

Another View



Herbert C.
Kelman

Where is the line crossed?

This week, Herbert C. Kelman writes that criticism of Zionism is not necessarily anti-Semitic.

The current debate on the Palestinian issue and Israeli actions in the occupied territories is marred by two dangerous manifestations: on the one hand, the use of otherwise legitimate criticisms of Israeli policies and practices as an excuse for guilt-free expressions of anti-Semitism, which helps to re-legitimize anti-Semitism under the guise of political criticism; on the other hand, the tactic of labeling all

criticisms of Israeli policies and practices as anti-Semitic, which attempts to delegitimize such criticism and cut off debate.

By what criteria, then, can we determine whether criticisms of Israel can be described as anti-Semitic? Though the line may be hard to draw, criticisms become anti-Semitic when they are directed at "the Jews" rather than at Israeli policies and practices. The charge of anti-Semitism is particularly appropriate when references to the Jews and criticisms of Israel (or indeed, of U.S. Middle East policy) evoke the stereotypes of the Jew.

One example of a traditional stereotype with a distinctly anti-Semitic odor is the attribution of vast power to Jews, as in the claim that Jews control U.S. foreign policy or that U.S. policy in the Middle East is an extension of Israeli policy. U.S. policy, of course, is made by Bush, Cheney, and other top officials who are far more beholden to and influenced by other interest groups, ranging from the oil industry to the Christian right, than by the Jewish neoconservatives in their employ or, for that matter, the Israel lobby or the Jewish vote.

However, other indicators often used to designate criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic are inappropriate, such as the charge that Israel is being singled out for criticism, while more serious or pervasive violations of human rights in other parts of the world are being ignored. People may take action in one particular case rather than another for a variety of reasons, including a special interest in a particular area of the world and identi-

fication with its population, or the availability of an opportunity for effective action. We cannot automatically assume that the reason for singling out Israel for criticism or protest is anti-Semitism.

Similarly, criticisms of Zionism – as an ideology and as a historical project – are not necessarily anti-Semitic. Certain attacks on Zionism, however, such as the equation of Zionism with racism, do cross the line of legitimacy in my view. I can agree that some versions of Zionism may properly be called racist; that the way in which the Zionist project has fulfilled itself has had, arguably, some racist consequences; and that some of the practices of Israel can legitimately be described as "racist." But Zionism as such is Jewish nationalism – the national liberation movement of the Jewish people. To be sure, all forms of nationalism have a racist potential. But to single out the Jewish national movement as inherently racist strikes me as illegitimate and, indeed, racist in itself.

The efforts to delegitimize the other – whether by calling Israel and Zionism racist and invoking classical anti-Semitic stereotypes, or by calling critics of Israel anti-Semites (or self-hating Jews) and invoking the stereotypes of Palestinian terrorism – only deepen the conflict. The road to peace requires acknowledgment of the other's legitimacy and concerns.

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