

Criticism of Israeli Policy Is Not Anti-Semitic

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*I was provoked to write this discussion of what is and what isn't anti-Semitism by an article in Ha'aretz on the "controversy" created by the awarding of the 2018 Nobel Prize in Chemistry to **George P. Smith**. According to the reporting, Smith is not only a brilliant scientist whose work has helped lead to the creation of new drugs that can treat cancer and a range of autoimmune diseases, he is also an outspoken supporter of Palestinian rights and a critic of Israeli policies.*

The Ha'aretz piece notes that Smith has long been "a target of pro-Israel groups" and is listed on "the controversial Canary Mission website"—used by supporters of Israel to harass and silence critics.

As I read through the article looking for evidence of Smith's sins, I found quotes saying that he "wished 'not for Israel's Jewish population to be expelled' but 'an end to the discriminatory regime in Palestine.'" At another point, Ha'aretz quotes from an op-ed written by Smith condemning Israeli policies in Gaza which he concludes by expressing his support for the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS) calling it "Palestinian civil society's call for the global community of conscience to ostracize Israeli businesses and institutions until Israel repudiates [their violence against Palestinians] and the Palestinian people, including the exiles, achieve full equality with the Jews in their shared homeland."

I read all of this in the context of this worrisome campaign that is unfolding here in the United States to silence critics of Israel or the exclusivist vision of Political Zionism. It is a well-funded multi-pronged effort, one component of which is the shadowy Canary Mission website that publishes the names, photos, and backgrounds of pro-Palestinian students and professors—terming them anti-Semites or supporters of terrorism. It does so with the expressed purpose of harming their careers. The Canary Mission list is also used to taint and smear these activists to intimidate politicians from engaging with them. And the lists have been used by the Israeli government to deny entry to, in particular, Palestinian Americans or progressive Americans Jews seeking to see family, study, teach, or simply visit that country.

Although the Canary Mission has done its best to keep its operations, leadership, and funding secret, recent articles published in the Jewish press have revealed that the project has been financially supported by some mainstream American Jewish philanthropic entities.

In addition to the Canary Mission there is the campaign that seeks to criminalize support for BDS or to penalize supporters of the movement to hold Israel accountable for its systematic violations of Palestinian rights. This effort is massively funded by the likes of Sheldon Adelson and we now learn, also from a recent expose in a prominent American Jewish newspaper, by millions of dollars funneled to the campaign from the Government of Israel.

Then there is legislation currently pending in Congress designed to make boycotting Israel a crime, complementing the 25 states that have already passed laws denying salaries, contracts, or benefits to individuals who support BDS.

Finally, in a replay of the effort that pressed the UK's Labour Party to define criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic, Trump's appointment to lead the Civil Rights Office at the U.S. Department of Education has made clear his intent to investigate anti-Israel activism on college campuses as forms of anti-Semitism. And there is legislation pending in Congress—the Antisemitism Awareness Act. Both this bill and the action by **Kenneth Marcus** at the Education Department seek to extend the definition of anti-Semitism to include criticism of Israel.

In reflecting on these developments, there are several observations that should be made: anti-Semitism is real, ugly, and dangerous; criticism of Israel is not anti-Semitism; and the effort to conflate the two not only silences needed debate, it distracts from the effort to root out real anti-Semitism, a scourge that has created great pain and enormous suffering in human history.

Anti-Semitism is hatred toward Jews—individually and as a group. It is also the attribution of evil intent or negative qualities to individuals or a group just because they are Jews. On the other hand, criticism of Israeli policy is not anti-Semitic. When Smith has criticized Israel's massacres at the Gaza border or its systematic denial of equal rights and justice to Palestinians, he is not attributing this behavior to their religion or even suggesting that this behavior is due to their being Jews. For example, he is not saying "Israel is oppressing Palestinians because that's the way Jews behave." Nor is he saying that all Jews, as a group, are responsible for these actions—this would be anti-Semitic. He said no such thing. The only reason to target Smith and those, like him, who critique the policies of the state (that by the way are not supported by all Israelis or Jews, worldwide) is to silence their voices.

This idea that criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic (what is now called "the new anti-Semitism") is decades old. It has received a push, in recent years, by the campaign to add to the definition of anti-Semitism any criticism that singles Israel out and doesn't apply the same standard to other countries. This is, at best, a far-fetched effort to shield Israel. While it's proponents claim that it targets only those who single out Israel for criticism, what they really seek to do is single out Israel as the one country that can't be criticized.

It is also important to note that there is evidence that in, too many instances, the struggle to combat real anti-Semitism takes a back seat to the effort to shield Israel. For example, while some pro-Israel groups targeted Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party charging him with tolerating anti-Semitism, they ignored the virulent anti-Semites operating on the right-wing of UK politics. This led many Labourites to conclude that the real target was Corbyn's unrelenting support for Palestinian rights. Much the same could be implied from Benjamin Netanyahu's embrace of far-right anti-Semitic European leaders, because they were strong supporters of his government.

The bottom line is that this entire effort is designed not to combat anti-Semitism but to silence criticism. And in the process of doing so enormous damage is done to: legitimate, well-deserved and necessary criticism of Israeli policies; the reputations of individuals like Smith and student activists who speak out because they are outraged by the injustices visited upon Palestinians; and the struggle against the scourge of real anti-Semitism.

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