

An Interview with Shira Robinson

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The protests at AIPAC in March put a spotlight on American Jews who are critical of Israel's policies and/or anti-Zionist. Though they have always existed, this segment of American Jewish society seems to be more visible now. What changed to cause these American Jews to mobilize so heavily? Are people just paying more attention?

Several factors explain this protest. IfNotNow, the group that organized it, is a new organization. It formed in response to Israel's deadly assault on Gaza in the summer of 2014, and the failure of leading American Jewish institutions to respond to demands of young American Jews to begin a frank discussion about the moral and political costs of the community's unquestioned support for Israel. These young people are notable for their deep investment in their cultural and religious identity; many were educated in Jewish schools and spent their summers at Jewish sleep-away camps. They mobilized an estimated one thousand people to come to Washington, DC to demonstrate against AIPAC's long-standing support for Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (now approaching its fiftieth anniversary), and against its embrace of Islamophobic policies and organizations in the U.S.

IfNotNow did not come out of nowhere. It represents the culmination of years of a growing political disconnect between young American Jews and the Jewish communal establishment that purports to represent them. Here I mean the leadership of the various Jewish religious streams (reform, conservative, etc.) as well as the mainstream institutions that purport to operate on behalf of Jewish communities around the country: the Jewish Federation, the Jewish Community Relations Council, Hillel International, and Birthright Israel, among others. Of course, American Jewry has

never been a political monolith. But the seeds of the generational revolt we are witnessing today were planted at the turn of this century: with the collapse of the Oslo process; 9/11 and the beginning of the War on Terror; and the popularization of social media, which helped expose young people to the violent reality of the Occupation. For example, one of the most prominent leftist activist groups on Israel/Palestine today is Jewish Voice for Peace. JVP was established in the mid-1990's in the San Francisco Bay area by a small group of graduate students and professors who sought a way to work publicly against the occupation—both collectively, *as Jews*, and in solidarity with Palestinians.

Trump's chief strategist Steve Bannon has allegedly made various anti-Semitic comments and fully embraces what is known as the alt right, which consists of white nationalists and anti-Semites. Notably, Bannon started Breitbart Jerusalem, the media outlet's bureau in Israel. Sebastian Gorka, Trump's deputy executive assistant, has also been revealed to have anti-Semitic affiliates in his home country of Hungary. Despite Gorka and Bannon's close proximities to Trump, many pro-Israel figures, including Netanyahu, consider Trump to be "a friend to Israel." How can anti-Semitism and pro-Israeli sentiment exist in the same space?

Zionism has always been an uncomfortable bedfellow of anti-Semitism. Many early European Zionist intellectuals and poets, including Leon Pinsker, Aaron David Gordon, and Hayim Nahman Bialik employed or outright embraced anti-Semitic tropes holding Jews to be parasitical, fanatic, degenerate, cowardly, or otherwise in need of radical reform in their call to remove them to a faraway Jewish homeland. Take Theodor Herzl, the movement's political founder. In his 1896 treatise, *The Jewish State*, Herzl argued that anti-Semitism was an incurable disease of the gentiles, and that the only way to end its scourge would be to persuade European leaders to help Jews establish a separate nation-state outside of Europe (ideally in Palestine, then under Ottoman rule, but if not in a European-held territory in the colonized world). His pitch to European leaders whose diplomatic support he sought also drew on classic stereotypes: by ridding your countries of Jews—people associated with perverting your economies on the one hand and fomenting revolutionary politics on the other—you can restore social and political order. The awkward marriage between Zionism and anti-Semitism lived on after Herzl's death in 1904. One year later, Prime Minister Alfred Balfour—a close interlocutor of Herzl's who would go on to author the famous 1917 declaration of Britain's support for a Jewish national home in Palestine—actively supported the 1905 Aliens Act, which blocked the vast majority of Jews fleeing persecution in Russia from entering the United Kingdom.

This dynamic has endured and in recent months has had significant consequences for American Jews. In late January, the new president's statement on Holocaust Remembrance Day edited out mention of anti-Semitism and the Nazis' targeting of European Jews exclusively for death. When pressed on this omission, the White House doubled down, claiming that the administration merely aimed to offer an "inclusive" message. Its historically inaccurate insistence on relativizing Jewish suffering in the Holocaust, and its denial of the uniqueness of Nazi policy toward Jews (only the Roma and Sinti were also targeted for death), was hardly the only cause for concern this Spring.

Equally troubling was the administration's months of silence in the face of hundreds of bomb threats on Jewish community centers and a series of vandal attacks on Jewish cemeteries and synagogues. Even as Trump was cheered at AIPAC and its campaign included individual conservative Zionists like Jared Kushner (and later on, David Friedman), his team felt no need, throughout 2016, to distance itself from its white supremacist supporters, some of whom spent the year trolling and threatening Jewish journalists or opining that Jews belonged in Israel, not the U.S. (This includes Richard Spencer, the white nationalist leader who regularly invokes Zionism as a model for his exclusionary project to restore "European American" identity and power.) Nor did Trump's strong support from the American Jewish right prevent the campaign from airing stunning election-eve ads that portrayed other well-known Jews—all Clinton supporters and involved in finance—as "levers of power in Washington" and "pushers of special global interests."

One might expect that this cascade of events would, at the very least, elicit a statement of concern from Israel's Prime Minister, who regularly presents himself not as the elected leader of his country's citizens but as the spokesperson for global Jewry, and who constantly invokes the threat of another Holocaust as Israel's reason for being. In fact, however, apart from his defense of President Trump as "a great friend of the Jewish people," Netanyahu has gone mute in response to the signs of growing anti-Semitism in the U.S. Like his predecessors before him, the Israeli leader cares about the wellbeing of Jews outside of Israel only insofar as he can use them as leverage to support his own hardline policies against Palestinians, Iran, etc. Indeed, given his eager call for French Jews to emigrate to Israel in the face of rising anti-Semitism several years ago, one could make the argument that global anti-Semitism actually bolsters his agenda. Netanyahu's cynical silence in the face of meaningful safety concerns on the part of the second largest Jewish population in the world is a stark reminder of how we cannot, and should not, ever conflate Judaism and Zionism, or Jewish interests with Zionist interests.

U.S. Ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, has come under fire for comments he made in the past, including calling anti-Zionist Jews and Jews critical of Israeli policy "as bad as the kapos." How will his appointment affect U.S.-Israeli relations from the perspective of American Jews?

The well-publicized disruption of Friedman's senate confirmation hearings by Palestinian and Jewish activists back in February may be a sign of things to come. I would not be surprised if we begin to see growing opposition to US policies directed at the Ambassador's office—for example, American ex-pats marching on the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv or the Consulate in West Jerusalem. In general, Friedman's hardline support for Jewish settlements and Israel's unilateral annexation of the West Bank—without giving Palestinians citizenship—is likely to drive a deeper wedge between the Jewish communal establishment and American Jewish young people in the short term, and between the Israeli government and American Jews in the long term.

During the 2016 Presidential campaign, Trump pledged to move the United States Embassy to Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. What would this mean for the peace process?

Shortly after Israel conquered the West Bank from Jordan in June 1967, the government announced its unilateral annexation of East Jerusalem—home to the al-Aqsa mosque, the third holiest site in Islam—and declared the unified city as its capital. In keeping with the international consensus on the illegitimacy of this move, the US has kept its embassy in Tel Aviv ever since. For years there have been efforts in Congress to relocate the embassy to Jerusalem. On the one hand, with the partial exception of George Bush in the early 1990s, U.S. presidents have chosen not to pressure Israel into ceasing its colonization of Palestinian land within the municipal boundaries of the city (or anywhere else in the West Bank). They have consistently balked, however, at the idea of moving the embassy, knowing full well that it would further antagonize Muslims around the world. The stakes are high.

In February, Trump held a press conference with Netanyahu and expressed that he would be open to either a one- or two-state solution—whatever option both parties could agree on. This marked a drastic departure from Obama’s two-state position. What are the consequences of the US making this statement?

We should not read too much into Trump’s statement at the press conference. He seemed unprepared for the question and indeed to be making up his answer off the top of his head. Still, his response was refreshing in a way, as it opened up the possibility of ending two longstanding charades: first, that Israel and the U.S.—who, together, hold the cards—are committed to a genuine two-state solution; and second, that such a solution remains a realistic possibility. For all the rhetorical opposition to West Bank Jewish settlements from Obama and his predecessors, and for all their reiteration of the illegality of those settlements under international law, the U.S. has rarely put teeth into its objections. Instead, it continues to give Israel disproportionate amounts of aid, what today amounts to a quarter of our defense budget and half of our foreign aid budget. Once these charades are truly over we can begin to speak candidly about the 4.5 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip who live under occupation and various degrees of military siege, without any meaningful rights or representation, alongside 800,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank, who enjoy not only full rights as Israeli citizens but also disproportionately privileged access to land, water, and roads.

I think most Americans today would object on moral grounds to the basic idea of a single regime governing two different populations, defined along racial or ethno-national lines, according to different laws. Indeed, recent polls suggest that growing numbers of Americans find Israel’s status quo in the Occupied Territories morally problematic and deserving of sanction. So what should American policy be? For years many observers, including former Secretary of State John Kerry and current Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, have been warning that Israel is “approaching apartheid.” Many others argue that apartheid is here—that the ship sailed years ago. While there are important differences in the nature of the segregation that endures in Israel/Palestine versus the conditions of South African apartheid until 1994, the fundamental condition of legal segregation under a single regime is undeniable. Of course, it bears repeating that many Israeli Jews and their supporters in the West find these conditions perfectly acceptable. In other words, once diplomats stop talking about a “two-state solution,” the battle to determine the nature of the single state between the

Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River will begin.

The Israeli government recently approved the first new settlement in the occupied West Bank in 20 years. Is this timing just a coincidence, or is the Netanyahu government simply testing the waters now that they know they have an ally in the White House?

At that same press conference in which Trump defended himself against anti-Semitism, there was an awkward moment in which he asked Netanyahu to “hold off on settlements for a bit.” Despite this request, or perhaps because of it, it seems that Netanyahu is indeed testing the waters. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the distinction between settlements built with prior government approval, settlements built without that approval but which the government frequently offers after the fact, and the expansion of existing settlements, means nothing for neighboring Palestinian communities, who are harmed the same way regardless through the confiscation of their lands, their reduction in water access, and the increased militarization of the area in which they live. This distinction also has no relevance under international law, according to which *all* civilian settlements in occupied territory are illegal. Today, while the physical space of all the Jewish settlements today occupies just 1 percent of West Bank land, the amount of land that has been confiscated to secure these communities—access roads, security perimeters, etc.—is closer to 42 percent.

Some have observed that following the election of Trump, the Israel-Palestine issue is effectively “dead”, especially in the midst of Syria, Iraq, Yemen, etc. What is the future of the peace process?

First, there hasn't been a political process underway since the 1990's. And second, the likelihood that a lasting political solution would emerge during Oslo's peak was nil. The 1993 Oslo Accords offered no promise of a Palestinian state, no promise that Israel would withdraw from the Occupied Territories and dismantle its settlements, no promise that the settlers would have to return to Israel within its 1949 lines or agree to live under Palestinian rule as equal citizens, and no commitment to refugee return, water sharing or resolving the status of East Jerusalem. Instead, during the 1990s, the number of Jewish settlers in the West Bank doubled, and the government built more Jewish-only bypass roads that connected the settlements to “Israel proper” than ever before. Any anguish over the purportedly sudden end of the peace process as a result of Trump's statement is thus misplaced.

I see a lot of dialogue that questions the effectiveness of BDS. Do you think BDS is a valuable tool to fight the occupation?

The Boycott Divestment Sanctions (BDS) Movement started in 2004 when a group of Palestinian scholars and community activists issued a global call to boycott Israeli academic and cultural institutions so as to end the normalization of the Occupation—to end the sense that the status quo of what by then were four decades of violent military occupation and creeping dispossession of four million Palestinians was simply a normal fact of life that they should expect to live with forever. Since then the BDS movement has made significant strides in raising public awareness in the U.S.

and Europe, not only about the Occupation but also regarding the legal and institutional discrimination faced by Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the ongoing plight of 1948 refugees. Whether BDS on its own can change Israeli policy is doubtful, but I think most activists see it not as an end in and of itself, but as a tool to pressure Israel and a legitimate, non-violent means of re-opening the conversation about Palestine and Palestinian political rights in the aftermath of the failure of the Oslo process and the first and second Intifadas.

One of the principal activities that BDS activists have undertaken is to try to pass boycott and/or divestment resolutions within student councils and academic associations that condemn Israeli policies and renounce their ties to and partnerships with Israeli institutions. While these resolutions have had mixed success, it is clear that the educational campaigns that have preceded the votes have been a great cause of concern for both Israel and mainstream American Jewish institutions. The Prime Minister's Office alone has invested millions of dollars in their "Engage" counter-campaign—on college campuses, in the press, in state legislatures, and on social media. We can draw a clear line between the relative success of BDS public awareness outreach and the growing clampdown on speech and movement inside Israel, targeting citizens (Jewish and Arab) and now tourists as well. In the short-term, the anti-BDS movement has become a dangerous development for free speech in Israel, Europe and North America. In the long term we may look back and see this moment as the beginning of a new public discussion about Israel/Palestine, and ultimately the start of a political process that yields meaningful and just outcomes for everyone who lives within its borders.