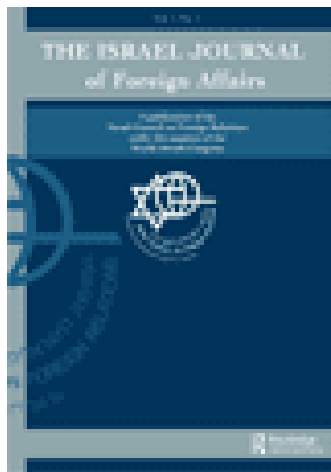


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### Uncivil War: The Israel Conflict in the Jewish Community

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***Uncivil War: The Israel Conflict in the Jewish Community***

by **Keith Kahn-Harris**

(London: David Paul, 2014), 223 pages

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On November 16, 2014, the Board of Deputies of British Jews voted 135 to 61 to accept the membership of Yachad, a group that describes itself as “pro peace and pro-Israel” and supports “a two-state solution.” The meeting of the Board was described by Anshel Pfeffer of *Haaretz* as “an impassioned debate attended by an unprecedented number of deputies and spectators.” Pfeffer quoted one deputy who objected to accepting Yachad as saying, “If anyone thinks that they are helping Israel by criticizing it, they’re living in cloud cuckoo land.”<sup>1</sup>

It is against this backdrop that independent sociologist Keith Kahn-Harris, who is also known as an authority on heavy metal music, devotes his book to the ongoing debate in the Anglo-Jewish community as to how legitimate it is to criticize Israel. The first part of the book describes the different views held by the Jewish community regarding Israel. The latter part of the book is an impassioned plea by author Kahn-Harris for the Jewish community to carry on this debate in a civil manner that will not tear the community apart. The author concludes by proposing his own criterion of “Jewish peoplehood” and by describing his own efforts to encourage such civil debate, including dinners at his house hosting community leaders from different groups. We are even informed about the menu at these strictly kosher dinners, which avoided “such standard Jewish community fare as grilled salmon with new potatoes in favor of less expected recipes. These included Mexican tacos, gazpacho, smoked cod’s roe with ricotta and broad beans, savory Scottish porridge with smoked haddock, and Sephardi-style red mullet.”

Few would disagree with Clive Lawton,<sup>2</sup> who, in the introduction to the book, said that “Jews are a factitious lot. All through Jewish history Jews have squabbled and argued over just about anything.” However, Kahn-Harris is quick to point out that “otherwise genial people behave in extraordinary ways to other Jews when the issue of Israel comes up. Israel has become a source of deepening conflict in the Diaspora.”

The author states outright that he is not a “disinterested” player, and that as regards Israel he has strong “leftist opinions that sometimes conflict with those of

much of the Jewish community.” He adds that he is “strongly committed to Jewish community and to Jewish peoplehood” and that he writes “as a sociologist and as a committed member of the British Jewish community.”

Kahn-Harris maintains that despite the heterogeneity of political views within the State of Israel during the early years of its existence, “Zionism and Israel have become a source of consensus—perhaps *the* source of consensus—within most Diaspora Jewish communities.” This, however, according to the author, changed after 2000. “The outbreak of the second intifada was intensely traumatic.” This coupled with “increased public prominence of pro-Palestinian campaigning in the 2000s raised insecurities and anxieties about antisemitism among Jewish supporters of Israel.” The author points out that “it was much easier [for British Jews] to identify with Israelis fighting on a battlefield than on the streets of Jenin.” After conducting a study on the views of British Jews, Kahn-Harris concluded that the mainstream majority in the Jewish community has a broadly dovish vision of Israel’s future and exhibit cautious support for Israel’s actions. “More religious respondents and those with lower levels of educational attainments tended toward hawkishness.” The author’s own view of Israeli policy is perhaps reflected in his statement that “given the repeated media images of overwhelming Israel force directed at lightly armed combatants and unarmed civilians, it would take a highly robust and uncompromising view of the conflict to remain staunchly pro-Israel in these circumstances.”

Kahn-Harris’s profession as a sociologist is clearly reflected in Chapter 2 of the book, in which he attempts to classify British Jews into separate categories based on their positions on Israel and Zionism. He identifies fourteen different groups:

- public supporters;
- pro-Israel pluralists;
- pro-Israel, pro-peace left;
- Jewish radicals;
- the anti-Zionist left;
- the decent left;
- the neo-Conservative right;
- the Jewish religious right;
- the Haredi community;
- authoritarian Zionists;
- private engagers;
- Zionist youth movements;
- the apathetic; and
- non-Jewish supporters.

Such divisions are clearly arbitrary and the author himself comments, “The positions are not rigidly fixed; individuals move between them.” Another group is

labeled by the author as the “as-a-Jews.” Its members, according to Kahn-Harris, are people with little connection to Judaism or to the community, who preface every statement criticizing Israel with the opening phrase “speaking as a Jew.”

Regarding the “public supporters,” Kahn-Harris notes that for them, “criticism of Israel’s security choices and military actions is unacceptable; criticism of other aspects of Israeli society may be allowable.” He believes, however, that mainstream British Jewry consists of young liberal Jews, whom he describes as “pro-Israel pluralists,” who support Israel wholeheartedly but are willing “to tolerate the public expression of views that may be critical of Israel.” For this group, challenging the centrality or legitimacy of Israel, or advocating BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions), is “strictly taboo.” He characterizes Yachad as the “pro-Israel, pro-peace left” and describes it as being close to the American organization JStreet. The “Jewish radicals” are described as viewing opposition to the occupation as being of such urgent priority as to overshadow any need to express support for Israel. Those who criticize Israel’s policies but do not turn a blind eye to the antisemitism of some pro-Palestinian movements or to the rabid nature of radical Islam are defined as the “decent left.” According to Kahn-Harris, some of the differences within the community are related to “emerging generational differences....Those who have only known Israel as a regional superpower in conflict with the Palestinians may not be able to identify with those who knew Israel as a developing country, struggling for independence in the shadow of the Holocaust.”

Kahn-Harris devotes a considerable part of his book to the tension these divisions cause in the Anglo-Jewish community. He stresses the emotional involvement in Israel of Britain’s 300,000-strong Jewish community: “Israel is a place of ‘peak experience,’ of intense teenage and young adult tours, in which growth and sexual exploration take place in an emotionally heightened atmosphere.” However, he comments, “Some of those who were most passionately Zionist in their youth... become disillusioned when they find the reality of Israel cannot match their expectations,” adding, “many of the most intractable conflicts occur between those whose views are relatively close together ideologically.” This is undoubtedly true and Kahn-Harris recalls Monty Python’s description in the *Life of Brian* of the schism between the “People’s Front of Judea” and “Judean People’s Front.”

The author feels that the debilitating effect of internecine disputes over attitudes to Israel could lead to a situation in which the “already fragile bonds tying Jews to each other could be shattered entirely.” This could destroy what he describes as “Jewish peoplehood,” a concept that “allows different kinds of Jews to use a common language and framework.” Kahn-Harris advocates a concept of Jewish peoplehood that would allow the inclusion of “Jews who have no ideological or theological commitment to peoplehood.” He proposes as a common denominator “a common journey by Jews towards the protection of our self-interest as Jews.”

According to this proposal, “Jewish communal institutions need to work to include those who reject or are strongly critical of Israel and Zionism.” He adds, “There cannot be a non-controversial simple ‘pro-Israel’ position,” and therefore “Jewish institutions that aspire to inclusion may have to pull back from some kinds of Israel-related activity. “Celebratory, defensive and political engagement” should not, in his opinion, be part of Jewish peoplehood activity. The author, however, does believe in excluding those who “seek the dissolution of any kind of Jewishness,” are explicitly antisemitic, who call for “mass expulsion of all Jews from Israel,” or “embrace Holocaust denial.”

In the opinion of this reviewer, by removing both religious and Zionist content from the idea of “Jewish peoplehood,” the author is in fact proposing the evisceration of the concept of a Jewish people and is depriving it of any real content or ideology. What would be left is an empty shell with no common binding element. That being said, Kahn-Harris’s book is thoughtful and thought provoking. Beyond its obvious relevance to Anglo Jewry, it will also be of interest to other Diaspora Jewish communities.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Anshel Pfeffer, “By admitting pro-peace group, British Jews show more maturity than U.S. counterparts,” *Haaretz*, November 16, 2014 (English language edition), [www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/jewish-world-features/premium-1.626761](http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/jewish-world-features/premium-1.626761).
- <sup>2</sup> Clive Lawton is one of the founders of Limmud, a pioneering initiative in Jewish education that first began in Britain and it not affiliated with any stream of Judaism.