

# 'Anti-Zionism' without the hyphen

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By Ben Cohen

(JNS) To hyphenate or not to hyphenate?

One of the more enduring debates among scholars of anti-Semitism is whether to include the hyphen in the spelling of that word. A growing number of commentators are these days choosing to spell it without the hyphen ("antisemitism") for two main reasons.

First, they say, "anti-Semitism" with the hyphen is not our word. It's a word the anti-Semites themselves came up with in the late 19th century to give their hatred of Jews a "scientific" gloss, and thereby distinguish it from the Christian tradition of anti-Judaism.

Second, anti-Semites are not people who are opposed to "Semitism," a non-existent word, and nor are they opposed to a race of "Semites" since there isn't such a race in the first place, just a language group. If you include the hyphen, the argument goes, then you are boosting anti-Semitism's self-image as a revelatory, liberating and compelling explanation of why the world is such a rotten place. Leave the hyphen out and you see "antisemitism" for what it really is: a malicious conspiracy theory about Jews that carries genocidal intentions towards them.

The reason I mention this debate is because, to my mind, similar considerations apply these days to anti-Zionism. It may be the case that the hyphen in that word is playing a similarly obfuscatory role in our understanding of how dangerous this phenomenon really is.

For most Jews, Zionism is understood appreciatively as the movement that built the Jewish state in the land of Israel. In the first half of the 20th century, the goal of building a

sovereign Jewish state was opposed by a variety of Jews for a variety of reasons; some of these objections were religious, some were socialist, some were liberal-assimilationist. The point is that these Jewish objections were "anti-Zionist" in the strict sense of the term: those who advanced them disagreed with the aims of the World Zionist Organization.

These days, however, being an "anti-Zionist" is a radically different proposition. To begin with, the Jewish state that the Zionist movement strived for has been in existence for more than 70 years. The "anti-Zionist," then, is no longer opposing a political tendency within the Jewish community, but a constituted nation that is also an international legal reality. Can opposition to the existence of the Jewish state be described as "anti-Zionist," as if such a position was merely the outgrowth of the older political tradition?

Let's say that you believe that out of nearly 200 states in the international system, only Israel should be eliminated from that framework. You are asked why. "Because Israel is built on land stolen from the indigenous Palestinians," you answer straight away.

But why, you are asked, is the dissolution of a sovereign state—a goal that history shows can only be achieved through violence and war—a just solution nearly a century later? "Because Zionism is a colonial movement that has created an apartheid state, privileging the Jews on the backs of the Palestinians," you answer. "Therefore, Zionism is responsible for the conflict, and the problem can't be part of the solution."

You are then asked what will happen to the Jews if the state created by the Zionists is dismantled. You answer that they will have a choice: to remain in a unified Palestine as loyal citizens or to join their relatives living in America or Europe. But in truth, this is not an aspect of the conflict you spend a lot of time thinking about because it's the Palestinians who are living under occupation, not the Jews. Indeed, you reflect, the very fact that these abstract, moralizing "what if?" questions get asked shows the power that the Zionist discourse has over our media and on public opinion: The Palestinians are being persecuted and dispossessed, and here we are, still talking about the rights of the Jews.

Rather than "anti-Zionism"—opposing the Zionist movement's state-building enterprise on the grounds that it doesn't serve Jewish interests—I would suggest that what we are dealing with

here is "antizionism." Much like its parent "antisemitism," it is a grand conspiracy theory with pretensions to be revelatory, liberating and compelling explanation for why the world is in a rotten state.

"Antizionism" does not oppose Zionism as the national movement of the Jewish people: what is caricatures as "Zionism" is in fact a deadly, unaccountable, globally influential power that has trampled on the national rights of the Palestinian people in the course of establishing itself as a key component of an unjust, racist international system. Hence, if Jews outside Israel wish to identify with the Jewish supremacist monster, then they will reap what they sow.

The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre argued that anti-Semitism is not an opinion, in the sense that one has opinions about trade policy or healthcare, but a "passion": an all-consuming, all-explaining hatred of the Jewish presence in society. I would suggest that what we still call anti-Zionism, which might better be described as "antizionism," can be classified in the same way and is focused on exactly the same target: the Jews.

It is in France where, this past week, President Emmanuel Macron announced that he had officially reached the same conclusion. Speaking to the annual dinner of French Jewish communal body Crif, which represents a community that is less than 1 percent of the total French population, but the object of more than 50 percent of the hate crimes committed in that country, Macron said plainly that [he would call out anti-Zionism](#) for what it is: a modern form of anti-Semitism.

Macron was speaking with memories still fresh of the anti-Semitic outrages of recent weeks, among them the barracking of the French Jewish intellectual Alain Finkielkraut as a "Zionist sh\*t" by a group of protestors associated with the populist "yellow-vests" movement. As far as Macron is concerned, that is not so much salty political critique as it is hate speech. Whether the French judiciary and law-enforcement bodies will share the president's understanding, as he hopes they will, remains to be seen. Because as long as "anti-Zionism" is perceived as merely an opinion, rather than, in Sartre's word, a "passion," the mask will not fall.

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