



STUC call for views on a boycott of Israel

Response from the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

Jewish people in Scotland hold as wide a variety of views about current Israeli politics as do other people, and it is not difficult to find Jewish supporters of every position from the left to the right. There is much heated debate within Jewish community as to what Israel should do about security and diplomacy and human rights issues. That said, the vast majority of Jewish people regard it as axiomatic that there should be a Jewish state. That state is Israel. In that fundamental sense, the vast majority of Jewish people are Zionist, are supporters of Israel, have family and friends in Israel, and indeed many have lost some of those family and friends to terrorist attacks against Israel. It is, therefore, impossible to construct clear-cut distinctions between “Zionists”, “supporters of Israel”, and “Jews”. (“Zionism” is nothing more than the name of the political movement that is Jewish nationalism.) The relationship between Jews and Israel is not unique, and it has become a cliché to speak of living in a multicultural global village in which many people (for example Kashmiri Scottish Muslims) have overlapping multiple identities, and members of immediate and extended families living overseas.

This does not, however, imply that all Jewish people support the actions of any particular Israeli government. The war in Gaza is a case in point. Although the majority of the Scottish Jewish community broadly supports the policies of the elected government of Israel, there is a minority who take a contrary view. Opinions are divided on whether the Israeli action was correct, whether it was wise tactically or strategically, whether it was “proportionate”. Because there are such disparate views within the community, the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities does not take a view on these matters. However, our remit is for the wellbeing of Jewish people in Scotland, individually and collectively, and hence we are deeply concerned at current grossly excessive rhetoric that does not distinguish what is said about Israel from what is said about Jews, especially when it replicates ancient antisemitic myths with the simple substitution of “Zionist” for “Jew”. Calls for a boycott of Israel are frequently couched in such terms.

Of particular concern is the equation of Israeli action with the Holocaust. This historically groundless comparison is unlikely to be due to simple ignorance, but, on the contrary, an awareness that the Holocaust is central to Jewish collective memory and identity. It also reinforces the attempts by right-wing groups to suggest that there were no gas chambers and that only a small number of Jews may have died at the hands of the Nazis. The Nazis sought to eliminate all Jews (and other groups) in a programme of systematic industrialised slaughter targeted at an entirely civilian population; their victims are estimated to have numbered 6 million Jews and 5 million others. By contrast, “proportionate” or otherwise, the Israeli action in Gaza was a response to escalating guerrilla action and rocket attacks, while the casualties were not remotely comparable, and indeed the local population is growing.

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Comparisons are often drawn with South Africa. However, a recent leading article in the Times¹ contrasted the situation in South Africa with that in Israel and Palestine: "*[South African] Apartheid was an evil system against which it was right to impose economic and diplomatic sanctions. ... The Israeli-Palestinian conflict comprises competing and equally legitimate national claims, both of which must be accommodated in an eventual territorial compromise.*"

Quite apart from any political consideration, there is an important difference. The boycott of South Africa impacted on South Africa itself and on organisations that might otherwise have done business with South Africa, but not on any particular community in Scotland. By contrast, there can be no doubt that a boycott of Israel would impact heavily on the Scottish Jewish community. We do not suggest that this would be an intended consequence of a boycott, but it would be a more than accidental corollary. After all, if Israel is the only country to be boycotted, then that may be interpreted as a statement that Israel is the worst country in the world, and it therefore follows that its supporters are moral reprobates deserving of social isolation, political abandonment, and perhaps even a good kicking every now and then. Thus runs the argument – and its conclusion can be seen in all the rhetoric that suggests that support for Israel's actions, or even its right to exist, is not merely wrong, but illegitimate. That puts the majority of the Jewish community, who not only support but have family ties with Israel, beyond the moral pale, and so exposes them to attack. This is not mere speculation, since it is a fact that previous boycott leaflets have called on people to "boycott Jewish businesses". Although we recognise that some participating organisations would deplore both the argument and its consequence, such deprecation will not prevent the Jewish community, and individuals in that community, from becoming targets.

A boycott of Israel would have another serious consequence for the Scottish Jewish community. Many kosher foods are imported from Israel, and the loss of these would severely limit the diet of observant Jews. People living in rural areas where there are no dedicated kosher food shops are particularly reliant on Israeli products on general sale in supermarkets. They would, therefore, be disproportionately affected by a boycott, and indeed, only last week there were reports of kosher food suppliers being targeted. We believe that this would breach Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights, by obstructing the right "to manifest religion or belief, in ... practice and observance."

Furthermore there is little evidence that even the most ardent advocates of a boycott are prepared to forego the use of Israeli technology in the mobile phones, laptops, and wireless internet on which they depend to organise their campaigns. That is not only hypocritical, but contrasts with their disregard for the religious rights of the Jewish community.

In January the Community Security Trust (CST) published its annual report, which showed a welcome, if small, reduction in the number of antisemitic incidents in the UK in 2008. Ironically, however, this was published at the end of a month that saw an unprecedented rise in antisemitic activity, and in the first four weeks of 2009 the CST recorded almost half as many incidents as in the whole of 2008. The overwhelming majority of those incidents related to the situation in Gaza. That is not conjecture,

¹ 4 March 2009 http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading_article/article5841342.ece

many of the perpetrators were anxious to ascertain they were speaking to a Jew – not to an Israeli – before, for example, demanding belligerently "*what are you people going to do about the holocaust in Gaza?*".

A Jewish – not an Israeli – student at a Scottish University received an e-mail complaining that the media is controlled by Jews, and telling him to "*watch his back*", while another had Gaza-related graffiti painted on his door. An employee of a Jewish – not Israeli – organisation based in Glasgow was informed by telephone that "*we hate Israel and we hate the Jewish conspiracy*", and a letter from a prominent public figure, published in the Herald, stated that the situation in Gaza "*bodes ill for ...Jews all over the world.*"

This conflation of "Jew" and "Israel" is not a new phenomenon. For example, students supporting Mordechai Vanunu in the Glasgow University rectorial election campaigned by chanting "Israeli's are evil; Jews are evil", and a man convicted in Kilmarnock Sheriff Court of painting Nazi graffiti and shouting anti-Jewish abuse claimed in his defence that he had "taken umbrage against Israel". Contributions to The Scotsman's online discussion forum following an article about Israel included "*jews [sic] are not fit to breathe our air. They must be attacked wherever you see them; throw rocks at their ugly, hooked-nosed women and mentally ill children, and light up the REAL ovens.*"

There are Jewish people living across the whole of Scotland from the Borders to the Shetlands. The majority live in the central belt, with the largest concentration in East Renfrewshire, but outwith these communities, most Jewish people live in rural areas, often at a considerable distance from the nearest synagogue, from communal services and resources, and from other Jewish people. As always when tensions rise in the Middle East, we have been contacted in the last few months by isolated Jewish people fearful that they will become a target. Some have told us that they now conceal their Jewish identity from friends and neighbours because they have previously been attacked. Others say they feel "*intimidated*", that "*it's quite a dangerous thing to say that you're Jewish, especially because of what's happening in Israel*", and many have told us that that they would "*think very carefully before deciding to tell someone I'm Jewish.*" A number of people, each the only Jewish employee in their workplace, have received Gaza-related e-mails at work which they describe as "*fundamentally anti-Jewish*", and "*extremely distressing*". Everyday activities have become a source of anxiety; for example, one mother told us that she was afraid to send her three year old daughter to nursery because of the hostility of the comments she heard from staff and other parents. Even more worrying is the fact that we know from our own enquiries that the majority of such incidents are not reported, so that those referred to are merely the tip of the iceberg.

It is undoubtedly true that not all criticism of Israel is antisemitic. It is equally obviously true that not all of it is not. There is no denying the continuing recurrence of posters, chants, and graffiti of "*kill the Jews*".

One feature of current antisemitism is that the perpetrators claim the right to define it themselves – a senior trade union leader told his conference in 2007 that because Britain had stood against Hitler and had liberated Jewish victims of the Holocaust, "*we will not have the Israeli state tell us that the boycott is antisemitic*". The

Macpherson principle that "if offence was taken, then offence was given" cannot, however, be disappplied to antisemitism, and the fact of the matter is that many of the protests have been very intimidating, and the people who report feeling intimidated feel they are being targeted because they are Jewish.

As with other offensive behaviour, the onus is on the perpetrator to demonstrate that it is not discriminatory. In fact those campaigning against Israel have little or nothing to say about analogous conflicts such as in Kashmir or Sri Lanka. There is much concern in the Jewish community as to why so many political activists, journalists, politicians, etc. should focus so intently on Israel and Palestine when they pay so little attention to other crises. Why, for example, has there been so little media coverage of Sudan's expulsion of humanitarian aid organisations from Darfur? Many Jewish people fear it reflects subconscious antisemitism and emboldens overt antisemitism. At the very least it is something that requires explanation.

Antisemitism is not just physical violence against Jews, but treating Jews differently; it is not just directed against individuals, but collectives too. So when Jewish organisations in this country and the Jewish state are singled out for criticism and boycott when they act just like other organisations and states, that is as much antisemitism as the desecration of a synagogue.

Criticism of any country's government is entirely legitimate. Targeting, intentionally or otherwise, a local community on account of the actions of another country's government – or acting in such a way that a local community becomes, even incidentally, a target – is not legitimate. It is remarkable that many of those most vocal in calling for a boycott that will inevitably stigmatise Jewish people, were, by contrast, also vocal in calling for recognition that the blame for the attacks on the Twin Towers and the London underground should not be laid at the door of the Muslim community. That inconsistency also requires explanation.

The STUC has a record of dialogue with both the Histadrut and PGFTU, both of which have urged constructive engagement rather than a boycott. It is our view that promotion of such dialogue, in combination with support for organisations that work with both Israelis and Palestinians, will achieve positive outcomes. A boycott of Israel would disrupt that dialogue, and ostracise not only Israel and Israelis, but also Jewish people living in Scotland. It would, therefore, obstruct moves towards peace in the Middle East, and also be extremely damaging to good community relations in Scotland.

Note: The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland comprising Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Dundee as well as the more loosely linked groups of the Jewish Network of Argyll and the Highlands, and of students studying in Scottish Universities and Colleges. SCoJeC is Scottish Charity SC029438, and its aims are to advance public understanding about the Jewish religion, culture and community. It works with others to promote good relations and understanding among community groups and to promote equality, and represents the Jewish community in Scotland to government and other statutory and official bodies on matters affecting the Jewish community.