To Our Allies: Please Don’t Call for the Destruction of the State of Israel

Recently, some members of the Black Lives Matter movement have taken up the decade-old cry that Zionism=Racism. Working on theories of intersectional racism, these activists equate white supremacy and white racism against blacks in the United States with Jewish oppression of Palestinians in Israel.

This essay is addressed to these activists as well as to Jews who call ourselves “progressive.”

Let’s set the table first. The claim of Israeli racism is largely justified.

1. The State of Israel is oppressing Palestinians in the West Bank, in Gaza, and within the 1968 borders of Israel itself.

* Palestinians in Gaza are essentially imprisoned in a small, inhospitable territory with no way to make a living, no educational opportunities, and no clear future. On a regular basis, they are bombarded with missiles from Israel, resulting in the not-unfrequent death or injury of loved ones and creating an environment of permanent trauma and stress. They also live with the governance of their territory by Hamas, a militant group that does not allow for internal dissension.
* Palestinians in the West Bank are denied the ability to travel freely, live in fear that their homes will be taken away, and face constant harassment and surveillance by Israeli settlers and police that is significantly worse than that faced by Blacks in the United States.
* Palestinians in the Israeli state face job discrimination and harassment by the police.

1. Recent comments by Israel’s Prime Minister and by several Israeli Cabinet ministers have been racist. Period. The fact that new elections were not called immediately after these comments were aired makes the majority of Israelis complicit in this racism.
2. Palestinian refugees should have the right to return to their homes. Jews want this right. Why should it be denied to the Palestinians? To do so is, again, racist.

Are Israeli Jews thus in the same position as white supremacists or racists in the United States? No.

1. While the State of Israel was colonized and settled largely by Jews fleeing Nazism in Europe and pogroms in Russia, Jews also already lived in the land of Palestine. Since Jews migrated to the Mediterranean coast in approximately 800 BC, there have always been communities of Jews living on that land. So the situation is not parallel to, say, the colonization of the United States by the British, or the colonization of Mexico by the Spanish.
2. Outside of Israel, Jews are an often-persecuted minority. We don’t have to look back to the 1940s to find instances of anti-Semitism. They exist today in France, the United States, Argentina, and elsewhere. Again, unlike whites in America who do not face violence **because they are white,** Jews do face violence **because they are Jews.**

Jews are both persecuted and persecutors, a stigmatized minority and a racist majority.

It is this paradoxical identity that makes the situation in Israel so difficult for progressive Jews in Israel, the United States, and around the world to untangle.

Because Israel claims to be—and is through its immigration policies-- a state for all Jews, Jews cannot stay silent about the racism we observe in Israel. We must demand the right of return for Palestinian refugees. We must demand the end to racist speech and practices within the 1968 borders of Israel. We must demand the end to Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and the right of Palestinians to move freely between the West Bank and Gaza.

We must be willing to back up these demands with actions. That is why so many progressive Jews now support the boycott, divestment and sanction movement. Jews in the United States have a particular responsibility to pressure the U.S. government to stop funding Israeli companies that promote settlements in the West Bank, and Israeli personnel and weapons used to control populations in the West Bank and Gaza.