

Open Letter to the Board of Deputies of British Jews From Jewish People in the UK

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We are appalled that the Board of Deputies (BoD) which claims to be “the voice of British Jews,” has once again attempted to justify the massacre of unarmed Palestinian people by the Israeli military. You issued a throw-away tweet on 31 March and a full statement on 15 May, followed by a comment opposing the World Health Organisation fact-finding mission into the health needs of the occupied territories on 24 May.

As you know, on 30 March, when Israel began its latest attack, Palestinians were commemorating Land Day. [1] It was the launch of their Great March of Return demanding the right to go back to their homeland and an end to the blockade of Gaza. The March continued until 15 May, the seventieth anniversary of the Nakba, when three-quarters of a million Palestinians were ethnically cleansed from their land: hundreds of towns and villages were depopulated and destroyed to make way for the state of Israel.

Since 30 March, 123 Palestinians have been killed, including children, women and medics, and journalists wearing vests marked PRESS, many shot in the back, and 13,600 have been maimed or injured by live ammunition, tear gas and firebombs. For six weeks the killings continued, day after day, and on 14 May, when the US moved its embassy to Jerusalem, despite “overwhelming global opposition”, another massacre: 60 people killed, and 2,771 maimed and wounded. The Israeli use of illegal “dumdum” bullets which expand after entering the body was clearly intended to cause not only greater pain but permanent disabilities.

Your statement justifying this massacre prompted over 500 Jewish Zionists to write to outgoing president Arkush and president-elect Marie van der Zyl [2] protesting that BoD had “deeply misrepresented” their views by relieving Israel of all responsibility for the deaths caused by their snipers.

BoD is doing its best to hide that Jews are divided over Israel’s ongoing repression and slaughter of the Palestinian people, which many of us, like most people everywhere in the world, including a number of Zionists, are outraged by. So much for BoD “speaking for all Jews”! You are so determined to defend Israel that you have even accused Jewish organisations and individuals of “antisemitism” because they support Palestinian rights, and campaigned for their expulsion from the Labour Party.

This is not the first time the BoD has condoned murder, claiming to speak on behalf of

Jewish people in the UK. The BoD publicly supported pro-Israel rallies during the bombing of Gaza in 2008/9 and 2014 that killed thousands of Palestinian women, children and men. It has consistently supported a regime that is widely considered guilty of war crimes and the racist crime of apartheid. You are now saying that opposition to Israel's actions is antisemitic, thus demanding that Israel should be the only government in the world exempt from criticism.

The BoD in recent years has been uncritical of Israel and pro-Tory, contrary to the great Jewish working-class tradition of struggling for social justice in every situation. Arkush declared his political allegiance when (on 9 June 2017) he mourned the Tory prime minister's failure to win an outright majority at the general election as a "loss" for the Jewish community, and described the Tory alliance with the extreme right-wing, homophobic, anti-abortion Democratic Unionist Party in the North of Ireland as "positive news" and the DUP as "exceptionally warm and friendly". The Tories that Arkush supports are aligned in Europe with right-wing political parties that honour Nazi collaborators and Islamophobes. Arkush also celebrated the election of Trump undeterred by his racist, Islamophobic, and antisemitic campaign.

Your identification with the Israeli government could prove even more frightening. Governments and people around the world fear that the wrecking of the agreement with Iran by Netanyahu and Trump (the heads of two nuclear powers) may start yet another war, repeating the horrors of Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria. You may find yourself not only supporting the destruction of Iran, but urging the risk of nuclear war.

As Jewish people we are distraught that the Nazi holocaust has been, and continues to be, used to justify the brutal occupation of another people who played no part in our historic persecution, and to indulge in warmongering.

We reclaim our tradition of struggling for social justice for all by echoing the call by Jamal Juma, coordinator of the Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign and the Land Defence Coalition:

"It is time for the world to stop standing in implicit or explicit complicity with Israeli apartheid and to join us in nonviolent action by taking up the Palestinian call for boycotts, divestment and sanctions until Israel respects international law and human rights."

Notes

1. Land Day is the annual remembrance of the 1976 general strike protesting Israeli land theft from Palestinian citizens of Israel, when six unarmed Palestinians were killed, a hundred were wounded, and hundreds arrested.

2. We note that van der Zyl's suitability to be president of BoD has been questioned by victims/survivors of child sexual abuse who accuse her of "abandoning" them in their efforts to eradicate this crime from Jewish institutions.

Signed by

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