

False charges of antisemitism are the vanguard of cancel culture

The right is voicing alarm over progressive views restricting free speech, but says nothing about how antisemitism is weaponized to quash speech on Israel.



By Mairav Zonszein | July 28, 2020



Protest by Students for Justice in Palestine at UC Berkeley, Sep. 23, 2014. (Ariel Hayat/Flickr)

Over the last few weeks, mainstream American media has been embroiled in a debate over an open letter published in Harper's Magazine warning that the current reckoning over racial and social justice is leading to an intolerant climate that endangers free speech and has ushered in what some are terming "cancel culture." Starkly missing from the debate are the power dynamics at play in who decides the boundaries of acceptable speech, as well as how those boundaries are weaponized to "cancel" others.

This oversight is perhaps most clearly at work when it comes to accusations of antisemitism. For example, after Peter Beinart wrote

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essays in [Jewish Currents](#) and the [New York Times](#) this month arguing for a binational state for Israelis and Palestinians, emeritus Harvard Law School Professor Alan Dershowitz [responded](#) with a piece in Newsweek entitled "Beinart's Final Solution: End Israel as Nation-State of the Jewish People." Dershowitz's comparison of Jewish-Palestinian equality to the Nazi genocide is not only ludicrous — it is an attempt at silencing a fellow Jew using the baseless accusation of antisemitism.

It is unlikely anyone seriously believes that Beinart hates Jewish people or seeks to endanger them, yet several critics have lobbed similar accusations at him. In a [letter to the editor](#) published in the New York Times, the Anti-Defamation League's Deputy National Director, Ken Jacobson, barely stopped short of calling Beinart antisemitic, stating that Beinart at the very least "plays into the hands of anti-Semites."

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Another similar accusation came recently when Caitlin Flanagan, a staff writer at The Atlantic, [suggested](#) Imani Gandy, a senior editor at Rewire.News, had made an antisemitic comment when she [tweeted](#) that some in the media were "sitting shiva for Bari Weiss" ("sitting shiva" refers to the Jewish ritual of mourning a person's death for seven days). Gandy's tweet was a response to Flanagan [claiming](#) that the New York Times opinion editor's resignation was the "biggest media story in years." Flanagan eventually deleted the tweet after people pointed out that Gandy is both Black and Jewish.

The knee-jerk invocation of antisemitism is meant to do one thing: silence people, whether by getting them fired or labeling them and their ideas illegitimate — in other words, canceling them. The accusation is used so often, and so effectively, because of the near-consensus that antisemitism is a red line one should not cross.

Yet on closer examination, it becomes clear that these accusations are often deployed against people of color after they criticize Israel. They include Congresswomen Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.) and Ilhan Omar (D-

Davis, who in 2019 had a human rights award rescinded (and later reinstated) by the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, presumably due to her vocal support for Palestinian rights.

Using Jews to cancel others

These accusations of antisemitism come even as those within and connected to the U.S. government have repeatedly invoked antisemitic tropes and symbols. They range from the Trump re-election campaign posting images with Nazi iconography on Facebook, to Republicans such as Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) and Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani spewing antisemitic conspiracy theories about George Soros, to the GOP's official website calling Joe Biden a "puppet" of Senator Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and the "radical left."



Republican Representative Matt Gaetz speaking with attendees at the 2019 Teen Student Action Summit hosted by far-right campus group Turning Point USA, Washington, D.C., July 22, 2019. (Gage Skidmore/CC BY-SA 2.0)

The accusation of antisemitism conveniently allows the accuser to avoid engaging in the actual content of the debate while appearing to take the moral high ground. Bari Weiss became notorious for doing this, from leading a campaign as a student at Columbia University to damage the careers of Arab professors because of their views on Zionism, to more recently amplifying a false accusation of Jew-hatred directed at Jewish cartoonist Eli Valley.

Equally, last fall, a group of students at Bard College peacefully protested a panel featuring Ruth Wisse, a retired Harvard professor with a record of making bigoted, anti-Arab remarks. The panel was moderated by The Forward's opinion editor, Batya Ungar-Sargon, who, after the event, published a column accusing the students — many of

whom were Jewish — of antisemitism, and levied the same charge at her fellow panelist — a Black Jewish educator — who advocated for the students' free speech. These accusations were directly contradicted by accounts from numerous people present at the event, but nonetheless caused great damage to the legitimacy of those accused.

This kind of cancel culture is precisely the tactic Republicans, emboldened by President Trump, have been using against Democrats in recent years. On July 14, Rep. Scott Perry (R-Pa.) and eleven other Republicans addressed a letter to State Secretary Mike Pompeo that called Democrats antisemites because they opposed Israel's plan to annex parts of the occupied West Bank.

"You will soon receive a letter criticizing any potential annexation of Judea and Samaria Area [sic]," Perry said, using the terminology for the occupied West Bank preferred by the nationalist, religious right in Israel and the Zionist right in the United States, including Christian Zionists. "We urge you to reject the blatant antisemitism that pervades the letter." By that logic, a significant portion of the Israeli population, including some of its top security experts, are antisemitic.

The letter, which called on the U.S. government to condition aid to Israel if it pursues its annexation plan, was initiated by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-Ny.) and signed by Sen. Bernie Sanders, who is Jewish. Similarly, top Jewish Democrats such as Sen. Chuck Schumer and Rep. Jerrold Nadler have expressed opposition to annexation in their own letter. Not a single Republican who signed on to Perry's letter is Jewish, however.



Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez speaking to attendees at a rally for Bernie Sanders in Council Bluffs, Iowa, November 8, 2019. (Matt A.J./CC BY 2.0)

The Trump administration has repeatedly used the president's political support for Israel to accuse the Democratic Party and other critics of antisemitism. Earlier this month Elan Carr, the State Department's Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, accused the left-leaning pro-Israel lobby group J Street of employing antisemitic "imagery" and "conspiracy theories" for illustrating their "Stop Annexation" campaign with a photograph of Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Jared Kushner, U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, and Jason D. Greenblatt, who was formerly Trump's point person on Israel and the Palestinians.

The photograph showed the heads of the two states that put together the so-called "Deal of the Century" alongside Trump's annexation team. Carr's claim that J Street's use of the image is antisemitic shows just how far the weaponization of antisemitism has gone: right-wing figures in positions of power, whether Jewish or not, feel emboldened to accuse anyone they wish of anti-Jewish racism because of their progressive politics.

Carr won't lose his job. But earlier this year, a Jewish high school teacher from the elite Fieldston school in the Bronx was ostensibly fired for harboring anti-Zionist views and expressing support for boycotts of Israel. Omar Barghouti, who cofounded the Palestinian call for boycott divestment and sanctions of Israel, was denied entry to the United States last year from Israel's Ben Gurion Airport. Steven Salaita, a Palestinian-American professor, was denied tenure at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign over his tweets critical of Israel's 2014 offensive in Gaza. The legal advocacy organization Palestine Legal recorded 1,494 incidents of censorship of U.S.-based Palestinian advocacy between 2014 and 2019.



Illustrative photo of BDS Movement co-founder Omar Barghouti in Brussels, April 30, 2015. (Photo by intal.be / CC 2.0)

Beyond these individual examples, there is also a burgeoning legal framework aimed at quashing speech in the United States. There are now 32 U.S. states with anti-BDS laws on the books which prohibit states from doing business with contractors who boycott Israel, in part because doing so is deemed to be inherently antisemitic.

This, in fact, is the vanguard of assaults on free speech in the United States. After all, what is cancel culture if not the ability to cost someone their employment or freedom of movement?

Antisemitism remains a potent threat. The age-old antisemitic tropes that portray Jews as shadowy and malevolent controllers of the media, finance, or a putative “world order” are still with us. Increasingly, however, those canards coexist with right-wing actors — above all those in power — increasingly labeling Jews as perpetual victims who must be protected, even as these same actors invoke well-worn antisemitic tropes elsewhere. By and large, these charges of antisemitism — especially as they relate to Israel — are made in order to gain political currency, even if the controversy at hand has no bearing on actual threats to Jews.

Using the antisemitism label so vaguely and liberally not only stunts free speech, but also makes actual threats to Jewish people harder to identify and combat. This weaponizing of antisemitism is not only “cancelling” Palestinian rights advocates and failing to make Jews any safer; it’s also using Jews to cancel others.



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Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war. The world is reeling from Israel's unprecedented onslaught on Gaza, inflicting mass devastation and death upon besieged Palestinians, as well as the atrocious attack and kidnappings by Hamas in Israel on October 7. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing this violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to intensify their attacks on Palestinians. The most far-right government in Israel's history is ramping up its policing of dissent, using the cover of war to silence Palestinian citizens and left-wing Jews who object to its policies.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 14 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, entrenched occupation and apartheid, and a normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment – but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your support? +972 Magazine is a leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists, activists, and thinkers can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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