

## **SOME NOTES ON THE CHARGE OF ANTI-SEMITISM**

The Occupation of the American Mind examines the myriad tactics that government officials and public relations experts use to maintain support for Israeli government policies. One of these tactics is smearing people who criticize Israeli policies as either anti-Semites or “self-hating Jews.” As the film points out, the charge of anti-Semitism has had a chilling effect on public discourse about Israel in the U.S., creating a climate of fear and intimidation that’s made it difficult for people to have rational discussions and debates about Israeli policy and Palestinian human rights. Here are some suggestions for how to handle this tactic if it’s used against you for screening the film.

### **Deal with the charge directly**

If you’re confronted with the accusation that The Occupation of the American Mind is somehow anti-Semitic, we recommend dealing with the charge head on.

First, begin by asking the person if they actually watched the film. If they haven’t, suggest they watch it before making an accusation as serious as this one. If they say they have watched it, ask them to provide specific examples from the film that struck them as anti-Semitic.

If they give specific examples, pay close attention to whether or not they’re equating criticism of Israeli government policies with criticism of the Jewish people. This will most likely be the case given that the film’s sole focus is Israeli government policy.

When it’s clear that’s what’s going on, simply point out that criticizing Israeli policies is entirely legitimate, and in fact no different from criticizing the policies of any other government, including our own. Then remind them what a number of people featured in the film, many of them Jewish themselves, say on this issue: that equating legitimate criticism of Israeli policies with anti-Semitism is a deliberate tactic that’s been used for decades to silence reasonable debate about Israeli policies.

### **Clarify the Terms**

When faced with the charge that The Occupation of the American Mind is anti-Semitic, the first thing we do is clarify what anti-Semitism actually is – namely, the hatred of Jewish people because they are Jewish. We then point out that there’s not a single instance of this kind of hatred or bigotry in the film, and challenge those leveling the charge to cite a specific example to back up their accusation. We also make it absolutely clear that we reject anti-Semitism out of hand, explaining that we abhor all forms of bigotry and racism that thrive on ignorance and fear and the dehumanization of entire groups of people, Islamophobia included. Finally, we forcefully reject the idea that it’s anti-Semitic – or somehow an indictment of the Jewish people – to criticize the policies of the state of Israel.

The fundamental point to be made here is that being Jewish is not the same as being Israeli. Being Israeli refers to a national identity. It refers solely to a citizen of Israel, not to the racial or ethnic or religious or cultural identity of Jews. This means that being Israeli is not synonymous with being a Jew, in the same way that being Jewish does not make you an Israeli. Millions of Jews are citizens of other countries and are not Israelis. And furthermore, there are lots of Israelis – citizens of Israel – who are not Jewish. Some 20% of the Israeli populace is in fact Arab. For these reasons, it’s simply factually inaccurate to imply that criticism of the Israeli

government is tantamount to anti-Semitism or criticism of Jews as a people. And it's absolutely crucial to recognize how blurring the distinction between the two has made it difficult to have an honest, reality-based discussion about Israeli policies.

### **Are Jewish people who criticize Israeli policy anti-Semitic too?**

It's also important to point out that there's no uniform political consensus about Israel among Jews themselves – both within Israel and outside of Israel. As the film discusses, the vast majority of Jews in the United States take a harshly critical view of current Israeli policy, oppose the occupation and settlements, and support an independent Palestinian state. Like any other religious or ethnic community, Jews are not monolithic in their political views, and Jewish opinion on Israel is no exception. One of the biggest problems with equating criticism of Israeli policy with anti-Semitism is that it implies that Jews who criticize Israeli policy are somehow themselves anti-Semitic. As *The Occupation of the American Mind* points out, this is of course exactly what some defenders of Israel have been saying for years: that if you're Jewish and take a stand against the injustices of Israeli policies, then you must be a "self-hating Jew." Another danger inherent in this line of thinking is that if Israel and Jews are seen as one and the same, then when Israel commits war crimes it follows that they are doing so in the name of all Jews – even those Jews who don't live in Israel and may explicitly oppose Israeli policies.

The bottom line is that criticizing the policies of the Israeli government is not the same as being anti-Semitic. To say that holding Israel accountable for its actions is anti-Semitic is like saying it's anti-American to criticize the American government. These are tactics that have been used successfully over the years to vilify dissent and shield governments from criticism. What's crucial to stress is that Israel is a state like any other and is therefore not exempt from criticism.

### **But isn't Israel being singled out unfairly?**

Another common charge made against American critics of Israeli policy is that they're singling Israel out for criticism and don't hold other countries accountable in the same way. The clear implication is that when Americans speak out against Israeli policies – and in favor of Palestinian human rights – they are somehow motivated by an irrational obsession with Israel that can only be explained as a form of anti-Semitism. What this line of attack ignores is that human rights advocates who speak up for Palestinian rights regularly speak up for other oppressed groups around the world as well. It also ignores how the American people not only have every right to question Israeli policy, but also a special responsibility to do so given the amount of military, economic, and diplomatic aid the U.S. gives to Israel. Israel depends on the support of American taxpayers. The American people therefore not only have a right, but an obligation, to know if U.S. support for Israel is enabling violations of Palestinian human rights. The fact that more and more Americans are starting to recognize their responsibility on this issue does not mean they are somehow singling out Israel for criticism; it simply means they're holding Israel to the same standards as everyone else, including their own government.

### **Putting the anti-Semitism charge in context**

In the end, the most effective response to the charge of anti-Semitism may be to refer back to what the film itself says on this issue. In many ways, this is exactly what the film is about: the tactics that have been used to shield Israel from criticism, prevent rational debate, and smear anyone who doesn't follow the official line. The ultimate goal of the film is to expose these

tactics and clear space for a reasonable and fair discussion about the reality of Israeli policies and their impact on the Palestinian people. This is what we would hope any post-screening discussion would stay focused on: the film's baseline argument that the American people have a right to as much information and as many perspectives as possible about this conflict so they can make up their own minds about it.