

‘Disappearing Palestine’ vs. “Jewish Loss of Land”

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In October, 2013, ten ads went up in Vancouver transit stations depicting loss of Jewish land in the middle east since 1000 BCE. It turns out that in that time Jewish land had shrunk by a factor of five or so. These advertisements were responding to ads put up in transit stations and on sides of buses over a month before by the [Palestine Awareness Coalition](#). PAC had the more modest aim of showing Palestinian loss of land only since 1946, which ended in a small continuous patch called Gaza and specks of discontinuous territory in the West Bank.



The response ads were put up by a group called StandWithUs which bills itself as “supporting Israel around the world.” The organization had previously countered pro-Palestinian advertising in [Denver](#), [Houston](#), [Helena](#), Missoula and elsewhere. “A combination of anti-Israel groups pretend to be pro-Palestinian,” StandWithUs CEO Roz Rothstein said. “The bottom line is they don’t want an Israel. They want Israel to be gone.”



The original Vancouver ads were designed and paid for by seven actual local pro-Palestinian groups: Boycott Israeli Apartheid Campaign, Building Bridges, Canada Palestine Association, Canada Palestine Support Network, Independent Jewish Voices, Seriously Free Speech and Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights, later joined by a national Canadian organization, Canadian Friends of Sabeel / Near East Cultural & Educational Foundation.

I am a member of IJV-Vancouver, and I believe that our design was as territorially accurate as it could be, given the graphic streamlining of advertising. A professor of political science at the University of British Columbia stated that the ads simply showed “statements of fact,” but his name, Hani Faris, got him disqualified as an expert by a writer in the *Jewish Independent* (We wondered if we could work the same magic on Alan Dershowitz sometime). Our design was pretty straightforward: a graphic illustration of statements like the following:

In over 60 years, around 700 Jewish communities have been established in Israel’s pre-1967 borders-but just seven for Arab citizens (and those were built

in the Negev for “concentrating” the Bedouin population). The average Palestinian community inside Israel has lost up to 75% of its land since 1948, while a quarter of all Palestinian citizens are internally displaced, their property confiscated for use by the state and Jewish towns” (Ben White, *The New Statesman*, February, 2005).

The lands in question were actually not taken over in the name of the state, since this could be construed as illegal confiscation, but handed over in trust to the Jewish National Fund for state and individual Jewish use. We thought this obvious fact might still be a new and alarming piece of information for many in our intended Canadian audience. Similar graphics exist by the hundreds on the Internet and have been the basis of billboard and transit advertising at many US sites. This very graphic is used by Wikipedia to illustrate its article on Palestine.

The response ads were quite unhinged: the first panel shows a sprawling mass of territory identified as the “Ancient Jewish Kingdom” of 1000 BCE, while the second shows a territory easily three times as large as the present state, identified as the “Jewish Homeland” of 1920, i.e. all of British-controlled Mandate Palestine (regardless of the actual minuscule Jewish population). The third panel shows the present State of Israel with Gaza and the West Bank identified as “disputed territories”—a breathtaking act of geopoliticalchutzpah.

The nature of a coalition is such that it erases all sharp extremes, so we naively thought that we had advanced a non-controversial statement of fact designed to educate the Canadian public: the land had disappeared, and we didn’t even blame any entity for its disappearance. But the response told us we had done something despicable and devastating. The backlash was vicious, and hysterical—as it so often is—quite out of keeping with the “provocation.” The response came, not from the Jewish community, but only from that bullying sector that always responds fiercely to any criticism of Israeli policy. In a curious way, the ferocity of the pro-Israel response guaranteed the success of our campaign better than anything we could have done ourselves. (The Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) even wrote, “Countering these ads in the public domain (on buses, for example) would only raise the profile and lend credibility to these marginal groups,” to solace their supporters.

We couldn’t be called self-hating Jews, since only one of the groups was Jewish, but we were nonetheless accused of wanting to destroy the state of Israel, and we had timed the ads so that they would appear over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In fact we had no control over the timing, but as my wife Martha pointed out, the interval between the two holy days is traditionally a time for reflection and repentance.

Mitchell Gropper, chair of the Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver, called the ads a provocative attack on Jewish people that would incite hatred. “This is of grave concern to our community at large, because the ads make the use of the buses unwelcome and unsafe,” Gropper continued, linking it with terrorist attacks in Israel that often target buses. The Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center in Toronto agreed that TransLink was running ads “that are provocative and incite hatred and contempt.” Stephen Schachter, the co-chair for CIJA, told us that there were “members of the Jewish community who say they are not going to use transit and are very concerned about safety issues as a result of this kind of advertising,” a motif that was elaborated on by an op-ed writer in the *Vancouver Sun*: “I can’t imagine the anxiety of a Jewish parent, with no other transportation option, sending their child off to school wearing a yarmulke on a bus featuring these ads. I’m worried that

these ads could, at any time, provoke an unbalanced or even just ill-informed person to lash out verbally or physically.”

It was just the right emotional context for unconscious betrayals: we were accused of wanting to wipe out the state of Israel when we were claiming that that was almost precisely what Israel had already done to Palestinian territory. It was a trenchant instance of an old Hebrew adage that says “The accuser accuses himself.” And the B’nai Brith Canada hinted at indecent exposure in the typo in the title of their article: “Exposé: Whose Behind Anti-Israel Ads in Vancouver.”

Liana Shlien of the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies told us that Palestinian land could not be disappearing because, “In truth, an official state of Palestine had never existed, while Jewish contiguous presence on the land is a record of fact.” And others lathered on the same stock distortions and misstatements that are regularly used to silence criticism of Israel. To all of which we could only repeat that Palestine is universally understood as the name of a geographical region in southwest Asia on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, inhabited for centuries, and without interruption, by a people known as the Palestinians who are of different faiths: Muslim, Christian and Jewish; and who assumed a predominantly Palestinian Arab culture in the seventh century. All of these elements, Palestinian land ownership, the indigenous people of the land and the indigenous culture, are disappearing, as our four maps show. To say or imply that these things cannot be disappearing because the boundaries of a Palestinian state have not yet been set by an occupying power and a subject population is the sheerest casuistry.

A subsequent donation allowed us to keep the wall mural up for an extra month, and our opponents then changed tactics: tearing down the ads three times, immediately after we had them put up again. We assume it was our opponents (or some small subset of them); we couldn’t imagine ordinary criminals taking such offense at our images.

We are thinking about what to do next, but our efforts will continue.

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