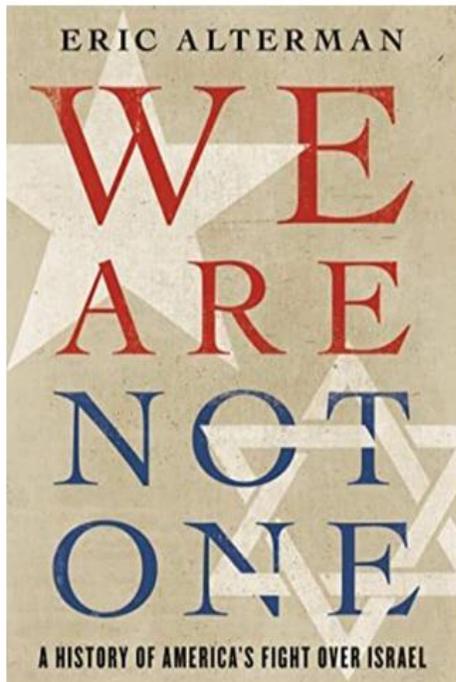


THE SIT-DOWN OPINION

## What American Jews fight about when they fight about Israel

Andrew Silow-Carroll January 22, 2023



Eric Alterman is the author of "We Are Not One," a history of the debate over Israel in the United States. (Maresa Patterson; Basic Books)

([JTA](#)) — Eric Alterman, born in 1960, says the view of Israel he absorbed growing up in a Jewish family in suburban Scarsdale, New York, was decidedly one-sided.

“I went on this nerdy presidential classroom thing when I was in high school,” he recalls, “and some Christian kid from the South raised his hand and said to the rabbi, ‘I don’t get it, if the Jews could have a state, why can’t the Palestinians?’ And I was like, ‘How dare you?’”

Alterman would go on to attend Cornell University, where he wrote his honors thesis on Israel, Vietnam and neoconservatism; spend a semester abroad at Tel Aviv University; study Israeli military history

while earning his master's degree in international relations at Yale, and research a dissertation on American liberalism and the founding of Israel as a doctoral student at Stanford.

Although he frequently writes about Israel as a contributing writer at the Nation and the American Prospect, Alterman is best known for his liberal analysis of the media and U.S. politics. He's written 11 previous books, including one on Bruce Springsteen.

Yet he never stopped thinking about the widening gap between the idealized Israel of his youth and the reality of its relations with the Palestinians, its Arab neighbors and the West. Even when Israel's revisionist historians were uncovering evidence of massacres and forced expulsions of Palestinians during the War of Independence, and Israeli politicians and intellectuals began asking why, indeed, the Palestinians didn't deserve a state of their own, he saw that such discussions were considered blasphemous in most American Jewish circles.

Alterman, now a CUNY Distinguished Professor of English at Brooklyn College, explores that gap in his latest book, "We Are Not One: A History of America's Fight Over Israel." The book surveys U.S.-Israel relations, but with a focus on the ways defending Israel have shaped public discourse. It's a book about arguments: within the administrations of 14 presidents, between Washington and Jerusalem, and mostly among Jews themselves.

Earlier this month we spoke about how the pro-Israel lobby became a powerful political force, the Jewish organizations and pundits who fight to limit the range of debate over Israel, and what he thinks is the high price American Jews have paid for tying their identities so closely to Israel.

"I try to take on shibboleths that in the past have shut down conversation and take them apart and sympathetically show the complexity of the actual situation that lies beneath — so that [criticism and disagreement] over Israel can be understood rather than whisked

away by changing the subject, or what-aboutism, or by demonizing the person who is raising them,” said Alterman.

Our conversation was edited for length and clarity.

***Jewish Telegraphic Agency: Let me start by congratulating you: It’s the first book about U.S.-Israel relations with a chapter named after a Bruce Springsteen album: “Working on a Dream.”***

***Eric Alterman:*** Nobody else has caught that. But it’s not about U.S.-Israel relations. It’s the first book about the *debate* over Israel in the United States. There’s a million books on U.S.-Israel relations.

***So let’s define that more narrowly. The title reminds me of the United Jewish Appeal slogan over the years, “We Are One,” which was about American Jewish solidarity. So who is the “we” in your title, “We Are Not One”?***

There are three or four different meanings. The “we” in this book are obviously the United States and Israel. An awful lot of people argue that the United States and Israel have identical interests in the world and that’s crazy, because Israel is this tiny little country in the Middle East and we’re a global superpower thousands of miles away. So obviously, we’re going to have differences. Number two, American Jews and Israeli Jews are very different people. They have very different life experiences. And they see things quite differently as evidenced by the political split between them. The title also refers specifically just to Americans, because we can’t even discuss most things anymore. The pro-Israel community, such as it ever was, is enormously split and it’s split in angry ways.

***Much of your book is about what happens to American Jews when the idealized portrait of Israel’s founding and its presumed blamelessness in its actions toward the Palestinians comes up against reality. In that context, tell me a little about your choice to devote a chapter to the Leon Uris novel “Exodus,” an extremely sanitized version of Israel’s founding, and the 1960 movie based on it.***

The influence of “Exodus” is something I didn’t understand until I wrote the book. It’s crazy, because Leon Uris was this egomaniac who wrote kind of a shitty book and said that he wanted to add a new chapter to the Bible, and he kind of succeeded. I was born in 1960. When I was growing up in suburban New York, every single family had “Exodus” on their shelves. When the movie came out Israelis understood this. They said, “We can just shut down our public relations office now.” And from the standpoint of reality the movie is worse than the book because it has Nazis — the Arabs in the book are working with Nazism. Uris didn’t have the nerve to do that. So the book created this idealized Israel and this idea of [Palestinians as] evil, subhuman Nazis.

What most Americans don’t understand, or choose not to understand, is that before the 1940s most Jews were anti-Zionist, or non-Zionist. This changed in the 1940s, when, as a result in part of the Holocaust, and the reaction to that, and the triumph of Zionists, they became intensely pro-Zionist, leading up to the creation of Israel. But after that, they kind of forgot about Israel. One might have given their children JNF boxes to carry on Halloween instead of UNICEF boxes, or maybe they paid to plant trees. But Israel doesn’t show up in the American Jewish Committee’s 1966 annual report until page 35 or 36, and Nathan Glazer’s 1957 book “American Judaism” says that the creation of the Jewish state has had “remarkably slight effects on the inner life of American Jewry.”

With the events of 1967, Uris’ idealized notion of Israel came together with this terrible fear of a second Holocaust, and the terror and shame and frightening nature of that combined to transform American Judaism overnight to an enormous degree.

***You are referring to Israel’s lightning victory in the Six-Day War, which even non-religious Jews saw as a kind of miracle, and redemption two decades after the Holocaust. And that transformation, you argue, put defense of Israel, combined with Holocaust consciousness, at the center of Jewish identity.***

More than just the center: It basically comprised almost all of it, for many secular Jews. I quote the neoconservative Irving Kristol in the book saying in 1976 that “the Holocaust and the founding of the state of Israel” was 100% of what Judaism means.

***Which in turn led to a the tremendous pro-Israel lobbying efforts, political activism and punditry.***

The budgets of American Jewish organizations overnight went from social services and liberal social justice causes to defense of Israel. And rabbis were replaced at the center of public discourse by the heads of these organizations — most of whom had no religious training or knowledge of history or Judaism.



Joe Biden, then vice president, speaks at the AIPAC 2016 Policy Conference in Washington, DC, March 20, 2016.

(Molly Riley/AFP via Getty Images)

***One distinction you repeatedly make is between what most Jews believe compared to the Jewish organizations that claim to represent them. Surveys show the rank and file is consistently more liberal on Israel and less hawkish than the big organizations — a gap that showed up markedly around the Iraq War and the Iran nuclear deal.***

Right. The big mistake that so many in the media make is that they go to the heads of these organizations who pretend to speak for American Jews when they don't speak for American Jews. They speak for their boards and their donors.

***The shift to Jewish lobbying on behalf of Israel coincides with an era in which there is seldom daylight between what Israel wants and what the United States wants or agrees to — often to the frustration of presidents. You are critical of those who exaggerate the pro-Israel lobby's influence — folks like Stephen Walt and John J. Mearsheimer, authors of the 2007 book “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy” — but, at the same time, you write, referring to the Israel debate in America, about “the continued stranglehold that money, power, organizational structure, and clearly defined paths to personal career advancement continue to hold over the shape of foreign policy.” How will you respond to critics who will say your book is trafficking in the myth of Jewish power and its conspiracy-minded hold over American policy?***

The short answer is, that's why I wrote a 500-page book — basically, for two reasons: One, everything is incredibly complicated. And some of those complications are consistent with antisemitic myths, and therefore they have to be teased out and broken down in such a way that you're telling the truth rather than portraying the myth.

If you say things without context, they sound antisemitic. I say that yes, Jews are very powerful in the media and many use that power on or about Israel. But I think if you lay out the examples that I use, if you look at them and examine them, I don't see how you can conclude otherwise. The people I describe often say that about themselves — how much power and influence they yield.

Secondly, I've always found it just about impossible to discuss Israel with anyone, because you have to share exactly the same assumptions with that person. And if you don't, then they take it personally, or you're an antisemite, or, at best, you're insufficiently sensitive to how

important antisemitism is. And if you describe ways in which American Jews act in ways that are consistent with antisemitic myth, it has a way of shutting down the conversation.

Undoubtedly there's some criticism of Israel that is motivated by antisemitism, but there's an awful lot of reasons to be critical of Israel, particularly if you are a Palestinian or care about Palestinians. This accusation [antisemitism] has shut down the discourse and part of my hopes in demonstrating the complexities of this history is to open this up.

***So let me ask about your own stake in this. Your educational background and relationship to Israel are similar in many ways to the writers and thinkers in your book who tolerate no criticism of Israel. I don't know if you call yourself a Zionist, but you have some connection to Israel, and you're also willing to tolerate critiques of Israel. What's the difference between you and some of the other people who went on the same journey?***

For the longest time I was comfortable with the words "liberal Zionist," but I don't think they have any meaning anymore. I don't think it's possible to be a liberal Zionist — you have to choose. Israel is the only putatively democratic country that prefers Trump to either Obama or Biden, and it's not even close. And young Israelis are moving further in that direction and young American Jews are moving further in the opposite direction.

So you ask me if I am a liberal Zionist. I don't think the word "Zionist" is useful at all anymore, because Israel is a country and it's not going anywhere. I sometimes call myself an anti-anti-Zionist, because anti-Zionism is dumb. I'm very anti-BDS. If I thought [the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement] could end occupation, I would support it, even though the idea of boycotting Jews puts a bad taste in my mouth. But the theory behind BDS apparently, and I've spent a lot of time on this, is that the world will force Israel to give up its identity and turn the country over to its enemies. It's inconceivable that Israel would do that and inconceivable the United States would pressure

them to do that. So BDS is entirely performative. It's more of a political fashion statement than anything else.

And to me, it speaks to the failure of Palestinian politics throughout history. I have a great deal of sympathy for the Palestinians and their bad politics because it's based on two problems. One is that they have never been able to see the future very well. So they should have agreed in 1921 and 1937, or whenever they would have had the majority and they were being given a country by the British. They should have taken the lousy offer from Ehud Barak and Bill Clinton in 2000. I kind of get it because they have so many competing constituencies, and it's impossible to satisfy all of them at the same time. I understand that. It's hard to imagine a Palestinian politician who could say yes, and if you look at Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, in both cases, it's hard to imagine making peace with them.

***I read that in your book, and my first thought was, well, isn't that basically just confirming what the pro-Israel right has always said — that Israel has no partner for peace? So maybe the best it can do is maintain a status quo that assures some security for Israel and a workable something for the Palestinians.***

Well, number one I hold Israel significantly responsible for the conditions under which that has developed and that they can change those. And number two, that's no excuse for the way Palestinians are treated, either in the occupation or in Israel. So yes, I agree. There's no one to make peace with today, but there are many steps Israel could take that could vastly improve the lives of the Palestinians, both in the occupied territories and inside Israel. And there are a lot of steps they could take that could build confidence for a future that could weaken Hamas, that could strengthen the Palestinian Authority, so that one day peace would be possible. But they do the opposite.



An Israel supporter at a New York rally to tell the United Nations "no more anti-Israel documents or resolutions," Jan. 12, 2017. (Don Emmert/AFP via Getty Images)

***You talk about funding of Israel studies and Jewish studies departments as a reaction against fears of a pro-Palestinian takeover of academia. At the same time, you write how Palestinian supporters “succeeded in colonizing Middle East studies departments, student faculty organizations, and far-left political organizations.” Why does that matter in the long run if, as you also write, nothing’s really going to change American policy on Israel?***

I gave a talk before the book came out at Tel Aviv University and someone asked me that question. I said, You care about these transformations for two reasons. One, you really will be all alone in the world. You’ll have the support of conservative [Evangelical] Christians who are in many respects antisemitic and are using you for their own purposes. So if you lose American Jews, you will be existentially alone in a way you’re not now and that strikes me as very unpleasant.

I do think that the quote-unquote pro-Israel community has a stranglehold on American politics that I can’t see changing anytime soon, and I think the change in the Democratic Party [that it will turn

more pro-Palestinian] is very much exaggerated by both sides for their own reasons.

That being said, the people who are being trained now to be in the State Department and the National Security Council and the Defense Department and the think tanks and the places where the intellectual foundation of U.S. policy is made are learning something very different from what you and I learned in college. Right now, there's no such thing as an influential Palestinian lobby in this country. There's no pushing back. There's no percentage for anyone opposing Israel who has a career interest in the future. That will change, and the whole shaping of the discourse will change and that will change the relationship between the United States and Israel. It's not going to happen anytime soon, but it's definitely going to happen.

***As Jews in this country have remained largely liberal, Israel appears to be getting more illiberal, as we've seen with a new government that is more right-wing than any previously. And Israel has become more of a divisive element among Jews than a unifying force. As this gap appears to be widening, do you have any real hope for changing the discourse?***

No, I don't have any hopes for that. I don't have anything optimistic to say about Israel. I think, politically speaking, from the standpoint of American Jews, everything is going in the wrong direction. But by demonstrating just how different Israeli Jews are than American Jews, and how little Israeli Jews care what American Jews think, I do think that it presents an opportunity for American Jews to think about what it means to be an American Jew in the Diaspora. Roughly half of the Jews in the world live in the United States. And since 1967 American Jews have defined themselves vicariously through Israeli Jews and taking pride in Israel. They expressed their identities by defending Israel and attacking the media when the media didn't defend Israel.

Meanwhile, American Jews hardly ever go to synagogue. According to Pew, 20% of American Jews regularly attend synagogue and half of *them* are Orthodox, who are 10% of the community. What brought

me back into Judaism was studying Torah. And hardly any American Jews are ever exposed to that.

So I think there's an opportunity to reimagine Diaspora Jewry now that the Israel story doesn't work, and it's clear that it doesn't work. Young American Jews are leaving or voting with their feet. They're walking away. Israel-centric Judaism is in part responsible, although it's not the whole story. Inter-marriage is a big part of the story. The de-religionization of all groups is part of the story. But personally, I don't see what a liberal American Jew would see in a Judaism that defines itself as it has for the past 50 years as defending Israel and remembering the Holocaust.