

ZIONISM:

Beyond 'the right to exist'

• By SABRINA SOFFER

Do you believe in Israel's right to exist – in the narrow sense of the definition?" *The Economist's* editor-in-chief, Zanny Minton Beddoes, asked Tucker Carlson during their hour-long conversation last week.

Carlson pressed Beddoes to define "right to exist," which she clarified meant the existence of the current "political State of Israel." His deflections filled the room, through smug spouts and a Cheshire Cat's grin.

Eventually, Carlson conceded that he "do[es] not want Israel to be destroyed," as he wouldn't want any country to incur that fate. Beddoes said this made him a Zionist.

Cackling, he rejected the label, then proceeded with the lie that Israel threatens other nations' "right to exist." His threads of provocation funnel in followers and cash, and crown him with clicks. Indeed, "conspiracy theories are a booming business."

Antisemitism's market is inflating, and that small portion from Carlson's exchange with Beddoes begs reflection on the typical response to Zionist bashing.

Zionism's frequently invoked definition is "the right of the Jewish people to sovereignty in their ancestral homeland," or more simply, "Israel's right to exist." The connection between the Jewish people and their ancestral homeland is often underemphasized, while the "right to exist" has been elevated. And it has been weaponized.

It is astounding that only Israel, unlike any other country, is forced to defend its existence. However, many Zionists, especially in the Jewish community, have made a strategic mistake: accepting that framing. Defending Zionism within a framework that puts its legitimacy up for debate inadvertently succumbs to the very double standard imposed on the Jewish nation. Arguing for the right to exist opens the window for hinting at its non-existence.

Israel's existence is a given, like that of any other sovereign nation. Who asks if India or Pakistan has the right to exist? Iran, China, or North Korea? Just as citizens of those countries wouldn't applaud acceptance over their right to exist, neither should Jews and Israelis.

Jewish history offers a lesson: adaptability without losing identity requires the responsibility to course-correct. Viktor Frankl wrote that "Between stimulus and response, there is a space... and in that space is our power to choose our response."

We would be best to reject the reduction of Zionism to a mere "right to exist." Instead, Zionism should be understood through the Jewish people's enduring connection to the Land of Israel, the long arc of Jewish history, and its influence on the building blocks of America and the West. Contrary to Carlson's claims, Christianity has not superseded Judaism, and indeed, the biblical people of Israel are the same people of Israel today.

Zionism was both compelled and completed by history. The word "Zion" is rooted in the Bible, synonymous with the Land of Israel. Theodor Herzl trailblazed the Zionist movement in the late 19th century after witnessing the Dreyfus Affair, which crystallized the idea that reviving Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel was necessary. That case has been a *fait accompli* since 1948.

The catch is that Carlson and many contemporary critics of Israel insist that they are not advocating Israel's destruction and even affirm its "right to

exist." Anyone willing to listen and scrutinize their arguments will identify the hollowness of those words, as their arguments do the opposite. The existence standard is a shield and a lure into the lair of anti-Israel lies and characters.

"Never in my life did I think I'd agree with Tucker Carlson, and I am not the only one. So many people are saying this." This prevalent reaction to Carlson's interview stems from a deceptively simple logic: why question whether a country that exists has the right to exist? That shallow "reasonableness" foreshadows the danger of the existence standard.

In discussing his book *The Message* in October 2024 on CBS, Ta-Nehisi Coates was asked if he supported Israel's right to exist. He acknowledged Israel's existence as a *fait accompli*. Yet, the reporter astutely pointed out that Coates's book effectively delegitimized Israel.

Carlson and Coates's responses have unveiled a targeting of Israel more insidious than blatant calls for destruction. They achieve the same end, disseminating the Three D's of Antisemitism – Demonization, Delegitimization, and Double Standards – while presenting themselves as balanced and morally serious.

That dynamic extends to figures like J Street president Jeremy Ben-Ami, who not only affirms Israel's existence but couches his rhetoric in the language of concern. He pins eroding US support for Israel on AIPAC, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Israeli voters, which ultimately dilutes Israel's democratic processes and independence.

His argument thus advances the false narrative that Israel is an extension of American power rather than a sovereign state. Even *Haaretz*, no ally of the Israeli government, condemned J Street as "self-indulgent and delusional," citing "immoral reasons" for opposing the war on Iran despite overwhelming Israeli public support.

Carlson, Coates, and Ben-Ami follow a similar pattern: Israel has a right to exist, but. It is in that "but" that demonization and distortions flourish, and keep Israel's existence open to question. Yet, many Zionists continue to engage on those terms. Arguing for accepting Zionism because it merely sustains Israel's "right to exist" has not, and will not work. Herzl, too, realized this.

A February 2026 Gallup poll found that, for the first time, more Americans sympathize with Palestinians than with Israelis. The ideological horseshoe has taken on a different dimension: rather than only at the extremes, closer to the center, so-called moderate voices are advancing a variety of arguments that converge and feed conspiracies. The actors may never stand on the same stage, but together, in their respective performances, amplify the tune of antisemitism. That tune has been too widely sung, piercing societies with lunacy and hatred, and even deafening us.

Words matter, and paradigms and ideas surrounding Zionism matter now more than ever. Our ears and eyes must remain open, listening and looking for opportunities to respond. We must follow in the footsteps of Herzl's philosophy: Israel's existence is not up for debate, and neither is the identity it represents. Zionism, with a biblical, historical, and continuous connection to the land of Israel, stands resolute and continues giving gifts to the world.

The writer is co-author of the forthcoming book, Of Good Courage: Israel and the West's Fight for Moral Clarity, with Israeli Ambassador to the US Dr. Yechiel (Michael) Leiter, and a research fellow at the Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs.