

The AFSC and Israel/Palestine: From Reconciliation to Advocacy

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There is a lot that can be said about the impressive history of the AFSC's work in the Middle East as well as its current priorities, but those have or will be partially covered elsewhere in the conference by those who have been more directly involved than I have. My involvement with the AFSC's Middle East work--which stretched from the mid-1970s through the mid-1990s--was primarily that as a volunteer and committee member in what was then referred to as peace education. The then-dominant approach that AFSC took to the conflict was to encourage dialogue between Jews and Arabs. Recognizing it as a conflict between two historically-oppressed peoples, it was understood that peace and reconciliation required hearing each other's stories and perspectives. On one level, this seemed quite reasonable, but I was one of those who believed it was important to also recognize the gross asymmetry in power at this point in history between Israelis and Palestinians. One group was living under a foreign belligerent occupation and the other was the occupier. And our government was largely responsible for making that possible.

There was a palpable tension during that period between Philadelphia and the regional offices over a number of issues which often boiled down to the question of how much overt advocacy the AFSC should engage in in pursuit of Israeli-Palestinian peace, specifically regarding how much should U.S. and Israeli policies be explicitly challenged. Indeed, when I was one of the three finalists for the AFSC Middle East Peace Education Secretary position here in Philadelphia in 1994, I was interviewed by phone by the half dozen regional staff focusing on Israel and Palestine. A recurring theme of the interview was, will you have our backs in our disputes with the board?

Last year, I was invited to Pendle Hill to take part in a joint meeting of the AFSC and the Quaker Palestine/Israel Network. Having long been accustomed to being seen as in Quaker circles as being one of the more strident "pro-Palestinian" voices, I was surprised to find myself as one of the more moderate voices in the room. My perspective on the conflict had not

fundamentally changed. Yet, during my twenty years as an academic in California, there had been a discernable shift in the dominant discourse in the AFSC towards a more explicit pro-Palestinian activism.

This shift is quite understandable in many respects, given the dramatic shift to the right in Israeli policies and ongoing U.S. support for those policies, but it has had its consequences in placing the AFSC under extreme pressure.

Among the issues that have made the AFSC a target of criticism has been the issue of boycotts, divestment, and sanctions, or BDS. Let's remember that these are tactics, not an organization. There has been a formal call for a comprehensive BDS by Palestinian civil society organizations which makes little distinction between the occupied territories and Israel itself and calls for the continuation of boycotts, divestment and sanctions until Israel grants completely equality for Palestinians, including the right of return of Palestinian refugees and their descendants, which would mean Jews would no longer be a majority of the Israeli population. This is what has led some to accuse those who advocate BDS, including the AFSC, of wanting to "destroy Israel."

Let's recall, however, that the "AFSC supports the use of boycott and divestment campaigns targeting only companies that support the occupation, settlements, militarism, or any other violations of international humanitarian or human rights law." They do not "call for a full boycott of Israel nor of companies because they are either Israeli or doing business in Israel" nor do their actions ever focus individuals.

Even going this far constitutes a much bolder stance than the AFSC has taken historically on Israel/Palestine. However, it is not a radical departure for the AFSC overall. For example, I remember one of my first volunteer efforts with AFSC, at age 19, was in support of boycotts, divestment, and sanctions in relations to the occupation of Namibia by apartheid South Africa.

Indeed, support for boycotts has been used by Quakers for centuries, such as the refusal to buy products produced by slaves. More recent examples have included the boycott of non-union lettuce and grapes in support of California migrant farmworkers to the boycott of certain brands of coffee connected to supports of Salvadoran death squads.

Nevertheless, the AFSC's decision to support boycotts and divestment as a nonviolent means of opposing the Israeli occupation has led to strong opposition, even from some Quaker institutions.

For example, for a number of years Lower School students at Friends Central had put on a concert which raised money for the AFSC. This was a tiny amount of cash raised by the young pupils themselves, last year totaling roughly \$28. However, the Friends Central administration decided — due to AFSC's partial BDS endorsement — that the money had to go to a non-Quaker charity instead. They never asked the pupils if they wanted to change the recipient of their fundraising efforts. Even though barely more than one percent of the AFSC's total budget is directed towards Israeli-Palestinian peace education work, and only a minority of that goes to supporting boycotts and divestment from those four or five companies, the Friends Central administration essentially decided to not allow their students to support AFSC because of that three-tenths of one percent, which would amount to roughly twelve cents. Rather than defend AFSC from spurious attacks by right-wing supporters of the Israeli occupation that such support for corporate responsibility in territories under foreign belligerent occupation somehow constituted "anti-Semitic" efforts to "destroy Israel," the Friends Central board went to great lengths to emphasize to the public how Friends Central was a free-standing Friends school not under the care of a Quaker meeting or any other Friends organization and that they would insure that they would make sure their students would not be able to donate any money to the AFSC because of it.

The decision to support such nonviolent methods for peace and justice as boycotting and divesting from companies has cost the AFSC more than the \$28 from Friends Central pupils. A number of donors, including a family foundation which used to provide annual grants to the AFSC no longer does so as a result. It has also run the AFSC afoul with state governments. A number of states, such as New Jersey—which has worked with the AFSC on immigration and other issues—may be forced to sever its ties due to a new law that forbids the state government from working with any organizations which "boycotts Israel," which is defined in the law to include companies in the occupied territories. Ironically, while the BDS movement has been criticized for not distinguishing between Israel and the occupied territories, over a

dozen states—with broad bipartisan majorities—have passed similar laws which punish those who boycott the illegal settlements in the same manner as those who boycott Israel as a whole.

In many respects, these attacks against AFSC are not new. As far back as the early 1970s, the AFSC booklet *Search for Peace in the Middle East*, which is extraordinarily moderate and understated by today's standards, was subjected to vicious attack and misrepresentation. Indeed, it is a reminder that, when it comes to Israel and Palestine, even the most moderate position can get you in trouble.

Among the most effective efforts the AFSC to challenge the false charges of being “anti-Israel” has been to bring dissident Israeli voices—some of whom identified as Zionists and some who did not—to share their perspectives on how Israeli policies and U.S. support for such policies is not only harmful to Palestinians but ultimately to Israelis as well. This is very important, as it underscores that this is not ultimately a conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, but between forces of militarism, racism, and national and/or religious chauvinism and those of peace, justice and reconciliation.

Unfortunately, even that approach is unacceptable to some Quaker institutions. Just a couple years ago, Friends Academy on Long Island cancelled a scheduled assembly—which was to be followed by a lunchtime dialogue with students—by two young Israeli conscientious objectors, part of a speaking tour organized by the AFSC. The Quaker-in-residence at the school, AFSC General Secretary Shan Cretin and others tried to convince the school administration to allow the COs to speak, but they steadfastly refused. Neither the head of school at the time of the cancellation, the current head of school, nor the chair of the board has been willing to explain to me why they cancelled the presentations. One Jewish parent, a former Israeli (whose daughter was valedictorian this past year) suspected that anti-Semitism may have played a role, since non-Jewish conscientious objectors have been allowed to speak at the school both before and after that incident.

The Israelis were to talk about their leadings that led them to refuse military service, which would have included raising concerns about the brutal Israeli occupation. As a result, others have shared their opinion that, rather than anti-Semitism, the Friends Academy

administration may have been motivated by anti-Arab racism, apparently believing that the Israeli occupation is actually a *good* thing, that Palestinians *should* be forced to live under foreign military occupation, that they do *not* have the right to their freedom, and students should therefore not be exposed to those who believe otherwise, even if they are Israelis.

Whatever the reason, it underscores how contentious AFSC Middle East peacebuilding work can be when a Quaker school bans conscientious objectors. (I would therefore strongly encourage each of you to write the Friends Academy head of school Andrea Kelly (andrea_kelly@fa.org) and chair of the board Debra Del Vecchio (debdelvecchio@yahoo.com) at Friends Academy and encourage them to end their ban on Israeli COs.)

Another criticism the AFSC receives for its work on Israel/Palestine, including from many Friends, is that they are not being “balanced” in their presentations and that it is important to hear “both sides” of the issue. Some of the Palestinian speakers sponsored by the AFSC have come across as too strident and have made Friends uncomfortable.

For decades, the AFSC has brought in people from conflict regions to tell their stories and perspectives, perspectives which—due to biases in Washington, the mainstream media, and elsewhere—we did not normally get to hear. Some of these speakers—who came from such countries as Vietnam, Namibia, Nicaragua, South Africa, El Salvador, and elsewhere—took positions which at times made Friends uncomfortable and contradicted our understanding of the Peace Testimony and other forms of Witness. Yet they were perspectives that were important to hear, even if we believe they were wrong in some respects.

In exposing people to witnesses from the Global South, Friends schools and organizations have largely understood this. They did not insist on “balancing” the perspective of a black South African anti-apartheid activist with a white South African pro-apartheid speaker; or a human rights activist from El Salvador with a supporter of the Salvadoran junta; or an East Timorese with a supporter of the Indonesian occupation. Why is it that we keep being told to insure “balance” only if the speaker is a Palestinian or a supporter of Palestinian rights? Why must there be a special sensitivity when it comes to Israel? Why should Israel be treated differently than other U.S.-backed right-wing governments engaging in oppressive policies?

Some would argue that it is because it is *indeed* different. Not that Israeli policies are any more justifiable than those by other repressive governments, but that Israel is the world's only Jewish state. For example, if there was only one black state in the world, there would like be a lot of African-Americans—along with many white liberals—who might be somewhat defensive about criticisms, even if completely justifiable. As with the specter of racism, which leads many of us reticent to say things that might inadvertently encourage prejudice, there are those who feel obliged to show special sensitivity regarding anti-Semitism. There is an understandable desire to reassure our Jewish friends, neighbors, colleagues, and others that we are not unfairly singling out Israel and that our concerns about Israel and Palestine are consistent with our Witness regarding violence and justice everywhere. We indeed *do* need to exercise a special sensitivity on issues related to Israel. We need to acknowledge that notwithstanding false charges of anti-Semitism, the fact is that—like racism—is all-too real, it is ubiquitous, and is often manifested unawares, so we must be constantly vigilant to challenge it whenever or wherever it may occur and to look critically at ourselves and our own often subconscious prejudices.

The question, however, is to what extent is the AFSC required to show “special sensitivity” to right-wing militaristic political positions advocated by pro-Israeli national chauvinists? The fact is, that—as a result of internalized oppression or other reasons—there are some Jews (like those of other faith traditions or those of no faith tradition) who are more or less set in their ways and all the listening and re-wording and rescheduling is not going to change them. We should not hold back out of fear of getting people upset with us, particularly since growing numbers of American Jews also oppose the Israeli occupation and support equal rights for Palestinians.

And let's take responsibility for the choices of leaders of Quaker institutions. For example, some people have tried to explain the decisions by Friends Central and Friends Academy administrations against the AFSC and its programs because they were pressured by Jewish parents for whom they rely on financial contributions. I have seen no evidence to support this claim, however. Indeed, such assumptions parallel the ugly anti-Semitic stereotype of blaming some kind of cabal of wealthy Jews behind the scenes, effectively scapegoating Jews

for the decisions of non-Jewish administrators and board members. Even if there indeed *were* threats by right-wing Jewish parents supportive of the Israeli occupation to withhold donations, the fact is that Quaker institutions have for years received pressure because of our principled commitment to desegregation, peace in Vietnam and Central America, majority rule in South Africa, ending the arms race, climate justice, labor rights and more, yet their administrations and boards have almost always stood up to principle. As a result, the decision rests with the administrations and boards alone and neither Jewish parents nor the AFSC should be blamed.

I know that is difficult for many of us to be falsely accused of prejudice of any kind. We don't like being attacked in the media. We don't like losing donors. We don't like being yelled at. We must hold fast to principle, however.

Within AFSC today, the Middle East program is on solid ground. Though the continued expansion of illegal Israeli settlements has resulted in such dramatic demographic changes that a viable two-state solution may no longer be possible, the AFSC continues to affirm "the right of both Israelis and Palestinians to live as sovereign peoples in their own homeland" and is open to any equitable and reciprocal resolution.

Restructuring and other initiatives has largely eliminated the tension of earlier years and has resulted in better integration between the international program and peace education projects as well as those between foreign and domestic staff. Some important niches in relief work and peacebuilding are taking place in Gaza, Jerusalem and elsewhere. Domestically, the AFSC—as it has for decades—has served to quietly work with other groups, providing space to encourage cooperation on shared concerns and building broad coalitions. Given that some groups involved with Palestine embrace some rather extreme ideologies or associations, AFSC has had to practice a fair amount of discernment with what kind of coalitions with which it is willing to work, and has had to make some tough but wise and principled decisions. Their two major campaigns current are "No Way to Treat a Child," focusing on young Palestinians detained by Israeli occupation forces, and "Gaza Unchained," working to lift the siege on that crowded impoverished enclave where the AFSC's launched one its most impressive relief projects back in 1948. The AFSC has also brought together Palestinians in the United States and

Europe, “enabling connections typically disabled under the occupation and diaspora conditions and creating opportunities for Palestinian networking, community-building and leadership.”

The AFSC has done a good job with working out the morality of complex questions, but I believe we can do even better at working out the strategic dimensions. I also believe that the AFSC can still do more to minimize criticism while still speaking Truth to Power.

For example, Palestine is the one of only two nations formally recognized by the United Nations as non-self-governing territories under foreign belligerent occupation. The other is Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, which, like Palestine, has struggled under a brutal military occupation, illegal settlements, a separation wall, and an occupier which has routinely defied the United Nations, the World Court, and most of the international community. As with Palestine, Western Saharans have been calling for BDS to support their struggle for freedom, specifically a handful of foreign corporations which support the occupation. What if AFSC, instead of calling for divestment specifically from companies supporting the Israeli occupation, the call was for divestment from companies supporting *all* UN-recognized foreign belligerent occupations?

Not only would including all occupations in the divestment campaign help protect AFSC from spurious charges of “anti-Semitism” and broaden its appeal, it would help bring attention to the little-known but important self-determination struggle of the Sahrawi people against the illegal and oppressive Moroccan occupation of their country, which was invaded by the U.S.-backed kingdom in 1975, eight years after the Israeli conquest of the West Bank and other Arab territories.

Given the intense polarization, harsh polemics, and suspicions regarding Israel and Palestine, a campaign based more on universal legal and moral principles against occupation, rather than targeting a particular country that has a strong and influential domestic constituency, would be far more effective. Given the suffering of the Palestinian (and Sahrawi) peoples and the complicity of the U.S. government and U.S. corporations in their oppression, they deserve nothing less.

Secondly, I believe greater focus on the U.S. role in the conflict is important.

There is no way that Israel would be able to maintain its occupation, repression, and colonization of the occupied territories—nor could it get away with the kinds of war crimes it has committed in its periodic military operations in Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, and elsewhere—were it not for the unconditional military, financial, and diplomatic support of the United States. As a U.S.-based organization, the AFSC has far more power to influence our own government than foreign governments. During the wars in Central America during the 1980s, it was important to highlight the war crimes by the Salvadoran government, but we also emphasized that how they were only able to engage in the massacres and repression as a direct result of U.S. support. This is the same situation today with Israel.

Without the U.S. veto power in the United Nations, Israel would be subjected to international sanctions and other pressures that would have long ago forced them to end the occupation. Israel engages in the kinds of repressive policies and violations of its international legal responsibilities *because it can*. Any other country in a hostile region given such a blank check would probably do the same kinds of things. (Indeed, Morocco has done what it has done because the United States, along with France, has blocked the United Nations Security Council from enforcing its resolutions calling for an end of the occupation and self-determination for Western Sahara.)

The refusal of the United States to apply pressure to end its colonization of the West Bank is not just bad for the Palestinians, but bad for Israelis as well. As Ron Young, who served as both AFSC Middle East Representative and AFSC Peace Education Secretary, observed back in 1983, U.S. policy is no more “pro-Israel” than it was “pro-El Salvador”—it is support right-wing militarist elements which are pursuing policies leading towards the country’s self-destruction. It has essentially made a viable two-state solution, and therefore a sustainable peace settlement in which Israel could remain a democratic Jewish state, virtually impossible. Illegal Israeli settlements and roads—reserved for Jews only—create an apartheid-like situation, and make it extremely difficult for Israeli forces to defend against a population angry at the occupiers who have confiscated what is often their best land. Israel would be far more secure defending a clearly defined and internationally recognized border than an archipelago of illegal outposts within Palestinian territory.

Yet an Israel at peace with its neighbors would be far less likely to be willing to serve as a reliable ally in support of U.S. hegemonic designs in this critical region.

As a result, it would be important to emphasize even more that we are not talking about Israel versus Palestine, but the United States versus peace and security for both peoples; that the United States may be anti-Palestinian, but it is not pro-Israeli; that the problem is not Israel, but U.S. support for the most right-wing militaristic elements in Israel which Washington has helped come to power and sustain; and that the United States is not really interested in peace, but of imposing a Pax Americana. The more we can focus on the contradictory role of the United States as Israel's #1 military, economic, and diplomatic supporter with its role as a supposed mediator in the conflict, and the less about Israel's crimes in isolation, the more AFSC can focus on the real problem and the less on defending itself of charges of unfairly "singling out Israel."

There is so much more I can say, but what underlies all this is that there is inherently no contradiction between advocacy and reconciliation. In order to effectively address Israel-Palestine, one needs nuance, reflection, discernment, empathy, a willingness to listen, and an ability to keep a global perspective while prioritizing the responsibilities of our own government.

This is not easy. And yet, all these are the very kinds of things that Friends are particularly good at. As a result, despite how messy and complicated and problematic our efforts have been on this issue over the years, I do believe that the AFSC has a particularly strong ability to address Israel and Palestine in a fair and effective manner. And that is why I believe we have no choice but to continue to do so.