

Pearls and Irritations

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Date 19/05/2025

Resolved to publish Yes / No

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How can pro-Palestine protests be intimidating to Jews when Jews attend them?

January 29, 2025

Jillian Segal, a former President of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry and now Australia's controversial Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism, has described weekly pro-Palestine protests as "intimidatory" to the Jewish community. Adding to this narrative, U.S. Rabbi Abraham Cooper has urged Kevin Rudd to move these protests away from the CBDs to "less disruptive and intimidating locations."

Last week I was astonished to read Chip Le Grand's opinion piece in *The Age* (23/1/25), claiming that these protests intimidate Jews. While I'm unsure of Le Grand's background or religion, I am certain he cannot speak for all Australian Jews or define our collective "opinion."

In our multicultural society, combating antisemitism and all forms of racism is essential. However, suggestions from Segal, Le Grand, or any external figures to limit democratic rights to peaceful protest risk setting a dangerous precedent.

Segal's call for protests to be held "away from where the Jewish community might venture" and Le Grand's push for them to be shifted from central Melbourne are particularly concerning. Such proposals not only imply creating segregation in Sydney and Melbourne — cities celebrated for their multiculturalism — but also mock the purpose of protests: to raise public awareness by being visible and impactful.

Those advocating for restrictions on pro-Palestine protests must acknowledge the diversity of Jewish perspectives. Many Jews, including members of anti-Zionist groups like Jews Against the Occupation '48, Tzedek Collective, and the Loud Jew Collective, actively participate in these weekly rallies, standing in solidarity with Palestinians suffering atrocities in Gaza and the West Bank.

Globally, anti-Zionist Jewish groups echo this support. In the U.S., Jewish Voice for Peace and IfNotNow have organised mass protests. Orthodox groups like Torah Jews for Justice have taken clear anti-Zionist stances. In London, the "Jewish Bloc" within pro-Palestine rallies numbers in the hundreds, including Holocaust survivors. Na'amod, a contributing group, emphasises that "Only when Palestinians live in freedom and dignity will Israel have security."

These groups, like ours, reject the notion that Zionism represents all Jews. The atrocities committed by Israel are not done in our name.

I write from a unique standpoint — my name literally means "woman of Judea." As a history graduate who specialised in the Holocaust, I've opposed all forms of racism, including antisemitism, throughout my life. Importantly, I am a regular participant in Sydney's pro-Palestine protests, driven by a commitment to justice and human rights.

My heritage compels me. My great-grandparents fled pogroms in Eastern Europe, and relatives were lost in the Holocaust. Their memories demand that I oppose oppression in all its forms.

Each week at the protests for Palestine, we are not just attendees but active participants whose contributions are met with cheers and appreciation. Jewish speakers frequently address the crowd, articulating our shared anguish and hope for peace. We carry signs stating, "Never again meant for anybody," or "Not in our name," reminders of our commitment to universal human rights.

The argument that these protests could be intimidating to Jews is unfounded. On the contrary, every mention of our community at these events is met with gratitude, not hostility. The atmosphere is one of solidarity and mutual respect, a far cry from the isolation some fear. The Australian Palestine protest organisers state unequivocally and repeatedly how they abhor antisemitism, as we all do.

We are hugged, thanked, and photographed by fellow protesters acknowledging our support—a powerful testament to the inclusive nature of these movements. We cry with our Palestinian friends, share in their pain, chant with them, and call out "shame" as we hear stories of atrocities perpetrated against their families.

What is intimidating is the implication by Segal, Le Grand, and others that we should not protest—or that we should do so elsewhere—against what we see as crimes against humanity. This undermines our identity as Jews standing with the oppressed.

These protests are not merely demonstrations but vital spaces for shared expression, catharsis, and action. Each week, our chants — “We are the people, we won’t be silenced, stop the bombing now”—resonate with a call for change and a demand for accountability from our leaders.

Criticising a state’s policies is not antisemitism. By protesting, we draw on the painful lessons of our past to advocate for a better future, grounded in justice and human dignity for all.

Inclusive engagement is essential to addressing the complex issues at the heart of these protests. Perhaps Segal or Le Grand should attend one. They might walk with us and witness the solidarity firsthand.

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