

Israel is getting away with murder and Jews who find it unacceptable should say they oppose what the country stands for, says Antony Loewenstein.

BY JOANNE BLACK

White, Australian, atheist, Jew, journalist, blogger, author – the adjectival abundance of descriptions of Antony Loewenstein, used by himself and others, makes it difficult to decide where to begin.

Add in a few others – anti-Semite, and “self-hating Jew” – and the picture becomes more complicated still, but these terms have been used to describe the man who admits that certain anti-Semitic groups see in his rhetoric some similarities to theirs.

“But their interests, of course, are very different to my own,” he asserts.

Loewenstein wrote *The Blogging Revolution* and his publishers recently released a third edition of his controversial 2006 book *My Israel Question*. He will be in New Zealand this month for the Auckland Writers and Readers Festival, and engagements in Wellington and Christchurch.

Loewenstein’s language is moderate and his fluency is punctuated by frequent disclaimers. “I’m not saying one can’t be Jewish and balanced, I’m not saying that for a second ...” “I’m not saying every single Jew is privileged, of course I’m not.” “I’m not suggesting Jews are unfairly taking jobs from other people, I’m not suggesting that.” “I’m not saying there isn’t anti-Semitism or hatred of Jews in some parts of the Middle East. Of course there is, obviously ...”

It is hard to say whether this is simply a rhetorical device to soften what he is saying – which is that Israel is racist and brutal if you are unfortunate enough to be living there and not Jewish – or whether he is wary of being misinterpreted so clarifies as he goes. Even with this constant couching of his views, they are certainly polarising.

Speaking by phone from Sydney, Loewenstein says he is tired of being accused of being self-hating or anti-Semitic. Both labels, he says, are designed to shut him up and to deter others from saying similar things, “because they know they are going to get that response, and who wants to be called an anti-Semite?”



# Cry the pro

Not Loewenstein. And he is not anti-Semitic, but he is an anti-Zionist Jew and he says that is a very difficult position for non-Jews to understand.

“The concept of being anti-Zionist, which means that there should not be a Jewish state, is a very big red line.”

Well, yes. And even the most cursory understanding of Jewish history in Europe since 1930 surely explains that.

Loewenstein says the reaction to suggestions that there should not be a Jewish state are partly from fear that it would

bring on another a Holocaust, and “there is still profound insecurity about talking about what Israel is doing.

“Simply saying there is an Occupation, explaining what it involves and talking about the profound racism that exists in Israeli society, is confronting for a lot of people because we’ve grown up with this idea – and we hear Kevin Rudd or Barack Obama or whoever in the West say that Israel and the West have shared values, and it’s complete nonsense.

“Shared values of what? That we believe

Remembrance Day, April 18, 2010, in Jerusalem. Israeli families and scouting youths stand in front of a burning inscription symbolising the Israeli army.



**“They are shielding the American public from the truth of what’s going on in Palestine.”**

ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN

commentators, journalists and owners of media companies, especially in the United States, are Jewish.

“I’m not saying one can’t be Jewish and balanced, I’m not saying that for a second. But what I am saying is that the result of that – especially in publications like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, etc, the opinion-makers, so to speak – has been a deliberate shutting out of views that are not very Zionist.”

Many Americans have not been told what’s going on in Israel, says Loewenstein, “what’s being done in their name and what is actually being paid for by their tax dollars”.

“And that dishonesty and that shielding has, I think, a lot to do with the fact that a lot of editors and publishers, for example at the *New York Times*, have long been Zionists and proudly saying, not so much while they’re there but after they have left, they are unashamedly of that view.

“They have every right to have that view, let me say that, but they are shielding the American public from the truth of what’s going on in Palestine.”

Loewenstein believes the internet in general, and some bloggers in particular, are helping disseminate information and air a much wider array of voices, including those the mainstream media chooses not to publish because, he says, they prefer to print their own people.

Partly because of bloggers, Loewenstein believes, more opinions are being heard, and opposition to Israel’s occupation is growing.

In particular, he says, more commentators are beginning to see that the so-called two-state solution favoured by Western politicians to finally end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may never work.

Instead, Loewenstein thinks Jews have to give up the concept of a Jewish state, and accept Israel as a bi-national state in which Jews would be the minority.

He admits it is a lot to ask to suggest Jews not only become magnanimous towards their traditional foes, but also

LEFT: MARKES

# mised land

in Occupation and racism and discrimination? It’s nonsense.

“It’s made worse by the fact that the majority of Jews who are saying this – in Australia, New Zealand and the West in general – are privileged.

“I’m not saying every single Jew is, of course they’re not, but often the ones who are leaders are privileged Jews who are speaking about discrimination, a world of which they have zero understanding, because they have been raised in privileged societies.”

He says there is a “real fear” in the West of daring to raise the issue of Jewish power, “and of course whenever anyone thinks of that, they think, ‘Oh, here we go, [he’s saying] Jews rule the world’, and of course I’m not saying that, not at all.

“But since World War II and more so in the last 30 or 40 years, there are many Jewish individuals in positions of power in our society and there is a fear of raising that.”

In particular, he says, there is resistance to pointing out how many influential

give up their idea of a Jewish state.

“Yes, it is a big ask, but a lot of people are seeing it only from a Jewish perspective. There’s been profound Palestinian suffering and it’s not on the same scale, numbers-wise, as the Jewish Holocaust, but if you ask any Arab or Palestinian what happened in 1948, it will be very different to what most Jews see it as.

“Jews see it generally as a wonderful success in having a Jewish state, but most Palestinians call it by the *nakba*, meaning the catastrophe.

“The second point is the danger in saying non-Jews don’t have the right to be more critical or to urge Israel to be more magnanimous ... because we fund what goes on over there.

“Australia, the West – and America particularly – have a deep financial interest in maintaining a status quo. The US funds Israel [to the tune of] US\$3 billion a year, on top of numerous military means as well, and Israel is the only country in the world that does not need to explain to America where the money goes.”

In the past month, as the Obama administration has “in a very mild way started to put a little bit of pressure on Israel to check its behaviour”, Loewenstein says, so have numbers increased of those in Israel who say they don’t need the US and that Israel can stand on its own two feet.

“Well, the truth is that Israel can’t stand on its own two feet. Its economy is doing pretty well, but diplomatically, militarily and, I would argue, in other ways as well, Israel without the US and the West’s support wouldn’t exist.”

In Loewenstein’s view, it would be a good thing if that happened, or at least if Israel didn’t exist in its current form.

Strangely, for an atheist, he says he shares the view that Israel was born in sin. It is not a controversial view, he says. Israeli historians had gone back into the archives and found documents that show very clearly that thousands of Palestinians were dispossessed in order for Israel to exist.

Other colonial countries, including Australia, share the same type of history, he says, “but Israel has not even begun to seriously address who they dispossessed in order to exist”.

“Until there is at least acknowledgement, discussion, reparation for what Jews did to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians by forcing them out at gunpoint in 1947 and ’48, nothing will change.

“One can’t change that history: what has happened has happened and you



**Hebron tinderpoint: evictions of Jewish settlers by Israeli security later prompted furious attacks on Palestinians in the city.**

we have come from is better.

“South Africa has major problems, of course. Northern Ireland also still has major problems but they are two imperfect examples of a privileged minority accepting the fact that they cannot indefinitely maintain a racially discriminatory policy.”

Anyway, he says, “there is a deliberate victimhood that many Jews choose to display towards the Middle East, which is not, in my view, based on any justification”.

Loewenstein is critical of the fact that although the mainstream media have thousands of journalists in Israel, almost none live in the Gaza Strip or the Occupied territories.

If there were such journalists, he thinks, the Western world would know more about what life is like in Israel. They might know more about the 500,000 Jewish settlers in the Occupied Territories, a “sizeable minority” of whom, he says, are religious bigots who want a Taleban-style Jewish state.

“Many in the West choose to look away from this and say the crazy people in the Middle East are all Muslim. There are a lot of crazy people in the Middle East, but the truth is there are sizeable numbers of Israeli Jews in the Knesset [the Israeli Parliament] who, if they had a choice between living under a democracy or Jewish law, would not choose democracy.

“Again, a lot of the Western media have not responsibly reported on this reality where Israel has created for itself an enemy within of individuals who loathe democracy, loathe Arabs, loathe secular Israeli Jews and have very high birthrates. The fear I have, among others, is that you could well see civil strife between Jews and Jews.”

He says the only long-term options for peace are Israel choosing to give up some land to create a Palestinian state that is viable, or Israel accepting one state in which Jews are a minority.

“There would need to be safeguards. I’m not saying there isn’t anti-Semitism or hatred of Jews in some parts of the Middle East – of course there is, obviously.

“But this is the same argument that white South Africans used and said, ‘We cannot give up our privileges because otherwise the blacks will come and get us.’” ■

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can’t undo it. We are where we are but I think growing numbers of people around the world are realising that Israel is only a democracy if you’re Jewish.”

Loewenstein says he has looked into countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, “and of course they are fundamentally undemocratic as well, but the difference is that they don’t call themselves democracies, and if they do, everyone laughs”.

He likens Israel to pre-apartheid South Africa, saying black South African anti-apartheid activists who have spent time in places like the Gaza Strip say there are similarities, but that life for Palestinians is worse in Gaza than it was for blacks under apartheid.

But does he consider contemporary South Africa, which is racked by violence, a successful model of reform?

He concedes white South Africans might be fearful, and violence is rampant.

“But the alternative is that you go back to how it was before. Apartheid was hardly an ideal situation and the fact that a transition to a new period is problematic does not therefore mean that where

THE BLOGGING REVOLUTION (MUP, \$46.95), MY ISRAEL QUESTION (MUP, \$59.95), by Antony Loewenstein; AUCKLAND WRITERS & READERS’ FESTIVAL, May 12-16.