

# Jewish Voice for Peace

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## INTRODUCTION

Jewish Voice for Peace is a radical anti-Israel activist group that advocates for a complete economic, cultural and academic boycott of the state of Israel. JVP rejects the view that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a tragic dispute over land which has been perpetuated by a cycle of violence, fear, and distrust on both sides, in favor of the belief that Israeli policies and actions are motivated by deeply rooted Jewish racial chauvinism and religious supremacism.

JVP considers supporters of Israel, or even critics of Israel who do not hew to JVP's own extreme views, to be complicit in Israel's purported acts of racist oppression of Palestinians. JVP leaders believe that expressing support for Israel, or not challenging mainstream Jewish organizations that support Israel, must also be viewed as an implicit attack on people of color and all marginalized groups in the United States. JVP's energetic proselytizing of this view – especially among other social justice groups -- has created a hostile environment for many progressive Jews. In a sense, JVP is extending its boycott agenda to include not just Israel but its American supporters as well.

More troubling, JVP's dissemination of the view that Israel and its U.S. supporters are fundamentally racist oppressors of non-Jews has the effect of perpetuating the classic anti-Jewish stereotype of Jews as self-centered elitists, disdainful of non-Jews, who are focused on their own interests, sometimes at others' expense. Additionally, JVP's ongoing insistence that virtually all criticism of Israel cannot be anti-Semitic gives cover to anti-Semites who couch their malice toward Jews as mere anti-Zionism.

Many of JVP's Jewish activists say they are motivated by the age-old Jewish ideals of supporting the oppressed and making the world a better place. In the vast majority of cases, there is no reason to doubt their sincerity. But their fixation on what they consider Israel's uniquely evil role in the contemporary world leaves them blinded to the damage they wreak on efforts to enhance intergroup relations, both in Israel/Palestine and in the United States. Their ideologically inflexible view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict leaves them unable to recognize the legitimate concerns of both parties, which can only make peace harder to attain.

JVP often links Israel to prominent social justice issues in the U.S. -- like police brutality -- in an attempt to implicate Israel in violations or offenses committed here. For example, after the alt-right rally in Charlottesville in August 2017, JVP called Zionism akin to white supremacy and compared Richard Spencer's white nationalism to Jewish nationalism. JVP's so-called "Deadly Exchange" campaign seeks to blame Israel for police brutality on American streets. This strategy has allowed JVP to establish common ground with activist groups dealing with American social justice issues, while also demonizing Israel among new constituencies. But it has also distracted from advancing progress on underlying and important civil rights issues, such as police-community relations in the U.S.

All of these themes will be explored in greater detail in the following chapters of this report.

## **BACKGROUND**

Jewish Voice for Peace was founded in 1996 in the San Francisco Bay area [\[link\]](#) and is led by Executive Director Rebecca Vilkomerson. As of May 2018, its website lists a staff of 26 working for 50 chapters across the country. It also maintains four subgroups that focus on specific issues, including an “Artists and Cultural Workers Council,” an “Academic Advisory Council,” a “Rabbinical Council,” and a “Health Advisory Council.” JVP also runs a “Network Against Islamophobia” [\[link\]](#). In 2016 it had a budget of \$2.7 million [\[link\]](#).

## **POSITIONS ON BDS**

JVP’s position on BDS has grown more radical over time. In 2001, JVP called for the suspension of U.S. military aid to Israel, and a recalibration of economic aid “based on actual need and subjected to normal congressional supervision.” [\[link\]](#)

Three years later, JVP stated that it supported “selective divestment from companies that profit from Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem,” as well as from companies in the United States which “profit from the wholesale destruction of Palestinian homes and orchards.” [\[link\]](#) In 2005, JVP issued a “Statement on Selective Divestment” stating that while Israel “deserves sanctions” for its continued occupation of Palestinian land, JVP, citing strategic reasons, was not ready to call for general divestment from Israel or a broader boycott of all Israeli companies. The group also rejected an academic boycott of Israel, and called instead for “inviting pro-justice Israeli academics.” [\[link\]](#)

JVP issued a statement in September 2010 in support of a group of Israeli actors, directors, and playwrights who refused to perform in the West Bank settlement of Ariel. [\[link\]](#) In 2015, it adopted a complete BDS agenda that focused on all of Israel rather than just those aspects of Israeli society connected with the settlements. [\[link\]](#)

## **INCREASINGLY ONE-SIDED POSITIONS ON THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT**

In 2007, JVP said that it would “welcome even-handed pressure on both sides that pushes for honest negotiations.” [\[link\]](#) By 2014, however, JVP had adopted a different approach, writing that negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians are impossible as long as a power imbalance exists between the two parties. [\[link\]](#) JVP believes that BDS is required to undermine Israel’s position prior to any negotiations.

JVP’s website defends the group’s one-sided approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: “We know there has been horrific Palestinian violence against Israelis,” states one article from 2016. “But that can happen when a country’s “inception” (a much nicer term than ‘mass ethnic cleansing’) results in the displacement and death of thousands....Yes, we do tend to be ‘one sided’ in our views on exploitative colonialist initiatives. Terribly shortsighted of us.” [\[link\]](#)

JVP also posted a January 2018 speech by Anna Baltzer, a JVP member and Director of Organizing and Advocacy for the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian rights, entitled “The Danger of Neutrality.” “Yes, Palestinians have been killed, but so have Israelis,” Baltzer says. “It’s complicated, we’re told. Shouldn’t we be a moderating force to bring both sides together rather than being one-sided?” The answer, apparently, is no. “Look at who has power, and who doesn’t. And side with those who don’t, those who are seeking the rights that others take for granted.” The speaker calls on listeners to “reject Zionism.”[\[link\]](#)

JVP is also dismissive of Israeli fears of terrorism perpetrated by Palestinians, and comes dangerously close to excusing Palestinian violence against Israelis. In a 2016 “conversation guide” to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, JVP states that although it opposes “all violence against civilians,” the real threat of terrorism does not justify Israeli policies: “The uprising happening in Palestine today is the inevitable result of decades of occupation, dispossession and state violence. The right to resist colonization is enshrined in international law, this resistance will only end when the Israeli government stops brutally oppressing Palestinians...” [\[link\]](#) JVP’s one-sided approach, which ignores Israel’s own anxiety over the

threat of terrorism, does nothing to disrupt the cycle of fear and distrust from both sides which drives much of the conflict.

JVP also celebrates figures who have been convicted of engaging in terrorism, including Palestinian activists Rasmia Odeh and Marwan Barghouti.

Odeh was sentenced to life in prison by an Israeli military court in 1970 for her membership in an illegal terrorist organization and for planting the explosives used in two 1969 Jerusalem bombings. She pleaded guilty to knowingly making false statements about that history in her U.S. immigration and naturalization applications in April 2017, shortly after JVP feted her at its 2017 conference, calling her “a feminist leader... [who has] survived decades of Israeli and U.S. government persecution and oppression.”

On June 2, 2017, JVP ran a paid advertisement in the Jewish newspaper *The Forward*, featuring an extended quote from Barghouti alleging that Israel has purposely inflicted suffering on Palestinians who are incarcerated in Israeli prisons. JVP misidentified Barghouti as the leader of a Palestinian prisoner hunger strike, omitting the fact that he is a terrorist convicted of murdering five Israelis.

## **DEMONIZING ZIONISM AND AMERICAN JEWS**

Although early JVP statements allowed for a range of opinion on Zionism, more recently JVP has taken the position that Zionism is a fundamentally racist movement. “Settler colonialism and white supremacy is the right, holistic frame with which to understand Israel and Palestine,” said JVP Deputy Director Cecile Surasky in 2015. [\[link\]](#) In January 2016, JVP convened an online panel entitled “The Toxic Stew: Zionism, Antisemitism, and White Supremacy.” One of the speakers stated that Zionism “means white supremacy, it means apartheid, it means genocide and ethnic cleansing.” Another speaker made the shocking claim that there is a “real and conceptual connection between Zionism and American white supremacy and Jim Crow white supremacy.” To support that last contention,

the speaker said that “Israel has maintained this state of affairs through heavy military force that has been funded through massive fiscal support from the United States. And from my point of view, that’s money that might otherwise have gone to ending structural American Jim Crow. So from my point of view, there is a direct theft from communities of color, including but not only Native Americans and first nations peoples.” [\[link\]](#)

One member of JVP’s leadership has gone further and entertained the notion that Judaism itself encourages racism and genocide. In a 2015 speech at Portland State University, Surasky stated that the traditional Jewish doctrine that Jews must be a “light unto the nations” is “predicated on a system of racial and ethnic superiority,” and should be interpreted as a divine justification for “ethnic cleansing, even genocide.” [\[link\]](#)

According to a Pew research report from 2017, a majority of American Jews state that they are “attached to Israel and that caring about Israel is either ‘essential’ or ‘important’ to what being Jewish means to them.” [\[link\]](#) JVP’s rhetorical drumbeat promoting the view that Zionism and supporting Israel is of a piece with white supremacy, racism, ethnic cleansing and genocide, has the effect of demonizing this constituency of U.S. Jews.

One area where this is explicit is in JVP’s smearing of liberal American Jews and American Jewish organizations as Islamophobic. In 2015, documents posted by JVP’s “Network Against Islamophobia” claimed that “Israel’s leaders and its supporters” have “seen Muslims as ‘the enemy’” since the 1980s, and described a “money-Islamophobia-Israel network--bound by ideology, money, and overlapping institutional affiliations--[which] furthers a rabidly anti-Muslim climate in this country and helps bolster the state-sponsored Islamophobic and anti-Palestinian policies adopted and promoted by the U.S. government.” JVP’s document condemns as Islamophobic both “supporters and critics of Israel who are not virulently anti-Muslim and anti-Arab” if they do not challenge “the use of anti-Muslim/anti-Arab stereotypes and assumptions to support Israeli policies that

repress Palestinians and demonize Muslims and Arabs.” [\[link\]](#) The materials JVP issued in 2017 for its “Challenging Islamophobia and Racism” workshop series state explicitly that “Pro-Israel advocates play a major role in advancing an Islamophobic narrative that helps deny justice and equal rights to Palestinians” in the United States. [\[link\]](#)

JVP’s rhetoric on Islamophobia tars all supporters of Israel with one brush, and reflects its ideological commitment to demonizing every expression of Zionism. JVP ignores the full range of Zionist identities in the United States, and equates the mildest expressions of support for Israel or celebrations of Israeli culture to the furthest fringes of hardline Zionist expansionism. JVP also distorts the religious beliefs of other Jews whose Judaism includes Zionism and the belief that Jews have a historical and religious connection to the land of Palestine/Israel. JVP consistently opposes the “conflation of Zionism with Judaism,” [\[link\]](#) insists that Zionism is nothing more than “a political ideology,” [\[link\]](#) and states that “anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism.” But Zionism is part of many Jews’ religious identity. JVP’s insinuation that the religious identity of these Jews is somehow deficient, immoral, or racist would be undeniably anti-Semitic if it was expressed by anyone else.

## **JVP ON ANTI-SEMITISM**

Its single-minded devotion to a simplistic narrative of oppression leaves JVP blind to nuance and the need for multiple voices and perspectives in order to make advances in creating a more just society. JVP is particularly challenged when addressing anti-Semitism. It downplays the emotional weight of what Jews experience because “anti-Jewish bigotry is not equivalent to the structural oppression” [\[link\]](#) that other communities of color experience. The group also warns against “equat[ing] anti-Semitic microaggressions with structural inequality.” [\[link\]](#)

JVP's 2016 policy statement on anti-Semitism [\[link\]](#), which it republished in its 2017 book, *On Antisemitism: Solidarity and the Struggle for Justice*, focuses on what it describes as "Christian anti-Semitism" (which it defines as "treat[ing] Judaism as inferior to Christianity" or blaming Jews for the death of Jesus); and "racial anti-Semitism" (which it says is expressed as "treating Jewish people as a monolithic group, stereotyping Jewish people as rich or greedy, or demonizing Jews as all-powerful or as secretly in control of political events"). JVP is intensely suspicious of any allegations of anti-Semitism which do not comport with these rigid definitions.

JVP frequently states that "Definitions of antisemitism that treat criticism of Israel or of Zionism as inherently antisemitic are inaccurate and harmful." [\[link\]](#) This is certainly true. Criticism of Israel or of Zionism is not inherently anti-Semitic. But sometimes it is. More radical expressions of Anti-Zionism can be motivated by anti-Semitism, and can perpetuate anti-Semitic stereotypes. It may also create a climate in which anti-Semitism becomes more acceptable. JVP is unwilling to recognize this.

Evidence of this can be found on JVP's own national Facebook page, which is a hotbed of classic anti-Semitic language and conspiracy theories. Commenters frequently claim that Israelis and Zionists around the world are uniquely evil and depraved, that they have a rapacious and greedy desire for land and other physical assets, that they are contemptuous of non-Jewish people, that they promote wars and conflicts around the world, and that they control the media and world governments. These are classic anti-Semitic claims which have been leveled at Jews since the Middle Ages. The fact that their proximate targets are described as Zionists instead of Jews does not excuse the perpetuation of anti-Semitic stereotypes.

Some recent comments on JVP's Facebook page include:

- Arguing that Israel should be "[wiped from the face of the earth](#)," and that "[we should erase israel \[sic\] from the world map](#)."

- That “the Jews” paid President Trump to withdraw from the Iran deal and that Trump “does his Zionist masters bidding [sic].”
- Israel was responsible for the 9/11 terror attacks.
- Appropriating classic theological anti-Semitism, claims that Israelis are the “synagogue of Satan,” that they are “evil children of Satan,” that Israeli policies are “religion-driven evil,” and that purportedly anti-gentile Jewish religious teachings are the impetus for Israeli policy against Palestinians.
- Israel is “The Monster [which] controls western governments and the media”
- The Israelis are “khazar criminals” and “bloodthirsty Bolsheviks”
- One recent post used the hashtag #holocaustisalie. Others have claimed that “Nazi-Germany was a victim of the Jews,” and that “the Germans in the 1920 were aware of the complete ownership of the media by Jews.. nothing has changed, the Jews still control the media.”
- Zionists have “Rothschild’s sea of money” to enable them to oppress others; that “Zionist Jews” control the federal reserve
- Israel is “parasitic state” which “extort[s] money from western nations,”

The problem of anti-Semitism on JVP’s social media channel should not be dismissed as merely a symptom of lax comment moderation. Although the majority of these anti-Semitic comments do not appear to have been posted by JVP members, it is no coincidence that these comments arise out of anti-Zionist environment that JVP creates. Anti-Zionism is not always anti-Semitism, but JVP’s own Facebook page shows just how easy the crossover can be.

## **JVP BDS CAMPAIGNS**

- 2010: TIAA-CREF and the “We Divest” Campaign: In 2010, JVP initiated a national campaign to pressure the financial services giant TIAA-CREF to divest from companies that are allegedly profiting from the Israeli occupation (Caterpillar, Northrop Grumman, Motorola Solutions, Elbit

Systems, and Veolia). In January 2012, JVP announced that the “We Divest” campaign was being transformed into a coalition comprised of JVP, the U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, Adalah-NY, the U.S. Palestinian Community Network, Grassroots International, and the American Friends Service Committee.

- 2010: TESC Divest!: In 2010, JVP’s Olympia, Washington, chapter helped create TESC Divest!, a student-led group on The Evergreen State College (TESC) campus that focused on pursuing campus divestment from Israel. Following the creation of TESC Divest!, which was co-organized with the campus chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine, the student body passed two referenda urging the university to divest from companies that allegedly profit from the occupation, and prohibited the use of equipment made by Caterpillar on campus. Caterpillar was targeted because a pro-Palestinian American activist was killed when she was run over by a Caterpillar-made bulldozer during a home demolition she was protesting in Gaza in 2003.
- 2010-2013: UC Berkeley Divestment: At the University of California, Berkeley, JVP activists helped lobby in favor of a campus divestment resolution in 2010 and again in 2013, organizing an online petition to gain signatures from UC alumni, faculty, students and staff. After the resolution was passed, the group placed an ad in the campus newspaper urging Berkeley’s Senate President to not veto the resolution. The ad compared Israeli policy to Jim Crow laws in the South in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries.
- 2013: SodaStream Campaign: JVP chapters across the country urged their supporters to boycott SodaStream because one of the company’s four manufacturing plants was in the West Bank (the plant employed hundreds of Palestinian workers). This effort was subsequently taken over by an interfaith coalition of anti-Israel groups. Throughout the year, JVP sponsored rallies outside department stores that carry SodaStream products.
- 2014: The Presbyterian Church: At the June 2014 Presbyterian General Assembly (GA) in Detroit, Michigan, JVP lobbied for a resolution calling on

the Presbyterian Church to divest from three companies that allegedly profit from the Israeli occupation (Caterpillar, Motorola, and Hewlett-Packard). Leading up to the GA, JVP also issued several statements in support of the resolution. JVP sent a delegation of activists to the GA to testify on the floor in favor of divestment, live-tweet the debates and circulate a petition that called on the church to support divestment. When the Church voted 310-303 in favor of divestment, JVP issued a press release applauding the Church for its decision. One of JVP's New York members stated in the press release that, "Voting for divestment is a powerful statement of conscience."

- 2016: JVP pressured AirBNB to not allow homes located in the West Bank to be included in the service's listings. In keeping with its practice of linking anti-Israel activism with progressive political causes in the U. S., JVP used the slogan "Gentrification in the US. Apartheid In Palestine. #stolenhomes." [\[link\]](#)
- 2016: JVP launched a campaign pressuring Oscar nominees to decline free trips to Israel offered by the Israeli government. [\[link\]](#)
- 2017: "Return the Birthright" -- JVP launched a campaign to convince young American Jews to reject a program called "Birthright," which offers free, ten-day trips to Israel. In a manifesto, JVP argued that "the modern state of Israel is predicated on the ongoing erasure of Palestinians," and that the Birthright trips are "paid for by the dispossession of Palestinians." JVP even rejected the notion that young Jews could take the trip but "maintain a critical perspective." This is typical of JVP's ideologically extreme approach to Israel and Zionism.
- 2017: "Deadly Exchange": 2017: For over a year, JVP has run a campaign which blames Israel for police brutality, especially against people of color, on American streets. The campaign targets American Jewish organizations, and especially the Anti-Defamation League, for running seminars and trips which enable American and Israeli police chiefs to explore shared security challenges and discuss best practices for countering terrorism which faces

both of our countries. JVP claims that during these programs, Israeli police encourage their American peers to “bring paramilitary tactics to U.S. policing,” that they “reinforce, circulate, and promote the discriminatory and brutal policing practices,” and that they “exacerbate the existing crisis of racial profiling, mass surveillance, and deadly uses of force in both countries.” [\[link\]](#) and [\[link\]](#) One JVP article goes so far as to state that the American police return from trainings with “new methods of erasure to wipe out indigenous peoples by racist police forces,” and that exchange programs with Israel are an “imminent threat” to Native Americans. “If Israeli security forces are committing human rights violations against Palestinians every day and becoming insensitive to the violence they inflict, what will become of Natives [sic] policed by law enforcement officials learning from Israeli security forces?” [\[link\]](#)

JVP has linked this allegation to specific events in the United States, including to the tragic shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 [\[link\]](#), and to the standoff between U.S. police and Native American protesters at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota in 2016-2017 [\[link\]](#). By presenting itself as an ally to progressive groups already active in those cases, JVP has been able to inject anti-Israel animus into other social justice movements. Although this suits JVP’s broader mission to demonize Israel and its supporters wherever possible, it is questionable whether this tactic actually sheds light on these important social justice issues.

JVP’s so-called “Deadly Exchange” campaign encourages the formation of local affiliates under different organizational names. JVP’s Durham, NC affiliate is known as “Demilitarize! From Durham2Palestine.” [\[link\]](#) The campaign ran an online petition which stated that Israeli law enforcement agencies are responsible for “extrajudicial killing, excessive force, racial profiling, and repression of social justice movements.” It argued that an exchange between Israeli and American law enforcement personnel “helps the police terrorize Black and Brown communities here in the US.” [\[link\]](#) In April 2018, Durham Chief of Police C.J. Davis issued a

memo to the Durham City Council which stated that “there has been no effort while I have served as Chief of Police to initiate or participate in any exchanges to Israel, nor do I have any intention to do so.” The City Council endorsed that memo and stated its opposition to its police participating in “international exchanges with any country in which Durham officers receive military-style training.” [\[link\]](#)