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The American Jewish Committee

Advancing Religious, Ethnic and Racial Understanding Worldwide

Tips for Pro-Israel Advocates*

by

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September 30, 2002

Anyone who speaks out in support of Israel today in a public setting, particularly on an American college campus, is likely to encounter opposing voices, some reasoned, others shrill. The following “tips” from someone who has debated the Middle East in numerous diplomatic, political, media, and academic settings may be of help.

Be prepared. It sounds painfully obvious, but too few of us take this point seriously enough.

Talking about Israel these days requires a reasonably firm command of the subject, including, of course, basic history. Moreover, we must anticipate and respond to a torrent of arguments, some outrageous beyond belief, from the other side. Those arguments allege that Israel is guilty of “occupation,” “apartheid,” “human rights abuses,” “war crimes,” “racism,” “genocide,” “colonization,” “economic strangulation,” “humiliation,” or “military excesses.”

There are persuasive replies to each of these assertions, but they need to be thought through in advance with the help of available publications such as *Myths and Facts*, and talking points from the Israeli government Web site (www.mfa.gov.il), the American Jewish Committee (www.ajc.org), and other informed parties.

Know your adversaries. Where are they coming from and what motivates them? Do they support Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state, whatever the final borders, or do they in fact reject the basic tenet of Zionism, the national liberation movement of the Jewish people? Are they anti-American, anti-Western, anti-capitalist, and anti-globalization, and accordingly see Israel as nothing more than an extension of these values?

When they speak of the “end of occupation,” do they mean the end of Israel’s (unsought) occupation of the territories acquired in the 1967 Six-Day War for Israel’s survival, or do they instead refer to the end of Israel’s “occupation” of all lands since 1948, meaning the end of the State of Israel? When they speak of “Free Palestine,” do they mean an independent Palestinian state living side by side in peace with the State of Israel, or do they seek the “freeing” of all of British Mandatory Palestine as it was constituted in 1948, and therefore the end of Israel?

* Adapted from a speech to the Hillel’s 2002 Charles Schusterman International Student Leaders Assembly, Honesdale, Pennsylvania, August 21, 2002

If they reject Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, why? There are 191 members of the UN. Do the critics challenge any other country's right to exist, or only Israel's? If the latter, then don't hesitate to label this what it is – anti-Semitism. There is no other way to describe an attitude that uniquely denies to the Jewish people the right of self-determination that all other peoples seek.

Don't attempt to build your case on Israel's infallibility. Israel is not a perfect society, but then again, no society is. One does not have to defend each and every Israeli action from 1948 to the present to stand on Israel's side. Israel is capable of making mistakes, just like any other democratic society (not to mention non-democratic societies), but those mistakes do not undermine the basic case for Israel. In fact, Israel's case is so overwhelmingly powerful that acknowledging an Israeli error is not a weakness, but a strength.

Be compassionate. If innocent Palestinians are mistakenly killed or wounded by the Israeli military in its anti-terror operations, express regret. Make clear that in any conflict situation – and this conflict was triggered by the Palestinian decision to reject the Clinton-Barak peace proposal of 2000 and turn to violence instead – tragic accidents occur despite the considerable efforts of Israel, in this case, to minimize them. But avoiding such incidents can be especially difficult when an adversary cynically uses schools, hospitals, churches, and even children as shields to protect gunmen.

Be on the side of peace. Stress again and again that no nation on earth seeks peace more than Israel. Not only is peace at the center of the Jewish religious and ethical tradition, but it is the overriding goal for a nation that, 54 years after its establishment, has yet to know a single day of true peace. Emphasize that when Israel had a credible partner, e.g., Jordan and Egypt, peace became possible. The Clinton-Barak peace proposal offered the Palestinians a contiguous state with a capital in East Jerusalem. Rather than engage this tantalizing proposal, however, the Palestinians said no – not for the first time – and turned to terror to achieve their political aims. Without doubt, when a trustworthy Palestinian partner finally emerges, peace on this front will also become possible.

Be on the side of democracy. Hammer away at the fact that Israel is a democracy, the only one in the region. There are a million Arab citizens of Israel, and they enjoy the right to vote. The Israeli parliament currently has 10 of its 120 members from the Israeli Arab community.

Democracy means free and fair elections, smooth transfers of power, and an independent judiciary. Where else in the region is there a remotely comparable society? And if there were more democracies, there would be less conflict and more conflict resolution. When was the last time in history that one democracy attacked another? Look at the example of Western Europe. Plagued by wars for centuries, Western Europe today is a region of peace, stability, and prosperity. Why? First and foremost because the

nations all embrace democracy and have realized the benefits of cooperation rather than conflict. The Arab world could learn a thing or two from the European example.

Go on the offensive. Take on human rights issues in the Middle East that have been largely – and inexplicably – ignored. Why shouldn't there be a movement to promote women's rights in the region, or gay rights, or labor rights, or press freedom in the Arab world? Why should there be total silence about Syria's ongoing occupation of Lebanon and refusal to recognize the country as anything other than part of "Greater Syria?"

Emphasize the fact that there appears to be an obsessive, relentless preoccupation with Israel and Israel alone. The glib response is often that "we expect more from Israel." This comment completely ignores the fact that Israel is not operating in a vacuum, but rather in a conflict situation against adversaries with no scruples—witness the widespread use of suicide bombers against innocent civilians.

How do anti-Israel students (or professors, for that matter) explain a divestment campaign against companies doing business with democratic Israel, when these very same individuals, claiming to be driven by human rights concerns, fail to launch a campaign against companies doing business in countries with objectively appalling human rights records? How about a divestment campaign against, for example, energy companies doing business in Saudi Arabia? After all, that kingdom suffers from a total absence of democracy, abysmal treatment of women, and denial of any rights to Christians. And Saudi Arabia is just one of many countries in the region that trample on basic human rights while attracting heavy foreign, including U.S., investment.

Why should we be put on the defensive, as if Israel were the be-all and end-all of discussion about the Middle East?

Fight the liberal-conservative divide. Many today see support for Israel as an essentially conservative position, while liberals may reflexively support, even romanticize, the "underdog" Palestinians, totally ignoring the inconvenient fact that the Palestinian leadership has rejected peace offers that could have led to a two-state solution and a new start for the Palestinian people.

Point out that Israel is the only country in the region where liberal values are not just preached but practiced. Where else do political parties from across the spectrum, human rights organizations, women's groups, labor unions, gay groups, the press, the judiciary, and students have as much freedom to organize, express themselves, and act without interference? Where else in the region are basic human rights protections, which Americans often take for granted, in place? Where else would protest and dissent be permitted as it is in Israel?

Be passionate, not angry. Easily said, I know, but at times hard to practice. All of us have lost our temper at one time or another, but it's precisely at such moments that we risk losing the argument.

Remember the goal. The aim in any debate is not to persuade your adversary. That's usually a waste of time. Rather, it's to convince those who may be listening to you and are open to new ideas and cogent arguments. They are the real audience, and so it's essential to try to understand who else is in the room and what approaches and themes are most likely to resonate with them.

Don't win the battle but lose the war. In a debate on the Middle East, it's important not to get sucked into arguments over every single issue, but rather to control the message by sticking, when and where possible, to the larger questions.

These include Israel's demonstrated quest for peace and willingness to take enormous and concrete risks in its pursuit; the objective dangers to Israel of a neighborhood laden with arms and bereft of fellow democracies; the difficulty of trying to defend a nation against terrorism and suicide bombings that have touched every corner of the country (what would any other country do under similar circumstances to defend its citizens?); the Palestinian refusal to come forward, whether as far back as 1947 or as recently as 2000, in a spirit of cooperation and compromise, in the search for peace; and the impossibility of achieving peace with a Palestinian leader who may sometimes parrot the language of peace – in English, if not in Arabic – but who actively encourages terrorism, harbors terrorists, cavorts with the likes of Iran and Iraq, and thus betrays the interests of those Palestinians who seek a genuine accommodation with Israel.

Be confident, but never overconfident. You have the best weapon – the facts. Even so, each debate may take a slightly different turn; therefore, always be on your toes. Stay acutely sensitive to the dynamics of the discussion, the setting, and the audience, and adjust your approach accordingly.

Don't feel alone. There are countless Web sites, organizations, and publications available to offer advice and information. Among the most useful American Jewish Committee publications to help you, all of which are available on our Web site (www.ajc.org), are:

Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Brief Guide for the Perplexed (in English, Arabic, French, German, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish)

The Middle East: Back to Basics

Five Basic Talking Points on Israel