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Will the Sun Ever Set on Anti-Semitism?

An organization behind the Green New Deal pulls out of a rally because it included Jewish groups.

By Elliot Kaufman Oct. 22, 2021



A Sunrise Movement protest at Nancy Pelosi's office in Washington, Dec. 10, 2018.

PHOTO: MICHAEL BROCHSTEIN/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES

If anti-Semitism is the socialism of fools, what to make of anti-Zionism? It is increasingly in vogue on the left, and throwing its weight around. Consider Sunrise DC, Washington hub of the Sunrise Movement, an activist group whose once-fringe proposal for a Green New Deal is now de rigueur on the left. On Wednesday Sunrise DC announced it would pull out of an event advocating statehood for the District of Columbia, a cause it supports, because of the involvement of three “Zionist organizations.”

All three groups are liberal. The National Council of Jewish Women gives “Israel grants” to Women Lawyers for Social Justice and a group helping Palestinian women. The Jewish Council for Public Affairs wants to “end mass incarceration,” rejoin the Paris Climate Accord and secure a two-state solution. The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism represents the most liberal major Jewish denomination. It urges “immigration justice” and promises to “address our own behaviors, practices and policies through the lens of racial equity, diversity, and inclusion.”

If even these groups can be deemed toxic on the left—and Sunrise DC calls on an activist coalition to banish them—which Jews can’t? This points to an unavoidable fact: Anti-Zionism means marginalizing American Jews, some 90% of whom have positive views of Israel per Gallup’s review of studies. A token anti-Israel fringe doesn’t change that.

Take anti-Zionist logic to its conclusion. If the effort for D.C. statehood must exclude Zionists, shouldn’t the Democratic Party do the same? How about university faculties, media outlets and other major corporations? Arguing that Zionism is racism and silence is complicity, a successful American anti-Zionism would arrive at Ruth Wisse’s definition of anti-Semitism: the organization of politics against the Jews.

Justifying such a politics has always required dishonesty. In its statement, Sunrise DC asserts: “Given our commitment to racial justice, self-governance and indigenous sovereignty, we oppose Zionism.” The third plank is particularly galling, as Zionism entails the return of an indigenous people, the Jews, to sovereignty in their homeland, where they’ve had a continuous presence since biblical times.

Asked Thursday about the exclusion of Jews and about Jewish indigeneity, the national Sunrise group didn’t elaborate. It issued its own statement distancing itself from that of its affiliate: “Sunrise DC made a decision to issue this statement, and we weren’t given the chance to look at it before it became public.” On Friday, after critics noted that other pro-Zionist groups had escaped the local chapter’s notice, the national organization issued

another statement: “Sunrise DC’s statement and actions are not in line with our values. Singling out Jewish organizations for removal from a coalition, despite others holding similar views, is antisemitic and unacceptable.”

Sunrise DC didn’t reply to questions. Its original statement denies the Jewish connection to the land by calling Israel “a colonial project.” Like so much anti-Zionism, this stuff is the dregs of Soviet “anti-imperialist” and Arab nationalist rhetoric. For 2,000 years, Jews have prayed three times a day for the restoration of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel. It is crude propaganda to shunt Zionism, with its anticolonial struggle against the British, into the same category as, say, French colonization of Algeria. If Jews are interlopers in Israel, where is their home? If Israel is a colony, what is the metropole?

Next, Sunrise DC complains: “Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank cannot vote in Israel, despite the fact that these territories are occupied and effectively governed by the state.” That is untrue. Israel intervenes to protect itself, but Hamas governs Gaza, and the Palestinian Authority governs Palestinian parts of the West Bank. Neither Palestinian faction has held an election in years, but Sunrise DC doesn’t mention that. That’s another anti-Zionist tendency: Don’t get worked up about Palestinian deprivation if Israel can’t be blamed.

Sunrise DC panders to American sensibilities by condemning Israeli discrimination against “Black and brown Jewish-Israelis.” These Jews may now be useful as a cudgel against Israel, but their history illuminates the necessity of the Jewish state. In the 1980s and ’90s, Israel airlifted thousands of black Jews from Ethiopia, rescuing them from famine and violence. Mizrahim, the “brown” Jews of Sunrise DC’s taxonomy, constitute a majority of Israeli Jews. They were absorbed after violent expulsions from Arab lands. Anti-Zionists now demand their return to life as a vulnerable minority under Arab rule.

Sunrise DC ends by calling Zionism “incompatible” with “political sovereignty,” as if Israel were the only country with a minority group that makes competing national claims. Anti-Zionists portray Jewish self-determination as a unique evil, incompatible with feminism, as per former Women’s March leader Linda Sarsour, and racist, as per the infamous 1975 United Nations resolution and Black Lives Matter today. The Jewish state morphs into the universal obstacle to progress, the role Jews always play in the anti-Semitic imagination.

Excursions like Sunrise DC’s may succeed in chilling the already tenuous support for Israel in leftist circles. But the national Sunrise Movement’s belated damage control suggests it senses that anti-Zionism risks marginalizing the left. Americans are fair-minded, and whatever they think of statehood for the District of Columbia or the Green New Deal, they will recognize the exploitation of unrelated campaigns to dogpile on Israel and vilify Jewish groups as a sign of an ideological obsession. One handy word for this obsession is anti-Semitism.

Mr. Kaufman is the Journal’s letters editor.

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