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We all have views on Israel so let's hear them

Instead of striving for a united front, we should acknowledge our differences

By **Keith Kahn-Harris**, December 29, 2009



In 2009, the long-running controversy over Jewish communal representation in relation to Israel took a new turn. The election of Vivian Wineman, a founder of British Peace Now, as president of the Board of Deputies was met with the criticism that his doveish views were inappropriate for the head of an organisation that should unequivocally support Israel.

Last month, comments made during a radio interview by Board treasurer Lawrence Brass supporting a settlement freeze in East Jerusalem were strongly criticised by Likud-Herut UK. This in turn sparked an email campaign in support of Brass by members of Jews for Justice for Palestinians and other groups not normally known for their backing for the Board.

While recent public statements by the Board attacking the labelling of settlement produce and government inaction over the Goldstone report suggest that it remains solidly pro-Israel, barbs aimed at Board leaders have demonstrated that British Jewish communal politics are more complex than is often appreciated.

Too often, communal attitudes to Israel are understood simply as a struggle between a pro-Israel majority and a minority of leftist critics. This minority is treated variously as a menace or as an ill-led or unfairly stifled set of dissenters. The size of this minority tends to be viewed as either insignificant or rapidly growing.

Either way, the situation is not that straightforward. One section of the community can in many ways be regarded as being just as marginalised as the left has been seen to be, namely — the pro-settler right.

Many, principally Orthodox, British Jews are totally opposed to territorial compromise in any form.

In general, the right tends to be more circumspect than the left in expressing dissent from Israeli actions and "the Jewish party line" on Israel. During the Gaza pull-out, there were few public protests. Broadly speaking, the right is more likely than the left to voice its views privately, sacrificing politics for public solidarity. Its exponents do have their "red lines" though and regard people like Brass and Wineman as crossing those lines.

The presence of substantial minorities to the right and left of the supposed consensus over Israel is proof — if proof were needed — that the community is divided over this crucial issue. Even the most exceptional communal leaders cannot pretend that Jewish institutions embody the voice of Anglo-Jewry. This being so, the time has come for the "emancipation" of currently marginalised voices on Israel. Bizarre though it may seem, Jews for Justice for Palestinians and Likud-Herut UK have a common cause in the struggle for an Anglo-Jewish polity that recognises the community's diversity.

The Board and other communal bodies need to find a way to ensure that voices from across the spectrum of opinions over Israel can enter into a dialogue. Rather than constantly seeking to present a united front that does not exist, the Board should transform itself into a space within which the full range of opinions about Israel can be heard and properly debated, rather than quashed.

A daunting task, to be sure, but the only way of ensuring communal solidarity along with the inevitability of conflicting opinions.

Sociologist Keith Kahn-Harris is the convenor of the New Jewish Thought project

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