

United States

Why did Tucker Carlson talk about Israeli immigration policy? What you need to know about the white supremacist ‘open borders for Israel’ meme.

By Ben Sales April 16, 2021



Tucker Carlson takes aim at the Anti-Defamation League in a monologue on Fox News, April 12, 2021. (Screenshot)

(JTA) — In Tucker Carlson’s response to accusations that he endorsed one white supremacist talking point, the Fox News anchor appeared to echo another — this time about Israel.

Last week, the popular right-wing talk show host said there was a coordinated Democratic plan to “replace” the existing population of the United States with immigrants from the “Third World.” White supremacists refer to the idea as a “Great Replacement” orchestrated by

Jews, and that claim has fueled attacks like the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooting.

After the segment, the Anti-Defamation League called on Carlson to be fired. But Fox declined to act, citing Carlson's claim that he wasn't talking about race, and Carlson isn't backing down.

On Monday, he delivered a 20-minute defense of his "replacement" idea. At the end he took aim at the ADL, saying its defense of Israel's Jewish majority and opposition to the return of Palestinian refugees contradicts its advocacy for immigrants in the United States.

"In the words of the ADL, why would a government subvert its own sovereign existence?" he wondered, referring to an essay on the ADL's website. "Good question. Maybe ADL President Jonathan Greenblatt will join 'Tucker Carlson Tonight' some time to explain and tell us whether that same principle applies to the United States."

Perhaps this sounded simply like Carlson going after a group that has been challenging him.

But for far-right extremists, his question went beyond a debate about immigration policy. Carlson was alluding to a meme that has traversed white supremacist circles for years and is a direct corollary to the "replacement" theory: Jews want to replace white people in the United States through mass immigration, the theory goes, but in Israel they protect their own race by restricting immigration.

White supremacists often refer to this idea by calling for "Open borders for Israel" — trollishly suggesting that American Jews should support similar immigration policy for the U.S. as they do for Israel.

"Open borders for Israel" was a rallying cry at the 2017 rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where far-right marchers chanted "Jews will not replace us." A Facebook group called Open Borders for Israel features Pepe the Frog, a cartoon appropriated by the "alt-right." An

“Open Borders for Israel” face mask featuring an anti-Semitic caricature is available for purchase on at least one website, and a white supremacist group distributed flyers with the slogan at Texas Christian University last year, according to TCU360, a campus news website.

The contradiction only works in white supremacists’ imaginations. In reality, while American Jews tend to sympathize with immigrants and refugees, few Jews actually call for “open borders” in the U.S. And many Jews and Jewish groups, including the ADL, are particularly critical of Israel’s restrictive refugee policy, which has been a topic of heated debate there for a decade.

In the “open borders for Israel” meme, white supremacists take substantive debate beyond the pale of legitimacy. Beyond critiquing policy, they suggest (falsely) that Israel’s immigration system is one more piece of a Jewish conspiracy to destroy white society, and that Jews are playing a dishonest double game by advocating separate policies for the United States and Israel.

On its face, this can be phrased like a normal policy debate. Pro-Trump pundit Charlie Kirk, for example, tweeted this week, “Why is it controversial to say that America should have similarly strict immigration policies the way Israel does?” But to white supremacists, that question sounds like an endorsement of perceived Jewish hypocrisy — and hearing it articulated on one of the most-watched cable news shows in the country was invigorating.

An article about Carlson’s monologue by Andrew Anglin in the *Daily Stormer*, a white supremacist publication, was headlined “Tucker Nukes Israel – Says Jews Have Same Policy They Claim is Racist for Whites!”

“Jews come to America and force us to have unlimited immigration,” Anglin wrote, “while in their own country, they have a wall and DNA-based citizenship.” (Israel does not use DNA to determine citizenship.)

Nick Fuentes, a Holocaust denier with 126,000 Twitter followers, tweeted that Carlson “really brought it all together & spelled out explicitly what is happening to the country.”

“Demographic replacement, ADL, Israel, it’s all there ... a full redpill,” Fuentes wrote, using a term that denotes people being turned onto white supremacist ideas. “On primetime Fox News for 4 million mainstream conservatives. Can you feel it? We are inevitable.”

The idea that Jews adopt white supremacist policy when it comes to Israel was popularized in 2016 and 2017 by Richard Spencer, a white supremacist ideologue. Spencer claimed that all he wanted was for the United States to adopt laws similar to Israel’s — only to benefit white people instead of Jews.

In a 2017 interview with Israeli Channel 2, he referred to himself as “a white Zionist in the sense that I care about my people. I want us to have a secure homeland for us and ourselves. Just like you want a secure homeland in Israel.”

Spencer linked that idea with immigration in response to a question from a rabbi in 2016.

“Do you really want radical inclusion into the State of Israel?” he asked. “Maybe all of the Middle East can move into Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. Would you really want that?”

American Jewish groups reject the comparison. In a statement, the ADL said Carlson quoted its materials “out of context,” and called his claim “an attempt to distract from his promotion of a white supremacist conspiracy theory that is rooted in antisemitism and racism.”

“Using Israel and the Jewish people to give cover to this white supremacist theory is pretty disturbing,” the statement said. “It has nothing to do with the ‘Great replacement theory,’ a toxic and extreme ideology that has led to violent attacks both at home and abroad.”

Carlson did not reply to a JTA inquiry asking whether he sees a distinction between his statement and those of white supremacists.

But he's not the only one to note a perceived contradiction in the ADL's work. Leftist groups in recent years have also criticized what they see as a discrepancy between the ADL's values at home and its advocacy for Israel. Unlike white supremacists, however, they want the ADL to be more critical of Israeli policy, not more conservative in the U.S., and don't claim to see evidence of a nefarious Jewish conspiracy. On Wednesday, the left-wing Jewish columnist Peter Beinart tweeted that the contradiction identified by Carlson makes the ADL vulnerable to criticism.

"This is the problem with being an anti-bigotry organization in the US but opposing equality for Palestinians," Beinart tweeted. "You have a glass jaw. As I wrote a while back, white nationalists like Carlson see Israel's system of ethnic privilege as a model for the US."

Pro-Israel advocates say there's a reason to differentiate between immigration policies in Israel and the United States. They note that Israel's immigration system does privilege Jews, offering them automatic citizenship, because Israel was founded in part as a safe haven for Jews after centuries of lethal persecution. By contrast, the United States was founded, in theory, on the promise of equality for all. And unlike the Jews who founded Israel, white people in America are not a persecuted minority.

In Israel, non-Jewish Israelis are afforded individual equality under the law. An Arab Israeli sits on the Supreme Court and, following Israel's most recent election, an Islamist party may act as kingmaker.

"Tucker is wrong because the ADL opposing a [Palestinian] 'right of return' is about preserving a single, functioning refuge for an oppressed people," tweeted Gilead Ini, a senior research analyst for the right-wing pro-Israel media watchdog CAMERA. In a subsequent tweet, he wrote,

“Surely Tucker understands the difference between what’s described above and the situation of, say, Americans of English descent.”

Israel’s immigration policy has led to mass immigration, however, of Jews from around the world. Waves of Jews from the Middle East, North Africa, Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union have moved to Israel in the seven decades since its founding. But unlike in the United States, where Carlson claims that immigration benefits the left, those groups of Israeli immigrants have largely supported the political right.