

Israelism: A sensitive film commentary that enrages Israel's supporters

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Over the last two months, various US universities have been taking pains to suppress showings of the award-winning documentary *Israelism*, delaying and canceling screenings and threatening students who screen it with disciplinary action. Why such a hostile reaction?

The effort is part of the McCarthyite campaign in support of the Tel Aviv regime's day and night slaughter in Gaza. The film is alarming to supporters of Israel because, among other things, it exposes as a lie the claim that to be anti-Zionist is to be antisemitic. Notably, *Israelism* has been well-received by Jewish and non-Jewish audiences alike. It took the Audience Award at the recent San Francisco Jewish Film Festival and Best Documentary at the Arizona International Film Festival, among other accolades.

Israelism, produced by first-time documentarians Erin Axelman and Sam Eilertsen, is sensitive and thoughtful. It is told primarily from the perspective of two Jewish-American young adults raised with strong pro-Israel affinities, but whose viewpoints change as they are confronted by the realities of Israel's brutal treatment of the Palestinians.

That such a work has been made has an *objective* significance. It speaks to important changes in political outlook and social orientation. The old falsehoods and myths are simply no longer effective.

The documentary, while not without its weaknesses, reveals Israel—supposedly the “only democracy in the Middle East”—to be a dictatorial-garrison state. Lies and violence abound. For the Palestinians, the military is everywhere: checkpoints, road stops, soldiers on patrol. Fenced in, there is nowhere to go.

Through video clips, interviews and discussions with *Israelism*'s two primary subjects, Simone Zimmerman and a young man named Eitan, as well as Palestinians from the West Bank, we experience close up the daily humiliations and cruelty to which Palestinians are subjected by a government that hates them, rejects their right to exist and has transformed them into a stateless people. The methods used are of a fascist nature. But they are described by the filmmakers in an objective, matter-of-fact manner.

A Palestinian merchant recounts the hours-long daily journey he must take to sell his wares in Jerusalem and the risks associated with crossing military checkpoints. Two residents of Bethlehem, Baha Hilo and Sami Awad, reflect on the 750,000 Palestinians expelled during the *Nakba*—“catastrophe”—of 1948. Their families cannot return home. A Palestinian family tells a Jewish settler that the settler is stealing their land, to which the latter replies that it doesn't matter—if he doesn't grab it, someone else will. There is no way out.

Some of the most moving moments in *Israelism* are those showing the treatment of children, who are themselves roughed up and made to witness the roughing up of their parents, families and other adults.

There is something fatally diseased about a society that subjects the most tender and defenseless of creatures to such acts.

The documentary unfolds as the story of Zimmerman and Eitan—Jewish Americans whose formative years were spent in Jewish private schools, youth groups and summer camp—coming face-to-face with these realities. They were taught an unquestioning love of Israel from an early age. Their education either excluded any mention of the Palestinians—Israel was a “land without a people for a people without a land”—or, when they got a mention, treated them as subversives whose aim was to deprive the Jews of their hard-fought and long-deserved refuge.

The film editor, Emmy award-winner Tony Hale, expertly contextualizes these early-childhood experiences with footage of kids singing, chanting and shouting their support of Israel. Zimmerman holds up pictures of the pro-Israel artwork she did in her youth. We see summer trips to Israel that include weapons training and war simulations, complete with uniforms. Eitan recounts how, after years of this, he enthusiastically joined the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) upon completing high school.

In an interview, filmmakers Axelman and Eilertsen explain that they spoke with 80 people before choosing to feature these two individuals. The trajectory of their lives mirrors the key objectives of the pro-Israel indoctrination campaign: to develop Zionist activists and leaders within the US and to recruit new soldiers for and immigrants to Israel. Zimmerman and Eitan's lives are particular examples of a broader socio-political phenomenon.

Israelism draws the viewers' gaze to the pro-Israel lobby. There are discussions with members of the campus Hillel groups who are smug and self-satisfied in their Zionism, university events for which talking points have been handed out to pro-Zionist students ahead of time. They have been instructed to cry and be emotionally hysterical at meetings in which allegedly anti-Israel resolutions are being passed. Interview clips with Abe Foxman, the former head of the Anti-Defamation League, makes clear that any Jew who questions Israel is an enemy.

In revealing how the Zionist state operates in the US, the documentarians look at the Birthright Foundation, an organization that funds multi-day trips for Jewish-American youth to visit their “birthright homeland.” At the start of the film, we see a rally staged for these travelers when they arrive in Israel. It is replete with deafening party music, rock-concert-like screaming and fetishism of Israel. No critical thought is encouraged or likely to occur at this extremely well-funded event, to say the least. It is one of many jumping off points for widespread recruitment of Jewish Americans into the IDF, whose soldiers are described as “hot, awesome.”

Eitan falls for this national-chauvinist hoopla and joins the Israeli military. The consequences ultimately have a radicalizing impact on his outlook. While escorting a detained West Bank Palestinian to a holding facility, he witnessed fellow soldiers throw the man to the ground and mercilessly beat him under the silent gaze of their commander and military police. Eitan was revolted by his status as occupier.

Zimmerman's transformation from a pro-Zionist into an insistent critic of Israel is driven by a number of incidents. She is troubled by the fact that her questions about Palestine and what is on the other side of the walls that surround Gaza are not answered. "Why can't I see it?" she asks. When she finally does, she understands why there was a cover-up.

Israelism is powerful in its portrayal of anti-Zionist Jews standing up to genocide and anti-Palestinian hate. The documentary was produced over a seven-year period, not in response to the October 7 events. But its protest scenes seem like they could have been shot at recent anti-war actions on college campuses, in Washington D.C. or at the Grand Central Station sit-in in New York City—demonstrations that have all seen significant participation from anti-Zionist Jews. Today, however, these are many times larger.

While *Israelism* is intelligently and sensitively constructed, it offers little insight into why any of what it documents is occurring. The filmmakers, as well as Zimmerman and Eitan, avoid discussion of the history of the formation of the state of Israel and its relationship to the imperialist powers. In fact, they even shy away from the term Zionism, preferring their own made-up word, "Israelism."

Zimmerman, for instance, explains the viciousness of the Israeli state as some sort of misbegotten product of the "inherited trauma" that Jews experience today as a result of the Holocaust. But this social-psychological terminology cannot explain why the industrial extermination of the Jews by the Nazis has resulted in a new Jewish genocide—this time, with the Jews as perpetrators. Why would the destruction of one's own people lead that people to destroy another? The two are not inherently causally related.

Rather, the two are linked by imperialism. The Zionist movement, which from its origins embraced the primacy of "race" over class, celebrated the virtues of the national state, and was deeply pessimistic about the assimilation of the Jewish people into European culture and society, believing that securing the support of one or another great power was the means by which a Jewish state in Palestine would emerge. Zionism was anti-socialist, rejecting the idea that the liberty and security of the Jewish people would be achieved through the overthrow of capitalism by the international working class in combat against all forms of oppression.

Ze'ev Jabotinsky, leader of the fascist wing of Zionism wrote in 1934 that ever-present hostility between Jews and Arabs was "almost providential" in that it would force an alliance between Israel and a great empire:

"[A] Palestine predominantly Jewish, Palestine as a Jewish State, surrounded on all sides by Arab countries, will in the interests of its own preservation always seek to lean upon some powerful Empire, non-Arab and non-Mohammedan."

This required two things: first, finding an imperialist benefactor, which in the aftermath of World War II the Zionist movement did in the United States; Israel is Washington's proxy in the Middle East. Second, ethnically cleansing the Palestinians, which Israel also carried out and now continues. Jabotinsky's proteges in the Herut movement, led by future Likud founder and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem

Begin, perpetrated some of the worst atrocities during the *Nakba*.

Israelism sidesteps all this and then sputters as it tries to channel its audience toward a combination of electoralism, the Democratic Party, pseudo-left politics and progressive Jewish spiritualism.

Zimmerman herself accepted a position with the Bernie Sanders campaign as Jewish outreach coordinator. She was summarily fired two days later due to pressure from Foxman, former president of the Anti-Defamation League, and others. To her credit, she does not back down in the face of the pro-Israel lobby and does not issue any sort of mealy-mouthed apology. But she and the filmmakers lay the blame on Foxman—no mention is made of Sanders' miserable cave-in or, even more importantly, his decades-long support for American imperialism and Israel.

The film features ominous footage of Donald Trump but says nothing about the Democratic Party. Cornel West and Noam Chomsky, pseudo-leftists whose careers have been made by using criticisms of capitalism to steer people back toward the Democrats, make an appearance. Nothing is said about Barack Obama or Joe Biden, the latter of whom is the criminal of criminals when it comes to what is happening in Gaza.

Israelism concludes with an appeal for a different kind of Judaism—one that is progressive, peaceful and opposed to hate and oppression. Undoubtedly, the thuggish, fascist Zionist state does not arise out of the history of Judaism, much less does it represent the totality of the Jewish people, from among whom have emerged some of history's greatest revolutionaries and contributors to the cultural and scientific development of humanity.

Many tens of thousands of Jewish people today hate what is being done in Gaza and the West Bank and are protesting against it. Jewish-American criticism of Zionist policies has been growing for years. A 2020 poll found that Jews favored conditioning US military aid to Israel by prohibiting use of funds on "annexation of the West Bank" by 57 percent. And a 2021 poll found that a quarter of US Jews believe Israel is an apartheid state, with figures rising for younger cohorts. Recent polls indicate that half of young Jewish-Americans oppose Israeli policies.

Individuals like Zimmerman and Eitan have principles and not a small dose of bravery. They have lost jobs, had to break ties with family and friends and been subject to all forms of abuse.

However, anti-Zionist Judaism alone will not solve the disaster of the state of Israel for the Jewish people, the Palestinians or anyone else. That requires broad masses of the world's working class to mobilize against capitalism and imperialism, which spawned the horror unfolding today.



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