

Essay 11 - How can you help Israel here in the UK?

- **The important thing is to be an active, involved member of British society.**
- **Being an active citizen is not restricted to engagement in formal politics. It includes 'civil society' in general.**
- **We need to get as organised as Israel's critics are!**

The important thing is to be an active, involved member of British society.

All of us are citizens, and have the democratic rights of citizens. Such rights go beyond voting in elections. They include writing to – and sometimes speaking to – our Member of Parliament or local councillor.

They also include participating in political debate in a variety of other ways.

A traditional way for the individual citizen to engage in political debate is to write a letter to a newspaper. This is still important even in the modern digital world, despite a general decline in newspaper circulation. Indeed, a letter published in the print edition of a newspaper can nowadays have even more impact as it will most likely also appear on the newspaper's web site, and thus reach a far wider audience.

However, the problem with letter-writing is actually getting the letter published. Most newspapers receive far more letters than they can possibly publish, so most of your efforts will go unrewarded.

To maximise your chance of getting a letter published, you need to do the following:

- Carefully read the rules for letters stated by the publication and make sure you conform to them (these will often include the provision of full name and contact information to enable verification of your identity).
- Make your letter relevant. It should ideally be in response to something published in the paper, and include a clear reference to that earlier item (e.g. 'your editorial of 12th March').
- Be concise. Something short and punchy, which includes one or two key facts, is far preferable to a learned treatise.
- Avoid abuse or unsubstantiated allegations.
- Know your facts and state them simply and clearly.

Engaging in online debate is often easier, as the space restrictions associated with the printed press do not apply. Nevertheless, at least some of the above principles still apply. Being relevant (avoidance of 'trolling', in internet parlance), being concise and avoiding abuse are principles which are not always honoured (to say the least) in the on-line world. Nevertheless, online as in real life, courteous behaviour will win you more friends than rudeness.

Being an active citizen is not restricted to engagement in formal politics. It includes 'civil society' in general.

All of us play multiple roles in our own society. As citizens, we are voters. If we are in employment, we may be members of professional bodies or trade unions. If we run our own businesses, we may be members of trade associations, local chambers of commerce, and so on. If we are in full-time education, we may be members of student unions or other bodies.

Beyond these identities, we may choose other forms of involvement. We may be members of a political party or other campaigning organisation. We may be members of neighbourhood bodies such as residents' associations or Neighbourhood Watch.

Depending on our religious identity and beliefs, we may be members of a synagogue, church or other place of worship.

All these organisations, and many others, form part of what is generally known as civil society – that is, the active communal life of the country that exists beyond the government and its official bodies. The debates and decisions occurring within all these diverse organisations contribute to the overall life of the nation. Those who are most active within them can contribute most to the shaping of the national conversation.

Hence, for those who wish to support Israel, being involved in such organisations is vital. This does not mean engaging in what is sometimes known as 'entryism' – that is, joining an organisation simply in order to push one's personal hobbyhorses. That sort of behaviour tends in any event to be counterproductive as one's fellow-members

will resent their organisation being used in this fashion. Rather one should become active in those organisations with which one is genuinely in sympathy, and generally be a good member of the organisation.

Anti-Israel campaigners will often seek to push policies of boycott, disinvestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel within such organisations.

Their aim is less the specific measures which they advocate, but rather to paint Israel as an international pariah, and to give the impression that there is a groundswell of popular opinion against Israel which will influence policymakers and thus weaken Israel's international image. Such an impression is also intended to influence popular opinion, by creating the impression that detesting Israel is or should be the normal, mainstream attitude of right-thinking people.

Supporters of Israel who are valued, active members of such organisations are in the best position to combat these initiatives, and to put Israel's case.

Most 'civil society' organisations have no interest in international politics and will see such issues as a distraction from their normal functions.

The notion that political hobby-horses are a distraction from the organisation's normal activities is often the best ally of pro-Israel campaigners. Such activities can often be shown to harm the organisation in a variety of ways.

- They are divisive, antagonising loyal members who do not support the boycotters' aims, and may result in loss of membership as a result.
- They take up time and effort which could be spent on the direct aims of the organisation.
- They are discriminatory, in fact if not (necessarily) in intent, and potentially illegal.

Nevertheless, such an approach is rarely enough in itself. In particular it is vulnerable to the riposte that the organisation (especially if it is of a religious nature, or a trade union, say) has wider ethical responsibilities, and cannot be silent in the face of injustice. Therefore supporters of Israel need to educate themselves on the issues, so that they can challenge these arguments head-on. In particular, supporters need to be able to show that support for Israel is itself the ethical choice, and to have the arguments to back this up.

Accusations of antisemitism are rarely a good idea.

While there is no doubt that some Israel-haters are motivated by antisemitism (radical Islamists and some Western far-rightists), most supporters of BDS do not see themselves in these terms. Nor do the vast majority of the uncommitted, even where they are unconvinced by the boycotters' arguments, see them in that way. Consequently, such accusations are likely to be seen as smears, designed to avoid the real issues, and will antagonise more people than they convince.

This is especially the case when some of the boycotters are of Jewish origin.

There are of course some genuine arguments to be made along these lines, although they have to be deployed with extreme care.

- Firstly, there is no doubt that boycotts of Israel that discriminate against Israeli citizens (and it is hard to see how they could not) are illegal in that they breach provisions of equalities legislation which prevent discrimination on grounds of nationality.
- Secondly, they will often result in indirect discrimination against Jews (who are more likely to have personal and professional links with Israel). Thus, an academic boycott will discriminate against those working in Jewish Studies, holocaust education and so on, because many of the major resources for these subjects are in Israel. A boycott by supermarkets will reduce the supply of kosher foods, and so on.
- Thirdly, even where anti-Israel arguments are made in good faith, they often rely (even if unconsciously) on anti-Jewish stereotypes which have deep roots in western culture. Allegations of a 'well-funded Jewish lobby' recall ancient prejudices about Jewish money and power, as does the notion that Israel (a tiny country no bigger than Wales or New Jersey) somehow controls American or British foreign policy.

Note that none of the above arguments impugns your adversaries' actual motives. Such personal attacks are never a good idea. Concentrating on the substantive issues (and ensuring you can speak with authority on these) will always go down better with those whom you are trying to convince.

Get organised.

Most people aren't political activists. Writing to an MP or a newspaper are radical steps for the majority of people. They are often diffident about pushing themselves forward, unsure of their knowledge of the issues, and reluctant

to get into debate with those who they feel may be more knowledgeable and might make them look foolish. Still less are most people likely to attend a demonstration or hand out leaflets on the street (an activity often associated with cranks).

Also, a person who feels isolated within a given context is less likely to speak out because he or she will fear being labelled ('oh it's just him/her banging on again').

All this raises the question of organisation. Where people combine with others, they can encourage each other. The individual comes to realise that he or she is not the only one who feels strongly about this issue. They can exchange information and arguments. They can provide moral and practical support. A person who for example would not normally dream of attending a demonstration might do so if they can go in a group of people they know.

In the past, it has to be said, supporters of Israel have not been good at generating the kind of organisation that can overcome these problems. One approach is raising issues with leading policymakers quietly behind the scenes. While such an approach can achieve positive results in some instances, it has disadvantages which mean that it needs to be complimented by grassroots activism.

One disadvantage is that it makes no use of the energy and commitment of the vast majority, and instead confines activism to those 'in the know'. Another disadvantage is that only working behind the scenes has limitations in a democracy where Ministers are influenced by MPs who are in turn influenced by their perception of the opinions held by their constituents. Organisations in civil society with a democratic structure, such as trade unions, can have their policy swayed by resolutions based at grassroots branch level, which need to be combated at that level by grassroots members fighting back, not just by top-level persuasion.

It is noticeable that anti-Israel campaigners are always happy to trumpet the successes of their campaigns while we tend to play ours down. The difference is that they present themselves (however spuriously) as the leaders of a mass movement, hence any successes can be presented (again spuriously) as victories for democracy or popular pressure. Whereas any pro-Israel successes are presented as victories for a sinister elite working behind the scenes.

One solution to these problems is local organisation. Supporters of Israel exist in religious groupings, in political parties, in trade unions, and generally among ordinary people. Too often however, they are not aware of other like-minded people, even in the same locality, and hence feel isolated.

[We Believe in Israel](#) is trying to overcome these weaknesses, and bring supporters of Israel together in localities around the country. Local 'Friends of Israel' groups have had a major impact in a number of areas, but there is still much more to do.

Please get in touch with us and ask to be put in touch with other supporters of Israel in your locality. If there is already a local group we can put you in touch with it. If there isn't, we can help you form one.

We want to hear from you. Together we can make a difference.

Would you like to know more about Israel and to get more involved in supporting Israel? This email is one of a series of educational emails from We Believe in Israel, the grassroots initiative of BICOM. We Believe in Israel is a UK grassroots network of people united in believing in the right of the State of Israel to live in peace and security. We aim to support and facilitate activists who seek through local engagement and campaigning to create a more complete understanding of Israel and its situation in the UK. You can join We Believe in Israel's mailing list [here](#). Our website is www.webelieveinIsrael.org.uk. BICOM's website, with all the latest news and analysis about Israel is www.bicom.org.uk.

