

# Progressive Zionist Answers to the Anti-Israel Left

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## **Introduction**

On college campuses, in community settings and in the media, Israel is under attack by left-leaning activists. These attacks often do not express legitimate criticism of specific policies or government decisions, but rather seek to delegitimize Israel as a Jewish, democratic state. The critics typically question the basic right of Israel to exist and often claim that Israel and her supporters control United States foreign policy, manipulating it solely for Israel's benefit.

This pamphlet answers eight of the criticisms of Israel most commonly raised by her harshest critics on the left. It is not intended to delve deeply into these questions, but rather to provide the reader with an overview of each specific claim and a progressive Zionist response.

For many American Jews who align themselves with the left side of the political spectrum on domestic and other international issues, the finger-pointing at Israel is confusing and causes discomfort. Reconciling a commitment to liberalism, equality and human rights with attachments to ethnic groups and nation-states is not a new dilemma. Progressive Zionists believe that our commitment to the universal values of liberalism and equality can be reconciled, in theory and in practice, with our particularist attachments to the Jewish people and to Zionism.

At Ameinu, we believe there is no contradiction between a progressive approach to political issues and critical support for Israel. Committed to peace, social justice and the centrality of Israel for the Jewish people, Ameinu serves the American Jewish community by providing a voice for liberal Jews on issues of concern in both the United States and Israel. This guide is one example of the work that Ameinu is doing to give voice to progressive American Jews.

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## **The Pro-Israel Lobby Has a Stranglehold on U.S. Foreign Policy**

This fallacy accompanies the upsurge in anti-Semitic literature that has surfaced in recent years (Jews control banks, media and foreign markets are the other common canards). While the pro-Israel lobby group AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) is indeed a powerful and well-organized voice in Washington, it does not speak for all Jews and does not control Congress. U.S. policy, whether correct or incorrect, Republican or Democratic, is based on nuances and complexities and is not controlled by one ethnic or religious group's lobby.

How do lobby groups affect change? In Washington, lobbyists gain influence in three main ways: they organize voters to support candidates; they funnel campaign money from their wealthy supporters to candidates for office who stand with the lobby on specific issues; and they "educate" legislators and the executive branch on "their side of the issue." Compared to other groups in Washington DC, AIPAC and other Jewish groups can motivate sizable blocks of voters in just a few states, which is not surprising as Jews constitute approximately two percent of the U.S. population. These groups are somewhat more successful at channeling money, but even this pales in comparison to many other issue-oriented groups. In a study released by The Center for Responsive Politics on the 2004 election, election contributions were broken down into "industries" such as energy, retirees and pro-Israel. The pro-Israel lobby ranked 39 out of 80 industries, contributing only \$6 million, hardly a sum large enough to control government policy. Trial lawyers, on the other hand, contributed more than \$85 million.

Lobby groups like AIPAC often succeed by targeting specific Congressional races. Candidates that are supportive of the lobby's position are rewarded with additional political donations. Unfriendly candidates are "punished" with funds flowing to their opposition. In this way, effective lobby groups impact individual candidates more than overall policy.

In the particular case of AIPAC, they do not serve as the monolithic Federal lobbyist of the Jewish community. There are a variety of Jewish organizations that maintain Washington offices and lobby Congress on a wide range of foreign policy, economic, healthcare and social policy issues. In recent years there have been a number of occasions on which AIPAC has run into American Jewish opposition within and outside the organized Jewish community, and even differences of opinion with the Israeli government. This is a healthy development for the U.S. body politic and the Jewish community.

## **Israel is an Apartheid State**

Some critics of Israel erroneously use the word “apartheid” to describe both Israel as a whole and its treatment of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. The Afrikaans word apartheid refers to the South African National Party’s system of institutionalized racial segregation by which the white minority dominated the non-white majority until 1994. The word apartheid also invokes South Africa’s pariah status within the international community. By labeling Israel an apartheid state, Israel’s critics are implicitly arguing that Israel is illegitimate and akin to pre-1994 South Africa and therefore should not continue as a Jewish state. This is a more “politically correct” way to say that Zionism is racism, which is a false claim.

Those using the term apartheid often picture Jews of European ancestry oppressing a darker race of people, the Palestinians. In fact, Israel is a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-racial state in which all citizens have equal rights protected by the nation’s democratic system of laws. When individuals and segments of Israeli society feel they are being denied their civil liberties, they have full access to the Israeli courts to seek redress. The Israeli courts have frequently sided with minority communities to protect a full range of individual and community rights.

Using the term apartheid in the Israeli-Palestinian context is particularly unhelpful because it confounds two situations with little in common. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a clash of national aspirations by two separate peoples with historical ties to the same land. Even the majority of Palestinians do not espouse the elimination of Israel as a Jewish state, but rather call for peaceful coexistence of two states for two peoples.

Those who call Israeli policy in the West Bank and Gaza apartheid refer to a policy of segregation and disfranchisement of the Palestinians within these territories, especially relative to the privileges and preference given to Jewish settlers in these areas. We in Ameinu and our counterparts on the Israeli left agree that Israel’s treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories can at times be dehumanizing and degrading. We have long called for withdrawal from the territories and better treatment of the Palestinians. Yet, Israel’s policies in the West Bank and Gaza must be viewed within the context of the ongoing conflict. Identity cards, checkpoints, security roads and the security barrier all separate the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza from Israel, increasing the physical security of Israel’s citizens, who live under the constant threat of physical attack. This balance between easing the pressures on the Palestinian residents while ensuring security for Israelis is complicated and is under constant debate within Israel, often resulting in Palestinian submissions to Israel’s High Court. Critics searching for analogies to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should look at other long-term disputes between neighboring peoples such as the Russians in Chechnya, the Chinese in Tibet or the Indians and Pakistanis in Kashmir, rather than at the institutionalized racism of apartheid.

## **The Minority Arab Population Can Never be Treated Fairly in a Jewish State**

There is no inherent contradiction between providing Arab Israeli citizens equality as required by law and decency, and the fulfillment of Zionism. Ameinu and its allies in Israel are continually working to achieve this reality, sadly recognizing that gaps in services, education and opportunities still exist. The Arab minority within the boundaries of the Green Line (not the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza) are equal citizens who have voting rights as well as the full range of civil and political liberties. Indeed, Israeli Supreme Court Justice Elyakim Rubenstein points out that anyone who wants to preserve Israel as a democratic and Jewish state must strive to achieve full equality for Arab Israelis.

The Israeli Declaration of Independence, which together with Six Basic Laws, serves as Israel's foundational document (similar in weight to a constitution) states that:

“The State of Israel...will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the Prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions.”

Israel's founders understood that Israel cannot and should not treat its minorities the way that Jews were treated throughout history by other governments. The State of Israel was created so Jews would have a home where they could have full equality based on a shared language, religion and history. Many of the world's democracies, old and new, have a distinct ethnic culture analogous to Israel's Jewish culture. The constitutions of most European countries reveal that they are nation-states in this sense. These states celebrate their distinct histories, languages, identities, religions and emblems.

It was understood from the beginning that the Jewish homeland must grant these same precious privileges to all its citizens. In Israel, this belief in equal treatment under law is not just a modern secular ideal; it is a millennia-old, shared Jewish value based on the Torah teachings about the obligation of the community to the *Ger* (the non-member residing with the community).

Unfortunately, practice has not always lived up to these ideals. Israel must improve educational opportunities, public services, budget allocations, and access to land for its minorities. However, these gaps can be overcome and are not inherent in the Israeli structure.

## **The Solution to the Israel-Palestinian Conflict is a Binational State**

A binational state can only exist as a successfully cohesive entity if each group gives up the idea of a nationalist state of its own. This is the one thing that the Palestinians and Israelis have been fighting about for nearly a century. Israelis and Palestinians each want a nation for their own people in which citizens share a common language, culture and history. A Jewish/Palestinian binational state cannot be based on commonalities between these two peoples because the differences vastly outweigh the similarities.

Twentieth- and twenty-first century history is replete with civil wars, ethnic conflicts and national struggles that demonstrate the inadvisability of combining two or more ethnic groups with a long history of conflict into a single nation. Yugoslavia, Iraq, Kenya, Congo and Lebanon all illustrate the ongoing danger that occurs when two distinct ethnic groups are unable to work together in the long run to build one stable national identity.

In the case of the Jewish people, the quest for a political homeland began just over a century ago, but the emotional quest is over 2000 years old. Such strong national aspirations will not die because it is politically expedient to “solve” the conflict by reconstituting Israelis and Palestinians into a binational state.

If a binational state were created, it would be based on an unhealthy dynamic in which the Hebrew-speaking, Jewish Israelis wield the economic power but, in all likelihood, become a numeric minority, demographically dominated by the Arabic-speaking, Moslem Palestinians. (Christian Palestinians are already a tiny and shrinking minority among the Palestinians.) Situations such as these, with language, religious and ethnic fault lines, are inherently unstable. Even in peaceful, modern and quintessentially European Belgium, the French-speaking Walloons and their wealthier Flemish neighbors are talking of separating into two states because their differences are irreconcilable.

In addition, given the realities of the Middle East and the Jewish history of victimization from pogroms and anti-Semitism culminating in the Holocaust, it is difficult to imagine the Jewish citizens of a binational state trusting the new government and military to safeguard their rights and physical security. Jewish Israelis are largely the children and grandchildren of people who came to Israel because they had no other option—they were displaced by WWII, thrown out of Arab countries or could not practice their religion in the former Soviet Union. The sensitivities of people who bear intense psychic scars from their families’ histories of persecution should not be underestimated in proposing a solution that looks reasonable to outsiders.

Finally, while a binational state often seems like a rational solution to well-meaning outside observers, within the Israeli-Palestinian dynamic, this solution is often championed by Palestinian nationalists who see it as the first step in taking complete control of the geographic and governmental landscape.

**Palestinian Refugees from the War of Independence in 1948  
Deserve the Right to Return to their Ancestral Homes  
Within Israel**

Any solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be consistent with the national rights of both peoples. In other words, the Israelis and Palestinians must each accept the right of national self-determination for the other side in order for the conflict to come to an end. The refugee question remains one of the most contentious of the conflict; however, since the right of national self-determination is recognized, it is evident that the vast majority of Palestinian refugees will only be able to exercise their right of return to a Palestinian homeland living at peace, beside an Israeli state.

In creating two states for two peoples, the collective national right to self-determination may conflict with some individual rights, such as the right of a particular family to return to a specific house in Jaffa. The demographics of the conflict mean that Israel could not remain a Jewish state if all Palestinians who trace their origins to towns and villages within the 1948 borders returned to these areas. Likewise, Jewish settlers will need to vacate many of their communities in order to allow the Palestinians to live in a physically contiguous territory on the West Bank.

While most experts expect that a final agreement will include a limited number of Palestinians who return to live within the pre-1967 Israeli borders under family reunification provisions, the vast majority of Palestinians will need to be given compensation for the land and possessions they, their parents, grandparents or great-grandparents left behind. As part of a comprehensive peace, a similar agreement will need to address the analogous situation for the hundreds of thousands of Jews expelled from Arab nations, which legally bar their return.

Unlike most refugees worldwide, the Palestinian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon have not been allowed to fully integrate into their host countries. Instead, there are third and fourth generation refugees whose status remains ambiguous. For these people, the demands that they be allowed to “return” to the towns which their ancestors left is a cynical use of rhetoric designed to prolong the conflict because it is clear that Israel could never agree to such a demand. Any realistic attempt to solve the conflict must instead call for monetary compensation and the right of these multi-generational refugees to live as citizens in their own country, with internationally recognized, definitive borders.

## **An Academic Boycott of Israel Will Help Bring an End to the Occupation**

The recent British-led boycott against Israeli academics and universities is only the latest in a long list of such efforts advocating boycott as a non-violent means to resolve conflict. In truth, such a measure hurts those advocating coexistence the most and weakens those on Israel's left in general.

Academic boycotts are an assault on the very idea of the university as the home of intellectual freedom and informed debate. The assumption behind the boycott is that the "truth" in Israeli-Palestinian conflict is so clear-cut that nothing can be gained by further examination or debate, that no one needs to do any further research or to consider developments in the conflict by going to the region or by hearing from Israelis who are doing such work.

By boycotting professors and denying them invitations to international conferences due to their government's policies, such boycotts punish people based on their national identity and not their personal beliefs or politics. British academia has not called for similar boycotts in other international conflicts. For example, there is no such boycott of Russian academics over the conflict in Chechnya. Because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been singled out of all the global conflicts for this treatment, this boycott effort is widely seen within Israel as motivated by anti-Semitism within the British academic community. If it is not anti-Semitism, then it is blind prejudice against those Jews who are Israelis.

Within Israel, the prejudicial nature of the boycott undermines its purpose. Rather than strengthening the forces in Israel that work for peace and coexistence, the calls for boycott strengthen the position of those who argue that Israel cannot give an inch because Jews cannot trust anyone else to help them. The ironic result of the calls for boycott is to push the general Israeli population further to the right, the direct opposite of the intended goal.

The independent international group *Scholars for Peace in the Middle East* denounced the academic boycott for these reasons. By the end of July 2007, 10,000 academics had signed its anti-boycott statement, including thirty-two Nobel Prize winners and fifty-three university heads.



## **Progressive Zionism is an Oxymoron**

Many of the early pre-state pioneers who established the borders as well as the ethos of the state of Israel identified as Labor Zionists and Socialist Zionists. Beginning with the first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, Israel has often been led by men and women who came out of that background and belief. As inheritors of that tradition, we in Ameinu see no contradiction in our support of a Jewish and democratic state and our embrace of universal, moral values of peace and social justice. These values all have deep Jewish roots that have lived in a healthy tension with one another for over 2000 years. This is the tension between the universal and the particular, between national identity and prophetic vision. Ameinu embraces both sides of this divide — we fight for social and economic justice for all of Israel’s citizens in a democratic and Jewish Israel living side by side, and at peace, with Palestine.

Today, this vision is far from reality on many fronts. The entire future of Israel as a progressive Zionist state is imperiled by the status quo. Social issues are continually put on hold until the “conflict” ends. Clearly, the conflict must end for Israel’s sake as well as for that of the Palestinians, but simplistic answers do not lead to durable and effective solutions.

The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians did not begin with the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 and addressing Israel’s internal social problems cannot wait until the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is resolved. The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza needs to end, but the unilateral disengagement from Gaza did not ease the pathway to peace. Israel lives in a tough neighborhood and a comprehensive peace with its neighbors is the only way to ensure its future security. Painful compromises will be needed for this peace to be achieved. Finding a way to share Jerusalem is only one of the difficult issues ahead. Placing blame entirely on one party or the other does little to pave the way to peace.

Progressive Zionism occupies a unique spot on the political landscape — a spot of optimistic realism that can speak with loving criticism to Israelis, can urge American Jews to support the peace process and argue with Israel’s detractors, particularly on the political left. We do not embrace the simplistic solutions of “a Greater Israel” or “a binational state”; a nuanced message is always more difficult to deliver.

Our form of Zionism involves activism on internal Israeli issues as well on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ameinu works on societal issues concerning women, religious pluralism, and the growing economic gap. The Ameinu agenda reflects the voices of real grassroots people. We are proud of our work within Israel as well as the way in which we inform the American public about these concerns and work together to alleviate these difficult matters. Getting to know us and our work is the best way to understand that Progressive Zionism is not an oxymoron — it is a way for lovingly critical supporters of Israel to make a difference and build a better Israel for all.

## About Ameinu

Ameinu is the leading grassroots progressive Zionist organization in the United States and the U.S. affiliate of the World Labor Zionist Movement.

Ameinu envisions Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, at peace with its neighbors, committed to religious pluralism and social and economic justice for all its citizens.

Our agenda addresses a range of domestic and international issues, including protection of the environment, support for universal healthcare, preservation of civil liberties and economic justice in the workplace. Ameinu promotes its agenda through advocacy and educational programming, both independently and in alliances with other organizations. Most recently, we have taken a leadership role in organizing grassroots American Jewish support for the current peace talks between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority. In addition, Ameinu has developed close relations with leading social justice activists in Israel, including the Negev Institute for Strategies of Peace and Development (NISPED) and Yedid, which operates Citizen Rights Centers in poor communities around the country.

As a member of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, the Jewish National Fund and the American Zionist Movement, Ameinu has an important "seat at the table" within the organized Jewish community.

Our commitment to Jewish continuity motivates us to support and work with our youth movement, Habonim Dror North America, which operates seven summer camps as well as programs during the school year. Knowledgeable and committed youth and students will ensure the next generation of leaders for the American Jewish community.

Find out more about Ameinu's work and support our political and social activism, please visit our website at [www.ameinu.net](http://www.ameinu.net), email us at [executive@ameinu.net](mailto:executive@ameinu.net).