The Left against Zion

by Dominic Green

On the intellectual left and Israel.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

Susie Linfield

*The Lions’ Den: Zionism and the Left from Hannah Arendt to Noam Chomsky*

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“S

go good to see you sis!,” Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.) tweeted on April 2. “I will always speak truth to power because I got you to protect.”

The “sis” in need of protection is Zahra Billoo, the executive director of the San Francisco Bay Area chapter of the Council on American–Islamic Relations (cair). In 2009, Judge Jorge Solis of the Fifth Circuit found that the FBI had presented “ample evidence to establish the associations” of cair, the Islamic Society of North America, and the North American Islamic Trust with Hamas and the Holy Land Foundation, which, until its designation in 2001 as a terrorist organization, had been the largest Islamic charity in the United States.

Billoo disapproves of Memorial Day because it’s wrong to “honor people who commit war crimes.” She believes that the FBI fabricates terrorism cases against American Muslims, and her cair chapter in 2011 advised them to “build a wall of resistance” between themselves and law enforcement. She has claimed that the U.S. government intends to intern American Muslims: “they’re going to send us to concentration camps.” She calls Israel an “apartheid state” and the
Israel Defense Forces a “genocidal group” like Isis. She believes that “Israel ‘defending’ itself from Palestinians is analogous to Nazi Germany defending itself from Jewish uprising.” Her Twitter feed includes the slogan “From the river to the sea, #Palestine will be free,” as well as a lovely picture of her with Bernie Sanders.

Also in early April, Barack Obama told Tlaib, a spouter of coarse anti-Israel propaganda and a follower of anti-Semitic material on Instagram, that he is “proud” of her. The Democratic presidential candidates Bernie Sanders and Beto O’Rourke called the Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu a “racist,” with O’Rourke claiming that Netanyahu, who, with his Likud Party, won his fifth election in April, does not represent “the true will of the Israeli people.” Another Democratic candidate, Tulsi Gabbard, opined that “Netanyahu and Saudi Arabia want to drag the United States into war with Iran, and Trump is submitting to their wishes.”

The idea that the president of the most powerful country in history must “submit” to client states on the other side of the world is a conspiracy theory, the cant of the gutter. Its most celebrated exponent is Ilhan Omar, the anti-Semitic Congresswoman from Minneapolis who believes that Israel has “hypnotized the world.” In February, Omar expounded that American foreign policy is “all about the Benjamins, baby”—that’s Benjamin Netanyahu dispensing the Benjamin Franklins—and that Israel’s American supporters use this bribery to extract “allegiance” from American politicians. Democratic Party managers attempted to create a House resolution condemning Omar, but they crumbled when the Farrakhan-friendly Congressional Black Caucus refused to sign on. Omar was on form in early April, too, calling the White House advisor Stephen Miller a “white nationalist,” though Miller—to use today’s parlance—“identifies” as Jewish. That same week, Newsweek put Omar on its cover and praised her for “changing the conversation about Israel.”

The conversation changed in late April, when the international edition of The New York Times ran a cartoon depicting a blind, kippah-wearing Donald Trump being led by Netanyahu in the form of a dog. The Times did not apologize until after a white nationalist had attacked a synagogue in Poway, California, killing one and injuring three—proof that, Right or Left, the real world is collateral to the war of images. Normal service resumed, however, in early May, when the Iran-sponsored Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas launched hundreds of rockets into Israel from Gaza, and Israel had the temerity to defend itself.

The Democratic Party is becoming Corbynized from the bottom up—following the example of
Britain’s Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn—and the roots of radical leftism are showing. The Obama administration’s only significant foreign policy achievement is to have exacerbated the trend in which support for Israel has become a partisan issue. A recent Pew Research Center survey of attitudes to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict found that, between 1978 and 2018, Republican support for Israel rose from 49 percent to 79 percent, while Democratic support for Israel declined from 44 percent to 27 percent. Republican support for the Palestinians fell from 15 percent to 6 percent, but Democratic support for the Palestinians rose to 25 percent, well ahead of the 16 percent national average. While self-described “moderate Democrats” favor Israel by 35 percent to 17 percent, “liberal Democrats” now favor the Palestinians by 35 percent to 19 percent.

The cult of the Palestinians fits the delusional self-image of “the resistance,” for whom tweeting disapproval of Donald Trump is like ambushing the Wehrmacht in the bocage of Normandy, and sporting an edgy bumper sticker on a Prius is like driving around the suburbs of Baghdad with a machine gun mounted on a flatbed. While not all anti-Zionists are anti-Semitic, all anti-Semites are anti-Zionist. You can see why. Nothing leavens the political grind of anti-Zionism like the metaphysical grains of anti-Semitism. And if you dislike Jews, you’ll hate the State of Israel. Spend any time online, and it’s obvious that anti-Zionism is a gateway drug to the hard stuff.

It wasn’t always like this on the American and European left—or the right, for that matter. The diplomatic breakthroughs of pre-state Zionism derived from the support of British Liberals and American Democrats: the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and President Truman’s recognition of Israeli statehood in 1948. As Zionists built their state under the aegis of the British Mandate, support for Jewish autonomy became common even on the revolutionary left; the kibbutz movement was the first and, it turned out, only sustainable example of a collective society. For the first two decades after 1948, anti-Zionism, whether inspired by a distaste for Jews, a taste for Arabian oil, or attempts to retain post-imperial influence over Arab states, was most common in center-right parties of government.

This partisanship reversed in the late sixties. It is commonly said that Israel lost the Left’s support by shifting from David to Goliath in winning the Six-Day War of 1967. It would be more accurate to say that the Six-Day War landed Israel on the wrong side of the Manichean fantasies of the New Left. But then, Israel had no more enjoyed uniform support on the left than it now does on the right. It has, however, come to enjoy uniform support from the Diaspora. Facts on the ground, as the Zionists say—the facts being murder, the ground being Europe.

There used to be anti-Zionism among Jews left, right, and center, for reasons theological, intellectual, and social. The historical disavowals of American Reform Judaism’s Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 would warm the cockles of Rashida Tlaib’s heart: “We consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine . . . nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.” These gentlemen of the Mosaic persuasion changed their minds about anti-Zionism in 1937.

If the definition of a Zionist includes favoring Jewish self-determination in a nation state, then
almost all American Jews are now Zionists. In an October 2018 survey for the Jewish Electorate Institute, the percentage of respondents describing themselves as “generally not pro-Israel” (3 percent) fell inside the margin of error (3.5 percent). Of the 91 percent who described themselves as “pro-Israel,” 32 percent described themselves as “supportive” of the Israeli government’s policies, 35 percent were “pro-Israel but critical of some policies,” and 24 percent “pro-Israel but critical of many policies.”

The survey did not ask how many of the “generally not pro-Israel” 3 percent opposed the idea of a Jewish state entirely, but it must be even lower. Nor is there reason to augment their thin ranks with recruits from the 6 percent who had no opinion. The inescapable conclusion is that anti-Zionism has become marginal among American Jews. Its most prominent Jewish advocates exist on the fringes of ultra-Orthodoxy and revolutionary socialism, in sects like Neturei Karta and Jewish Voices for Peace.

“This tradition dwindled in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel,” the Wikipedia entry on “Anti-Zionism” notes wistfully, “but is still alive in religious groups such as Neturei Karta and among many intellectuals of Jewish background in both Israel and the Diaspora, such as George Steiner, Tony Judt, and Baruch Kimmerling.”

The intellectual giants of Jewish anti-Zionism are long gone. Their heirs are pygmy protégés of Kimmerling.

Kimmerling, an Israeli sociologist and historian who was critical of Israel but maintained that he was a Zionist, died in Israel in 2007. Steiner, may he live to be a hundred and twenty, describes himself as personally “anti-Zionist,” but has also called Israel’s creation “necessary” and “a sad miracle.” Judt, who died in 2010, was the genuine article, or at least became so when Israel disappointed him. But the quality of Judt’s articles was not high. “Israel: The Alternative,” from 2003, Judt’s case for converting Israel into a binational Jewish-Arab state, was thick with nostalgia for the British Mandate-era group Brit Shalom, a sect of professors at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem that later included Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber. The reality of the Arab Revolt of 1936–39 sank Brit Shalom, just as the suicide bombings of the Second Intifada were to explode the woozy idealism of the Oslo Accords. More facts on the ground.
The intellectual giants of Jewish anti-Zionism are long gone. Their heirs are pygmy protégés of Kimmerling: disaffected Israelis like the communist Ilan Pappé, a historian who should be trusted with the facts as an alcoholic should be trusted with the key to the liquor cabinet, and the eccentric Shlomo Sand, who has revived the “Khazar hypothesis” that Ashkenazi Jews are not “real” Jews, but descendants of medieval Turkic converts. In the Anglophone world, the amateur intellectuals of anti-Zionism are the crackpots and cranks on the fringes of both right and left. The professionals are left-wing academics in the universities.

The “Khazar hypothesis” has never enjoyed serious historical support, and it has recently been further undermined by genetic testing. But when Sand advanced it in The Invention of the Jewish People (2008), he jumped from deserved obscurity to global celebrity. The Invention of the Jewish People is alleged to have been translated into more foreign languages than any other Israeli history book. The English edition is published by Verso, a “radical publishing house” founded by the staff of the New Left Review when the New Left was still new. Even false history repeats itself: in 1976, Arthur Koestler made the same Khazar argument in The Thirteenth Tribe. Koestler, as protean as he was unscrupulous, managed to be an “intellectual giant” of both Zionism and anti-Zionism. So, notoriously, did Hannah Arendt. And Noam Chomsky, it appears, manages to be Zionist and anti-Zionist at the same time. One Jew, two opinions.

Susie Linfield’s intellectual history The Lions’ Den traces Zionism and its discontents in the lives and thought of left-wing intellectuals from Koestler to Chomsky.1 Seven of Linfield’s eight case studies are Jewish, the odd one out being the British soixante-huitard Fred Halliday. Most of them are dead, apart from Chomsky and Albert Memmi. The familiar heavyweights Koestler and Arendt are here, but there are also scholars and journalists whose reputations now survive only among masochists and specialists.

Among them is Maxime Rodinson, the French Communist scholar of Islam and the Arab world who wondered in 1981 whether he was “the most famous anti-Zionist in France.” Isaac Deutscher was the biographer of Trotsky, who himself is now remembered chiefly for his accoutrements of moustache, glasses, and ice ax, and as a cameo in the Frida Kahlo story. The Irish-born Fred Halliday of the New Left Review “disparaged criticism of the Palestine Liberation Organization’s airplane hijackings as a ‘bourgeois’ hang-up,” but softened into politically correct liberalism after his experiences in Iran alerted him to the rise of political Islam. I. F. Stone was a secular American Jew who had no position on Zionism until after the Holocaust, then wrote the impassioned Underground to Palestine (1946), a memoir of his travels with a group of Holocaust survivors trying to enter the British Mandate, only to denounce Israel in 1967 in that court of world opinion, The New York Review of Books. Finally, and most interestingly, there is Albert Memmi, a Tunisian Jewish writer who, like the Likud’s older voters, knows Arab society personally and consequently remains a Zionist.

Linfield describes her subjects’ agonies, spiritual as much as ideological, in the period between Koestler’s aliyah from Mitteleuropa in 1926 to Linfield’s epiphany at a dinner party in New York in
2011. Apart from Chomsky, whose political pronouncements are timelessly irrelevant, most of her subjects had done most of their major thinking by 1982, the time of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. It is as if we are viewing the middle panel of a triptych: the crucial scene of genocide and statehood, but one which cannot stand alone without the other panels. The panel describing the cataract of theory after Marx—the leftmost panel, of course—is unseen. So is the rightmost panel, the one in which the Israeli voters turn almost completely away from their left-wing parties, and the global Left turns almost completely away from Israel and, by the logic of anti-Zionism, away from Jews in general. Almost completely, that is. Linfield is a member of the shrinking tribe of pro-Israel leftists. She is to Zionism as those Japanese soldiers who, not having heard the war was lost, remained at arms, were to Emperor Hirohito.

The title of The Lions’ Den implies that these thinkers dared to be Daniels, but Linfield’s story might be better called The Lions’ Mouth. One by one, our brave intellectuals approach the knots of Jewish fate and modern politics, stick out their necks, and get bitten. These being intellectuals, the biting is mostly self-inflicted. A tragic history is reflected in a blackly comic unworldliness; intellect is no defense against trauma. Koestler chases his shadow into Zionism and out in the 1920s, then into Communism in the 1930s and out in 1938, then back into Zionism, and then out again into apocalyptic despair. It is an “outright crime” for parents to raise their children with the “stigma” of Jewishness, he writes in his 1955 essay “Judah at the Crossroads.” The Jews have “no cultural tradition” of their own, and “the sooner all this is discarded, . . . the better for all concerned.”

In October 1944, as the killing accelerates in Europe, Arendt announces the “decline of the national state and of nationalism” in a fantastically ignorant and arrogant essay titled “Zionism Reconsidered.” The kibbutzniks, the builders of the Israeli state and army who were to run Israel for its first three decades, are concerned only with “lofty ideals” and represent a “tragic abdication of political leadership.” Imagine what they could have achieved if they hadn’t abdicated.

In 1966, Deutscher, who was clever enough to draw all the wrong conclusions from the three pogroms that he witnessed as a child in Russia, declares that “European Jewry has paid the price for the survival of capitalism,” whatever that means. “It goes without saying that classical Marxism made no allowance for anything like the Nazis’ Final Solution,” Deutscher asserts, as though Marx had not specified that the Jews would disappear along with capitalism. “To my mind,” Deutscher insists, “the tragic events of the Nazi era neither invalidate the classical Marxist analysis of the Jewish Question nor call for its revision.” Deutscher is so gripped by the political heresy that has replaced his childhood religion that it becomes, Linfield writes, “a kind of rote fundamentalism—eerily similar to the Talmudic studies against which the young Isaac chafed.”

In 1968, Maxime Rodinson retroactively decrees that “the notion of a ‘Jewish people’ ” had become “outdated” by the end of the nineteenth century, and that Jewish communities in Europe had become “free associations much like political parties or chess clubs.” This from a skilled historian whose parents had been deported by their fellow French citizens to Auschwitz along with the
other chess players.

In 1974, Chomsky praises the anti-war priest Daniel Berrigan for an “admirably even-handed, nonpartisan critique of Israel and the Arab nations.” What Berrigan actually said was that Israel had presented the world with something new, “a criminal Jewish community” characterized by “domestic repression, deception, cruelty, militarism.” Israel is “an Orwellian transplant, taken bodily from Big Brother’s bloody heart.” In one passage, Berrigan combines Soviet propaganda from the Cold War with classical Marx: Israel is a neocolonial expression of the “racist ideology” of the Nazis, and the Israelis are “huckstering.” Berrigan delivered this tirade to the Association of Arab American University Graduates in Washington, D.C., during the Yom Kippur War. Chomsky praised Berrigan for refusing to “take sides.”

Only Memmi rejects the fantasies of assimilation and dissolution. “The intellectuals were self-deceived, blinded by their ethical aspirations,” he writes in 1962 of the Tunisian Jews who expected the end of French rule to lead to an inclusive Tunisian republic, rather than reduction to the status of pariahs in a Muslim society. “The destiny of the Jew too often carries with it a hard nucleus that cannot be minimized. No historic duty toward other men should prevent our paying particular attention to our special difficulties.”

“Why such historical masochism?,” Memmi asks in 1966. The Left had always loathed national identity, but only the Jews had been expected to dissolve themselves in the cause of the dialectic. This, as the Marxists said, was “no accident.” Jewish leftists were willing “cuckolds . . . accomplices in our own destruction.” The Jewish socialist is fatally naïve, and persists in “seeing as friends people who would watch him being tortured with indifference.”

Yet Memmi, too, remained a socialist. “In a grotesque version of the repetition compulsion,” Linfield concludes, “the Jewish plight of marginality, exclusion, and rejection had been reproduced within the very movement in which so many Jews had placed their hopes and for which they had sacrificed, fought, and died.” As Theodor Herzl said, “If you will it, it is no dream.”

Linfield’s conclusion is a ninth case study in ambivalence about the Jewish state and the state of the Jews. The Western Left, she writes, has been an “acute and invaluable critic” of Israeli policy, but “these very criticisms have sometimes led it to scorched-earth policies and false solutions.” This is a triumph of euphemism over recent experience. As Linfield has shown, the modern Left has always been predisposed to hostility towards nationalism in general, Jews in particular, and Jewish nationalism most of all. The rational case for irrational loathing, and the revolutionary case for eliminating class enemies, are foundational left-wing principles. The Western Left has frequently rejected the very existence of a Jewish state, and started even before Israel’s alleged turn to tyranny after 1967. Since 1967, the Left has consistently denied Jewish rights in the historical Land of Israel, choosing instead to pander first to terrorists and now to Islamists in a foolish and cynical campaign to mobilize the wretched of the postcolonial earth. As in earlier variations of the Left’s war for the future, the Jews are condemned as proxies of “imperialism” and
“capitalism.”

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Nor is it clear whether the criticisms in Linfield’s case studies were ever “acute and invaluable.” Among Linfield’s Jewish case studies, only Koestler the pre-state kibbutznik knows his subject from within. The rest, including Memmi, interpret Jewish statehood through the Marxist theory of their day or, in Arendt’s case, vain universalism, old-European snobbery, and what Hans Jonas, who had fought in Israel’s War of Independence, called an “ignorance when it came to things Jewish.”

The truth that Linfield exposes but cannot name is that the Left’s criticism of Israel, always prone to malignant delusion, finally parted ways with reality nearly twenty years ago. In September 2000, Yasser Arafat abandoned the Clinton-sponsored Camp David negotiations for a “two-state” solution and, allying with Hamas, launched a war of suicide bombings. The Left had advocated for the “two-state” solution, but when that turned out to be a disastrously false solution, the Left responded not by reconsidering its assumptions, but by denouncing Israel’s attempts to defend itself, and subsequently drifting into anti-Jewish incitement and conspiracy theorizing. The facts on the ground are not essential to acute or invaluable criticism. They are an impediment to the satisfaction of ideological fantasies.

1 The Lions’ Den: Zionism and the Left from Hannah Arendt to Noam Chomsky, by Susie Linfield; Yale University Press, 400 pages, $32.50.

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