

**WHY PROGRESSIVES  
SHOULD REJECT  
“DECOLONISATION”  
MYTHS ABOUT ISRAEL  
LFI POLICY BRIEFING**

# **LABOUR FRIENDS OF ISRAEL**

**WORKING TOWARDS A TWO STATE SOLUTION**

## **WHY PROGRESSIVES SHOULD REJECT “DECOLONISATION” MYTHS ABOUT ISRAEL LFI POLICY BRIEFING**

**BY**  
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**MARCH 2024**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The war between Israel and Hamas has amplified a view among the Jewish state's opponents that regards the State of Israel as a "colonial" entity and the Jewish people as having no rights at all. It recognises only the legitimacy of Palestinian national rights "between the river and the sea".
- There is an urgent need to confront this distorted worldview which fosters antisemitism and hinders the prospects of peace and a two-state solution. As we saw in the Labour party during the Corbyn period, anti-Zionist discourse frequently spills into overt antisemitism.
- Describing Israel as a "settler-colonial" state is not simply inaccurate, it also demonstrates a blindness and insensitivity to the history and cultural identity of Jews. It is a conspiracy theory upon which a series of other conspiracy theories rest and is just the latest in a long line of antisemitic conspiracy theories to which Jews have been subjected for centuries.
- One of the most pernicious effects of this mythology is to dehumanise Israelis, who are reduced to "colonialists" against whom Hamas' slaughter is legitimised as "resistance".
- Chants such as "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" and calls for "decolonisation" appear to call for the elimination of the State of Israel. This is both immoral and inherently incompatible with the concept of a two-state solution.
- Left-wing intellectual anti-Zionism is driven by factors specific to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, including the long history of antisemitism on the left; the impact of Cold War Soviet propaganda; and a political alliance between the radical left and Islamist politics in the west. It is also reflected by the growth of identity politics among some sections of the left.
- The Jews who came to the territory of Israel-Palestine were neither imperialists nor colonialists. They were typically refugees fleeing antisemitic persecution within the European states where they lived. Jews were drawn to the land not for its resources but because it was the unique territorial focal point of Jewish history, faith and prayer. They did not seize or appropriate, but bought the land on which they settled and they had an ethos of cultivating it themselves rather than seeking to exploit the labour of the local population.
- The UK Labour party reaffirmed its support for the Jewish national home no less than 11 times between 1917 and 1945 and opposed the government's 1939 white paper that severely limited migration to Mandate Palestine and thus denied Jews this final place of refuge from Nazi persecution.
- Branding Israel as "settler-colonial" and calling for "decolonisation" is not progressive and fuels an approach to activism that entrenches the conflict, rather than contributing to its resolution. Rather than putting pressure on rejectionists and supporting moderates on both sides, such campaigns collectively demonise an entire society on one side of the conflict and plays into the hands of the Israeli right and its oft-professed view that the country has no "partner for peace". In the UK, these campaigns harm British Jews with deep personal and cultural ties to Israel.

## INTRODUCTION: 'DECOLONISE PALESTINE' = ELIMINATE ISRAEL

“Anti-Zionist antisemitism is the antithesis of the Labour tradition. It denies the Jewish people alone a right to self-determination. It equates Zionism with racism, focuses obsessively on the world’s sole Jewish state, and holds it to standards to which no other country is subjected.”

Keir Starmer, LFI Annual Lunch, November 2021

Since becoming leader of the Labour party, Keir Starmer has worked to expunge the legacy of the Corbyn era, and restore a longer, more authentic and deeper Labour tradition of commitment to the right of Jews to national self-determination, alongside unwavering commitment to Palestinian national rights. This reflects a view that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is best understood as a tragic clash between two legitimate claims to national self-determination in the same territory. This is the notion that shapes the policies of mainstream political parties across liberal democracies. And it has long been the basis of international diplomacy, including the 1947 UN partition plan; UN security council resolution 242 (1967), which recognises Israel’s right to security within its pre-1967 boundaries and was accepted by the PLO in 1988; and UN security council resolution 1397 (2002) which explicitly calls for a two-state solution. In 1993, Israel and the PLO recognised one another’s “mutual legitimate and political rights” in the Oslo Accords, which formed the basis for all subsequent direct negotiations.

Understanding the conflict as a clash between two legitimate national causes is also the position taken by many scholars. Professor Mark Tessler introduces his highly respected 1,000-page book, [A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict](#), with the words:

Both Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs have legitimate and inalienable rights. These rights are rooted in the historical experience of each people. Their validity does not depend on the absence of any corresponding rights possessed by the other party to the conflict. Nor can these rights be forfeited; the validity of each people’s claims and aspirations transcends the actions of its leaders, who at times may have acted unwisely, or perhaps even unethically.

However, the war that began on 7 October has exposed the prevalence of another view – one that only recognises the legitimacy of Palestinian national rights “between the river and the sea”, and regards the State of Israel as a “colonial” entity and the Jewish people as having no rights at all. There is both an urgent need to confront this distorted worldview in the wider intellectual circles where it is frequently promoted without challenge and to remember that the current tragic war began following Hamas’ brutal attack on Israel on 7 October - an attack which saw the indiscriminate massacre of men, women and children; premeditated and continuing sexual violence; and the greatest loss of Jewish life since the Holocaust.

Framing Israel as a “settler-colonial” state exposes a conspicuous blindness and insensitivity to the historical experience and cultural identity of Jews. It diverges so far from historic and contemporary reality that it has to resort to what the historian Simon Sebag Montefiore called in a [recent essay](#) “a caricature, zombie history,” to sustain itself. In short, it is a conspiracy theory – a faux intellectual edifice upon which a series of other conspiracy theories rest and just the latest in a long line of antisemitic conspiracy theories to which Jews have been subjected for centuries.

The principles of free speech and academic freedom dictate that scholars have the right to pursue and argue for competing approaches to explain complex social phenomena. But in many arenas the “settler-colonial” narrative – despite its evident flaws – appears to have become an ideological orthodoxy.

One of the most pernicious effects of this mythology is to dehumanise Israelis, who are reduced to “colonialists” against whom Hamas’ slaughter is legitimised as “resistance”. It has created an intellectual and social context in which it has become shockingly widespread for left intellectuals, activists and

movements to not only express their belief that Israel should not exist but to [express unrestrained admiration](#) for the actions of Hamas.

Much more widespread are chants such as “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free”, coupled with calls for “decolonisation” which, regardless of whether they reflect direct approval for Hamas, are hard to interpret as anything other than maximalist calls for the elimination of the State of Israel. This is both immoral and inherently incompatible with the concept of a two-state solution.

This situation is creating a climate of fear especially for many Jewish students, who have found the public space of their universities and schools – whether digital or physical – to be hostile places, in complete violation of the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion. As we witnessed in the Labour party during the Corbyn period, anti-Zionist discourse frequently spills into [overt antisemitism](#).

But aside from demoralising British Jews, this mythologised approach to the conflict makes it impossible to understand the current crisis and thus to resolve it. That is why distorted versions of history must be countered not only within the Labour party, but in the universities, schools and other places where all too often they are being reproduced without challenge.

## THE DEEP ROOTS OF THE “SETTLER-COLONIAL” MYTHOLOGY

This distortion of history cannot be explained as simply a reaction to the (entirely justified) sympathy for the historic tragedy of the Palestinians and their continuing plight. Nor can it be explained by the failure to bring an end to the occupation of the territories that began in 1967, or as a response to the rise of the Israeli radical right and far right, with its rejection of Palestinian national rights, even though these factors certainly exacerbate it.

The roots and drivers of left-wing intellectual anti-Zionism have been increasingly studied by sociologists and historians in recent years, and they run much deeper. Some of the drivers are specific to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. They include the long history of antisemitism on the left (which indeed predates the establishment of the State of Israel); the [impact](#) of Soviet propaganda during the Cold War; and social and demographic changes that have created political alliances between the radical left and Islamist politics in the west and the Middle East.

But the challenge to the legitimacy of the State of Israel and Zionism - which is simply the belief in the right of the Jewish people to national self-determination - must also be understood in the context of a much wider shift to advance particular ideological and political agendas in western academia.

The direction of identity and race politics, influenced by trends in western social sciences and humanities in the post-Cold War era, has been to demonise the west as an inherently malign global force, whose entire social and intellectual system is inherently racist and imperialist and requiring of “decolonisation”. The false reduction of Israel-Palestine to a conflict about “settler colonialism” is thus fuelled by this wider crisis of identity within western states.

This ideologically slanted approach to the Israeli-Palestinian issue runs counter to the pursuit of an intellectually honest, balanced and accurate understanding of the birth of the State of Israel; the causes of Palestinian statelessness; and politically viable and just ways to resolve the conflict.

In a recent short introductory text on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict [published](#) by Oxford University Press, Professor Dov Waxman claims that “in left-wing circles in western societies, and especially on university campuses and in academia, it has become not only fashionable, but almost taken for granted, to view Zionism as synonymous with colonialism.”

But, as Waxman argues, “Zionist settlers were not European colonialists”. Instead, “the Zionist settlement project ... significantly differed in its intentions and its practices from the kind of colonial projects carried out by the British, Dutch, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Germans, and Italians.”

Lumping the Zionist project in with European colonial projects obscures any understanding of how it acted and any fair evaluation of its legitimacy. This conflating of Zionism with colonialism is just one element of a wider set of ideas that Professor Alan Johnson has termed an “[anti-Zionist ideology](#)”. The ideology – which treats Zionism as unified, racist, even genocidal – doesn’t shine a light upon the history of Zionism as a diverse and multi-faceted movement, or the contemporary reality of the conflict. Instead, it selects, interprets and distorts information to fit in with, and reinforce, its rigid assumptions. It is an intellectual straitjacket that feeds prejudiced and conspiratorial thinking, rather than analysis. Previous efforts to reach a two-state compromise, for example, are dismissed as cynical. This judgement is not based on an objective assessment, but based on an ideology that assumes they must be pursued in bad faith.

There are entirely justified debates to be had about the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the current political situation, who is to blame and what should be done. There must be entirely legitimate space to criticise or even condemn particular policies and attitudes. But, if it is to be constructive and informing, this must be rooted in a striving for objectivity and fairness, and separated from demonising and polarising ideologies.

## WHY ISRAEL IS NOT AN OUTCOME OF “SETTLER-COLONIALISM”

The Jews who came to the territory of Israel-Palestine were neither imperialists nor colonialists. They were typically refugees fleeing antisemitic persecution within the European states where they lived. The Zionist movement was ideologically diverse and multi-faceted. But, as a whole, it was energised at the end of the 19th century by European Jews finding that antisemitism had not withered with the onset of modernity but rather morphed into new, and ultimately deadlier, forms. Jews were drawn to the land not for its resources but because it was the unique territorial focal point of Jewish history, faith and prayer; where there had been a Jewish state until its destruction by the Romans in 70AD; and where there was an indigenous, non-diaspora Jewish population continuously living. This included Jerusalem, where there was a Jewish majority from the mid-19th century. Zionists viewed themselves not as newcomers but as exiles returning to their homeland. Unlike European colonialists they did not serve an imperial power but were motivated by goals of national emancipation. They did not seize or appropriate, but bought the land on which they settled, often at highly inflated prices. Moreover, they had an ethos of cultivating it themselves rather than seeking to exploit the labour of the local population.

The first waves of modern European Jewish settlement occurred while the territory was still part of the Ottoman Empire. These early Zionists established many new communities including kibbutzim in the coastal plain and Galilee; built Jewish neighbourhoods outside the Old City of Jerusalem; founded Tel Aviv; and purchased the land for the Hebrew University, all before the British conquest during the first world war.

The period of cooperation between the Zionist enterprise and the British empire was important but short lived. It began with Britain’s arrival in Palestine in late 1917 and ended with the UK government’s 1939 MacDonalld white paper which all but stopped Jewish immigration to Palestine. Moreover, while the British may have been driven by the interests of their nation and empire, Jews were motivated by the desire for national rebirth and physical survival.

The Jews that immigrated to Palestine during the Mandate came not only under the umbrella of the British empire but an international charter of the League of Nations that designated Palestine as a Jewish national home in 1921. The UK Labour party [reaffirmed](#) its support for the Jewish national home no less than 11

times between 1917 and 1945, including in the August 1917 [war aims memorandum](#) which was published three months before the Balfour Declaration.

With the rise of Nazism in Europe, the necessity of a national home for Jewish survival became ever more apparent. In 1937, Chaim Weizman, who would later become Israel's first president, told Britain's Peel Commission, which was investigating the Palestine question, that, for the Jews of Europe, the "world is divided into places where they cannot live and places where they cannot enter". This was not only pithy but tragically accurate. No wonder then that the British Labour party opposed the 1939 white paper that denied Jews this final place of refuge from Nazi persecution. Once Britain closed the gates, and the Nazi-Soviet pact was signed, the fate of six million European Jews was effectively sealed.

It can never be overlooked that the process that created the State of Israel in 1948 – the Jewish narrative of salvation, just three years after the liberation of Auschwitz – is for Palestinians their narrative of catastrophe. Regardless of the historical debates surrounding the circumstances of Israel's creation, the loss and suffering of the Palestinian people is undeniable.

But the events of 1948 did not involve one refugee crisis but three. The creation of Israel provided a home for European Jewish refugees who had survived the Holocaust and were stranded in transit camps. They typically had no home to return to and some of those who tried were subject to massacres such as the 1946 Kielce pogrom. Israel also absorbed hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees from within the Middle East. Far from being "white", "European", or "colonialists", these were Jews fleeing persecution in Arab lands. Half of Israel's Jewish population is descended from Jews of Middle Eastern origin.

## THE OCCUPATION

There is a clear distinction to be made between the legitimacy of the State of Israel within its pre-1967 boundaries and the territories captured by Israel in the defensive war of 1967.

While Israel has understandable reason to seek changes to the pre-1967 "Green Line" boundaries and special security arrangements, the establishment of a Palestinian state in the equivalent of the entirety – or close to it – of these territories (with territorial swaps) is ultimately a reasonable compromise established in previous negotiations. Settlement blocs close to the Green Line, which are home to 70-80 per cent of the settlement population, could be incorporated into Israel's borders in a future agreement. But construction beyond these blocs threatens Palestinian territorial contiguity in areas that ought reasonably to be considered part of a future Palestinian state, and therefore challenges the realisation of Palestinian national rights in the future. Although conflict-ending negotiations are not currently realistic, Israel ought to avoid steps that will make such an agreement harder to achieve.

Israel has an obligation to end the occupation that began in 1967 in line with the principles of UN security council resolution 242, which was passed in the wake of the war. Yet, the [enduring wisdom](#) of this resolution was that it called for peace based on two parallel principles: Israeli territorial withdrawal on the one hand and recognition of Israel's right to "live in peace within secure and recognised boundaries" on the other. At that time, Israel's security was threatened by Soviet-backed Arab states committed to its destruction. Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula in 1982 – territory it captured from Egypt in 1967 – came in return for Cairo ending all its claims against Israel as part of a comprehensive peace, and agreeing to keep the territory demilitarised.

Today, Israel is threatened by armed Islamist extremists backed by Iran, who insert themselves into weakly governed spaces in the Middle East, including on Israel's borders. We have two recent cases of Israel "ending the occupation" of territory on its borders: the withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000 and from the Gaza Strip in 2005. In both cases, Iranian-backed groups have taken control – Hezbollah in the case of

the former and Hamas in the latter – and used those territories as bases to launch attacks on Israel, as part of a long-term war of attrition. International diplomacy has failed to address these challenges. A 10,000-strong UN force in South Lebanon has been unable to enforce UN security council resolution 1701 which mandates that there should be no military force there other than that of the government of Lebanon.

As UN security council resolution 242 suggests, Israel's obligation to end the occupation should come in parallel with political arrangements that fulfil its right to peace and security.

Over the past 25 years, specifically at Camp David in 2000 and Annapolis in 2008, Israel has agreed to, or made, proposals recognising a Palestinian state in Gaza and nearly 94 percent of the West Bank, with East Jerusalem as its capital. It included a land swap giving Palestinians compensating Israeli territory. The Palestinian Authority did not accept this. More recently, in 2013, Israel indicated its acceptance of US secretary of state John Kerry's "framework agreement" for negotiations. Again, the PA never responded.

Today, a far right and religiously fundamentalist variant of Jewish nationalism has gained a share of political power in Israel, holding government ministries. These extremists hold positions that mirror the maximalist position of those advancing the "decolonisation narrative". They too believe that there is only one legitimate national claim to the territory. Their position is not only illiberal and callous but politically destructive. Palestinians are no less willing to drop their national claims than Jews are and denying them is a recipe for unending conflict.

However, Jewish extremism does not define Zionism or the State of Israel. Nor does it negate the legitimacy of Jewish national self-determination within the recognised borders of the State of Israel, any more than Palestinian extremism negates the legitimacy of Palestinian national self-determination.

## WITHIN ISRAEL'S BORDERS

Those who are ideologically committed to the notion that the State of Israel is inherently illegitimate in any borders try to argue that a system of apartheid exists even within Israel's pre-1967 boundaries, where two million Arabs are Israeli citizens. They try to blur any meaningful difference between the situation on either side of the Green Line marking the pre-1967 boundary.

This is absurd, since Palestinians have completely different political statuses and lived realities in Israel, East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Arab citizens of Israel have equal rights before the law. They sit as judges in Israeli courts, including the Supreme Court. Indeed, it was an Arab-Israeli judge, George Karra, who sent the former president, Moshe Katsav, to jail. Israel's Arab citizens are members of the Knesset - the mainly Israeli-Arab Joint List was the third largest parliamentary grouping after the 2015, September 2019 and March 2020 general elections - and serve in Israeli governments. For the first time, an Arab political party, Ra'am, was part of an Israeli governing coalition in 2021-22. The "settler-colonial" narrative cannot begin to explain how an Islamic Arab party can participate as a full partner in an Israeli government.

Though deep structural and societal challenges face Israel's Arab minority, and its relations with the majority are greatly complicated by the unresolved national conflict, this is far from apartheid.

The trends in the status of the Arab minority are complex. While ethnic tensions are deliberately fuelled by the Israeli far right, and are exacerbated by violence between Israel and Palestinian armed groups, there are also trends towards increasing integration in the workforce, narrowing gaps in [education](#), and increased government investment.



## CONCLUSION: TAKING A PROGRESSIVE POSITION

It is a progressive position to support Palestinian statehood and oppose any steps by Israeli governments designed to thwart it. By contrast, branding Israel as “settler-colonial” and calling for “decolonisation” is not progressive. This is not just bad history and a flawed political analysis but is politically destructive.

Aside from making it impossible to assess objectively what is happening it also fuels an approach to activism that entrenches the conflict, rather than contributing to its resolution. Rather than putting pressure on rejectionists and supporting moderates on both sides, such attitudes collectively demonise an entire society on one side of the conflict. In the UK, the main practical effect is to harm British Jews with deep personal and cultural ties to Israel.

If BDS directed at “decolonisation” impacts the conflict, it is only to exacerbate it. To the extent that Palestinians are led to believe, erroneously, by international “supporters”, that Israel can be pressured to the point of collapse (as apartheid South Africa was), or that Palestine can be “decolonised” (whatever that may mean), they will be less likely to face the compromises necessary to achieve a Palestinian state alongside Israel. And a pressure campaign that targets all Israeli society with an explicit view to its destruction simply plays into the hands of the Israeli right and its oft-professed view that the country has no “partner for peace”.

Israel is not South Africa. Demographic growth means Israel will soon be the home to the majority of the world’s Jews. They will no more give up on their national claims than Palestinians will, and they will not contemplate minority status in an Arab majority state. The maximalist demand for the elimination of Israel is therefore a path away from progress and towards never-ending conflict.

In a fraught conflict between two national movements a progressive position is to support moderates and channel the parties toward compromise, not to encourage the maximalist positions of one side. The need to reject this kind of polarising politics is all the more important now. The war that began on 7 October is the deadliest and most destructive Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 1948. The images we have seen and stories we have heard are traumatic even at a great distance. The large pro-Palestinian rallies illustrate the power of this conflict to mobilise people in the UK.

For those who have experienced the war at first hand, the terrible violence suffered will fuel mutual loathing rather than mutual recognition. The physical destruction will take years to repair. The psychological scars will be with Israelis and Palestinians for generations.

The idea that Israelis and Palestinians can coexist in one state “between the river and the sea” has never looked more detached from reality. The war has also exposed the short-sightedness of open-ended occupation or “conflict management” which ignored Palestinian aspirations and incubated extremism exploited by Hamas and its backers in Tehran.

Yet precisely because there is no going back to the pre-war situation in which Israel practiced a policy of containment towards a Hamas-run Gaza, this is a moment where a better future might be glimpsed. There are factors that might enable a progressive path out of this catastrophe: the effective destruction of Hamas rule in Gaza; the overwhelming desire in Israel for an end to Benjamin Netanyahu’s rule; and the shared interest of Israel and moderate Arab states to undermine Iran and its “axis of resistance”.

For this reason, it is all the more important for third parties, who have the luxury of physical and emotional distance, to avoid entrenched positions and hold multiple perspectives with empathy. We must oppose rejectionism on all sides and reaffirm the principles of mutual legitimacy. This includes contesting the intellectual movement that frames this as a conflict about “settler-colonialism”, and promoting nuanced research and teaching of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which is free of destructive and faulty ideologies.

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