

The Distinction We Keep Losing

Bill Wood

Most people I know who care about Israel and Palestine agree on more than they think they do. They believe Jewish people deserve safety after a history that gives that need real weight. They believe Palestinians deserve to live without occupation, blockade, or permanent statelessness. Almost no one I've ever talked to, across the political spectrum, disagrees with either of those sentences.

What they disagree about is a word: antisemitism. And I think the disagreement is mostly a misunderstanding worth clearing up.

Two Different Things

Antisemitism is hatred of Jewish people because they are Jewish — a prejudice with a long and murderous history, and one that is very much alive today, including on the political left. It deserves to be named and opposed everywhere it appears, without hedging.

Anti-Zionism is something else: a political position about a state, not a people. It's the view that the modern state of Israel, as a Jewish-majority ethnostate established in a land with an existing Arab population, was the wrong solution to a real problem — or that its current form and conduct have failed the people it governs. You can hold that view about Israel the way you can hold a critical view of any nation's founding or policies, without it implying anything about Jewish people as a group. Many people who hold this view are themselves Jewish.

The trouble is that these two things get treated as the same thing constantly, and I don't think that's always an honest mistake. Collapsing "I oppose this state's policies" into "I hate this people" is a very effective way to end a conversation before it starts. It lets serious criticism get waved away as bigotry, and it does something worse: it cheapens the word antisemitism itself, so that when real antisemitism shows up, people are primed to hear it as just another instance of the same tired conflation.

If you take nothing else from this piece, take that distinction. It's the whole hinge.

A Debt Handed to the Wrong Address

Here's where I think the conversation usually goes wrong next. The case for Israel's founding is almost always made by pointing to the Holocaust — and it should be. Six million Jewish people were murdered in Europe, by Europeans, with the complicity of European institutions that had centuries to do better and didn't. The argument that Jewish people needed a state of their own, immune to the whims of host countries, doesn't require the Holocaust to be true — Theodor Herzl was already making a version of it in 1896, watching a French officer destroyed by antisemitism in the most liberal country in Europe at the time. But the Holocaust gave that argument its most undeniable proof.

Here's the problem. That was a European crime. The people who committed it, and the people who stood by, were European. The land where Israel was established was not empty, and its Arab residents had nothing to do with what had happened in Germany or Poland. When roughly 750,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes in 1948 — an event they call the Nakba — the cost of a European catastrophe was paid by people who had no hand in causing it.

I don't think most people who support Israel's existence have thought carefully about this specific asymmetry. It isn't an argument against Jewish safety. It's a question about who was made to pay for it, and whether that's ever been honestly reckoned with.

Whose Decision Was It?

There's a second layer worth sitting with, separate from the moral debt: who actually had the standing to make this decision in the first place.

In 1947, the United Nations voted to partition Palestine — land governed by Britain under a Mandate, not owned by the UN, home to a population that was never consulted. The vote passed over the unanimous objection of every Arab state in the region and without the consent of the Palestinian Arabs whose land was being redrawn. Whatever you think about how things unfolded afterward, that starting point deserves scrutiny on its own terms: a group of outside powers, several of them the same powers whose failures had created the refugee crisis they were now trying to solve, redistributing someone else's land to fix a problem of their own making.

That doesn't answer what should have happened instead — I don't think there's a clean counterfactual available, and I'm not going to pretend otherwise. But it does mean the legitimacy of the starting point is a fair question, not an off-limits one. You don't have to conclude the state shouldn't exist to conclude that the way it came to exist deserves the same honest scrutiny we'd apply to any other territorial decision made by outside powers over the objection of the people who actually lived there.

What's Happening Now Isn't Ancient History

It's tempting, especially for people encountering this for the first time, to file the whole thing under "conflicts that go back thousands of years" — old hatreds, complicated, nobody's fault in particular. I'd ask you to resist that framing, because I think it does real work in letting everyone off the hook.

This is not a two-thousand-year-old war. Jewish and Arab communities lived in the same region under Ottoman rule for centuries without this specific conflict — not as equals, but without the organized, sovereignty-versus-sovereignty war that defines the modern situation. What changed was the 20th century: two national movements, both with real and understandable claims, asserting exclusive sovereignty over the same territory at the same time. That's a modern political collision, not an ancient one, and modern political collisions are the kind of thing that can actually be resolved — through partition, through federation, through a change in who's paying the cost of continuing rather than settling.

Calling it ancient and intractable isn't neutral. It's a way of saying nothing can be done, which conveniently benefits whoever currently holds the advantage in an unresolved situation.

The Part That's Hardest to Look Away From

Whatever you conclude about how Israel came to exist, what's happening inside its borders and the territories it controls right now is not a historical question. It's current.

The West Bank has been under occupation for close to sixty years, with settlements that are illegal under international law continuing to expand. Gaza has lived under a blockade that human rights organizations have repeatedly called collective punishment. Arab citizens inside Israel's own 1948 borders hold formal citizenship but face documented legal and structural inequality.

And this isn't the position of a fringe within Israeli politics anymore. Israel's current Finance Minister has said the country's first prime minister should have "finished the job" in 1948. Its National Security Minister has said there's no room for Arab political participation in a Jewish state. These are members of the sitting government, saying this openly, not activists on the margins.

I'd ask anyone who cares about Jewish safety — and I do, genuinely, without qualification — to sit with what it means that the tradition producing Amos and Isaiah, prophets who built their entire moral authority on holding their own people accountable rather than their enemies, has in this specific political project been inverted into something that treats scrutiny of its own conduct as an attack.

What I'm Actually Asking

I'm not asking anyone to stop caring about Jewish safety. That need is real and it isn't going away, and any resolution that doesn't take it seriously isn't a real resolution.

I'm asking for something narrower: separate the question of whether Jewish people deserve security from the question of whether this specific state, built this specific way and conducting itself this specific way, is the only or the right vehicle for that security — and stop treating the second question as evidence of hatred toward the first group. Palestinians didn't create the problem this state was built to solve. They deserve, at minimum, an honest accounting of what was taken from them, and a resolution that doesn't quietly assume the current arrangement is the fair starting point to negotiate down from.

That's not a radical position. It's just an honest one, and I think most people, if they let themselves actually sit with the distinction at the top of this piece, would find they already believe more of it than they realized.

The author is a retired publishing executive of dual heritage, including Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry from Poland and Russia.