisrael.com/over-80-of-palestinian-reporters-self-censor-study-finds/) to a study released by a Palestinian media rights group in 2017.

Despite these disturbing facts, there is hope in providing more accurate and balanced coverage of Israel/Palestine, if journalists look more closely. There has been a huge shift in Jewish opinion in the Diaspora towards Israel in the last decade, many Jews now actively oppose the occupation and regularly condemn the Israeli government for its racism, and yet too often reporters portray a monolithic Jewish community in the US, Britain or elsewhere in the West. This is no longer the case although major pro-Israel lobby AIPAC and its affiliates still wield huge political power.

One of the largest Jewish groups in the US, Jewish Voice for Peace, JVP, with hundreds of thousands of supporters, has emerged as one of the most principled examples of this change. After the Pittsburgh synagogue massacre, JVP released a [statement](https://jewishvoiceforpeace.org/unitedwefight/) that read in part:

“We are not fooled by the Israeli government’s sudden concern for a diaspora it regularly disdains, we remember and condemn its abuse of Palestinians, refugees and asylum-seekers, and we refute its false promise of safety through militarism. Our home is where our community is.”

JVP teaches online classes about “Facing the Nakba”, educating Jews about the forced displacement of Palestinians in 1948, and opposes the training of American law enforcement by Israeli police, military and intelligence services. Reporters and editors need to look beyond the usual soundbites when covering the conflict and look for new, lesser known faces to speak about the growth of Jewish dissent. It’s no longer a fringe movement but a growing wave.

There are many Jews and liberals around the world who hate the ways in which Israel has tried to normalise the occupation. Netanyahu recently [told](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/pm-if-youre-a-powerful-nation-you-can-occupy-and-no-one-will-care/) a closed party meeting that, “power is the most important thing in foreign policy.” The occupation is “nonsense. There are powerful states that have occupied and transferred populations, and no one talks about them.”

These kinds of attitudes are one reason that support for Israel has crashed in the US. In a [recent poll](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-poll-shows-support-for-israel-plummeting-among-u-s-liberals-millennials-and-women-1.6594182) by YouGov and the Economist, a majority of millennials, Democrats and women did not believe Israel was an ally. The tightening ties between Israel and the Trump administration had pushed liberals and Democrats away from Israel. Republicans and conservatives still backed Israel but the party and generational split was likely irreversible.

Another [study](https://www.timesofisrael.com/poll-shows-deep-divisions-between-israeli-and-us-jews-on-trump-peace/) earlier in the year, conducted by the American Jewish Committee, found a majority of American Jews backed a Palestinian state, only a minority of Israelis did, though a majority of Israelis and American Jews opposed dismantling all illegal, West Bank settlements to reach a peace deal.

I recently [watched](https://972mag.com/al-jazeera-film-us-israel-lobby/138412/) the censored Al-Jazeera English documentary on the US pro-Israel lobby and it shows an increasingly desperate and ugly lobby out to smear supporters of Palestinian rights. A key Israel advocate admits that the power of AIPAC is diminishing, demographics shift in the US are rendering it less effective, but it’s unclear what will replace it.

Journalists should seek out these stories and investigate whether the more progressive and pro-Palestinian narrative has a chance of succeeding in the US Congress and wider US society. I believe it does, in time, though what this means for US and its backing of the indefinite Israeli occupation of Palestine remains to be seen. For now, strong support is guaranteed.

As a journalist who has extensively covered Israel and Palestine for 15 years, reporting from the West Bank, Gaza and Israel, I’ve seen too many reporters parrot Israeli government talking points, ignore the growing ties between Israel and the global far-right, Israel’s growing closeness with autocratic Arab regimes and shun stories on Israeli military hardware and tactics being sold on the international market. These are important issues that should be tackled more comprehensively.

Israel used to effectively sell its message and policies through savvy use of media domination, effective English language skills and behind the scenes bullying. The Israel lobby continues to pay for Western journalists and politicians to visit Israel on propaganda trips. Reporters should expose these visits, explaining how they worsen coverage of Palestinians and the occupation. Finally, Israel has utilised the post 9/11 sympathy for terror victims while ignoring the many Palestinian victims of Israeli terrorism. This narrative still works in many countries but is becoming less effective. Journalists should challenge the Israeli hijacking of 9/11 and explain why it’s deepened the relationships between the Jewish state and Washington’s war agenda.

The language and tactics of Washington’s “war on terror” were borrowed, if not stolen, from Israel long before 9/11. Renditions, assassinations, drone strikes, black sites and torturing children were all advanced by Israel as a weapon of war over the last decades. Journalists should explore how dehumanising language used against Palestinians, along with Muslims in general, contributes to Western ignorance of the Israel/Palestine conflict.

As a Jewish, atheist, anti-Zionist journalist, I know that Israel will continue to deepen its occupation of the Palestinian people. The occupation is permanent, at least for now. However, nothing lasts forever and international pressure will eventually force Israel to change course. In the meantime, it’s our responsibility to challenge the stale narratives that pollute our media discourse and find and utilise young, Palestinian writers and speakers who challenge the status-quo imposed by Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. Look for critical Israeli Jews who oppose the Netanyahu worldview. Discover the growing disconnect between Israel and the Jewish Diaspora.

Perhaps most importantly, this is principally an issue about justice denied. Never forget who the real victims are and humanise them daily. What the solution to the Israel/Palestine impasse should look like is ultimately up to Israelis and Palestinians, personally I believe in a single, democratic, secular state, but it’s vital to articulate how anachronistic it is in a modern world to have religious states that discriminate based on race. This is just as relevant for Israel as all Muslim nations.

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