



## THE UK, THE MIDDLE EAST, AND ISRAEL: A SYMPOSIUM

By Jonathan Spyer\*

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### INTRODUCTION

In this symposium, several experts report and analyze attitudes within the United Kingdom's civil society regarding the Middle East and Arab-Israeli conflict.

One of the most widely noted developments has been the rise there of grassroots activism and intellectual ferment on behalf of the Palestinian cause and against Israel. In 2005, an attempt to use professional associations to initiate a boycott of Israeli academia was launched in Britain. While this was eventually defeated through legal action, efforts to reintroduce it have become a regular part of the annual conference of the main British lecturers' union, the University and College Union (the UCU).

In 2009, the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) supported a call for a boycott of goods and services originating in Israeli settlements and a divestment campaign directed against companies "associated" with the occupation.

Yet the academic boycott saga and the TUC decision represent only aspects of a broader picture in which some elements of British civil society have emerged as the most trenchant of Israel's critics in Western Europe.

Why are these phenomena manifesting themselves with particular strength in the UK? Why has the UK become one of the central "hubs of delegitimization" facing Israel at the present time? What are the factors that need to be taken into account in order to better understand recent developments? Moreover, what is Israel doing in order to attempt to rectify this situation in what remains, after all, one of its most important global allies? The

articles within this symposium address these subjects, each in its own area of focus.

The first article is written by Douglas Murray, head of the Centre for Social Cohesion. In his essay "[How the UK Arrived at the Present Situation Regarding Israel and Middle East Issues](#)," Murray seeks to identify the core reasons explaining the emergence in Britain of the attempt to "delegitimize and demonize" Israel. He discusses a variety of factors that may explain the virulence of the anti-Israel campaign in the UK.

Murray points to the presence of radical Islamism in British society and political life as a central factor. He traces the vital and central role played by Islamist groups in bringing the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the prominence it now has in the British debate. Murray writes: "As a result of a very deliberate campaign from the start of the 'War on Terror,' at places of learning and in society at large, it has become lodged in the public mind that an issue at best tangential to the issues at hand is not just a part of the picture but the biggest part of the picture, and eventually, the whole picture."

Murray relates this growing prominence of radically anti-Israel positions in British society to what he sees as a broader failure of British society in developing ways to absorb successfully some Muslim immigrants in the country. He sees this in regard to broader problems affecting British society, which are discussed in the article. Whether or not one chooses to accept Douglas Murray's interpretation of the reasons for Israel's current standing in Britain, his essay offers a rigorous and thought-provoking treatment of the issue.

The subsequent articles focus on specific areas of British civil society and the attempts by advocates of Israel's cause to halt or reverse the slide toward delegitimizing Israel in their respective fields.

Ronnie Fraser, director of the Academic Friends of Israel, is both a researcher of British trade union history and an erstwhile activist in the UCU who played an important role in opposing the academic boycott of Israel campaign in Britain. His essay [“UK Attitudes Toward the Middle East: The British Trade Union Movement”](#) is informed by both his research and his experience.

He first discusses the historical roots of the British trade union movement's engagement with the Middle East as a whole, before going on to focus on the pro-Palestinian campaign in the movement. Fraser notes the general failure of the BDS (boycott, divestment, and sanctions) campaign internationally, and asks why the trade unions in Britain nevertheless seem interested in “buying into” this campaign. He discusses a series of practical measures that supporters of Israel in British trade unionism might take in order to arrest the decline.

Jonathan Rynhold of Bar-Ilan University was one of the Israeli academics most active in challenging the proposed academic boycott. He draws on this experience in his article [“The Meaning of the UK Campaign for an Academic Boycott of Israel.”](#) Rynhold looks into the dynamics behind the proposed academic boycott and the campaign against it. He sees the attempted boycott as a significant contribution to a larger effort by the British hard left to “shift the discourse” about Israel, which could later on form a real threat in terms of Israel's legitimacy and its relations with Britain and Europe. However, he is optimistic regarding the likelihood that this broader movement for divestment and sanctions against Israel can be “contained, if not fully defeated.”

Jonathan Cummings, director of the Britain-Israel Communications and Research Centre (BICOM) office in Israel, discusses his organization's experiences in bringing delegations of British journalists, students,

academics, and politicians to Israel over the last decade. Cummings, too, does not mince words in describing the problems affecting Israel in the UK context. “Criticism of Israel,” as currently manifested in the UK, he maintains, “threatens to elide into an assault on the very right of the State of Israel to exist as a democratic, Jewish state.”

[His essay](#) argues that Israel's traditional reliance on military deterrence must be supplemented and qualified in an age in which the real challenge to Israel, in his view, is the campaign to delegitimize the country. In dealing with this threat, Cummings suggests engagement, rather than deterrence, is the answer.

On this basis, he discusses BICOM's extensive work in recent years in seeking to bring members of the British opinionmaking elites to Israel, in order to allow them to develop a realistic picture of the Israeli reality. Cummings does not suggest that there are easy solutions to Israel's difficulties. However, he suggests that building “networks of relationships” between Israeli and British elites is one of the tools for achieving this.

[The following essay](#) in the series returns to a broader theme. David Rich, of the Community Security Trust in the UK, discusses British media coverage of Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in 2008/2009. Rich examines the extent to which “the hardening of attitudes toward Israel has opened the door to more extreme, and sometimes antisemitic, language when Israel or Zionism is discussed.” He notes examples in which Israel has been compared with Nazi Germany in UK public debate, arguing that there has been an increase in statements of this type by figures close to the British mainstream.

Rich considers that British media coverage of Operation Cast Lead formed a significant escalation in a process in the last few years whereby British Jews are feeling their sense of “well-being and belonging” somewhat “bruised” because of the widespread assumption among significant circles in Britain that Israel is “pretty much always in the wrong.” Rich cautions, however, against

simplistic readings of events, however, concluding, "The British intellectual scene, particularly in the media and academia, is dominated by a liberal left worldview that sees the Palestinians as the underdog and Israel as little America. This is different from antisemitism, even if it sometimes looks similar."

[Hadar Sela's contribution](#) focuses on the *Guardian's* "Comment is Free" website and its coverage of Israel. This very successful website, which publishes online articles mainly by individuals not employed by the *Guardian*, has been criticized for the one-sided nature of the very large number of articles it publishes on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Sela considers that the vociferousness of some of the attacks on Israel at Comment is Free--and the sheer volume of articles--means that the *Guardian* is playing a role in an ongoing campaign, the final result of which may impact on the lives of British Jews. As she puts it:

The effect upon public opinion and notions of socially acceptable forms of criticism of Zionism and Israel within Britain is far from negligible; indeed, increasingly hostile attitudes toward Israel and individual Israelis are to be witnessed at all levels of British society, from the House of Lords to trade unions and universities. By extension, these attitudes are liable to have a negative effect upon the lives and wellbeing of British Jews, the majority of whom identify strongly with Israel.

The importance of the issues raised here notwithstanding, it is also necessary to keep a sense of perspective with regard to developments in the UK. The agitation against Israel, which has received a large degree of attention, is ultimately largely restricted to a particular section of British public opinion--namely, the left plus supporters of various brands of political Islam. Elements within the Foreign Office traditionally hostile to Israel may perhaps also be included, but the "commanding heights" of the British-Israeli relationship remain largely

unaffected. Business relations are good and the British want to retain a role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which militates against taking an anti-Israel stance.

Also, there exist significant counterweights to the elements supporting an anti-Israel position. On the center Right in the UK, the anti-Israel position exists but is much weaker. On the center Left, meanwhile, despite the presence of vociferous anti-Israel voices, the last two Labour Prime Ministers--Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, were known and strong supporters of Israel. These issues and the dynamics of British policymaking on Israel are discussed further in this author's article, "An Analytical and Historical Overview of British Policy Toward Israel," published in the *Middle East Review of International Affairs* in 2004.<sup>1</sup>

While it is important to retain perspective in this regard, it is undoubtedly the case that developments in the British debate on Israel over the last decade represent a notable shift in the European debate on Israel. This symposium offers MERIA readers a variety of thoughtful perspectives in an ongoing analytical conversation on the significance of this shift.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Spyer, "An Analytical and Historical Overview of British Policy Toward Israel," Vol. 8, No. 2 (June 2004), *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, <http://www.gloria-center.org/meria/2004/06/spyer.html>.