Response To Common Inaccuracy: Israel Critics are Anti-Semites

Inaccuracy: Jews unfairly label anyone who criticizes Israel an anti-Semite.

Response

Certainly the sovereign State of Israel and its government can be legitimately criticized just like any other country or government in the world. Criticism of particular Israeli actions or policies – even harsh and strident criticism and advocacy - in and of itself does not constitute anti-Semitism.

However, it is undeniable that there are those whose criticism of Israel crosses the line into anti-Semitism. It is also undeniable that criticism of Israel is considered socially acceptable, thereby providing a pretext for some whose criticism masks deeper anti-Jewish attitudes.

How can one distinguish between criticism of Israel that is within the bounds of legitimate political discourse, and that which crosses the line into anti-Semitism?

Natan Sharansky, an Israeli leader and former Soviet “refusenik” identifies “3 D's” to determine when anti-Israel criticism crosses over into anti-Semitism: demonization, delegitimization and when Israel is held to a double standard.

One way is to recognize when those who criticize Israel invoke traditional anti-Jewish references, accusations and conspiracy theories. A clear cut example is when Israelis are depicted using Nazi-era Der Stürmer-like stereotypes: i.e.,
hooked noses; bent over, dark, ugly, demonic figures. Or when Israelis are accused of crimes that are reminiscent of age-old anti-Jewish conspiracy theories – i.e. alleged Israeli/Jewish influence over governments and media and public thought; that a Jewish cabal (elders of Zion) is behind Israel's strength or behind foreign policy that is favorable to Israel, or allegations of Israeli actions that are eerily similar to medieval blood libel (the deliberate killing of Palestinian babies by IDF soldiers etc).

Another common theme is when Israelis are compared to Nazis and Hitler. This comparison between the Jewish state and those who perpetrated the greatest and largest act of anti-Semitism in world history is not an impartial or dispassionate accusation. It is a charge that is purposefully directed at Jews in an effort to associate the victims of the Nazi crimes with the Nazi perpetrators, and serves to diminish the significance and uniqueness of the Holocaust. To make such a comparison is an act of blatant hostility toward Jews and Jewish history.

Deeper bias against Israel and Jews may also be evident when Israel is held to a different standard than any other country in the world. Such an example is when critics of Israel question or deny Israel's right to exist. No one questions France or China or Iran's right to exist, simply because there is disagreement with their policies. Why then should it be acceptable for only the Jewish state's legitimacy, or Jewish nationalism to be a subject for discussion? Similarly, questions of motivation arise when Israelis singled out for criticism for actions or policies that nations around the world engage in with impunity.

A more complex manifestation is when critics of Israel advocate policies which would effectively lead to the demise of the Jewish character of the state – such as calls for a "one-state solution" for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or demand the unqualified right of return for all Palestinian refugees. These measures potentially affect all Jews who have a religious, spiritual or nationalist connection to the Jewish homeland and would lead to the end of Israel as a Jewish state. Although
some advocates may not appreciate the destructive consequences of these policies, these policies are anti-Jewish in their impact.

Finally, it should be noted that even if strident anti-Israel activism is not motivated by anti-Semitism, at times, these campaigns create an environment which make anti-Semitism more acceptable. As then President of Harvard Lawrence H. Summers said in 2002 in reaction to an anti-Israel divestment campaign on campus, such advocacy is “anti-Semitic in their effect if not in their intent.”