

The Politics of Anti-Semitism, edited by Alexander Cockburn
and Jeffery St. Clair

reviewed by
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The goal that Cockburn and St. Clair's collection of essays aspires to achieve is quite ambitious: "To lift [the] embargo" over "criticizing Israel." This provocative collection only partially achieves this aim; moreover, I am uncertain that their volume is actually conducive to a more rational and open debate over U.S. policies toward Israel.

Most contributors decry a powerful Jewish lobby in the U.S., and perhaps elsewhere, that automatically tars anyone who dares to criticize Israeli policies toward Palestinians as being motivated by ugly anti-Semitism. In this dogged and dogmatic way, the vigilant lobby manages to control the public debate and channel it in a way that make it literally impossible to voice any criticism of Israel, constructive or otherwise. All these contributors concur that a clear and legitimate distinction between criticizing Israel and being anti-Semitic needs to be drawn if a genuine productive dialogue is ever to arise which may lead to a just solution. This line of argument seems to me to be quite valid and should indeed be pursued and put into action.

Several essayists, however, come perilously close to suggesting that a blanket hostility not only toward Israel but toward Jews generally is to some extent justified. This disturbing stance apparently is adopted because Israeli leaders proclaim, without much visible dissent, that they represent Jews everywhere, and so therefore implicate them. In these instances it's as if the "universal Jew" has been resurrected, only under a very different proprietorship. Consider that organizations such as AIPAC that unequivocally back harsh Israeli policies in the occupied territories likewise assert that they represent "Jewish opinion." In this misshapen context it is rather easy to see why many people would blame all Jews as responsible for upholding and maintaining an ongoing instance of grave injustice. Hence, the worrisome recent resurgence of anti-Semitism.

The authors' claim is that this powerful lobby successfully speaks as if it represents Jewish opinion and in this way implicates the entire community.

Moreover, they find that this lobby is even able to push different U.S. administrations, particularly the current one, to pursue policies that support Jewish/Israeli goals rather than U.S. ones. The aim of the book is to expose this lobby and thereby reduce its unjustified punitive use of the label of anti-Semitism as a disciplining device.

Yet, only Uri Avnery, Linda Belanger and Norman Finkelstein offer persuasive essays to open the hearts and minds of the public—and of the Jewish community in particular—to a more critical debate of Israel's behavior toward the Palestinians: mainly, by pointing out very affectingly that the Holocaust legacy ought to instruct us that cruel practices associated with the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza are immoral by any standard. There is no need to imply any offensive equivalence between the immorality of the Israeli occupation and the evil of the Holocaust; the Holocaust should have taught us all (including Anglo-American forces in Iraq) that there are irreducibly decent ways in which people should be treated. The Israeli occupation, as they argue, is a gross violation of these standards of decency. I believe that the book would have been far more forceful for an audience outside the “already convinced” if such constructive trails were blazed.

Some authors provide sound arguments why supporting Israel uncritically is in the long run profoundly counter-productive for all parties. Scott Handleman, for example, suggests that blind support of Israel will ultimately backfire badly because the injustices of the Israeli policies will eventually become so clear that the American citizenry will blame the Jewish community for the awful situation in the Middle East and for obliging U.S. policies that resulted in undermining U.S. interests. He has a point. On the other hand, essayists Cockburn and Avnery assert that the war in Iraq was almost exclusively initiated by senior Jewish officials in the Pentagon and other upper tiers of the administration. Their claim is echoed by Sunderland and the Christisons. The underlying accusation is of dual loyalty because the 2003 invasion was rhetorically justified on the grounds that it is necessary for achieving U.S. security but was actually pushed by people who care foremost about Israel's security.

The accusation of dual loyalty is an example of how this collection, instead of searching for ways to open up debate, probably distracts from what ultimately unites the writers, namely, opposition to Israeli policies in the occupied territories. It would be more fruitful if the cases these authors formulate would have shown how this war would serve neither American

interests nor (probably) Israel's. Sunderland asserts that different congressmen went to Israel and advised Israeli officials to ignore American pressure to agree to a two-state solution or conduct peace talks. This, he suggests, was treasonous. I would suggest that although this sort of behavior exemplifies bad judgment and bad politics, it is not treason. If Israeli politicians asked the U.S. instead to place more pressure on Israel to end its occupation he probably would not label that gambit as treason.

Other writers suggest that, on occasion, Israeli intelligence services deliberately withheld vital information that might have saved thousands of American lives. Again, it seems to me that bringing up unproven claims only undermine the credibility of the rest of their case, which ought to be heard. The final two essays by Yigal Bronner and the late Edward Said seem perhaps least relevant to a book titled *The Politics of Anti-Semitism* inasmuch as this phrase is not mentioned even once in them. Yet, they are the most powerful contributions as, in their distinct ways, they vividly convey the hideousness of the Israeli occupation and in this way stress the urgency of mobilizing the world wide public to demand that the U.S. and other major powers work to put an end to Palestinian suffering and, as I strongly believe, an end to Israeli suffering as well.