



PERSPECTIVES

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The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism and Its Jewish Supporters

by Evyatar Friesel

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Jerusalem Declaration is a political hit piece targeting the Jewish State and should be recognized as such. Even if we accept the claim of its authors that the intention of the Declaration is to “clarify” what antisemitism means, we should take note of the deviousness of the disguises used by modern-day antisemites. Many Jews and Israelis are among the Declaration’s signatories, pointing toward a growing ideological chasm between sectors of present-day Jewry.

The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism is the latest expression of a continuing wave of criticism of Israel by academics, many of them Jewish, that resurfaces in different guises every couple of months.

The new version is a clever piece of public relations. It uses the word “Jerusalem,” though the city has nothing to do with the issue at hand. The Declaration presents itself as an alternative to the well-established IHRA Definition of Antisemitism, which it alleges is “neither clear nor coherent” and “blurs the difference between antisemitic speech and legitimate criticism of Israel and Zionism.”

If that is in fact the Declaration’s aim, then it is superfluous. It has been stated again and again that critique of Israel or its policies is one thing and Israel-related Jew-hatred another, and it is easy to distinguish them. The Declaration and similar expressions are driven by a different ideological bent.

The Declaration is striking for its large number of Jewish signatories. This points to an ideological confrontation raging in contemporary Jewry about the Jewish State and the place of Israel in Jewish life.

With regard to antisemitism, while the Declaration makes points that are similar to those found or implied in the IHRA formulation, it contains a worrying addition that does not square with scholarly research. The study of antisemitism defines Jew-hatred not as a prejudice but as a doctrine—one that is deeply imbued in Western culture and that has a history of its own. The Declaration says the opposite: that in the name of liberal principles, the fight against antisemitism should be viewed as “inseparable from the overall fight against all forms of racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and gender discrimination.”

According to the Declaration, Jew-hatred has become domesticated. It is no longer a frightening beast capable of slaughtering millions of Jews. It has ceased to be a chameleon-like phenomenon that over the centuries adapted to changing social and ideological trends and is today directed against the most vital expression of Jewish life, Israel. According to the Declaration, antisemitism is only a preconception, like racism or xenophobia, that liberal societies know how to cope with. This kind of thinking is “antisemitism-lite.”

The Declaration’s target is Israel, and it is fundamentally biased. A *sine qua non* of any document that addresses a conflict between two groups is that the claims and actions of both sides be considered. In the Declaration, one hears only what Israelis are supposed to do or not do. About the intentions of the Arabs, which are often genocidal, there is not one word. Implicitly, there is no conflict: Israel is the aggressor and the Palestinians are the victims. The Declaration and its signatories, including the Jews among them, therefore support the Arab/Palestinian narrative. The Israeli narrative about the Jewish presence in the Land and the conflict with the Palestinians is ignored.

This approach is seen in, for instance, guideline 14 of the Declaration: “Boycott, divestment and sanctions are commonplace, non-violent forms of political protest against states. In the Israeli case they are not, in and of themselves, antisemitic.” Of course not. But the founding charter of the BDS organization, issued in July 2005, listed among its aims: “1. Ending [Israel’s] occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall... 3. Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194.” Setting aside the question of whether the dismantling of the Jewish state (euphemized as the Palestinian “right of return”) is antisemitic, the query arises: shouldn’t the writers and supporters of the Declaration, with their impressive titles and positions, be expected to read what they sign and consider the significance of their words?

The extent of Jewish participation in the Jerusalem Declaration is disturbing. Many of the roughly 200 signatories are Jews, some of them Israeli. They illustrate the widening rift in present-day Jewry between supporters and critics

of the Jewish State, from its traits to its foundations. Dozens of books, articles, and statements by Jewish and Israeli academics who are critical of Israel and Zionism have appeared in recent years. Their participation in the Jerusalem Declaration continues what is now an established pattern.

The clash between diverse sectors of contemporary Jewry has some bizarre aspects. Jewish critics of Israel express their opinions in highly emotional terms, but their views find scarcely an echo in Israel. The reaction of most Israelis is to ignore them, and experience suggests they will do the same regarding the Jerusalem Declaration. The standard (and insufficient) Israeli reply to Jewish antisemitism is: "Unhappy in the Diaspora? Come to Israel. That's why we have a Jewish State." Too many in Israel underrate the fervor of Jewish anti-Israelism and its international influence.

Why is this? Are Israelis ideologically inert? Not at all: the population of Israel is much more ideologically active than the populations of most other countries. Israeli society has unique tendencies and its own cultural and ideological setup. Israeli public opinion is moving ideologically rightward and is rather Israel-centered, while Jewish supporters of the Declaration belong to the center and center-left camp and support a broader cosmopolitan approach. One may like or dislike that drift in Israeli public life but there are clear reasons why it is occurring, and it is happening in an open and democratic political environment.

The Israeli Right is nationalistic and very much affected by the decades-long Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It has been disappointed by Palestinian rejection of Israeli efforts to find a solution to the conflict, and is naturally affected by the persistent terror attacks and threats of violence coming from the Arab side. This movement toward the political right is supported by the large religious camp. Unlike other developed countries, Israel has a growing religious-Orthodox population. Both sectors, the nationalists and the religious, are ideologically dynamic. About four parties in the Knesset are declared to be or are implicitly religious, meaning Orthodox.

On the other side, the Israeli Left is ideologically asleep. The religious-Reform movement, whose supporters are mostly center or center-left, have never shown either the interest or the will to uphold their views by political or any other means. The Israeli Labor Party, the political force that was behind the creation of the Jewish State, is now a shadow of its former self and barely manages to enter the Knesset.

The political/ideological situation does not entirely explain the acrimony and obsessiveness of Jewish critics of Israel. After all, these are educated people, mostly enlightened in their public views and moderate in their utterances—except when the subject is Israel or Zionism. Some, like the director of the

Jewish Museum in Austria (*Tachless*, March 2021), see the Jewish state as a threat: "...should we, as Jews, allow that our Jewishness be prescribed to us by Israel, by a state?" An Israeli professor and signer of the Declaration suggested that the Germans step in to help Israel correct its many shortcomings (*Die Zeit*, 2018). A German-Jewish professor, also a signer, once described the call for Jewish immigration to Israel an expression of a collective death wish, considering the many dangers to which the Jewish State is exposed (*Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, 4/2015). A much touted idea these days is that Israelis and Palestinians should form one common state. Coming from the Arab camp, the underlying calculation (which includes the return of the so-called refugees) is clear. But coming from Jews? Don't they know what happened to Yugoslavia in a comparable setup?

The varying cultural profiles of these Jewish critics suggest different explanations, but in general they fit into a concept coined by Isaac Deutscher in the 1960s, the "non-Jewish Jew": cosmopolitan, secular, anti-nationalistic, and very much integrated into their non-Jewish environments and their spiritual currents. Torn between their Gentile attachments and Jewish roots, many such people slide toward the ideological propensities of the non-Jewish side.

The Israeli academics among Israel's critics largely belong to that group, though they have characteristics of their own. A feeling of helplessness regarding ideological trends in Israel, the dominance of right-wing politics, and the growing assertiveness of right-wing extremists in the Jewish State have all embittered these critics to the point that they ignore the dangers inherent in Israel-related antisemitism. Jewish critics of Israel and Zionism, including the Jewish and Israeli signers of the Jerusalem Declaration, allow themselves to fall into dubious political alignments.

The Jerusalem Declaration is a poorly written and intellectually shallow document. It is a political hit piece targeting the Jewish State and should be recognized as such. Even if we accept the claim of its authors that the intention of the Declaration is to "clarify" what antisemitism means, we should reflect on the deviousness of the disguises used by modern-day antisemites.

Jewish critics of Israel, who tend to be intelligent and are not easily deluded, should consider what they are supporting and with whom they are collaborating in the Jerusalem Declaration. They may cherish what they perceive as their influence in Western public opinion, but they are being used in a wide-ranging campaign to delegitimize the Jewish State. In many cases they are willing pawns in an environment where antisemitic trends, declared or unconscious, continue to exist and to impose themselves.

Evyatar Friesel is professor emeritus of Modern Jewish History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. evyatar.friesel@mail.huji.ac.il