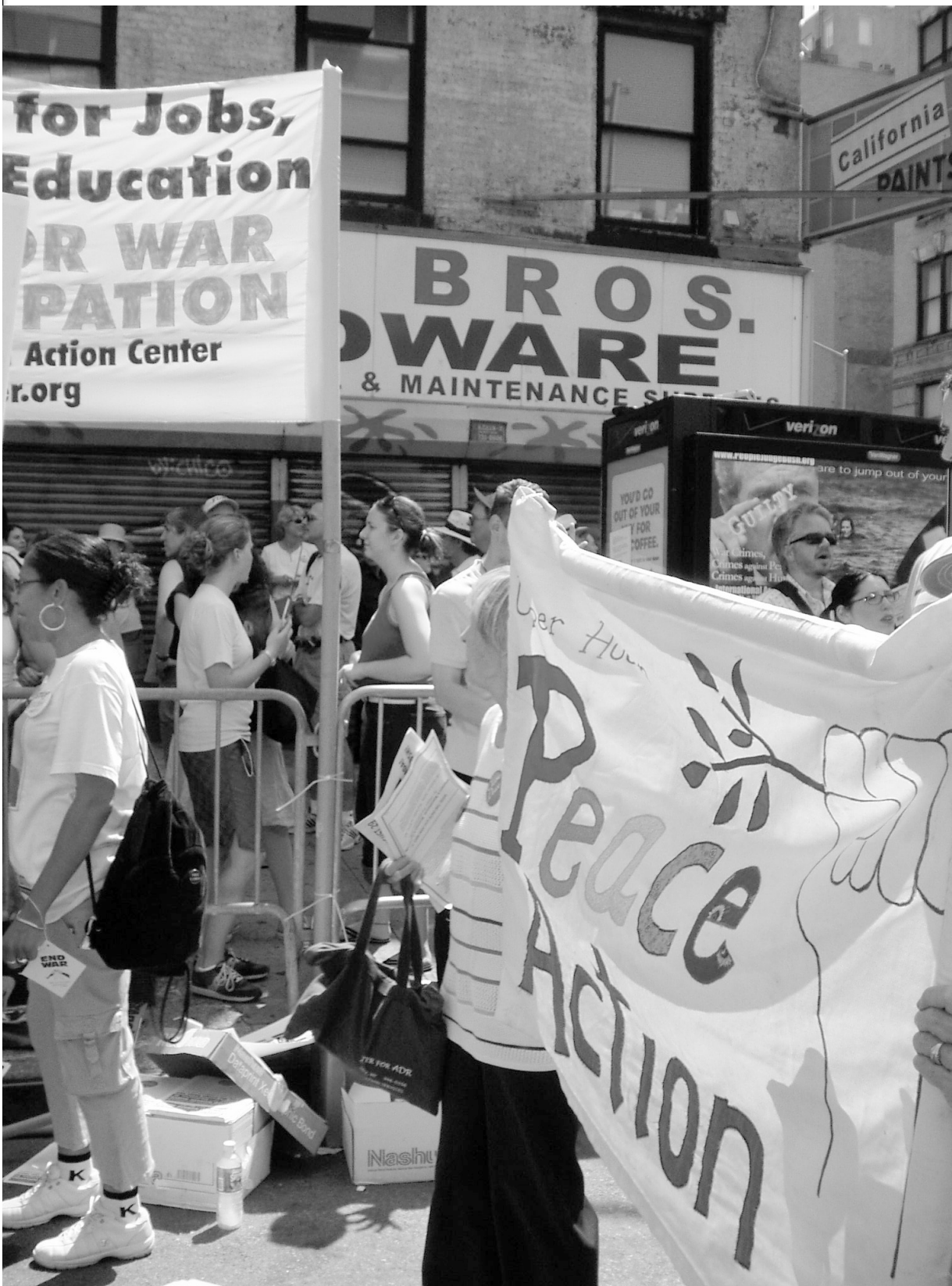


DON'T TOUCH THIS

THE ANTIWAR MOVEMENT TRIES TO GET A GRIP ON
ISRAEL AND PALESTINE,
OR AT LEAST KEEP FROM CHOKING ON IT

BY MIRIAM AXEL-LUTE



At an April 2002 antiwar demonstration in Washington, D.C., a young woman stepped to the side of the flow of people. She was carrying a sign opposing the threat of a U.S. invasion of Iraq. She had been walking for a while behind one of the many large groups at the event advocating Palestinian rights. This group had signs equating Zionism with racism, and the Israeli flag with a swastika in place of the Star of David. Her face set, the young woman turned her own sign over and fished out a marker. She wrote "I'm Jewish and I oppose the Israeli occupation" and rejoined the march, looking anxious.

Shortly after the second intifada began in 2000, a Boston-based Jewish group called Tekiah, which works on immigrant rights, antiracism and economic justice, and has supported efforts against the Iraq war, held a meeting. When the group had formed they had shied away from committing to work on Israel/Palestine issues—similar organizations had warned them that if they took it on, all else would be subsumed in that cause. Someone put an item on the agenda about whether to take a stand on what was currently going on in the occupied territories. Matt Borus, Tekiah's coordinator, remembers that even though the person facilitating the meeting was a professional mediator, the discussion was "explosive" and at least one person stormed out and never came back. "I actually was on the 'We can't be silent about this' side," recalls Borus, "but by the end of the meeting . . . I kind of understood that if we do this, it'll be what we do."

Across the country, at a San Francisco antiwar rally, a member of Jewish Voice for Peace approached a group of Palestinians with an Israeli-flag-and-swastika sign and asked what they meant by it. They talked about the experiences of their families, and she talked about being the daughter of Holocaust survivors, and why seeing a swastika distressed her.

Closer to home, about five years ago one of the early end-the-occupation vigils held by the Capital Region's Palestinian Rights Committee was heckled by a group of right-wing Jews. Some of the Jews participating in the vigil went over to talk with them and they ended up visiting each other and meeting several times in a quest for open and friendly dialogue. Neither side swayed the other in their position on the issue, but they stayed in touch.

This is not an article about Israel and Palestine, exactly. It is not an article that attempts to address or assess the differing positions and proposals about how to end the violence there, who's to blame, or how to construct a solu-



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tion that is peaceful and just. This is only an article that tries to look at how the existence of the issue itself—in all its thorny, complex, and emotional third-railness—is affecting the antiwar movement. It is an article that because of its subject matter, needs the disclaimer I just wrote, because even the base assumptions of people working in good faith to find a balanced middle ground will be disputed by others working in similar good faith. This is part of the problem.

It's difficult to get a handle on how the issue is affecting the antiwar movement at large because those who do not have particular stake in it are reluctant to speak up on the issue. But it is clear that it is a presence, and one that most activists will brush up against in one way or another.

Lawrence Wittner, a expert on peace movements who teaches history at the University at Albany, and has also been involved in the Jewish peace group Brit Tzedek v'Shalom (Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace), says that among the mainstream peace movements he's studied there's "some hesitation in terms of dealing with the Israel-Palestine conflict." Wittner says this is partly because the U.S. peace movement usually restricts itself to conflicts where the United States is directly involved—i.e., has troops on the ground. And it is partly that "the situation itself is less clear-cut. There have been terrible things done by both sides in the conflict."

And so, Wittner explains, peace organizations have been cautious not to seem "biased," and if pressed, they have generally advocated for a "balanced solution" often phrased as "trade land for peace." "Peace people, especially, don't want to seem either anti-Semitic or anti-Palestinian," he adds. "They try to avoid anything that will seem disparaging of two groups that have historically been persecuted."

Some in the peace movement may be comfortable with

this stance—Bethlehem Neighbors for Peace, for one, has steadfastly kept its agenda focused on the Iraq war—but as the profile of problems in the region as a whole have been rising, it's become a harder topic to ignore. "Ever since the intifadas, the peace movement has moved greatly toward recognizing how Palestine is central to the whole region, why that conflict has the whole region unsettled," says David Aube of the local Palestinian Rights Committee. Most local antiwar events in recent years have included some mention of the issue. He contrasts this with the massive 1982 antinuclear rally that occurred just after the invasion of Lebanon and yet "there was no mention of the Middle East at all."

United for Peace and Justice, an umbrella organization that emerged out of the organizing against the current Iraq war, has an entire detailed section on its Web site of reading and resources about the conflict, from a wide range of perspectives. Chapters of CodePink: Women for Peace have been listing and participating in end-the-occupation vigils. The topic is out there.

"In the antiwar movement, there isn't a huge constituency of people who think the Israeli occupation is OK," notes JVP's co-director Liat Weingart.

And in fact, many say that among activists in the Capital Region especially, it is not frequently an open bone of contention. "The Capital Region activists are all very good on the issue of Palestinian rights," says Aube.

"At one point you'd hear 'Israel doesn't have the right to exist' and 'Palestinians don't deserve to have a state,'" says Paul Tick, a founding member of the local chapter of Brit Tzedek and a leader in Bethlehem Neighbors for Peace. "I don't think you hear that kind of extremism so much any more." He credits many years of careful dialogue between groups like Brit Tzedek and the Palestinian Rights Committee for having helped people "learn to work with each other and listen to each other."

The dialogue has not diffused the underlying emotion everywhere, however. It remains a difficult thing to understand and grapple with on one's own, let alone talk about in a movement where agreeing on most things political is no guarantee of agreeing on Israel/Palestine.

Victorio Reyes, director of the Social Justice Center in Albany, recalls a discussion about how to address Israel/Palestine in a local antiwar rally at the beginning of the current Iraq war. While there were no explosions, the room was filled the whole time with "quiet tension." "I think there's a lot of silence," says Reyes. "People don't want to say anything, especially if they're neither Palestinians, nor Israeli, nor Jewish."

Take Bill Peltz, who spends most of his activist energy with the Green Party, where, he says, there's a "pro-Israel/pro-Palestine" consensus and people don't argue much about it. But Peltz is also the former staff person for the Capital District Labor-Religion Coalition, and he says not only was the subject avoided there as conscientiously as reproductive rights were, but he felt (and to some extent still feels) constrained himself from offering a public opinion supporting Palestinian rights because he was so closely associated with the coalition.

"Mostly I bite my tongue," he says, and describes having called a third party to feel out the position of a mutual acquaintance before bringing it up. "It's the sort of thing that you feel out very gingerly, because the reactions are so emotional."

Peltz, who grew up Jewish, has struggled with the issue in interfaith settings before: As a leader of the Council of Congregations when he lived in Champaign, Ill., he spoke at a gathering to oppose the United Nation's 1975 (now repealed) "Zionism equals racism" resolution. Deep down, however, he felt it was a valid criticism. On the other hand, he says, "It's not your garden-variety racism."

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"It was important to have Jewish and Christian unity and support the Jewish community," he explains. "But I felt intellectually that something was lacking about our position. . . . I don't know exactly what I said, but I was very uncomfortable about it."

Peltz also helped bring Mark Bruzonsky, owner (for now) of middleeast.org and a frequent writer on the subject, to speak in Albany this summer. What had been framed as a discussion of how to revive an education committee to talk to Jews about the issue was disrupted by a hostile audience member who accused Bruzonsky of being a self-hating Jew.

"For the most part, I haven't seen much good discussion of this," says Borus. "I see back-and-forth sloganeering, and perhaps even more so, I see people retreating into their own camps."

"This is an issue that people are afraid to bring up in certain organizations or groupings," acknowledges Aube, citing specifically any organization that relies on or is courting support from the Democratic party. "The liberal, primarily white middle-class peace groups . . . are very uncomfortable."

What does this state of affairs mean for the antiwar movement? As the movement has plunged into this territory, many people who favor a two-state solution, and many Jews—a traditionally antiwar constituency—feel like extreme elements on both sides have been using the issue to drive a wedge into the antiwar movement, perhaps keeping some of its natural constituency away.

The more visible problem comes when vocal elements within antiwar groups head into territory that at least appears directly anti-Semitic. The Israeli flags with swastikas or simplistic statements like "The United States went to war with Iraq because of Israel," while relatively uncommon, are definitely turning off Jews who would otherwise not only be sympathetic to the antiwar movement, but critical of the Israeli occupation, say Tick and Borus.

When Albany's Brit Tzedek chapter was formed, says Tick, it got a lot of interest from progressive Jews who said they didn't feel comfortable on the left because of this issue. If they stand up for a two-state solution, "they get branded as anti-Palestinian, right winger, right-wing Zionist, racist, etc." he recounts. "I don't want to make like it's been a major issue," he cautions, "but there are many people who bring up those things."

In the course of his organizing work with Tekiah, says Borus, he not only speaks with Jews who are somewhat uncomfortable with the way the topic is handled, but also receives frequent e-mails chastising the group for participating in the antiwar movement. One March 23, 2003, e-mail the group received reads: "[T]he protests have been as much about villifying Israel over the question of Palestine as they are about Iraq. I was even treated to an oratory as I waited to meet someone . . . about how the Jews say that the book, 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion' was a fabrication— and how that MIGHT be true. I am hoping you and others planning a Jewish contingency to the anti-war rallies realize . . . that these rallies are largely anti-Israel, anti-Jew."

"It annoys me that this is necessary to say, but I don't think the U.S. peace movement hates Jews," says Borus. "I think the Jewish community bears a lot of responsibility for its own misconceptions, but I also think that the antiwar movement bears responsibility for not being nuanced enough in its rhetoric to attract a constituency which has traditionally been antiwar."

"You have people who remember a world when Jews were really discriminated against, which is most of the past 2,000 years, and it's easy to see why you get defensive when people are attacking Israel," notes Bloch. "I don't think it's healthy, I don't think it's helping. But I understand it."

"A lot of Jews have a feeling that we're alone in the world, and [for] a lot of us, our family histories are really proof of that," explains Weingart. "We need people to be

clear that they're allies to us." And that, notes Borus, involves not only saying you oppose anti-Semitism, but, for example, not falling into stereotypes about Jews running the world, or assuming that discrimination against Jews is over for good, or buying it when the Israeli government says it is speaking for all Jews.

Although several calls to regional and national Muslim and Arab organizations were not returned, some tracts that have circulated in the activist community point out that some Arabs and Muslims have similar reactions to mainstream peace organizations who refuse to take a stand on the issue at all. "Under the guise of minimalist slogans, it is the political demands of those at the receiving end of war that are being muted and silenced," wrote the Muslim American Society Freedom Foundation in an essay on this Saturday's antiwar activities in Washington, D.C.

Perhaps more subtle a problem is the way that some within the peace movement, having discovered the issue, have given it special priority status among the variety of "connected issues" that form the context for the Iraq war.

Borus recalls a experience tabling for Tekiah at the Boston Social Forum in 2004. All the group's literature clearly stated that it was group focused on immigrant rights and antiracism, and yet all day, people kept assuming that because it was a Jewish group, it had to be working on Israel and Palestine. Borus remembers one woman who, when her misunderstanding was corrected, "immediately asked if that was because we didn't care about what's happening in Israel."

"The hypocrisy was amazing," he says, "because from what I could tell, she worked for one of the suburban peace groups, which was made up of middle-aged, middle- to upper-class white people, and I'm sure that if I'd walked up to her and said 'Oh, this is great! A white group working on reparations,' or 'A white group working racism,' or 'A suburban group working on disinvestment in urban communities,' or any one of a number of things where I could have assumed that in a position where she had privilege, she would have been working on it, I'm sure she would have thought I was insane. . . . There's a clear double standard."

"I think Israel/Palestine is important," Borus adds, but it troubles him when the issue becomes a litmus test when all sorts of other issues that could be as connected to the Iraq war—such as globalization, a poverty draft, or racism in the United States—are treated as "vaguely interesting fringe issues."

"One can't argue that what Israel has done in Palestine is good, but you can't say it's worse than what China has done in Tibet, or what the Turks have done to the Kurds, or the Indonesians had done to the East Timorese, or what happened in Rwanda or Darfour," notes Bloch.

And so, focusing overwhelmingly on the one that involves Jews carries "a whiff of something ugly," says Borus.

Leftists make an exception in their support for self-determination when it comes to Jews, notes Tick. "You never hear a leftist say, 'These people don't deserve a state of their own.' Everybody believes in self-determination. But . . . the left leaves out self-determination for the Jewish people."

Others argue that the conflict does have some particular connections to the Iraq war because of its geographic proximity. Aube notes that the United States was using U.N. resolutions to justify the invasion of Iraq while ignoring U.N. resolutions regarding the Israeli occupation.

Brian Becker, national coordinator of the ANSWER coalition, which tried to force United for Peace and Justice to add the Palestinian right to return to its list of demands for this coming Saturday's march, says Israel is particularly relevant because it is so close, and because of the U.S. aid that is sent there. Becker also argues that Israel was a motivating factor for the Iraq war, something hotly disputed by other supporters of Palestinian rights, and he defends the swastika signs as "expressions of opposition to fascism, not support of it."

(United for Peace and Justice, citing concerns with ANSWER's preemptive organizing strategy and the desire to make the best use of a moment when opinion was turning against the Iraq war, resisted adding right of return to the march's demands, and the groups nearly staged two separate marches. They did agree in the end to collaborate.)

One response to this tension has been a proliferation of Jewish groups that are working on Israel/Palestine (indeed, this is one of the reasons Tekiah founders wanted to focus on something else), from Brit Tzedek to JVP. "Groups like JVP are now a dime a dozen," says Weingart.

Even those, and there are many, who have been willing and able to see past the uncompromising elements on either side to work side by side on antiwar stuff and explore a middle ground on Israel/Palestine have found that one of the things that makes it so thorny is that the middle ground is huge and varied, and still emotional.

Not surprisingly, everyone I spoke to for this story characterized themselves as middle-ground, rational, willing to compromise in some way. But the variation of basic assumptions among those same people can be wide.

To Tick, for example, it's a fairly basic point that Israel has a right to exist, "like every other nation on earth has a right to exist, whether we like their policies or not," and says that "there's much more acceptance now than there was years ago that the place to start is a two-state solution."

For his part, Aube gets worked up easily by the idea that some people don't just want Palestinians to agree to a two-state solution, they want them to like it. "That kind of tone always gets me going," he says. "It's like asking Native Americans if they like that the land was stolen from them." While he is "100 percent opposed to all forms of anti-Semitism," he says that as an organizing strategy, something that focused on Jewish liberation or empowerment would be "too much."

To quote Peltz: "So what I just said, I'm uncomfortable saying." For the record, Tick and Aube work well together, and have for many years. The point is not that this collaboration is not genuine, but that even as people who have sought out their common ground, they are standing on different borders of that ground, even before trickier things like Jerusalem come up.

This is why Jewish Voice for Peace explicitly avoids discussion of what Weingart calls "the end game" in favor of a broad statement that something must be worked out that respects human rights and international law, a position they have found to be incredibly popular.

Similarly in the Capital Region, those rallies that just focus on "End the Occupation" get the largest turnout, notes Aube. And he thinks that kind of coalition-building statement is a fine organizing strategy, though he says the committee tries to combine it with education on right-to-return and ending U.S. aid to Israel.

Some say that's as far as mainstream peace groups need to go. "There's no reason why the peace movement in the United States should have to get down to very specific things," says Wittner. "In the end the solution is going to have to be hammered out by the Israelis and Palestinians themselves."

But others think that given the huge amount of financial support that the United States sends to Israel, people concerned with the United States' foreign policy will eventually need to get into the details a little further. Leaving it to the elites of the Israeli and Palestinian governments would be like not calling for troops to leave Iraq because that has not been called for by the governments of Iraq or the United States, writes Toufic Haddad in an article for *Z Net*.

"When people are being oppressed, I can understand the desire to say 'Look, let's not get into splitting hairs here, people are being oppressed,'" notes Borus. "But I think that what has happened is there is a lot of consensus [that] people want to stop that, but it's not the most useful consensus. . . . Even the Bush administration says it supports a Palestinian state."

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