

An Iron Dome for Social Media



IONISM IS PROGRESSIVE.”

When I was approached to pen this piece, I contemplated turning in just that one line as the whole article. *Res ipsa loquitur*. It speaks for itself. As someone who has worked in the entertainment industry all my professional life, this is what Virgil Abloh, the late great designer, DJ, and cultural influencer would have turned in. “Zionism is progressive.” Simple statements can be very powerful. As Virgil once said, people need to “stop using their mind, and start using their imagination.”

During the May 2021 conflict between Israel and Hamas, many were surprised by the slew of celebrities who made simple statements of condemnation of Israel, often with a meme or by way of a tweet.

One of the most egregious was made by pop star Halsey. She tweeted to her 14.5 million followers and the world that the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict was “not too complicated to understand”; it was about “brown children being murdered.” Her post was retweeted 40,000 times and received 123,000 “likes.” The fact that she has never visited Israel and undoubtedly couldn’t distinguish between a Jew and a Palestinian to save her life didn’t matter. The damage was done, and as the saying goes, a lie can travel halfway around the world before the truth puts on its boots.

During the conflict, my organization, Creative Community for Peace (CCFP), identified about 45 entertainers or influencers who made positive or neutral posts about Israel—mostly neutral ones. In contrast, 130 posted negative comments, often declaring that Israel was taking part in one of the usual buzzwords—apartheid, genocide, racism, or ethnic cleansing—while adding in a “free Palestine” for good measure. These are the most heinous crimes any country can commit, and lo and behold, the world’s only Jewish state is apparently guilty of committing all four. As historian Jacob Talmon put it, the Jewish state has become the Jew of the States.

Despite the public anti-Israel statements by these “activist” entertainers, supporters of Israel remain a strong yet silent majority.

For instance, during the May conflict, CCFP released an open letter that called on our colleagues to stop spreading misinformation and to hold Hamas accountable for its actions. This letter was signed by more than 130 entertainment-industry leaders from Michael Bubl  and Gene Simmons to Diane Warren and Selma Blair.

Unfortunately, our statement didn’t align with the mainstream media narrative, so it received little coverage. From May 11, 2021, through May 24, 2021, the *New York Times* featured nine negative Guest Essays about Israel, with just three taking a neutral stance on the conflict. The *Guardian* had 16 anti-Israel opinion pieces and just three neutral ones. Neither outlet had any positive articles from guest writers during the conflict.

With that sort of coverage, it was not surprising that some celebrities thought ill of Israel. Especially since Israel ceded social media to the anti-Israel movement long ago, where many of these articles were also circulated incessantly. For instance, during the conflict more than 2 billion videos used the hashtag #FreePalestine on TikTok. In contrast, the most prominent pro-Israel hashtag, #IStandWithIsrael, was used on just 20 million videos.

Make no mistake about it: This social-media onslaught was no accident; this was a coordinated attack. It wasn't on the ground in Tel Aviv, but it was an attack nonetheless. A calculated social-media disinformation campaign built up, fine-tuned, and unleashed. We've tracked this for years.

Anyone who spoke out against Israel saw their social-media posts supported and amplified by thousands of likes. In contrast, those who spoke up for Israel saw their social-media feeds overrun by waves of bots, trolls, fake accounts, and anti-Israel activists, with the help of Iran, Malaysia, and others. Artists who posted messages of peace were bullied into silence and accused of being sociopaths who supported apartheid, genocide, and the killing of innocent children. This was a targeted and successful campaign to silence anyone who dared speak up for Israel.

In addition, while the pro-Israel side put together long-winded social-media explainer posts, videos, and threads, the anti-Israel side hammered home simple messages. It's not a conflict; it's genocide. Don't dare talk about peace; it's apartheid. They established the narrative. They controlled the discourse. They shut down speech and silenced people, right out of the woke playbook.

This wasn't surprising: We have seen this weapon in action before, such as when singer Demi Lovato merely posted photos of her being baptized in the Jordan River, visiting Yad Vashem, and meeting with kids at a disabled children's hospital in Israel. The mere fact that she stepped foot in Israel was beyond the

Anyone who spoke out against Israel saw their social-media posts supported and amplified by thousands of likes. In contrast, those who spoke up for Israel saw their social-media feeds overrun by waves of bots, trolls, fake accounts, and anti-Israel activists.

pale. Her photos were overrun with hate, causing her to panic and apologize for daring to visit and post from Israel. She was labeled a “normalizer” by the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

The boycott movement, which existed even before there was a State of Israel, has reinvented itself to use the language of critical social justice theory, which is so salient in America's culture today. To people in the West, BDS presents itself as a social justice movement, an LGBTQ+ rights movement, an environmental movement, and a women's rights movement. They claim that to stand in “solidarity” with progressive causes is to support the Palestinian cause. Never mind that BDS cleverly obscures their true motives—that their real aim is Israel's demonization and eventual destruction—because that doesn't sound as woke.

Under this critical social justice theory, Jews, and thus Israel, are painted as white and therefore part of the privileged and oppressive class: the “colonizers.” Halsey and others took the bait.

Palestinian scholar Edward Said's *Orientalism* is the foundational work on which postcolonialism—one aspect of critical social justice theory—was developed. Under this theory, forget history, forget truth; the only narrative that matters is the narrative

Anti-racism activists — who understand racism as prejudice wielded by the powerful — cannot grasp the aspirational movement Zionism should represent to all indigenous communities because, through their lens, antisemitism constructs Jews as the privileged and powerful.

of the oppressed, the “colonized,” the Palestinians. History and this conflict are to be seen only through their eyes.

Never mind that to deny Jewish ties to the Land of Israel is antisemitic and that to paint all Jews as white is racist: The Israel–Palestine debate takes center stage in postcolonial studies, and, unfortunately, most leftist activist groups have adopted the postcolonial demonization of Israel. You want to be woke? You want to stand for minorities? Support the Palestinian cause as presented by anti-Zionists or be pushed out of your social spaces.

The anti-Israel movement effectively weaponizes this language by co-opting the ills of any country and forcing people to see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through that lens. In South Africa, Israel is an apartheid state; in America, Israel is a racist state; in Australia, Jews are the colonizers of the indigenous population. It’s fungible. Whatever the worst thing a country has done in its history, Israel is doing it now.

The anti-Israel movement also co-opted the Black Lives Matter movement at its inception; its leaders were whisked away to “occupied Palestine” within six months of the Ferguson protests.

It’s no coincidence that this domestic American movement for black rights chose to single out Israel for condemnation in its manifesto. To stand for black rights meant you had to stand against Israel. Be anti-Zionist.

Anti-racism activists — who understand racism as prejudice wielded by the powerful — cannot grasp the aspirational movement Zionism should represent to all indigenous communities because, through their lens, antisemitism constructs Jews as the privileged and powerful. If you were posting in solidarity with the American black community, you also needed to be posting in support of the Palestinians. That’s the rule. Go against this, and you face being ostracized by your peers.

The culmination of these efforts is what led to all these entertainers adopting the anti-Israel narrative.

It doesn’t matter that the Zionist story is a story of progressive success. The unprecedented story of a conquered and colonized people miraculously reestablishing a country in their historic homeland. Triumphant over real colonizers, not imagined ones. A country that has brought democracy to a region that has known only kings, dictators, and theocracies. Where the environment is protected — Israel is one of the only nations in the world that entered the 21st century with more trees than it had 100 years ago. Where there is socialized health care. Where LGBTQ+ rights are protected not just in practice but in law, while members of this community are violently persecuted in every other nation in the Middle East. Where a woman was elected prime minister within 20 years of the founding of the state. Where minorities sit on the country’s supreme court and within its governing coalition.

This is unheard of in the Middle East, and it’s all brought to the region by Zionism. Unfortunately, no woke theory sees the world through a Zionist’s eye. Or sees Israel for what Israel really is and what it has accomplished. But this has been the case for the past 2,000 years for the Jewish people.

So, what can be done?

As Thomas Friedman once remarked, people don't listen with their ears; they listen with their guts; therefore, you must connect to people on a gut level. If you do, they don't care about the details. If you don't, you can't show someone enough details to convince them of anything.

As Friedman and Virgil Abloh understood, the message needs to be simplified and emotive. Pro-Israel organizations and the Jewish social-media warriors need to stop talking just to the echo chamber of the converted and instead think about reaching the masses and influencing the influencers in order to transform the zeitgeist. Unfortunately, your favorite social-media warriors are being tuned out despite your nodding along. They've already been unfollowed.

Who wants to hear strident soliloquies about 3,000 years of history and the Balfour Declaration when the other side utters just a few words? People don't have that kind of attention span in today's world—particularly the younger demographic that lives so much on social media.

For instance, how much more memorable, viral, and impactful was Ukrainian president Zelensky's 30-second clip filmed on an iPhone at night on the streets of Kyiv, with his lieutenants by his side, than the more formal video of him talking stridently in front of a proper camera, played at the recent Grammy Awards? Then someone even set the iPhone clip to the music of hip-hop group Mobb Deep's "Shook Ones." Genius.

We need to create a social-media and communications Iron Dome. We can no longer cede the field:

- **Tech Center:** We need to establish a coordinated tech center that can counter the flood of bots, trolls, and fake accounts unleashed against anyone who speaks positively of Israel and

We need to establish a coordinated tech center that can counter the flood of bots, trolls, and fake accounts unleashed against anyone who speaks positively of Israel and that are nefariously used to amplify the voices of anti-Israel posts.

that are nefariously used to amplify the voices of anti-Israel posts. We also need to continue to expose this network, as CCFP did when artist Billie Eilish had her Instagram account overrun for two weeks in 2021 simply for saying "Hi, Israel."

- **Human Network:** We need to create an extensive, coordinated, human rapid-response network of young people who can engage on social-media posts that are attacked or that need amplification.
- **Empower Pro-Israel Activists:** We need to cultivate, support, and nurture the grassroots network of young pro-Israel activists to educate the pro-Israel community and who counter the anti-Israel online activists spreading misinformation online.
- **Engage the Zeitgeist:** We need to engage with marketing specialists outside the *hasbara* bubble. Firms and companies that specialize in storytelling, who ladder in cool, and who can tell the human side of Israel's story to younger, often more progressive audiences. We must speak their language and reflect modern-day sensibilities.

- **Public Relations and Communications:** We need to engage with communication firms and publicists who have clout and contacts. Through them, we must broaden the public's awareness, place articles, and get spokespeople and allies on center and left-leaning media outlets. We need to tell the real Israeli story across the partisan spectrum and on media outlets where young people get their news and information.
- **Influencer Education:** We need to continue to engage with influencers outside the pro-Israel echo chamber and educate them about what is really happening in Israel, about Israel's past, present, and future.

Most important, we need to amplify the voices of those on the ground, like Nof Atamna-Ismaeel, the first Muslim Arab to win Israel's *MasterChef*, who is on a quest to bring Jews and Arabs together in Israel through food. There are thousands like her, from the Jerusalem Youth Chorus to the Polyphony Foundation, including the Israeli National Football Team, where half of the starters last year were Arab players, and the captain is a Circassian Muslim. As chef Atamna-Ismaeel states in her new documentary *Breaking Bread*, 90 percent of Arabs and Jews want to live and work together peacefully, but the international media covers only the 10 percent who foment hatred.

This is why CCFP encourages entertainers to go to Israel and see for themselves and why the BDS movement doesn't want them going to Israel. If Israel really were practicing apartheid, genocide, and ethnic cleansing, wouldn't the anti-Zionists have wanted Demi Lovato to see that? No, they wanted to scare off any other celebrity like her from coming and seeing the truth, which doesn't align with the absurd narrative they are pushing.

Homo homini lupus, Ze'ev Jabotinsky declared in his 1910 essay. Man to his fellow man is a wolf. One of the greatest Zionist leaders understood intersectionality back then, as he spoke out

against anti-black racism in America and linked it to the struggles of the Jews and other persecuted minorities worldwide, such as the Kurds. Zionism has always been progressive.

So how do we take back the narrative? "Zionism is progressive." *