

Notes on 'Labour Friends of Israel'

***Labour's Relationship to Zionism and the Israeli
State***

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Forward

We, the authors of this 'pamphlet', are all Labour Party members, all members of the health professions. Over the last year there has been a concerted effort to bully the Party into silence on Israel/Palestine, and we have witnessed the Party leadership buckle under the pressure. This campaign aimed, first, to confuse the struggle for civil rights in Israel/Palestine with racial prejudice; and, second, to demonise the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement, [a grass roots, human rights-based movement](#)¹ of non-co-operation with institutions complicit in Israel's Occupation, undertaken in response to a call from the collective voice of Palestinian civil society. Our opportunity to express and act upon the compassion and solidarity we feel for the Palestinian people is at risk of being seriously eroded.

Our points of view and those of others like us have been made to sound controversial in the UK, although there is little here that has not been put forward in the pages of Israel's own daily newspaper, Haaretz. We expect our efforts to be met with counter-arguments, and not further witch hunting. In this way, we hope that the membership will have the opportunity to appraise the relative merits of different points of view in the light of our shared ideals.

Introduction

Last year there was a spate of accusations of anti-Semitism levelled against seasoned anti-racists in the Labour Party. Leading politicians, the BBC, the Guardian and the wider media gave these allegations credence, leaving it to an undercover journalist from the Al Jazeera news channel to expose the politically-motivated lobbying that lay behind the 'scandal'.

Trump's election, the real racism of the populist Right, and the danger it poses to democratic life and world peace, puts this local hysteria into perspective. But the questions raised by Al Jazeera's series '[The Lobby](#)'² remain unanswered, brushed under the carpet by both the Israeli embassy and the British Government.

The Labour Party featured heavily in these programmes: Israeli officials worked closely with Party activists to undermine those concerned with Palestinian rights, [fabricating accusations](#)³ to bully and harass political opponents. The tactics were unacceptable; moreover the cause they were working for is, we argue, fundamentally at odds with the stated aims and philosophy of the Labour Party.

Central to the attempt to influence Labour Party opinion was the lobby group 'Labour Friends of Israel' (henceforth LFI). In this paper we will not comment further on the behind the scenes shenanigans which 'The Lobby' exposed, ([they have been going on for a long time](#)⁴), but respond to LFI's open and public platform, the material it has placed on its own website.

A short while ago, Louise Ellman, then Chair of Labour Friends of Israel (LFI), declared that it was a '[grotesque smear](#)'⁵ to suggest an Apartheid system operated in Israel/Palestine. With a flourish she dismissed the opinions of [many](#)⁶ experienced commentators including South African [veterans](#)⁷ of their own struggle against racism, who report that the conditions faced by Palestinians are in fact [worse](#)⁸ than those faced by Black [South Africans](#)⁹. What is missing from the public debate has been any attention to detail: to come to a sound conclusion we need to assess the nature of the relationship between the Israeli State and the Palestinian people against the legal definition of Apartheid in [the appropriate UN Convention](#)¹⁰. It is a crucial question: Louse Ellman is using her considerable moral authority to deny the experiences of those on the ground.

Additionally Tom Watson, Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, recently [declared that](#)¹¹ 'the things LFI does – promoting a two-state solution, opposing the BDS movement and supporting those fighting for peace and coexistence – are good things to do, but they are a *moral responsibility* too for all of us, a commandment'. The 'enemy' here is represented by the Palestine solidarity movement. How do we account for this polarisation, when there is such a broad coalition in civil society, including church groups, trade unions and anti-racist movements across the world, convinced that the protection of Palestinian communities and the promotion of Palestinian rights is of critical importance, and indeed a moral responsibility?

Labour's support for Zionism goes back a long way. There are many reasons why, in the aftermath of the Nazi genocide, the establishment of a Jewish homeland appealed to the Left's humanitarian ideals. Left-wing interest in Zionism was encouraged too by the idea of the Kibbutz as the basis for a more egalitarian society, and the expectation that a socialist Israel could, by example, undermine the feudalism thought to characterise Middle Eastern societies. How Labour's identification with the Zionist project has survived the subsequent history of Israel's treatment of the Palestinian people down to the present day is much more difficult to understand. Despite the election of the most extreme right wing, pro-settler government in Israel's history, LFI claims that their support amongst Labour MP's [is growing](#)¹². We need to turn to the information provided by LFI to find out how this group of activists understand and promote Israel, and in what sense they are its 'friends'.

What is Zionism?

Within the Labour movement heavy pressure has been applied to deter us from discussing Zionism as a political ideology, giving it the oddest kind of protection. It is said that Zionism runs in the DNA of the Jewish people, that it is part of [Jewish 'identity'](#)¹³, and that therefore to criticize it is to commit a hate crime. Attempts to shield Zionism by manipulating guilt over our anti-Semitic history go back a long way. They seem to have intensified at the prospect of a Labour leader knowledgeable about and sympathetic towards the struggle for Palestinian rights, during a period when Israel's public relations teams have had just too much 'bad news' for world opinion to overlook.

The critical question, however, is this: why do our political elites parrot this strange assertion, to the point where they seem ready to [pass it into law](#)¹⁴, thereby jeopardising the liberties they should be protecting. Clearly, we need to clarify what is meant by Zionism, and here we outline three positions which, while inevitably involving oversimplification, might help us consider why LFI and other pro-Israeli forums are so keen to discourage discussion of it. Each of these positions has support both amongst Jewish Israelis and their friends abroad (although not, of course, in equal measure).

1. Following the suggestion of Israeli psychology professor [Daniel Bar-Tal](#)¹⁵, we call the ideology behind all recent Israeli governments, 'neo-Zionism'. By this Bar-Tal indicates the belief that the whole of the occupied Palestinian territories belong, by God-given right, to the 'Jewish people', resulting in policies pursued by Israeli governments over recent decades to incorporate them into Israel while disenfranchising the land's inhabitants. Neo-Zionism is willing to sacrifice democracy to keep the land and exclude the Palestinians who reside there. They will certainly not consider recognising the rights of the Palestinian refugees, and they frequently reveal their determination to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state, although at times the alliance with the United States has required them to conceal this.

2. Bar-Tal himself speaks from a position we shall call 'Left Zionist', which regards Israel only within its internationally recognised borders as belonging by right to the Jewish people. They see clearly that the expansionism advocated by neo-Zionists means either a democratic state that is no longer exclusively in Jewish control, or a Jewish state that is in no meaningful sense democratic. Left Zionists believe passionately in a two-state solution, as the only way to preserve or rebuild Israeli democracy. They want a real state for Palestinians so that their aspirations can be realised, including perhaps the return of the refugees, without infringing on the 'Jewish' character of Israel itself.

3. Non-Zionists and anti-Zionists are those who consider that a state should represent those who live within its borders, regardless of their ethnicity or religious background. They do not repudiate the Jewish Israeli desire to live in peace and security, however they are committed to building an Israel/Palestine in which everyone has equal political, civil and human rights. They recognise that there are two national peoples living in this small area, both of whose interests must be guaranteed and protected. This third group is distinguished from the other two by its concern not with 'the Jewish people' - indicating all people identifying as Jewish across the world - but with the tangible rights and responsibilities of an actually existing Jewish Israeli national community. Non-Zionists do not therefore privilege the claims of a 'Jewish nation' above the rights of the Palestinians: they recognise that both communities exist and have rights which need to be respected. Their concern is with the quality of the relationship between the two.

We suggest that progressives in Britain ought to argue for the third position as the only one likely to provide a sound foundation to a lasting reconciliation among the

inhabitants of Israel/ Palestine. From a pragmatic point of view, we can imagine that some might advocate support for the second variety, 'Left Zionism', on the basis that Jewish Israelis will never accept a situation of real equality between themselves and Palestinian citizens of the same state. What we cannot imagine is that people with any real concern for democracy and social progress could support option 1. As we shall argue, LFI, although ostensibly supporting the second position, is, by its actions, actually promoting the first and the least progressive position.

What does it mean to describe oneself as a 'progressive' today?

LFI has produced a booklet, [*'The Progressive Case for Israel'*](#)¹⁶, in which Dr Brian Bivati offers a view of what is meant by progressive politics:

There are two important components to a progressive view of politics. The first is a world view that accepts a pluralistic approach to public policy; that does not rely on single solutions, i.e. the market or the state. The second is an acceptance that to make change happen, it is necessary to build coalitions of the willing and form alliances with other progressive forces that share our values and beliefs."
(p17)

Why would a 'progressive view' be characterised in this way? It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the superficiality, even vacuity, of these ideas indicates a realisation that to expound more clearly the values of social democracy would, in this context, highlight embarrassing contradictions.

Can we provide a more fitting definition of those ideas and values that, broadly speaking, have led us to join the Labour Party rather than, for example, the Conservatives?

Progressives take it for granted that state power derives from the people, and that government should rest on the consent of the governed. At the very least we expect an inclusive system of electoral rights, ensuring political power is exercised by the people's representatives on the basis of one person, one vote. A parliamentary system with freedom of speech, the press, assembly and so on are not, however, sufficient for democracy. These freedoms were enjoyed by white South Africans under Apartheid and used by its racist government to claim parity with Britain and the USA. In addition, we expect to see equality before the law and a legal system that forms a barrier against racism and guarantees protection from state abuse or any other form of oppression. We would insist upon a constitution or body of common law that ensured these fundamental rights were available to all subject to the power of the State.

Progressives are uncomfortable with nationalism and, with the history of Nazism particularly in mind, have no truck with nativist or ethnic nationalism. Hierarchical and supremacist ideologies lie behind many of the atrocities perpetrated in living memory. The assertion that we are a single human race, is designed not only to convey a truth but

also to protect against ideologies that posit a pecking order of human value that inevitably punishes the oppressed.

To be regarded as a democratic, a regime would need to ensure that majority power was not used for the systematic oppression of minorities, but that participation in social and political life was encouraged and enabled for all. Progressives expect the State to take decisive action against paramilitary and other rogue elements in society. They would expect the use of violence by the State to be subject to law, to be proportionate and that military action would be undertaken only as a last resort.

If we are to make a 'progressive case for Israel', some variant on these values and expectations would surely inform the argument. We bear these ideas in mind as we consider the nature and role of the pressure group Labour Friends of Israel.

What do we find on the LFI website?

1 The Two State Solution

The fundamental aim of LFI is described [as follows](#)¹⁷:

"Labour Friends of Israel promotes a negotiated two state solution for two peoples; with Israel safe, secure and recognised within its borders; living alongside a democratic, independent Palestinian state."

The 'two State solution' is a slogan, a principle, the only conceivable way forward, loudly proclaimed at every opportunity. In the recent Commons debate on Israeli Settlements in occupied Palestinian territory, not a single MP deviated from the mantra 'the two-state solution is the only solution'! What does it mean?

It could indicate a focus for action. In this case some obvious steps to take if LFI were serious about a Palestinian State would be to:

- support the Palestine Authority in its moves to secure UN backing for a date to end the Occupation, and in its moves to take on the rights and responsibilities of a proper State, at the International Criminal Court, for example. It could mean that LFI pressured the UK government to bring its pressure to bear to ensure that the Palestinians achieve a State that is viable and meaningful in geographical and economic terms. It would not have followed the lead of the Netanyahu government in seeking to obstruct the parliamentary vote in October 2014 recognising Palestine as a State
- seek to influence Jewish Israeli attitudes towards the Palestinians and a Palestinian State. Polls indicate a majority of young Jewish Israeli adults [reject the two-state solution](#)¹⁸. What is LFI doing to challenge this? For instance, did LFI distance itself from the statement of Israel's deputy foreign minister, Likud member Tzipi Hotovely, when she declared, in May 2015, '[This land is our land](#)...

All of it is ours', adding: 'We expect as a matter of principle the international community to recognise Israel's right to build homes for Jews in their homeland, everywhere'¹⁹. Even when Israel's politicians reluctantly pay lip service to the idea of a Palestinian state, its policy on the ground is to create bankrupt, fragmented, poverty-stricken, aid-dependent Palestinian ghettos, abandoned to look after themselves in those enclaves that the Israelis have decided they can do without. What is LFI's positions on these conditions?

Why does LFI look away from Israel's relentless expansionism of ethnically exclusive communities on Palestinian land, instead giving the clear impression that they consider the Palestinians, rather than the settlements, to be the real obstacles to progress?

Given all this, we can only imagine that LFI's advocacy of the 'two state solution' - and note, only the two state solution- might serve other purposes such as the following:

- LFI's conception of a Palestinian 'State' may be no more than a misnomer for the bantustans into which the West Bank has been divided by Israel, leaving isolated pockets of territory in the hands of a Palestine Authority that exercises no real power.
- As a salve to conscience. LFI can present itself as being interested as much in 'Palestine' as in 'Israel', while failing to put forward any meaningful plan to end the occupation,
- Advocacy of a Palestinian State might provide cover to disguise LFI bias. By completely ignoring the gross asymmetry of power between the Israeli state and the Palestinians, a cynical insistence on 'balance' becomes merely an endorsement of the status quo.
- Directing all Palestinian aspirations into this one objective tends to deflect worldwide criticism of the nature of Zionism, and obscures the historical evidence of Israel's dispossession and suppression of the Palestinian people.
- It costs LFI nothing to concede the 'right' to a 'Palestinian State' that nobody will grant them, while it legitimizes the project of establishing an equivalent 'Jewish State' even though the imbalance of power ensures that, unless circumstances change radically, strengthening of the latter continues to be at the cost of Palestine's non-Jewish peoples.

One inevitably concludes that LFI's 'commitment' to a Palestinian State is a mere fig leaf, paying lip-service to Palestinian aspirations while actually stifling them, both within the State of Israel and in the Occupied Territories. We think it incumbent on all MPs whose party policy is based on 'the two state solution' to consider that this might both be an obstinate denial of reality, and a means by which they can turn a blind eye to Israel's subjugation of the Palestinians.

Insistence on the idea of 'two states' is accompanied by the endlessly repeated assertion that those who seek any other outcome forward are working for the 'destruction' of Israel. They want to 'de-legitimize' and destroy, they support 'terrorism'. Terms like these are used to tarnish all concerned about the true nature of Israeli society, and its relations with the Palestinian people, as 'anti-Semitic'.

So what is it that these Friends of Israel insist would be 'destroyed' by anything other than a 'two state solution'? What is at risk is this: the notion of a Jewish State. The reason LFI insists on parading its belief in a Palestinian State that certainly isn't wanted, in any real sense, by the regime it champions, is that only in this way can it mask its dogmatic insistence on the necessity of a Jewish State, meaning a state in which Jewish Israelis have a guaranteed majority regardless of the violence, inhumanity and oppression needed to achieve and maintain it.

Israel's violence is directed first and foremost against the Palestinian people. But the repercussions are being felt across the Western world. Witch hunts, attempts to distort the meaning of words, legal procedures and an intensification of intolerance and bullying of all kinds accompanies the attempt to induce liberal democratic political cultures, that would naturally critique its ethno-nationalist assertions, to accept Zionism. It is ironic that the relentlessness of the discourse of 'delegitimation' is designed to prevent precisely the kind of evolutionary process by which Israel could become fully 'legitimate' in the eyes of the world.

LFI, Zionism and British democracy

The 'existential threat' that so pre-occupies groups like LFI is not, then, a threat to the people of Israel, but to an idea. The only thing that those promoting Palestinian rights seek to 'de-legitimize' is an ideology, and it is because this ideology is so vulnerable once exposed to the light of day that so much energy is invested in excluding it from open debate. It is vulnerable because it is incompatible with the basic notions of Western democratic opinion. This, we believe, is behind the moves to include criticism of this ideology in the definition of hate speech.

On its website, LFI states that:

"We support constructive and informed discussion within the Labour movement; explaining the intense debate within Israel over the challenges the country faces, including constant security and existential threats."

What are we to make of these claims? Over the last year LFI has worked strenuously to suppress discussion within the Labour movement. Why is there no exploration on its website of the issues that are subject to 'intense debate within Israel'? And of the issues that we are told are being debated, why does it mention only 'constant security and existential threats', as if the problems lie outside Israel itself?

Key here is the meaning of the 'constructive': we assume that to LFI this indicates 'within the parameters set by the Israeli Government'. Just as, when we hear LFI has consulted with 'progressive' Palestinians, we have to assume they mean 'those Palestinians who are most subservient to the Israeli State'. There is no indication that LFI has been in any way affected in its thinking by cutting-edge critical debate that is going on amongst both Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. An opportunity to participate in this presented itself at the London ['Equal Rights' conference](#)²⁰ sponsored by Independent Jewish Voices in March 2015. Why would this kind of optimistic, humanist conversation be anathema to British parliamentarians? Why would LFI be absolutely closed to the suggestion, aired on the [Labour Friends of Palestine](#)²¹ website, that a democratic, bi-national state might offer the best chance of social justice and lasting reconciliation? Insisting on a particular outcome for negotiations, particularly one that now seems so utterly impractical, acts as a straitjacket, inhibiting the creativity and vitality of both peoples, and condemning both to a continuation of the current, appalling reality.

As indicated above, there *are* Zionists who clearly mean what they say when they argue for a two-state solution. They fear that the de facto annexation of the Palestinian territory necessitates a choice between sacrificing Israel's guaranteed Jewish majority and becoming an apartheid state. This thinking was behind the [full-page advertisement](#)²² placed in the New York Times by the S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace on 22nd Sept 2016, calling for a selective boycott of the settlements. It is the position at issue in a recent debate in the New York Review of Books, between ['left Zionists'](#)²³ and their [non-Zionists critics](#)²⁴.

Whether one agrees with their politics or not, it cannot be doubted that there are people who care passionately about the future of Israel as a Jewish and democratic State, which is in grave danger as a result of its own expansionist and oppressive policies. Yet none of these positions or controversies are mentioned by LFI.

This is not done out of ignorance. The LFI's silence here indicates an adherence to the outlook of Israel's extreme right wing. To sign up to LFI might therefore be to lend one's name to a group allied with forces that are both undermining democracy in Israel, and intent on crushing Palestinian rights. LFI exists to create a firewall preventing the intense conversations going on within Palestinian-Israeli society about the past, present and the future from being heard by the British public. (See below ***'What you will not find on the LFI website'***.)

The International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace: ['for israel, for palestine, for peace'](#)²⁵

What could be better? A group urging the UK government to increase its community development aid programme to Israel/Palestine, part of a programme to raise £50m for 'coexistence work', or 'people to people' work. It will support the 'extensive and growing network of NGOs that has worked at a grassroots level to foster the values of coexistence, peace and reconciliation between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples which will be required if any future settlement is to be sustainable'. It is about 'building positive relationships across conflict lines', constructing '[powerful constituencies for peace](#)'²⁶ in Israel and Palestine, forcing leaders in both countries to return to meaningful negotiations'.

Before committing ourselves to such a programme, let's consider some possible disadvantages and contradictions.

The Israeli Government works to cut off resources that foster self-reliance and resistance amongst the Palestinian people, or that highlight the Occupation's consequences [for Israeli society](#)²⁷. Under pressure, international donors have increasingly made their grants conditional on an undertaking that the work they fund will be 'non-political'. This prevents voluntary groups from campaigning on the causes of the suffering they exist to remedy.

A [recent report](#)²⁸ from the lobby group NGO Monitor suggests that, despite this risk to their resources, a large proportion of Palestinian organisations openly support BDS. They avoid engaging in relationships which undermine the boycott movement. So, the more money that is channelled into joint initiatives supported by the Israeli authorities, the more Palestinians will be confronted with an unenviable choice: between compromising their principles, and foregoing opportunities to make progress in an environment where they already face enormous discrimination and reduced opportunities.

We can see how this fund may act as a tool of normalization. In other words, far from being benign or neutral, it would work to give an appearance of ordinariness to Israel's relationship with the Palestinians. It would suggest an equality that does not exist, imply that the problem lay in a failure of understanding and empathy, and in this way could undermine the struggle for Palestinian rights.

How does the LFI approach to funding compare to that of voluntary organisations supported by 'left' Zionists.

The [New Israel Fund \(NIF\)](#)²⁹ has been working for many years to promote community development for all citizens of Israel. It is fully committed to the idea of a 'Jewish Homeland', but unlike Israel's governing parties it puts the democratic vision outlined in Israel's declaration of independence at the heart of its work. Where LFI presents the

words of the declaration of Independence as proof of Israel's progressive nature, NIF understands that Israeli society falls far short of these ideals. Unlike LFI, it accepts that 'the 20% of Israel's citizens who are Arab have suffered [de facto and de jure discrimination](#)³⁰ since the founding of the state'.

NIF rejects the boycott movement, but unlike LFI it ['oppose\[s\] any attempt to criminalize](#)³¹ legitimate support for any non-violent strategy or tactic, including the global BDS movement'. The NIF supports the idea of a two state solution, but it backs this up by explicitly condemning the settlement movement and calling for an end to the occupation of Palestinian territories. Unlike LFI, NIF does not idealise Israel. It understands that idealisation is a reactionary stance, because change only comes when abuses are clearly identified. NIF, for example, works against ['the wave of anti-democratic legislation'](#)³² being passed by the current government, and the signs of increasing racism and intolerance to which LFI raises no objection. Among the organisations funded by NIF is the [Israeli human rights group B'Tselem](#)³³ whose website provides a view of Israeli government and society that LFI exists to conceal. B'Tselem is currently being targeted by the Israeli government.

Another organisation that funds B'Tselem is the UK-based Jewish charitable fund, the [Shalom-Salaam Trust](#)³⁴ (SST). SST outlines its approach in the following way:

"Working closely with grassroots projects in Israel/Palestine, BSST is always aware of the injustices, disparities in power and destruction of democracy caused or exacerbated by the Occupation. We therefore seek to focus on groups that make it central to their purpose to challenge oppression, injustice and disadvantage, and that are committed to a just resolution of the conflict in Israel/Palestine based on equality and mutual respect between all communities there."

In other words, SST understands that if it is to create meaningful relationships with Palestinians it has to start from the position of recognising their oppression, understanding their history and respecting their rights. This is the starting point for ethical interventions in Israel/Palestine, and LFI are not there, not even close.

Modern Day Fellow Travellers

There is an obvious danger to idealising a country, an ideology or a political movement: idealisations are inevitably misleading and untrue. This is why the Fellow Travellers of the 1930s - Western intellectuals who embraced Soviet Russia, believed its propaganda, and extolled the virtues of the new Utopia - are such an embarrassment to the Left. We now think of them as dupes, whose liberal-left sensibility somehow led them to defend the tyranny of Stalinism.

There are parallels between the old Stalinist intellectuals and the contributors to LFI's booklet ['The Progressive Case for Israel'](#)³⁵. Both show a strange preoccupation with

technology and modernisation, as if these provide evidence of a nation's moral value. Instead of parading statistics for the growth of steel production and the joys of life on the collective farm we have the wonders of 'Silicon Wadi', the interest of the major multinationals, figures for investment and capital growth. 'It has the highest number of high-tech start-ups per capita in the world and, in 2009, there were more Israeli firms on the NASDAQ than those from China and India combined' (p9). Uncomfortable facts are covered up with euphemisms. '...due to the ongoing conflict, Palestinian GDP per capita is still below its 1999 levels, although this has been improving rapidly under the current West Bank leadership' (p13). The implication is that no one is to blame for the deterioration in Palestinian living standards, certainly nothing for which the Israeli government can be held responsible, like the permit system, checkpoints, the differential charges imposed on Palestinian producers.

Contributors to LFI applaud Israel as a bastion of personal freedom and democratic life. It is true that one can find courts operating much like courts in this country, newspapers as free of government censorship, people who routinely vote for their elected representatives. It is this that allows one LFI writer to state that: 'For most of the 7.7 million people of Israel, the experience of human rights is as problematic and contested as it is in any other liberal democracy. In fact, performance of the Israeli state is, in many respects, much better than many liberal democracies.'

This misrepresentation, however, glosses over the well-documented, systematic discrimination that has been the lot of Palestinian citizens of Israel. There are myriad ways in which Israeli society is organised hierarchically, to the severe detriment of non-Jews. Beyond the Green Line, these reassurances about Israel's liberal democratic culture take on the appearance of caricature. For fifty years Israel has ruled the whole of historic Palestine, and it has done so in all practical senses to incorporate the West Bank into the Israeli State. Bar-Tal calls this a 'creeping annexation' designed to fulfil the ideological aims of 'neo-Zionism'. The racist nature of this ideology is exposed if we understand the extent to which its adherents believe wholeheartedly that the land actually belongs to them, as of right; they have no wish to incorporate the millions of Palestinians who live on this land into Israeli society.

LFI and human rights

LFI writer Brian Bravati in presenting Israel as a country with an excellent record on human rights, cites a 2010 US State Dept. report to argue, bizarrely, that there are no politically motivated killings, no political prisoners, that Israel operates 'a rules and values based system' which we should work with, not undermine. This is possible, he writes, because there are "numerous domestic and international human rights groups" operating in Israel "without government restriction" ([Progressive Case for Israel](#), p17-18). Bravati's attempt to promote Israel by reference to its support of an NGO human rights sector is particularly offensive. B'Tselem has recently declared that it will [no](#)

[longer use the courts](#)³⁶ to seek redress against human rights abuses, so much has the judicial system become a means of white-washing the actions of the State. Even the US State Department's Report for 2016 is scathing about [Israel's human rights abuses](#)³⁷.

What would Bravati make of the recent protest by more than [20 human rights organisations](#)³⁸ detailing Israel's attempts to use illegitimate means to undermine human rights work inside Israel/Palestine and in other Western countries?

To be consistent, Bravati ought to join in this protest. In *The Progressive Case for Israel*, he cites the internal opposition the move to criminalise the BDS movement as proof of the vitality of Israeli democracy: since then, attempts to use legislation to clamp down on the boycott movement within Israel and in other countries have intensified. What is his view now?

To cite two human rights concerns amongst the very many that could be explored:

(1) what is LFI's position on the failure of Israel to investigate the more than one [thousand allegations of torture](#)³⁹, documented by professional reports written by Palestinian and Israeli clinicians?

(2) what is LFI's position on the report called ['Expel and Exploit'](#)⁴⁰ published by B'Tselem in December 2016 detailing the fragmentation imposed on Palestinian rural land in the West Bank through a case study of three villages in the Nablus District, just one illustration of broader developments taking place throughout the West Bank?

Zionism and anti-Semitism

Just at the moment when members of the Labour Party elected a leader with a track record of support for Palestinian rights, there was a concerted campaign claiming that challenging Israel and rejecting the ideology that drives Israeli State policy was a 'new' form of anti-Semitism. A progressive discussion on this subject can be found on the [website of FreeSpeechIsrael](#)⁴¹. Our experience is consistent with the view of Israeli historian Avi Shlaim, when he comments that 'anti-Semitism is [not a real phenomenon](#) within the Labour Party'⁴².

Here we make a few assertions. Zionism is a political ideology. It may not, in itself, be racist to believe in or yearn for a 'Jewish State'. But to execute a plan for the creation of a Jewish state in a land occupied by another people presupposes, in practice, a form of colonial supremacism with all that implies. The fact that some Jewish people are offended at having Zionism questioned cannot justify turning a blind eye to the injustice and ongoing suffering imposed on a subject people.

A large and increasing number of Jewish people reject Zionism; inevitably no Palestinian can embrace the ideology of a State which has transformed and devastated their lives. How therefore can it be a *moral duty* to support such a political movement or be anti-Semitic to oppose it? Of course anti-Semites might express their hatred of Jews

in a rejection of Zionism, but it is even more likely that they will support Zionism because it encourages the idea that the 'real' home for Jewish people is in the Middle East, not here in Britain. What is without doubt is that those who degrade the language of anti-racism to achieve narrow political advantage confuse and actually undermine the struggle against anti-Semitism. Any move to legislate for a re-definition of anti-Semitism to include anti-Zionism is dangerous not just for free speech but for the struggle against anti-Semitism and all other forms of racism as well.

As for the frequently-repeated allegation that anti-Zionists are bent on destroying 'Israel', we would counter that anti-Zionists do not want to 'destroy' anything, nor turn the historical clock back. They want to move forward to a situation in which both peoples who live in Israel/Palestine enjoy the same rights and privileges. In place of the mythology of one 'Jewish people' with the right to their own State in Palestine, they argue that Zionism has succeeded in creating a real national community of Jewish Israelis, living side by side with an indigenous community of Palestinian Arabs. The task of progressives is to enable a restructuring of relationships between the two on the basis of shared, fundamental, democratic values. It is this process which is inhibited by any claim that questioning Zionism is an attack on Jewish people.

The question that we have to ask, then, is why ideologues like LFI keep misrepresenting activists who, like the late Jo Cox, defend the struggle for Palestinian rights and support the right to boycott Israeli and other companies involved in the Occupation, as if it is only *their* views that are illegitimate?

What you will not find on the LFI website

From an examination of its website and its literature, LFI has nothing whatsoever to say about, among other things:

- the history of Israel or its governing ideology, Zionism, or [Palestinian perspectives](#)⁴³ on that history, including [the Naqba](#)⁴⁴: the forced expulsion of two thirds of the Palestinian population in 1948, Israel's refusal to recognise and respect the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, the destruction of hundreds of [Palestinian villages](#)⁴⁵ after 1948.
- the experience of Palestinian citizens of Israel since 1948, [their progressive dispossession](#)⁴⁶, the discriminatory systems of land allocation, residential housing construction, education, support to agriculture, municipality finance; the expanding number of [Israeli laws that discriminate](#)⁴⁷ against Palestinian citizens of the State.
- the experience of the Palestinians in the West Bank living under Israeli rule since 1967: the use of settlements, checkpoints and Israeli-only roads [to control everyday life](#)⁴⁸, the discriminatory system of justice: [military courts for the Palestinians](#)⁴⁹, and civilian law for the illegal colonists of the settlements; [the humiliation](#)⁵⁰ and degradation of life through the use of [checkpoints](#)⁵¹ and other coercive measures; the violence of Jewish Israeli [colonists](#)⁵² against civilians

- the movement of [non-violent resistance](#)⁵³ that challenges the theft of agricultural land and the illegal Separation Wall. There are no reviews of the moving [documentaries](#)⁵⁴ that pay tribute to the courage and resilience of West Bank villagers, [in Bilin](#)⁵⁵, [in Nalin](#)⁵⁶ and [Nabi Saleh](#)⁵⁷ in the face of overwhelming odds. Nor of their support by [progressive Israelis](#)⁵⁸.
- the fact that Israel has carried out [nearly 50,000 house demolitions](#)⁵⁹ since 1967.
- the [detention and maltreatment of children](#)⁶⁰, and the organisations that face a wall of silence in the West in their efforts to bring the world's attention to the abuse of these children: [Defence of the Child International](#)⁶¹, and [Military Court Watch](#)⁶². The way this [brutalizes young Israeli men](#)⁶³ and women while [traumatizing their young victims](#)⁶⁴.
- -the [use of torture](#)⁶⁵ in Israeli prisons, the use of [imprisonment without trial](#)⁶⁶ of Palestinian activists over long periods of time.
- the crimes committed against the people of Gaza including the three devastating attacks in 2008/9, 2012, and 2014, and their impact on the physical and mental health of the survivors. (In fact there is no mention of Gaza!)
- the names of any Jewish Israeli dissidents: [Avraham Burg](#)⁶⁷, [Yitzhak Laor](#)⁶⁸, [Jeff Halper](#)⁶⁹, [Yehuda Shaul](#), [Ruchama Marton](#)⁷⁰, [Shlomo Sand](#)⁷¹, and of the courageous Israeli journalists who - in the face of public acrimony - insist on telling the Israeli people what is being done in their name in the occupied territories and inside Israel itself: [Amira Hass](#)⁷², [Gideon Levy](#)⁷³ and [David Sheen](#)⁷⁴.
- the existence, let alone the documented findings, of Israeli human rights organisations [like B'tselem](#)⁷⁵, [Physicians for Human Rights-Israel](#)⁷⁶, the [Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions](#)⁷⁷, [Breaking the Silence](#)⁷⁸, or [Zochrot \('Remembering'\)](#)⁷⁹. The only voluntary organisation critical of Israeli policies mentioned is the [Parents Circle - Families Forum](#)⁸⁰ (but not their criticisms)
- the increasingly intense official pressure and [legislative restrictions](#)⁸¹ by the Israeli government on Israeli and Palestinian human rights workers. - the intensified [racism](#)⁸² evident and officially tolerated in Jewish Israeli society, the inflammatory remarks by [Israeli ministers](#)⁸³, generals and rabbis, encouraging the illegal killing of Palestinians; the fears of many that Israel is displaying increasing signs of degenerating into an openly [fascist society](#)⁸⁴, the growing attention that academics are paying to the question whether we are witnessing a [genocidal process](#)⁸⁵ in Israel/Palestine.
- Israel's systematic infringements of international law, the Geneva Convention in particular. There is no indication of an expectation that international law ought to form the basis of Israel's policies or of the West's expectations of Israel.
- the fact that the PLO were induced by the promise of a Palestinian State to accept the loss of 78% of historic Palestine at Oslo, and that since then Israel has embarked on a policy of 'creeping annexation' of the remainder. Nowhere is any criticism voiced of [the policies of 'judaization'](#)⁸⁶ that have involved the ethnic

cleansing of Arabs from areas coveted by settlers and the Israeli Government, and the plundering of their resources.

- the reasons why young Palestinians might resort to hopeless acts of violence against Israeli soldiers and sometimes civilians. The absence of any empathic interest in why people resist allows LFI to idealise Israel and to demonise such acts as 'terrorism'. Nor the scandalous '[shoot to kill](#)'⁸⁷ policies pursued by the IDF and [encouraged by politicians](#)⁸⁸ and other senior figures in Israeli society.

Conclusion: what kind of group is Labour Friends of Israel?

It is said that those working for Palestinian rights 'single out' Israel. This is another basis for the claim they - we - are anti-Semitic. Weirdly, for progressives, this is used as a shield protecting an obvious process of settler colonialism. The British in particular have a long history of perpetrating very similar crimes on indigenous peoples around the world: all of them violent and destructive. All settler colonial societies live in fear, all demonize their victims and all rationalize their aggression. And in the centenary year of the Balfour Declaration ([celebrated by Zionists](#)⁸⁹, [mourned in Palestine](#)⁹⁰), we need to recognise our particular responsibility for what is happening there.

The damage inflicted by the attempt to implement the Zionist programme has extended far beyond the people who have to be ethnically cleansed in the process. The harm has penetrated our own political culture, much more deeply than the Establishment's support for racism in South Africa back in the 1970s and 80s. To counter the boycott movement then, the Right proposed 'constructive engagement' (or 'let's carry on profiteering from Apartheid') as a more effective means of undermining the racist system in the long run. Very few, however, openly defended Apartheid. But in the case of Zionism, the ideology itself cannot be criticised. We can acknowledge that Palestinians have no rights, but not describe the reasons why. So political discourse is directly de-valued, language distorted and ideals drained of their meaning.

Groups like LFI play a leading part in the disinformation campaign, taking the side of an oppressive and racist regime, working to exclude from public discussion the ideological foundations of the dispossession and subjugation of another people.

Israel has created an Apartheid system across Palestine. By this we do not mean a replica of the racist structures that held sway in South Africa, but a system that meets the criteria for the crime of Apartheid laid down by the United Nations. The only criteria that is not met is 'the exploitation of labour'. This is not a happy exclusion, however. It merely points towards the different goals of the two forms of apartheid. South African Apartheid was designed to permanently entrench the privileges of a white minority, dependent on the super-exploitation of the black majority. Israeli Apartheid is designed to facilitate the removal of an indigenous people. Alongside the UN [Convention on Apartheid](#)⁹¹ we need to look at the UN [Convention on the Crime of Genocide](#)⁹². We need

to ask ourselves to what extent the situation in Israel/Palestine meets the definition of genocide. It is to prevent us from exploring these essential questions that organisations like Labour Friends of Israel have been formed.

LFI is, then, accurately characterised as a front organisation: it is not about being 'friends' of Israel, or of all Israeli citizens, far less all those who live and will continue to live under Israeli rule. It is friends to Israel's right wing regime. It is a front organisation of fellow travellers. In the 1930s Stalinist fellow travellers were marginalised and ridiculed by the mainstream. Unfortunately the fellow travellers of today are the establishment mainstream. But, since their views are not supported by the majority of British citizens, they use their power to promote the kind of witch hunts that are reminiscent of McCarthyite America.

If we want to contribute to a just and peaceful future for Israel/Palestine, where progressive values are just as applicable as they are in the rest of the world, then we need to challenge LFI. Instead of aiding and abetting the loud silence of Western governments and the Western media in the face of a racist ideology, an apartheid system, and possibly a genocidal process, we need [to link up with activists in Israel/Palestine and around the world](#)⁹³, of every background, on the basis of a commitment to democracy and anti-racism. We need to oppose settler colonialism in Palestine, as we would oppose it anywhere else in the world. We need to explore the basis for a new relationship between the national communities living in Israel/Palestine, enabling them to discover a future in which all enjoy the same rights and privileges, the same sense of security and freedom from fear.

¹ <https://bdsmovement.net/what-is-bds>

² <http://www.aljazeera.com/investigations/thelobby/>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qm0Qa-S3rbk&feature=youtu.be&spfreload=1>

⁴ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/peter-oborne-james-jones/pro-israel-lobby-in-britain-full-text>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/feb/17/labour-condemns-antisemitism-oxford-university-labour-club-claims>

⁶ <http://www.mintpressnews.com/noam-chomsky-israeli-apartheid-much-worse-than-south-africa/208936/>

⁷ <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/israel-far-worse-apartheid-south-africa-says-anc-chair-pretoria-conference-backs>

⁸ https://www.democracynow.org/2015/5/6/ex_un_official_john_dugard_israel

⁹ <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-s-apartheid-is-worse-than-south-africa-s-1.4590>

¹⁰ <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201015/volume-1015-I-14861-English.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.lfi.org.uk/deputy-leader-tom-watson-mps-speech-to-lfi-annual-lunch-2016/>

¹² <http://www.lfi.org.uk/mps-%EF%AC%82ock-to-support-labour-israel-group/>

¹³ <http://forward.com/opinion/337349/how-long-can-distinction-between-anti-zionism-and-anti-semitism-survive/>

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/dec/12/antisemitism-definition-government-combat-hate-crime-jews-israel>

¹⁵ <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-impacts-of-lasting-occupation-9780199862184?cc=gb&lang=en&>

¹⁶ <http://www.lfi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/making-the-progressive-case-for-israel-an-lfi-book.pdf>

¹⁷ <http://www.lfi.org.uk/about/>

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7fLKnuUpEw>

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/22/israels-new-deputy-foreign-minister-this-land-is-ours-all-of-it-is-ours>

²⁰ <https://ijv.org.uk/2015/02/13/ijv-announces-equal-rights-for-all-a-new-path-for-israel-palestine-2-day-international-conference/>

²¹ http://www.lfpme.org/userfiles/files/LFPME_Brochure_FINAL2.pdf

²² <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/save-israeli-apartheid-says-new-york-times-ad>

²³ <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/10/13/economic-boycott-israeli-settlements/>

²⁴ <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/11/10/on-the-boycott-of-israeli-settlements/>

²⁵ <http://www.lfi.org.uk/campaigns/>

²⁶ <http://www.lfi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Campaign-Pack.pdf>

²⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/08/netanyahu-breaking-the-silence-israel-theresa-may>

²⁸ <http://www.ngo-monitor.org/reports/eu-funding-ngos-active-anti-israel-bds-campaigns/>

²⁹ <http://www.newisraelfund.org.uk/about-us/>

³⁰ <http://www.newisraelfund.org.uk/about-us/faq/>

³¹ <http://www.newisraelfund.org.uk/about-us/faq/>

³² <http://www.newisraelfund.org.uk/issue/achievements-amid-wave-of-anti-democratic-legislation/>

³³ <http://www.btselem.org/>

³⁴ <http://www.bsst.org.uk/>

³⁵ <http://www.lfi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/making-the-progressive-case-for-israel-an-lfi-book.pdf>

³⁶ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/iw/sites/almonitor/contents/articles/originals/2016/05/israel-military-courts-complaints-human-rights-violations.html>

³⁷ http://www.salon.com/2016/04/18/u_s_acknowledges_israels_unlawful_killings_excessive_force_torture_discrimination_against_palestinians/

³⁸ <http://pchgaza.org/en/?p=8645>

³⁹ <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/israel-dismisses-1000-complaints-torture>

⁴⁰ http://www.btselem.org/publications/summaries/201612_expel_and_exploit

⁴¹ <http://freespeechonisrael.org.uk/>

⁴² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qm0Qa-S3rbk&feature=youtu.be&spfreload=1>

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⁴⁴ <https://www.palestinecampaign.org/article-ben-white-nakba-1948-today/>

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⁴⁶ https://occupiedpalestine.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/israel-palestine_map_19225_2469.jpg

⁴⁷ <https://www.adalah.org/en/law/index>

⁴⁸ <http://icahduk.org/get-the-facts/matrix-control/>

⁴⁹ <https://www.thelawfilm.com/eng#!the-film>

⁵⁰ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20160630-humiliation-the-hammer-crushing-palestinian-society/>

⁵¹ <https://machsomwatch.org/en>

⁵² <http://observers.france24.com/en/20160201-israeli-settlers-hebron-violence-west-bank>

⁵³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_Tz7KFMiTA

⁵⁴ <https://www.palestinecampaign.org/films/films-about-palestine/>

⁵⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkoAfdKH9fw>

⁵⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szsCkmifX8g>

⁵⁷ <https://nabisalehsolidarity.wordpress.com/>

⁵⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1WuzZ09ANY>

⁵⁹ <http://icahduk.org/>

⁶⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmkQ8w8MF4g>

⁶¹ <http://www.dci-palestine.org/>

⁶² <http://www.militarycourtwatch.org/>

⁶³ <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.765005>

⁶⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2f5tPd3NtF0>

⁶⁵ <http://stoptorture.org.il/?lang=en>

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⁶⁷ <http://www.ifamericansknew.org/history/rel-burg.html>

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- ⁶⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pur66KXJ0X8>
- ⁷⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZC_BzB1iCA
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- ⁷³ <http://www.haaretz.com/misc/writers/gideon-levy-1.402>
- ⁷⁴ <http://www.davidsheen.com/>
- ⁷⁵ <http://www.btselem.org/>
- ⁷⁶ <http://www.phr.org.il/en/>
- ⁷⁷ <http://icahduk.org/>
- ⁷⁸ <http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/>
- ⁷⁹ <http://www.zochrot.org/>
- ⁸⁰ <http://www.theparentscircle.com/>
- ⁸¹ <http://peacenow.org.il/en/israel-passes-law-targeting-civil-society-organizations>
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- ⁸³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JypHkx4KHmM>
- ⁸⁴ <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.736660>
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- ⁸⁷ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-shoot-to-kill-policy-palestinian-suspects-human-rights-watch-idf-soldiers-west-bank-gaza-a7505486.html>
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- ⁸⁹ <http://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/balfour-declaration-centenary-celebration-plans-unveiled/>
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- ⁹² <http://www.preventgenocide.org/law/convention/text.htm>
- ⁹³ http://www.eccpalestine.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Campaign_statement_endorsers2.pdf

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