

AN UPDATED HISTORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN JEWISH DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY, 2000–16

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The Australian Jewish Democratic Society (AJDS) is Australia's pre-eminent Jewish Left organisation. In an earlier publication, I examined the history of AJDS from its formation in 1984 till 1999.¹ This updated article traces the history of the organisation from 2000 until the current day.

Section One examines AJDS's views and actions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Section Two specifically analyses their approach to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Section Three considers their relations with the Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV) and other mainstream Jewish bodies. Section Four explores internal AJDS divisions. Sections Five and Six discuss their relations with other Jewish Left groups, and the political Left more generally. Section Seven assesses their relations with the local Palestinian community. Section Eight overviews AJDS perspectives on other issues such as Indigenous rights and refugees. Section Nine dissects the impact of generational change on the society.

AJDS and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

All Jewish Left groups experience an ongoing tension or conflict between their specific Jewish loyalties and their commitment to broader universalistic causes. The key question is whether these dual loyalties are balanced to produce both a representative Jewish view within the Left, and a discrete left-wing view among Jews. There is no doubt that AJDS actively promotes a left-wing perspective within the Jewish community, but there is less consensus about the extent to which they champion Jewish concerns and sensitivities within the communities of the political Left. An implicit aim of this study is to inquire whether AJDS presents a verifiable left-wing Jewish perspective, or alternatively whether it merely forms a Jewish fraction of the pro-Palestinian Left.

Much of AJDS's energy and resources historically have been devoted to activities concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and this is also the issue which most often provokes conflict between AJDS and other Jewish

groups and viewpoints. Similar to many Jewish Left groups internationally, AJDS was profoundly affected by the chronological turning point of the Second Palestinian Intifada in September 2000 and the associated breakdown of the Oslo peace process.

There was no uniform Jewish Left response to the Second Palestinian Intifada. Some groups and individuals responded to the violence and terror perpetrated by Palestinians during the 2000–04 period by constructing a more critical analysis of Palestinian views and actions politically and historically.² But others shifted in the opposite direction towards embracing the pro-Palestinian Left, and became enthusiastic advocates of the so-called Right of Return, and later the BDS movement. Some Jewish organisations even switched from a two-state to a one-state position.³ AJDS also moved in the pro-Palestinian direction, but still remained supportive of two states, albeit they were far more critical of Israel than were other left-wing organisations such as J Street and Americans for a Progressive Israel. Consequently, some AJDS members and supporters left the organisation in the period under study, but equally, other more radical Jews were attracted to AJDS by their change of direction.

AJDS members explicitly reject the dominant link that exists in most Jewish communities between Jewish identity and solidarity with the State of Israel. Instead, they base their judgements of Israel on a commitment to broader universalistic concerns and ideas, and demand that Jews recognise the suffering and rights of the Palestinians as well as Israel. Utilising a broad left-wing ideology, they offer a critical and relatively non-partisan analysis of Israeli policies and actions. While describing themselves as supporters of Israel and eschewing any overt criticism of Zionism, they appear in practice to blame Israel for the breakdown of the peace process, and to make far greater political demands on Israel than on the Palestinians. However, they still defend Israel's right to exist, and reject far-Left proposals for a one state or bi-national solution.

AJDS has traditionally positioned itself as a non-Zionist (but not anti-Zionist) organisation⁴ which is supportive of Israel's existence per se, but highly critical of Israeli policies that deny national self-determination to the Palestinian people. In short, its political alignment within Israeli politics has traditionally been with Left Zionist groups such as the Meretz Alliance and Peace Now rather than with anti-Zionist groups further to their Left. One of its current executive committee members, Robin Rothfield, describes himself as a longstanding supporter of the State of Israel.⁵ Even

Larry Stillman, who is regarded by many within the Jewish community as the leading anti-Israel voice within AJDS, has described AJDS as a 'left Zionist' organisation aligned with the 'anti-occupation Israeli Left'.⁶ Similarly, Sol Salbe, a longstanding anti-Zionist who has albeit moderated his views since the 1970s, described the AJDS as 'unashamedly pro-Israeli'.⁷ But noticeably some AJDS members questioned whether this description adequately represented their concern for Palestinian rights.⁸

Throughout the period from 2000 to 2016, AJDS continued to pledge its commitment to a two-state solution, and on one occasion publicly claimed that not one AJDS member supported a one-state solution.⁹ But with some exceptions which we note, AJDS promoted a one-sided version of two states, based almost solely on Israeli rather than Palestinian compromise and concessions. Their criticisms of Palestinian violence and extremism were not connected to any broader attack on the zero-sum nature of Palestinian political culture. They rarely censured the Palestinians for their rejection of Israeli offers of statehood at Camp David and Taba in 2000 and 2001, the 2006 election victory of the extremist Hamas, or their near-universal demand for a coerced return of 1948 refugees to Green Line Israel. AJDS never acknowledged that even if Israel offers a full withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders, there is a fair chance that the Palestinians will reject the offer because they cannot reconcile themselves with the continued existence of Israel.

AJDS questioned mainstream Jewish and Israeli arguments regarding the causes of the failure of the Camp David peace negotiations in July 2000, and the factors contributing to the outbreak of the Second Palestinian Intifada in September 2000. AJDS blamed opposition leader Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount for provoking the initial Palestinian violence, and condemned ongoing violence from both the Israeli and Palestinian sides while emphasising the disproportionate loss of life on the Palestinian side.¹⁰ They denied that the Israeli government headed by Ehud Barak had made the Palestinians a 'generous offer', arguing that the continuing presence of Jewish settlements would have frustrated geographic contiguity. Instead, they argued that the creation of a genuinely viable, contiguous and independent Palestinian State was necessary for peace.¹¹

Yet these statements ignored the fact that the Israeli offers at Camp David in July 2000 and (in an improved form) at Taba in January 2001 unequivocally recognised Palestinian rights to an independent state, and effectively separated legitimate Israeli security concerns from the

contentious religious and ideological claims of the Jewish settler movement. In contrast, the Palestinians arguably made little progress in separating their justifiable demand for a viable and contiguous state from their ideological demand for a coerced return of 1948 refugees to Green Line Israel.¹² Yet AJDS selectively targeted its criticism at Israel, and rarely identified the major Palestinian barriers to peace.

Later AJDS statements placed much of the blame for the continuing violence on the policies of the new Israeli government headed by Ariel Sharon. AJDS condemned the visit of hardline former Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to Australia in August 2001, claiming that he was inciting violent and politically extreme responses to the Palestinian Intifada.¹³ To be sure, AJDS unequivocally condemned Palestinian suicide bombings and acts of terror, and defended Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state.¹⁴ But they also suggested that the root cause of the conflict was the ongoing Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the consequent oppression and suffering of the Palestinian people.¹⁵ AJDS statements suggested that Palestinian violence would end if only the Israelis treated them more fairly,¹⁶ while ignoring evidence that Palestinian violence had significant national-cultural as well as structural causes.

AJDS condemned the Israeli invasion of the Palestinian West Bank cities in April 2002 as 'totally out of proportion to the violence that provoked the Israeli action', and effectively 'holding each and every Palestinian responsible for the actions of the terrorists'.¹⁷ But AJDS failed to recommend any alternative strategy for stopping the slaughter of Israeli civilians by Palestinian terrorists, which had killed 63 Israelis and injured many hundreds in March 2002 alone. AJDS also condemned the Israeli actions in the Jenin refugee camp as 'morally repugnant' while rejecting Palestinian accusations of a massacre.¹⁸

AJDS criticised Israel's construction of the security fence or wall in the Territories, arguing that 'the only way to escape the cycle of violence is to recognise the Palestinians as partners instead of seeing them as enemies'. Additionally, AJDS urged greater Jewish acknowledgment of the pain and suffering of Palestinians as well as that of Israel.¹⁹ Yet there is no doubt that the security barrier played a major role in stopping Palestinian terror attacks against Israeli civilians.

AJDS rejected allegations by critics that it was no longer supportive of a two-state solution, and argued that it had always supported Israel's existence and a viable Palestinian state. AJDS strongly endorsed the

unofficial Geneva Peace Accord, negotiated by a team of prominent Israeli and Palestinian negotiators in 2003, which proposed the establishment of a demilitarised Palestinian State in the West Bank and Gaza Strip alongside Israel accompanied by minor land swaps.²⁰

AJDS criticised the Israeli government's unilateral disengagement from Gaza in 2005, arguing that Israel intended to use the withdrawal as an excuse to retain large sections of the West Bank.²¹ A further statement was less equivocal, claiming that the disengagement would not advance the peace process as it was not based on any partnership with the Palestinians, but nevertheless supporting any withdrawal from occupied Palestinian territory.²²

AJDS criticised Israel's military action against Hezbollah in July 2006, arguing that even if Hezbollah was responsible for provoking the conflict, Israel's reaction had produced a disproportionate number of civilian casualties.²³ Describing its members as 'concerned supporters of Israel', AJDS argued that Israel had engaged in 'self-destructive policies' towards both the Palestinians and Lebanese. Instead of reliance on military action, an alternative path of face-to-face negotiations was recommended to Israel in order to resolve the hostilities in both Gaza and Lebanon.²⁴

AJDS continued to argue that the West Bank occupation and the associated suffering of the Palestinians was the root cause of the Middle East conflict.²⁵ The Society distinguished between genuine support for two states, which they claimed to support, and other Jewish organisations which they alleged only supported a pseudo two-state solution based on retaining Jewish settlements in Palestinian territory. AJDS emphasised that Palestinian leaders could never 'accept anything less than the Green Line as a basis for negotiations'.²⁶ They insisted that criticism of Israel's West Bank settlements was not the same as being anti-Israel, and that settlement building needed to stop to facilitate progress towards a two-state solution.²⁷

AJDS defended Israel's right to defend itself against rocket attacks from Gaza, but argued that Israeli military responses were disproportionate, and that Israel's blockade imposed unfair punishment on the civilian population. AJDS urged Israel to engage in negotiations with Hamas in order to establish a long-term ceasefire.²⁸ A December 2008 statement expressed similar sentiments, referring to the 'horrific death toll of innocent Palestinian civilians' and equating Israel's actions with those of the Russian army in Chechnya.²⁹

A further statement by AJDS condemned Israel's alleged 'collective

punishment' of Palestinians in Gaza, arguing that this 'cruel repression' would 'provoke violence, extremism and retaliation'. This statement did not include even one word critical of Hamas attacks on Israel, but nevertheless still endorsed two states.³⁰

AJDS condemned the Israeli attack on the Gaza Flotilla in May 2010 and the resulting deaths and injuries, arguing that the evidence suggested that the protesters were engaged in civil disobedience rather than violent action.³¹ Another statement suggested that the intransigence of the hardline Israeli government led by Binyamin Netanyahu was the sole reason for the failure of peace negotiations, but made no mention of the continuing extremism and violence perpetrated by Hamas.³²

AJDS supported a proposed UN resolution to recognise the State of Palestine, arguing that it would have a positive impact on both Israelis and Palestinians. AJDS noted that the resolution was supported by many leading Israelis, and suggested that it would help facilitate negotiations towards a two-state solution, which would require 'painful compromises' on both sides.³³ A letter sent to Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr in March 2012 called for support for Palestinian human and national rights, and a two-state solution that included 'resolution of the Palestinian refugee problem'.³⁴ But no mention was made of legitimate Israeli concerns regarding Palestinian violence and extremism, including the ongoing threat of rocket attacks by the Hamas regime in Gaza.

A number of AJDS members participated in a protest against the Jewish National Fund (JNF) in February 2013. The protesters accused the JNF of expelling Bedouin tribes from their homes in the Negev, and causing environmental harm through the planting of non-native plants such as pine trees.³⁵ A later statement by AJDS in November 2014 accused the JNF of engaging in theft of Palestinian land and 'ethnic cleansing'.³⁶ AJDS also criticised the JNF's choice of Jerusalem mayor Nir Barkat and the activist for Syrian Jews, Judy Feld Carr, as speakers for their October 2015 annual dinner, arguing that their politics were anti-Palestinian. AJDS alleged the JNF was responsible for 'the dispossession of Palestinian land and erasing of Palestinian history'.³⁷

An AJDS letter to new Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop in January 2014 accused Israel of 'cruel and illegal' acts including 'the deaths of thousands of Palestinians, the expulsion of hundreds of thousands, and the theft of land, water and other resources'. The letter recommended that Israel 'end the settlements, eliminate settler violence and set in place an

internationally-supported process that results in withdrawal from the territories'.³⁸ No reference was made to Palestinian views or actions that had also perpetuated the 65-year-old conflict.

AJDS blamed Israel for the renewed violence in Gaza in July 2014, arguing that Palestinian civilians had been the principal victims of the violence. AJDS argued that Israeli military attacks would not advance Israel's security, but rather would provoke further long-term conflict and hatred. It made no specific criticism of Hamas, but urged Israel to consider the proposal by Hamas for a ten-year ceasefire.³⁹

AJDS issued further criticisms of Israeli leaders and actions. For example, a proposed visit to Australia by the hawkish then Israeli Minister for Foreign Affairs, Avigdor Lieberman, was condemned by AJDS as reflecting 'the worst racist, extremist and exclusivist aspects of Israeli society', as opposed to what they called 'people who work for justice and peace'.⁴⁰ But AJDS did not clarify what type of policies would ensure justice and peace for both peoples, rather than just for the Palestinians. A January 2016 statement by AJDS denounced alleged attempts by Israeli authorities to censor human rights organisations in Israel. The statement also criticised the silence of Australian Jewish community groups on this matter.⁴¹ A further statement in April 2016 emotively attacked the Israeli government and local Jewish organisations for allegedly failing to condemn extrajudicial killings of Palestinian terrorists.⁴² But AJDS expressed little concern about the ongoing knife attacks by Palestinians on Israel's civilian population that caused 34 deaths from September 2015 to April 2016.

In May 2016, AJDS critiqued the commemoration by Australian Zionist organisations of Yom Hazikaron (Remembrance Day). Referring specifically to the 1956 Sinai Campaign and the 2006 Lebanon War, AJDS claimed that these were not examples of self-defence, but rather acts of overt military aggression. Utilising highly universalist values, AJDS seemed to be implying that Jews should be more concerned with Palestinian and Arab lives and wellbeing than with the security of Israelis.⁴³

Most contentiously, AJDS proposed 'in-principle support for the right of return of 1948 Palestinian refugees to their original homes'. AJDS qualified this statement by adding that 'our support for the right of return is not an unconditional support and any agreement on this issue would need to maintain Israel as a Jewish state'.⁴⁴ A further clarification indicated that 'Israel cannot settle an unlimited number of returning refugees.

Compensation and resettlement of refugees in the emerging Palestinian state will be the key to resolution of the refugee tragedy'.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, this qualified endorsement of Palestinian demands for a right of return appeared to place AJDS totally outside the mainstream Jewish and Israeli Left. Most leading Israeli peace activists, including David Grossman, Amos Oz and the Peace Now group, have denounced the right of return as code for the destruction of Israel.⁴⁶ To be sure, leading AJDS figure Harold Zwier rejected Palestinian demands for a right of return in both 2002 and 2004,⁴⁷ and a formal AJDS statement even denied (wrongly) that the organisation had ever supported a Palestinian right of return.⁴⁸ A further statement ambiguously suggested that 'any implementation must take into consideration Israel's demographic concerns',⁴⁹ while a later statement appeared to reject Palestinian demands for a right of return rather than compensation. AJDS argued that 'it diminishes the credibility of a Palestinian government to insist that Palestinians should be able to live in the state next door in preference to their own state'.⁵⁰

The equivocal stance taken on the right of return seems to typify the challenges faced by AJDS in attempting to reconcile both its specifically Jewish and broader universalistic loyalties. This ambiguous and arguably naïve employment of Palestinian nationalist discourse would also feature later in AJDS's partial endorsement of the BDS movement.

More balanced commentary came from Harold Zwier who argued in a talk to the far Left International Socialists in July 2001 that the killing had to stop in both Israel and Palestine. While critical of Prime Minister Barak's peace offer at Camp David, he added that many Israelis feared that Palestinians wanted Green Line Israel as well as the West Bank and Gaza Strip. He also criticised Yasser Arafat for failing to discourage Palestinian terrorism.⁵¹

In a further statement, Zwier attacked the support of many Palestinians for terrorist attacks, and accurately noted that both sides needed to make concessions to facilitate a two-state solution.⁵² Equally, AJDS issued a statement of respect for Yasser Arafat at the time of his death, which recognised the need for Israeli security as well as Palestinian independence.⁵³ Another statement by AJDS urging Australian recognition of a Palestinian State at the United Nations General Assembly urged the Palestinians to end rocket attacks on Israel, to pressure Hamas to recognise Israel, and to accept that the rights of refugees should be addressed by compensation and/or resettlement in a State of Palestine rather than 'solely through the

right of return'.⁵⁴ But these even-handed statements by AJDS were arguably an exception to the rule.

AJDS has also rejected mainstream Jewish concerns over alleged political and media bias against Israel. For example, AJDS has denied that the public broadcaster SBS is biased against Israel, and argues on the contrary that SBS promotes a diversity of views on the Middle East.⁵⁵ And AJDS opposed the campaign by some Jewish organisations against the awarding of the Sydney Peace Prize to Palestinian academic, Dr Hanan Ashrawi. While not formally endorsing Ashrawi's selection, AJDS argued that Ashrawi was a worthy candidate for the prize, given her support for two states and her joint activities with members of the Israeli peace movement. AJDS argued that the anti-Ashrawi campaign had used unfair and unbalanced arguments in an attempt to demonise and discredit her.⁵⁶

AJDS invited numerous progressive Israelis to address their forums. Some speakers such as journalist Tom Segev and the former Meretz Knesset member Naomi Chazan were mainstream figures who attacked extremists on both sides of the conflict.⁵⁷ Others included the chairperson of Rabbis for Human Rights Yehiel Grenimann, Nura Resh from women's peace group Machsom Watch, peace activists Zvi Solow, Sahar Vardi and Micha Kurz, refusenik Rotem Dan Mor, radical academic Oren Yiftachel, and Ha'aretz journalist Akiva Eldar.⁵⁸ In March 2015, AJDS hosted Amira Hass, a journalist based in Gaza who has long aligned her reporting with the Palestinian narrative of the conflict.⁵⁹

AJDS and the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Movement

AJDS's increasingly ambiguous views regarding Israel were reflected in their inconsistent approach to the extremist BDS movement. Although the BDS movement formally claims not to prescribe a specific solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there is no doubt that its key leaders internationally favour the elimination of the existing State of Israel, and its replacement by an Arab-dominated state of Greater Palestine.⁶⁰

Given AJDS's longstanding support for a two-state solution, the organisation was initially critical of Australian manifestations of the BDS campaign. Following the circulation of an academic boycott petition in May 2002,⁶¹ AJDS issued a firm statement in favour of the academic freedom of Israelis. The statement noted that many Israeli academics were active in supporting peace and human rights, and that the Israeli peace movement opposed academic boycott proposals. An associated commentary by

Sol Salbe strongly rejected calls for the boycotting of individual Israeli academics by refusing to publish their papers or collaborate with their research.⁶²

Similarly, AJDS condemned the April 2005 motion passed by the Association of University Teachers in Britain to boycott two Israeli universities, the University of Haifa and Bar-Ilan University. AJDS noted that the academic boycott proposal was strongly opposed by most left-wing academics inside Israel, and specifically praised the formation of the left-wing Engage group (consisting of left-wing Jewish and non-Jewish British academics) to fight the proposal.⁶³

A further statement by AJDS in June 2006 condemned the proposal by the Canadian Union of Public Employees for an academic boycott of Israel, noting that it used highly one-sided language that unfairly demonised the state of Israel.⁶⁴ And a March 2008 statement noted correctly that the BDS movement was led by anti-Israel hardliners who oppose two states and the 'very existence of Israel'.⁶⁵ In August 2009, AJDS again opposed the BDS movement, arguing that their tactics were 'counterproductive'.⁶⁶ However, AJDS decided in December 2009 to reconsider their policy. A draft statement suggested that while AJDS remained opposed to a blanket boycott of Israel, the organisation should consider endorsing specific boycotts of settlement products and Israeli academics publicly supportive of settlements.⁶⁷

In August 2010, AJDS convened a special general meeting which voted in favour of a limited boycott of Israel. The AJDS statement announced that they had become 'the first community-affiliated Jewish organisation to adopt the view that some boycotts of Israel may be justified',⁶⁸ which seemed to be a particular reference to their affiliation with the JCCV.

AJDS rejected in their motion any blanket BDS campaign against Israel, including the core BDS demand for a Palestinian right of return, but nevertheless still used the language of the BDS movement to endorse selective campaigns aimed at ending Israel's occupation of the West Bank. The motion was passed following an invited address to AJDS members by Samah Sabawi, a representative of the hardline pro-BDS Australians for Palestine group. Most members of AJDS agreed with the fundamentals of her argument, but expressed strong disagreement with her use of the term 'apartheid state' to describe Israel.⁶⁹

The boycott proposal was condemned by mainstream communal bodies including the JCCV, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry

(ECAJ) and the Zionist Federation of Australia.⁷⁰ In further statements, AJDS attempted to clarify that the proposed boycott was directed solely at West Bank settlements, and that the organisation did not support a boycott of Green Line Israel, given this would be contrary to a two-state position.⁷¹ But this subtle distinction between support for limited and full boycotts of Israel was not understood by many persons outside or even inside AJDS. Indeed, the former AJDS president, Harold Zwier, later resigned from the AJDS Executive due to his concern that the motion (which he had opposed) aligned the ADJS with the global BDS movement's agenda for eliminating Israel.⁷²

ADJS maintained a capricious approach to the BDS. In June 2011, they published a long statement from visiting Israeli peace activist Naomi Chazan attacking the BDS movement.⁷³ Additionally, Harold Zwier informed a JCCV meeting in June 2011 that AJDS opposed the BDS campaign.⁷⁴

In September 2011, the organisation denounced local BDS protests held against the Israeli-linked Max Brenner chocolate company on the grounds that they were unduly confrontational, and directed by groups favouring the elimination of the state of Israel. AJDS's criticism was strongly rejected by the Australians for Palestine group, which defended the protests and accused AJDS of unfairly associating the protesters with antisemitic or even Nazi viewpoints.⁷⁵ A further AJDS statement issued in September 2011 reiterated that the organisation did not support the BDS movement, that the Max Brenner protests were unduly confrontational, and that they were unreasonably directed at an organisation which did not produce goods in the West Bank settlements, and was merely a provider of care packages and chocolates to Israeli soldiers.⁷⁶

But in March 2013, AJDS once again advocated a limited boycott campaign aimed at settlement products. The campaign, launched during Pesach, used the festival's theme of freedom of slavery as a basis for urging an end to the settlement project. They denied that the campaign was in any way linked to the aims or objectives of the global BDS movement, or hostile to Israel per se.⁷⁷ However, a leading member of the AJDS Executive, Jordy Silverstein, clarified that she personally supported the three core aims of the BDS agenda⁷⁸ which are intended to delegitimise and ultimately eliminate Israel. AJDS's support of targeted BDS activities was strongly rejected by Jewish communal roof bodies such as the JCCV (which includes AJDS as an affiliate) and the ECAJ.⁷⁹ The *Australian*

Jewish News denounced AJDS's use of the Pesach story to justify the boycott proposal, arguing that they should be regarded as the 'bad child' of the community.⁸⁰ In November 2015, AJDS presented the views of the Australian BDS group in their newsletter, but emphasised that the Society 'does not have a policy of support for BDS'. They added that 'we do encourage discussion and debate of non-violent action to bring justice to Israel/Palestine. And we do urge people not to buy products from the Settlements'.⁸¹ A further statement in April 2016 reiterated the importance of the Don't Buy Settlements Products campaign, and linked the campaign to the global BDS movement.⁸²

In summary, AJDS members oppose the one-state perspective of the global BDS movement. But they don't regard BDS advocates as ideological enemies, rather as misguided. They are reluctant to explicitly reject the core aims of the BDS movement, and are not willing to state their solidarity with Jewish community groups campaigning against the BDS agenda of eliminating Israel. As longstanding AJDS moderate Harold Zwier has noted, the AJDS could have balanced its call for a boycott of settlement goods by recommending that Jews buy other Israeli products produced within the Green Line. They also could have denounced the global BDS campaign for a blanket boycott of Israel. But they did neither.⁸³

Inclusion or exclusion: AJDS relations with the Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV) and other mainstream Jewish bodies

AJDS attempted from 1987 onwards to join the Jewish roof body, the JCCV, but was blocked by conservative opposition. However, they finally gained affiliation in 1993 following the signing of the Israel/PLO Oslo Peace Accord which narrowed the gap between AJDS views and mainstream Jewish opinion, and suggested a revision of traditional Jewish approaches towards supporting Israel. In the ensuing years, AJDS established positive relationships with a number of Jewish organisations on issues of common concern such as support for Aboriginal rights and opposition to racism.⁸⁴ AJDS expressed pride in the fact of its affiliation with the communal roof body, and consequently suggested that it was easier in Australia than in the USA or UK for alternative Jewish voices to be heard.⁸⁵

AJDS regularly promoted the value of 'pluralism in the Jewish community', and argued that 'on specific issues, no single Jewish organisation has the right to speak on behalf of all Jews'. This was a reference to the passions associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and a call

for the community to respect dissenting views that were critical of Israeli government policies.⁸⁶ However, the outbreak of the Second Palestinian Intifada in September 2000 provoked renewed tension between AJDS and the JCCV, and other mainstream groups and individuals. These tensions reflected communal perceptions that AJDS gave greater priority to endearing itself to its allies on the Left, rather than addressing specifically Jewish concerns and sensitivities about Palestinian violence directed at the Israeli civilian population.

In April 2001, the JCCV president Grahame Leonard expressed concern that some Jews were promoting pro-Palestinian views that provided ‘ammunition for Israel’s enemies to use’. Mark Leibler, the national chairman of the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC), specifically criticised AJDS for misrepresenting events in the Middle East, and making ‘damaging remarks’ about Israel.⁸⁷ A further statement by Colin Rubenstein of AIJAC accused AJDS of adopting ‘ill-considered anti-Israel positions’ due to an ‘ideological fixation which no evidence or analysis can alter’.⁸⁸ A number of other letter writers and opinion writers in the weekly *Australian Jewish News* simply accused AJDS of ‘aiding the enemy’.⁸⁹

At the May 2001 JCCV forum, a number of delegates including Grahame Leonard, State Zionist Council representative Bill Borowski and JCCV Education chairman Michael Lipshutz attacked AJDS for sending a supportive statement to a pro-Palestinian rally. Borowski accused AJDS of breaking a longstanding communal position of solidarity with Israel when under attack.⁹⁰ David Zyngier of AJDS argued in response that Jewish supporters of Palestinian rights were not self-hating Jews or anti-Israel, but rather proud Jews and Zionists who were committed to Israel’s long-term wellbeing. He urged the Jewish community to respect the democratic right of Jews to express dissenting views.⁹¹

Leonard subsequently agreed to address an AJDS forum at which he described AJDS as ‘the social conscience of the Jewish community’. He also defended the right of AJDS to criticise Israeli government policies, but argued that AJDS had crossed a red line in sending a statement to a Palestinian rally that implied support for a Right of Return. He accused AJDS of being ‘naïve’ in accepting an invitation from people whose only motive was to ‘use what you say as ammunition against Israel’.⁹²

The presence of AJDS at a protest rally outside a function addressed by the hardline former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in August 2001, provoked further controversy. Alleged threats of violence

were made by right-wing Jewish groups against AJDS members attending the rally, although no actual violence ensued.⁹³ A number of leading Jewish Labor Party members including Melbourne Ports MP Michael Danby denounced AJDS for supporting the rally so soon after a wave of suicide bombings inside Israel.⁹⁴

The JCCV president Grahame Leonard had unsuccessfully urged AJDS not to attend the rally, and subsequently censured AJDS for providing ‘ammunition to those whose focus is the destruction of Israel’. He warned that AJDS was jeopardising their inclusion within the Jewish community, and risked ‘becoming a completely marginalised and insignificant minority’.⁹⁵ The former ECAJ president, Isi Leibler, now living in Israel, similarly rebuked AJDS as ‘morally disgusting’ for criticising Israel at a time of war.⁹⁶

At a later Israel Solidarity Rally held at Caulfield Park in September 2001, AJDS members handing out peace leaflets were verbally and physically attacked, and had leaflets and banners removed or damaged by a group of young religious activists.⁹⁷ AJDS later complained that they had attempted to introduce ‘a note of moderation’ to Jewish communal politics, but the ‘emotional climate prevents us from being heard or understood’. Instead, they were labelled by ‘parts of Melbourne’s Jewish community as being anti-Israel and self-hating Jews’.⁹⁸ A further statement in August 2003 defended AJDS as arguably representing ‘independence of thinking’ within the Jewish community.⁹⁹

In February 2005, AJDS representative Harold Zwier urged the JCCV to endorse a diversity of views in the Jewish community, to promote tolerant and civil debate, and to discourage personal abuse.¹⁰⁰ These issues were of concern to AJDS because the Society had ‘occasionally been the target of abusive e-mails, phone calls and other threatening behaviour’. Yet communal leaders had allegedly refused to censure these attacks.¹⁰¹

AJDS expressed further concern about attacks on alternative Jewish views in February 2007. While noting positively that AJDS and other progressive groups such as the Jewish Labor Bund and Meretz were affiliated with the JCCV, AJDS spokesperson Sol Salbe complained that politically progressive Jews were accused of being ‘self-haters’ or ‘disloyal’. Salbe argued that abuse and vilification was often used as a ‘substitute for rational debate’, but the communal leadership refused to take action.¹⁰² In a statement to the JCCV, Harold Zwier similarly identified numerous attempts to demonise Jews who expressed dissenting views on Israel. He

asked the communal leadership to condemn manifestations of hatred and vilification.¹⁰³

In November 2009, AJDS submitted a resolution to the JCCV (which was seconded by the Jewish Labor Bund) urging the roof body to recognise the ‘diversity and pluralism’ of the Jewish community, endorse ‘the importance of public debate’, and ‘reject abuse, vilification and threatening behaviour as having any part to play in the conduct of our debates and discussions’.¹⁰⁴ However, the May 2010 meeting of the JCCV rejected the addition of a paragraph to the JCCV policy platform condemning hatred or vilification of a person or group. Concern was expressed by affiliates such as the Zionist Council of Victoria and the Council of Orthodox Synagogues that this wording might inhibit arguments against a Jewish messianic group or an anti-Israel group.¹⁰⁵

The JCCV slammed AJDS’s August 2010 motion in favour of a limited boycott of Israel. The JCCV president John Searle specifically criticised AJDS for using the term ‘community-affiliated Jewish organisation’, arguing that ‘whilst the AJDS is an affiliate of the JCCV, this is a tribute to the latter’s inclusive nature, rather than an acceptance of the AJDS’ views’.¹⁰⁶ AJDS argued in response that they were entitled to voice their opinions regarding opposition to the West Bank settlements and occupation.¹⁰⁷ A subsequent motion passed by the JCCV condemned AJDS for endorsing the BDS movement, but rejected calls from some members of the Jewish community to expel the Society.¹⁰⁸ The JCCV annual report also attacked the AJDS BDS motion, arguing that it provided indirect support to anti-semitism. However, AJDS argued that this allegation was unfair, and that the JCCV should apologise.¹⁰⁹

In March 2012, AJDS sent a letter to the Foreign Minister Bob Carr which questioned the right of mainstream Jewish organisations such as the ECAJ, the Zionist Federation of Australia and AIJAC to represent a Jewish consensus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. AJDS argued that such bodies present a position which ‘downplays the complexities of the conflict and avoids casting a critical eye on Israeli policies that prolong the conflict, while readily highlighting Palestinian policies that do likewise. This does not in fact reflect the diversity of opinion in the Jewish community here, or indeed in Israel, particularly amongst younger people’.¹¹⁰

In February 2013, the JCCV president John Searle questioned whether AJDS should continue to be accepted as a member of the JCCV. He accused AJDS of making one-sided attacks on Israel while ignoring human

rights abuses elsewhere, and described such attacks as ‘antisemitism’. In response, AJDS accused Searle of unfairly defaming the reputation of the Society.¹¹¹

The March 2013 AJDS motion in favour of a limited boycott of Israeli settlements attracted vigorous criticism from the JCCV. An initial statement by the JCCV president Nina Bassat suggested that AJDS’s affiliation was under threat. Bassat argued that the AJDS campaign was ‘repugnant’ and contrary to the philosophical beliefs of the JCCV.¹¹² In response, AJDS denied that their limited boycott campaign was associated with the global BDS movement, and expressed concern that the JCCV would ‘consider disaffiliating a Jewish community organisation because of a difference of opinion on how to engage with Israeli politics’.¹¹³ A further AJDS statement argued that ‘it is not the role of the JCCV, or the different affiliates, to police what is an acceptable expression of Jewishness or Zionism. The JCCV should be focused on fostering an open, inclusive and dynamic Jewish community’.¹¹⁴

The JCCV passed a motion moved by the Zionist Council of Victoria at its June 2013 plenum condemning the AJDS campaign to boycott settlement products. The motion, which was supported by a large majority of affiliates, was nevertheless opposed by delegates from AJDS, the Jewish Labor Bund, the Jewish Ecological Coalition and also Rabbi Keren-Black from the Leo Baeck Centre. Additionally, AJDS agreed to sign an undertaking that they would no longer use their JCCV affiliation to promote controversial campaigns and policies.¹¹⁵

An AJDS statement in July 2014 condemning Israel’s military attacks on Hamas in the Gaza Strip also provoked the JCCV’s ire. The JCCV and the B’nai B’rith Anti-Defamation Commission jointly accused AJDS of lacking balance, and ‘engaging in a relentless campaign of propaganda in their continuous bashing of Israel’.¹¹⁶ To the surprise of some in the community, these controversies did not result in AJDS being disaffiliated or expelled from the communal roof body. But the regularity of such debates suggests a lack of communal trust about where AJDS’ loyalties lie when it comes to contested debates about Jewish concerns.

Internal AJDS divisions

AJDS’s harsh criticisms of the State of Israel at the height of the Second Palestinian Intifada (and the associated terrorism against Israeli civilians) created tensions not only with mainstream Jewish organisations, but also

within its own membership. For example, one AJDS member questioned in June 2001 why the Society had adopted more radical positions at this particular time, pertaining to support for a Palestinian right of return and general sympathy for Palestinian aspirations, when the Palestinians were actually moving to more rejectionist positions on conflict resolution.¹¹⁷ That member would later resign from AJDS as did others who held similar concerns.

The AJDS participation in the anti-Netanyahu peace vigil held in August 2011 caused serious internal conflict. This was because AJDS had formally agreed at the last moment to withdraw from the vigil in response to a horrific Palestinian suicide bombing in Jerusalem, and an associated concern that their participation could be seen by other Jews as support for terror and violence.¹¹⁸ However, more than 50 AJDS members still participated in the vigil, including AJDS publicity officer David Zyngier. Zyngier conducted a number of interviews with media outlets, which left the impression that he was presenting an official AJDS view. Consequently, the AJDS president Harold Zwiier resigned from his post due to the contentious nature of the statements made to the media.¹¹⁹

A number of AJDS members questioned what they considered to be the Society's one-sided criticisms of Israel. For example, long-time member Rachel Merhav attacked what she called AJDS's failure to criticise Palestinian as well as Israeli violence and terror. She also criticised the demonstration against Netanyahu.¹²⁰ Another long-time AJDS member Itiel Bereson attacked AJDS's December 2008 statement on the Gaza War as one-sided, in terms of blaming Israel more than Hamas, and reflecting a 'policy of appeasement that lacks responsibility for the future of the Jewish State'.¹²¹ There were also some internal tensions over the pro-BDS motion adopted by AJDS in 2010 as noted above.

Relationships with other Jewish Left groups

AJDS formed a range of cooperative, and not so cooperative, relationships with other local Jewish Left groups. There was some overlap in membership and support between AJDS and the short-lived Jews for a Just Peace (J4JP) group formed in May 2002 to oppose Israel's West Bank occupation, and promote the establishment of a Palestinian State alongside Israel.¹²² However, while AJDS welcomed the establishment of J4JP,¹²³ a number of the leading figures in J4JP such as Barry Carr, Rebecca Adams, Leon Orbach, Miriam Solomon and Les Rosenblatt had not previously

been involved in AJDS or the politics of the Melbourne Jewish community more generally.

Critics of both organisations, such as Labor MP Michael Danby, alleged that J4JP was little more than a front group for AJDS.¹²⁴ But AJDS spokespersons denied that any close association existed between the two groups.¹²⁵ In my opinion, J4JP was a slightly more radical organisation than AJDS, acting as a ginger group within AJDS, and encouraged the Society to move further to the Left in its criticisms of Israel. However, J4JP ceased to exist in late 2003. One of its former leaders, Les Rosenblatt, later became the media officer of AJDS.

AJDS had less in common with the small Independent Australian Jewish Voices (IAJV) group formed by anti-Zionist author Antony Loewenstein in March 2007.¹²⁶ To be sure, a number of AJDS supporters signed the original IAJV petition calling for a just peace between Israel and the Palestinians, and a more pluralistic Jewish debate about Israel.¹²⁷ And AJDS defended the IAJV's argument that the Jewish communal leadership's 'uncritical support for Israel did not reflect the diversity of views within the community'.¹²⁸

But AJDS later condemned the IAJV's support for an extreme advertisement attacking Israel's 60th anniversary. AJDS criticised both the inflammatory and one-sided language used in the advertisement, including terms such as 'racism' and 'ethnic cleansing', and an associated statement by IAJV wrongly implying that the advertisement had the support of signatories to their earlier petition.¹²⁹ AJDS were also critical of a statement issued by the IAJV in 2010 condemning Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, suggesting that the statement was unbalanced.¹³⁰

In response, IAJV activists accused AJDS of being too moderate in their policies and political strategies. For example, Antony Loewenstein labelled AJDS a 'liberal Zionist organisation' which he suggested was at times critical of Israeli policies, but generally not effective in forming partnerships with Palestinian groups or promoting alternative Jewish perspectives in the mainstream media.¹³¹ Similarly, Michael Brull branded AJDS a 'respectable organisation' which was insufficiently critical of Israel's war crimes in Gaza. He also praised AJDS for allegedly refusing to criticise antisemitism on the radical Left.¹³²

Relationships with Left groups more generally

AJDS often claims to use its influence to oppose expressions of antisemitism or extreme anti-Zionism within the broader Left. For example, AJDS has criticised the views of far Left anti-Zionist fundamentalist groups such as the International Socialist Organisation which regards Israel as a racist and colonialist state that has no right to exist.¹³³ Similarly, AJDS took credit for a number of Palestinian groups joining a Jewish-organised protest against the airing of a film by Holocaust denier, David Irving.¹³⁴ AJDS also claimed that their presence had ensured the removal of an antisemitic protestor and placard from an anti-Iraq War march.¹³⁵

But on other occasions, AJDS loudly supported left-wing organisations or individuals who had gone well beyond reasonable criticisms of Israeli policies to defame Israel or Jews per se. For example, AJDS defended a parliamentary motion by Labor MP Julia Irwin calling for an unconditional Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders, which most Jews regarded as one-sided and unbalanced.¹³⁶ AJDS never criticised Julia Irwin despite the fact that her attacks on Israel included equating Israeli actions with those of the Nazis. She also bizarrely accused Jewish lobby groups of controlling Australian Labor Party policy.¹³⁷

AJDS's apologia for the far Left *Overland* Magazine was even worse. *Overland* has been captured in recent years by the pro-Palestinian lobby, and regularly published fanatical attacks on the State of Israel and local supporters of Israel. This included an article by Independent Australian Jewish Voices blogger Michael Brull containing ad-hominem hysterical abuse of Philip Mendes and others. In response to this one-sided discourse, a group of six Australian academics consisting of Douglas Kirsner, Andrew Markus, Bill Anderson, Bernard Rechter, Nick Dyrenfurth and Philip Mendes sent a polite, but firm private letter to the *Overland* editor Jeff Sparrow, Editorial Board and patron, Barry Jones. The letter questioned why *Overland* chose to highlight the most extreme voices who 'contribute only fanatical polemics and represent nobody in either the Jewish community or the Left, and chose to ignore or actively censor the large group of Jewish (and broader Left) voices who support two states, strongly oppose Israeli settlements and expansionism, and seek to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace and reconciliation rather than continued violence and enmity. Their views represent the majority of the Left, but seem to have been deliberately excluded from the pages of *Overland* magazine'.

In response, Sparrow simply defended his highlighting of anti-Zionist

fundamentalist views by arguing that the critical two-state views held by the majority of the Australian Left gained regular access to the Murdoch-owned newspapers such as *The Australian*. The AJDS' new media officer Les Rosenblatt issued in response a statement of unequivocal support for *Overland's* pro-Palestinian orthodoxy. He bizarrely claimed that *Overland* were actually seeking to broaden rather than limit the range of views in the debate, and even more strangely cited with approval Michael Brull's article in favour of their (AJDS) concern to promote 'civility and respect in debate on political differences over the issue and strongly oppose the vilification and abuse that often follows expression of radical or minority opinions'. The AJDS clearly did not even bother to read the content of Brull's article for otherwise they would have realised that they were endorsing personal abuse instead of a diversity of opinions.¹³⁸

Relationships with local Palestinian and Arab groups

AJDS has always been keen to cooperate with local Palestinian or Arab groups which share their views on mutual compromise. For a long time such partnerships were minimal, given that few if any local Arabs accepted Israel's right to exist.¹³⁹ But since the outbreak of the Second Palestinian Intifada, AJDS has actively sought to build bridges to Palestinian and Arab groups.¹⁴⁰ AJDS argue that Jews as the stronger side in the conflict have a greater responsibility to initiate 'dialogue as a path to negotiation and conflict resolution' while recognising 'that the two sides are not equal'.¹⁴¹

But such a perspective arguably understates the extent to which there are Palestinian/Arab as well as Israeli barriers to peace, regardless of differences in military strength. Equally, many Australian Jews worry that local dialogue may end up as a lop-sided process whereby Palestinians and Arabs present a united hardline position against Israel, and then demand that Jews capitulate to their demands rather than engaging in a process of mutual compromise.

Regardless, AJDS have maintained substantial contact with local Palestinians, even if there is little evidence that such dialogue has moderated Palestinian views or produced any Palestinian criticisms of Hamas terror. In late 2000, the Australian Palestinian Coordinating Committee of Victoria invited AJDS to address a Palestinian solidarity rally. AJDS accepted the invitation and prepared a statement for delivery at the rally which highlighted that 'we understand the struggle of the Palestinian people for a resolution of the conflict based on a just peace between Israel

and Palestine'. Reference was made to mutual recognition of national rights, the dismantling of Jewish settlements, negotiation for a right of return or compensation, and the rejection of terrorism and violence. AJDS emphasised 'the need to understand the hopes, aspirations and demands of the other side to appreciate the complexity of the conflict. The situation has never been black and white'.¹⁴² However, after some public contention, AJDS elected not to proceed with their participation, and equally the rally organisers decided after viewing the proposed AJDS statement to withdraw the invitation.¹⁴³

But AJDS sent a supportive statement to a Palestinian Right of Return rally in April 2001, which was read out by rally coordinator Taimor Hazou.¹⁴⁴ The statement urged Jews during the festival of Pesach to remember not only how they fought for freedom, but also to recognise 'the Palestinians who yearn for their freedom, their land and their right to return. It has never been the position of the Australian Jewish Democratic Society that right and justice are purely on one side of the conflict'. The statement recommended the establishment of an independent Palestinian state living in peace alongside the state of Israel.¹⁴⁵

AJDS has frequently invited Australian Palestinians to participate in public forums. For example, local Palestinian activist Taimor Hazou, who has regularly demanded a Palestinian right of return to Green Line Israel¹⁴⁶ which is viewed by most Israelis as a code phrase for the destruction of Israel, participated in an AJDS panel discussion in early 2001. Hazou argued that asking the Palestinians to make a counter-offer to Ehud Barak's peace plan would be the equivalent of asking the Aborigines to make a counter-offer on the then Australian Prime Minister John Howard's refusal to say 'Sorry' for the Stolen Generation of Aboriginal children. Hazou also claimed provocatively that Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount was the equivalent of Nazi war criminal Konrads Kalejs visiting a Jewish synagogue.¹⁴⁷

Hazou publicly thanked AJDS for their support at the anti-Netanyahu rally in August 2001. He noted: 'I would like to thank all progressive Jews who were present on our side of the rally. It is unfortunate that the AJDS pulled out officially, but a lot of their members were there in person. They deserve a big thanks, because like our organisers they received death threats and intimidating phone calls, and some serious pressure from the JCCV not to be there. They are in a difficult position and we acknowledge that. Thanks.'¹⁴⁸

Hazou was also an invited speaker at an AJDS meeting in April 2008.¹⁴⁹ Elsewhere, he has publicly accused the Australian Jewish communal leadership of undermining local initiatives for Jewish-Palestinian peace and dialogue.¹⁵⁰ In August 2005, AJDS hosted Palestinian-Australian author Randa Abdel-Fattah,¹⁵¹ who is an outspoken supporter of the BDS movement. And *Age* journalist Maher Mughrabi, a relative moderate in the Palestinian community, addressed AJDS forums in November 2005, February 2006 and July 2007.¹⁵²

In 2009, AJDS identity Harold Zwier partnered with Arab community activist Joe Wakim to publish a joint article which criticised both Israeli and Palestinian leaders for failing to advance the peace process. That article was published in both the *Australian Jewish News* and the Arabic language *An Nahar*.¹⁵³ Another AJDS initiative was a long-running group of Jewish and Arab women called Salaam/Shalom who met regularly to discuss issues of common interest. The convenor of this group, Renate Kamener, received a Victorian government award for Community Service to Multiculturalism.¹⁵⁴

In recent years, AJDS has formed a partnership with the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network (APAN), a pro-Palestinian advocacy group consisting of Palestinians, Jews, churches and trade unions. In November 2014, AJDS members participated in an APAN lobbying exercise in Canberra aimed at convincing Members of Parliament to support the recognition of a Palestinian State.¹⁵⁵ And in July 2015, AJDS and APAN held a joint session at the Australian Labor Party's national conference urging the ALP to recognise Palestinian statehood, and condemn Israel's West Bank occupation and settlements.¹⁵⁶

Other issues: Indigenous rights, refugees

AJDS has been supportive of Indigenous rights throughout its history, and utilised a number of advocacy strategies including public forums and statements, publishing regular articles in its magazine and newsletter, and providing resources to Indigenous groups. Much of this history was detailed in an earlier article by the author.¹⁵⁷

One of the highlights of this support was the establishment of a bursary in honour of the late AJDS activist Renata Kamener to assist Indigenous students completing degrees at the University of Melbourne.¹⁵⁸ Peter Singer, Glyn Davis and Gareth Evans have been among the speakers at the annual orations to support this bursary.¹⁵⁹ AJDS also supported calls

for the Coalition government to apologise for the Stolen Generation of Aboriginal children, noting that ‘it was only two generations ago during World War Two that thousands of Jewish children had their ethnic, cultural and religious identity forcibly erased while they were raised by foster parents in Europe.’¹⁶⁰ AJDS later sent a representation of four members to Canberra to witness the Labor Party government’s apology to Indigenous Australians.¹⁶¹ Additionally, AJDS was active in campaigns for reconciliation, and for compensation to be paid for the past stolen wages of Aboriginal workers.¹⁶² AJDS also hosted a number of prominent Indigenous speakers, including Wayne Atkinson on Native Title and Land Rights.¹⁶³

In November 2015, AJDS issued a formal statement in support of Indigenous struggles for justice and land rights. The statement documented a number of activities undertaken by AJDS, including acknowledgement, solidarity with Indigenous-led campaigns, supporting Indigenous organisations and media, collaboration with Indigenous organisations, public forums and community education.¹⁶⁴ A later statement in January 2016 argued that Australia Day should be retitled ‘Invasion Day’ to symbolise Indigenous experiences of colonisation and dispossession, or alternatively ‘Survival Day’ to recognise Indigenous resistance to colonisation. Citing numerous example of Indigenous disadvantage, AJDS urged supporters to support Indigenous sovereignty and rights plus projects of decolonisation.¹⁶⁵

Another key AJDS objective has been opposition to racism, and support for tolerance and harmony between ethnic communities. AJDS has persistently supported the rights of asylum seekers to fair and humane treatment, and an end to mandatory detention. A February 2001 statement urged the government to close remote detention centres, impose only short-term detention to examine health and other personal information, provide access to legal advice and independent reviews, and cease any detention of children.¹⁶⁶ A further statement in August 2001 condemned the treatment of refugees in detention, and urged the government instead to be guided by ‘calls for justice and human rights’.¹⁶⁷

AJDS was subsequently active along with a number of other Jewish organisations and refugee advocates such as Arnold Zable in forming a group called Jews for Refugees which presented a specifically Jewish perspective in favour of refugee rights.¹⁶⁸ The new organisation held a Vigil for Refugees during Pesach at the Maribyrnong Detention Centre in March 2002 which was attended by over 600 Jews. A number of speakers including two rabbis argued that past experiences of persecution and

exile underpinned Jewish empathy for refugees.¹⁶⁹ A further gathering in September 2002 built a 'Sukkah of refuge and welcome' to extend the hand of friendship and support to asylum seekers imprisoned within the Detention Centre.¹⁷⁰

Similarly, a 2004 election statement condemned the incarceration of innocent children and asylum seekers,¹⁷¹ and refugee advocate Linda Briskman was the guest speaker at the 2007 Annual General Meeting.¹⁷² A later AJDS statement criticised as inhumane the government decision to stop the processing of refugees from Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, citing the Jewish experience of 'denial of refuge and asylum'.¹⁷³ AJDS also urged the government to release all children and unaccompanied minors from immigration detention facilities.¹⁷⁴

AJDS members Max Kaiser and Linda Briskman re-formed Jews for Refugees in May 2012 in order to provide a specifically Jewish opposition to mandatory detention, arguing that 'many people in our community are aware, from their own family histories, of what it means to have been strangers; what it means to have a well-founded fear of persecution; what it means to seek a safe haven; to seek asylum'.¹⁷⁵ The September 2013 AJDS newsletter was devoted to advancing the rights of refugees with the editorial opining: 'We look forward to the day when the lives of people in need are no longer treated as political footballs. When Australia's immigration policies are based on care and directed at protecting as well as helping people that come to us seeking asylum'.¹⁷⁶ Ironically, refugee advocates threatened to blockade a proposed AJDS forum featuring former Foreign Minister Bob Carr on the grounds that his views were unsympathetic to Tamil refugees.¹⁷⁷

AJDS was particularly supportive of the rights of Sudanese and other African refugees. The Society held a forum regarding their refugee and resettlement issues in May 2005 addressed by Matthew Albert, a young Jewish campaigner involved in providing educational support programs to the African community.¹⁷⁸ An April 2006 forum critically examined the genocide being perpetrated against the people of the Darfur region in Sudan,¹⁷⁹ and AJDS also participated in a further Jewish community rally in support of the people of Darfur.¹⁸⁰

AJDS condemned an October 2007 statement by the Coalition government Immigration Minister, Kevin Andrews, which appeared to promote prejudice against refugees from Africa. AJDS argued that greater support services were required to assist refugees to overcome past traumatic

experiences, and access education and employment.¹⁸¹ AJDS also signed a statement advocating support for African communities in Australia, and endorsing multiculturalism as ‘vital to the health and wellbeing of our communities’.¹⁸²

AJDS sharply defended the rights of refugees following an article by *Australian Jewish News* publisher Robert Magid, which labelled asylum seekers as ‘queue jumpers’ seeking economic opportunities rather than sanctuary, and potential terrorists who did not deserve Jewish sympathy. In response, AJDS denounced Magid’s comments as involving ‘group vilification’ of Muslims, and demanded that Magid apologise to ‘all the victims of persecution who arrived by boat’.¹⁸³ The AJDS was also active in facilitating an online petition critical of Magid’s statement.¹⁸⁴

AJDS activists June Factor, Steve Brook and Harold Zwier (aligned with others such as Robert Richter, Ron Merkel and Jewish Aid Australia) played a key role in initiating a pro-refugee statement signed by hundreds of Australian Jews. The statement, published in March 2014, urged the government to amend laws that undermine human rights and dignity. The statement proclaimed:

For centuries, Jews have sought refuge from persecution. We cannot deny to others the asylum we have found in Australia. It is long past time to end the unjust and brutal imprisonment of men, women and children – more than 1,000 children – seeking refuge here. This inhumane policy can only continue if good people are silent.¹⁸⁵

AJDS welcomed the Coalition government’s decision to accept 12,000 Syrian refugees into Australia, but called for consideration to be given to accepting a much greater number. AJDS also recommended that refugees be chosen without any reference to religious background.¹⁸⁶ Surprisingly, this statement made no reference to the possibility that Muslim refugees from the Middle East may be more likely than those from other religious backgrounds to display fundamentalist prejudices towards Israel and indeed Jews per se. AJDS continues to support the Jews for Refugees group, and its key aim to promote alliances between Jews and asylum seekers.¹⁸⁷ In May 2016, AJDS urged both major political parties to close the off-shore and mainland detention centres, and instead introduce humane policy responses.¹⁸⁸

AJDS were active in opposing prejudice against Muslims, and played an active role in combatting a campaign to prevent a group of Muslims in

St Kilda from using a community house for prayers.¹⁸⁹ AJDS have also supported the Voices Against Bigotry network formed to oppose anti-Muslim views.¹⁹⁰ AJDS were supportive of gay rights within and beyond the Jewish community, and highlighted the importance of providing an inclusive space for all regardless of sexuality.¹⁹¹ Other issues addressed in AJDS forums included the challenge posed by climate change,¹⁹² and the alleged threat to civil liberties posed by anti-terror laws.¹⁹³ An AJDS environmental statement urged action to promote ‘ecological sustainability’, and ‘the stability of the climate system’,¹⁹⁴ and a dozen AJDS members attended the November 2015 People’s Climate March under a ‘Jews for Climate Action’ banner.¹⁹⁵

AJDS were a founding member of the Victorian Peace Network, and strongly opposed the American invasion of Iraq and associated Australian involvement. AJDS argued that there was no evidence that Iraq retained weapons of mass destruction, and that a military conflict would harm the lives of millions of people in Iraq and neighbouring countries.¹⁹⁶ AJDS members were active participants in the major anti-war rally attended by 40,000 people in October 2002.¹⁹⁷ AJDS later cautioned that a small number of American neo-conservatives who happened to be Jewish such as Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith should not be blamed for the war. Rather, the American corporations who strongly influenced the actions of President George Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney should be held to account.¹⁹⁸

AJDS has had relatively little to say on antisemitism with some minor exceptions. AJDS criticised Lebanon’s NBN-TV station for broadcasting a program endorsing the notorious Protocols of the Elders of Zion.¹⁹⁹ Similarly, concern was expressed at the failure of left-wing anti-Israel protestors in Europe to condemn open manifestations of antisemitism.²⁰⁰ AJDS also condemned the statement of Iranian President Ahmadinejad urging the elimination of the State of Israel. AJDS argued that his views were not only racist towards Israel, but injurious to Palestinian concerns for progress towards a two-state solution.²⁰¹ However, AJDS attacked the JCCV for opposing dialogue with the former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami during his visit to Melbourne who had also expressed extreme hostility towards Israel.²⁰²

AJDS has rarely spoken out on debates concerning inequality, poverty, homelessness, disability, child abuse or social welfare generally within the Jewish community, other than hosting Tzedek CEO and victims of child

sexual abuse advocate Manny Waks as their annual dinner speaker in 2013.

Generational change and the passing of leadership

AJDS was formed and sustained throughout its first decade or more by a number of veteran left-wing activists. These activists had significant strengths such as their vast political experience and networks, but also limitations in their sometimes ambivalent associations with the Jewish community and Jewish identity. A number had been involved in highly assimilationist organisations such as the Communist Party which were hostile to any forms of Jewish national expression, or alternatively in organisations such as the Jewish Council to Combat Fascism which had conflictual relations with mainstream Jewish leaders and organisations. But equally, most had come to terms with the legitimacy of Israel and Zionism. They were generally united in supporting Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, and opposing dogmatic left-wing criticisms of Zionism.²⁰³

A number of these AJDS stalwarts passed away during this period. AJDS founder and long-time peace movement and Labor Party activist Norman Rothfield died at the age of 98 in 2010.²⁰⁴ AJDS founding member and former Communist Party activist Henry Zimmerman died at the age of 83 in 2006.²⁰⁵ Former Communist Party leader Bernie Taft died at the age of 95 in 2013.²⁰⁶ Former Communist Party activist and 3CR radio broadcaster Steve Brook died at the age of 80 in 2014,²⁰⁷ and long-time social activist Renate Kamener died at the age of 76 in 2009.²⁰⁸

In addition to the above figures, other key leaders of AJDS during this period included Harold Zwier (who was also involved pre-2000), Larry Stillman, Sol Salbe, David Zyngier and Tom Wolkenberg. All of these persons are over 50 years of age, which raised questions about the sustainability of the society. AJDS commissioned Executive member Helen Rosenbaum in early 2012 to develop some ideas around engaging and attracting younger people to the organisation. Rosenbaum conducted a small research project, including interviews with thirteen politically progressive Jews under 45 years of age and seven representatives of Jewish and non-Jewish organisations. The study identified that younger Jews were particularly interested in issues such as refugees and asylum seekers, Indigenous Australians, other marginalised peoples, climate change, and environmental sustainability. The conclusion was that the interviewees valued AJDS as an alternative to the conservatism of the Jewish mainstream, but that for many Jews AJDS was not visible, and for others there

was a lack of clarity about the Society's beliefs and agendas.²⁰⁹

As a result of these endeavours, AJDS reconstructed its leadership so that over half of the nine-person AJDS Executive, and both of their staff members, are under 40 years of age even though their membership overwhelmingly remains more than 50 years old.²¹⁰ At the time of writing, the AJDS Executive consists of Jordy Silverstein, Nicole Erlich, Sivan Barak, Danya Jacobs, Dennis Martin, Rachel Leibhaber, Keren Rubinstein, Yael Winikoff and Robin Rothfield. Most of these persons are new to AJDS activity, and this generational change did not proceed without its challenges. For example, veteran AJDS activist Robin Rothfield applauded the 'young and vigorous executive for doing some great work in advancing the agenda of AJDS', but added that 'decisions have been made which have been rash and caused potential embarrassment to the organisation'.²¹¹

Additionally, a number of these younger people seem influenced by anti-Zionist perspectives, which question the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state as opposed to an Arab-Jewish bi-national state. For example, a recent AJDS statement suggests renouncing Jewish nationalism while at the same time acting 'in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle'.²¹² I have argued elsewhere that anti-Zionists who value Jewish history and culture should not be excluded from our community.²¹³ But to be taken seriously, they need to move beyond a broad Western liberal universalism, which rejects any specific concern with Jewish rights and interests. In particular, they need to address the specific challenges facing Israeli Jews located in the non-western political culture of the Middle East. Current proposals by Jewish anti-Zionists for Jews and Arabs to share Israel/Palestine as equal citizens seem to be based on overtly Western values of ethnic and religious equality and freedom, rather than the actual political, national and religious values and culture of the Arab world. It seems very unlikely that they would protect the political and human rights of Israeli Jews.

Conclusion

The challenge for AJDS has always been whether it can effectively achieve its dual aim of being 'A progressive voice among Jews' and 'A Jewish voice among progressives'. There is no doubt that AJDS has advanced left-wing ideas within the Jewish community on a range of issues including Israel-Palestine, Indigenous rights, refugees, and opposition to war and racism. The former JCCV Chairman Grahame Leonard's description of AJDS as the 'social conscience of the community'²¹⁴ suggests this role is widely recognised.

But AJDS's willingness to advocate for Jewish concerns within the Left, particularly on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is highly debatable. It seems that AJDS is strongly influenced by the general Left hostility to Israel, and consequently is reluctant to offer any critical analysis of contemporary and historical Palestinian actions and strategies which have acted as serious barriers to peace. On issues such as the Palestinian right of return and the BDS movement, AJDS has adopted a moderate version of the Palestinian narrative with scant regard for Jewish viewpoints. Additionally, the *Overland* Affair discussed above suggested that when it comes to a conflict between left-wing pro-Palestinian groups (however extreme) and any Jews (even those on the Left) who are supportive of Israel, AJDS will always side with the former.

In summary, AJDS don't seem to understand that being part of the Jewish community involves responsibilities as well as rights, and that being a specifically Jewish Left organisation (as opposed to just a Jewish faction of a progressive movement akin to Jewish factions of Communist Parties in the Stalinist era) sometimes means prioritising particular Jewish interests over universalistic concerns.

Notes

- 1 Philip Mendes, 'Australian Jewish Dissent on Israel: A history of the Australian Jewish Democratic Society Part One', *Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal*, 15(1), November 1999, pp. 117-38; Philip Mendes, 'Australian Jewish Dissent on Israel: A history of the Australian Jewish Democratic Society Part Two', *Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal*, 15(3), November 2000, pp. 459-74.
- 2 For one example of this perspective, see Philip Mendes, 'End of the line', *The Diplomat*, 1(5), December 2002–January 2003, pp. 32-33.
- 3 Philip Mendes, 'The Jewish Left, Jewish Identity, Zionism and Israel: Attitudes to the Palestinian Intifada, 2000–2005' in Danny Ben-Moshe and Zohar Segev (eds) *Israel, the Diaspora and Jewish Identity* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2007), pp. 105-18.
- 4 *AJDS Newsletter*, November 2009, p. 7.
- 5 Robin Rothfield, *Challenges facing Israel at 60* (Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers, 2008), Inside cover.
- 6 Larry Stillman, 'Lobbying, the Left and web 2.0: a blueprint for the Australian Jewish community', *Galus Australis*, 5 October 2009.
- 7 *AJDS Newsletter*, May 2008, p. 1. On Salbe's political history, see the AJDS Oral History Project interview with Salbe, <https://www.mixcloud.com/AJDS/>

- ajds-oral-history-project-interview-with-sol-salbe-21102014/
- 8 *AJDS Newsletter*, July 2008, p. 3.
 - 9 *AJDS Newsletter*, May 2003, p. 1.
 - 10 *AJDS Newsletter*, November 2000, p. 2; December 2000, p. 11; Harold Zwier, 'Sharon's provocation is unforgivable', *The Age*, 5 October 2000; Harold Zwier, 'Extremists take charge in Israel', *The Australian*, 6 October 2000.
 - 11 *AJDS Newsletter*, February 2001, p. 2; March 2001, p. 4; April 2001, p. 5; Harold Zwier, 'The real issues', *Australian Jewish News (AJN)*, 16 February 2001.
 - 12 Philip Mendes, 'Israel's Camp David peace proposal: generous offer or sham?' *Australian Quarterly*, 76(1), January–February 2004, pp. 14–17.
 - 13 Harold Zwier, 'Netanyahu concerns', *AJN*, 10 August 2001.
 - 14 *AJDS Newsletter*, August 2001, p. 4; December 2001, p. 1; September–October 2003, p. 1.
 - 15 Renate Kamener and Steve Brook, 'Slur campaign on AJDS', *AJN*, 4 June 2004.
 - 16 Steve Brook, 'Not paying attention', *AJN*, 21 June 2002.
 - 17 *AJDS Newsletter*, April 2002, p. 11. See also p. 8; Renata Kamener, Harold Zwier and Steve Brook, 'Palestine's pain', *The Australian*, 13 April 2002.
 - 18 *AJDS Newsletter*, May 2002, p. 6.
 - 19 *AJDS Newsletter*, August 2003, p. 1; February 2004, p. 1. See also Harold Zwier, 'Israelis and Palestinians on a road to hopelessness', *The Age*, 2 September 2003.
 - 20 *AJDS Newsletter*, July–August 2004, p. 1; December 2003, pp. 1–6; January 2004, pp. 3–6. For the –etails of the Geneva Accord, see Yossi Beilin, *The Path To Geneva* (New York: RDV Books, 2004).
 - 21 *AJDS Newsletter*, April 2005, p. 1.
 - 22 *AJDS Newsletter*, July 2005, p. 1.
 - 23 Peter Kohn, 'Israel paying the price for unilateralism, say leftists', *AJN*, 28 July 2006.
 - 24 *AJDS*, 'This is no time to be silent', 20 July 2006.
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