

10 Ways to Have Conscientious Conversations on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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The Israeli-Palestinian conflict activates strong emotions and differences of opinion and perspective for many people. These disagreements are heightened in times of crisis. Remember that antisemitism, anti-Muslim bias and other forms of hate can manifest during crises, often exacerbated by [disinformation](#), and it is essential to reflect on how biases can show up in conversations. Allowing antisemitism or anti-Muslim bias to go unchecked not only harms the groups that are targeted by those biases, but also undermines trust and connection necessary to have productive conversations and learning experiences.

Antisemitism is the marginalization and oppression of Jewish people based on the belief in stereotypes and myths about Jewish people, Judaism, Zionism, and Israel. Most commonly, [antisemitism](#) shows up as a distorted view of Jewish people and a conspiratorial view of the world. Antisemitism has existed for thousands of years. Antisemitic ideas include believing that Jewish people are collectively working to harm society; justifying the exclusion, harm or deaths of Jewish people for political purposes; and suggesting that Jewish people are less in need or deserving of protection than other groups. Antisemitic ideas can be communicated explicitly, meaning the person is aware of their bias, and they can also be communicated implicitly, meaning the person is not aware that they hold and are communicating antisemitic biases.

Conversations about Israel can sometimes include implicit or explicit antisemitic ideas, even though criticism of the Israeli government or policies is not inherently antisemitic. Intentionally or unintentionally, antisemitic ideas can cause harm to Jewish people around the world and dehumanize Jews and Israeli people who are vulnerable. It is important to learn to recognize [anti-Israel bias](#), [anti-Zionism](#) and [antisemitism](#) and challenge biased language that is communicated within conversations about geopolitical conflicts.

Antisemitic biases are often activated when there is a large-scale conflict or war, political or economic instability, and other inducers of collective anxiety. Antisemitic tropes (common or recurring patterns, messages and devices that repeat throughout history) often show up in anti-Israel statements when there is heightened violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is important to recognize when the terms “Israel” or “Zionism” are being used to collectively assign blame to or to dehumanize the Jewish people or to all people living in Israel. A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences. It is important to recognize and challenge stereotypical thinking when we notice it in ourselves and others.

Here are ten suggestions to use when having conversations about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

1. Establish an environment for a mutually respectful discussion.

- Develop [guidelines and goals](#) for the conversation, such as seeking to build greater understanding, complicate rather than oversimplify, or to foster empathy for the people impacted by the climate.
- Strive for a common language based on respect when discussing complex issues. Recognize and challenge language that is meant to inspire anger and turn people against each other.

- Select a text (or video) from a credible source to anchor the conversation in a shared set of facts. For more on this, see #7.
- Recognize that antisemitic bias is universal, and that it can be implicit (unconscious) or explicit (conscious). Notice the thought processes or emotions that may come up for you with curiosity rather than judgment.
- Consider the [time and place](#). As violence unfolds or the conflict escalates, people may be in greater need of emotional support rather than educational opportunities.

2. Position yourself as a learner, not an expert.

- The [Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#) has roots that predate current events, and there are a wide variety of historical, religious, political and cultural factors in play. It is complex, nuanced and multi-layered.
- In order to truly be able to discuss the conflict, avoid oversimplification which only leads to stereotyping and bias.
- The best way to do that is to read a variety of informed sources from different perspectives.
- Accept and expect that there won't be closure at the end of the conversation nor will all questions be answered and resolved. That may cause some discomfort.

3. Choose language that helps to humanizes the people living in the region.

- Use precise language. For example, refer to Israel as the State of Israel or the Jewish state, as opposed to "the Zionist entity," "the Jews," or other euphemisms. Likewise, distinguish between Hamas or other terrorist organizations and the Palestinian people.
- Challenge the use of dehumanizing depictions of individuals and groups of people as [non-human, animals, vermin, or insects](#).
- Watch out for stereotypes and myths that depict people as all "good" or all "evil" based on their identity group.

- Provide examples, images, narratives, quotes and other material that humanizes people and fosters empathy.

4. Make connections across history, rather than direct comparisons.

- Explore the history of the Jewish people's origins in the land of Israel, and contextualize the current conflict as part of a long history of different empires and peoples asserting a claim to the region.
- People will often use language and aspects of the Holocaust and Nazism to demonstrate the seriousness of discrimination or bias-motivated violence that is taking place. Making direct comparisons to Nazism or the Holocaust is painful and potentially retraumatizing to Jewish people, especially those who are survivors of the Holocaust or their descendants. The Holocaust was not a "lesson" for the Jewish people to learn. Intergenerational and historical trauma may trigger compounded pain during this conflict.
- Explore definitions and origins of terms that are used to describe mass atrocities in history. Using terms like "[genocide](#)" and "[ethnic cleansing](#)" inaccurately in order to provoke a strong reaction can further cause harm.

5. Center and affirm the concerns that Jewish people express about safety.

- As [antisemitic incidents](#) in the US and around the world tend to spike when there is a conflict in Israel, validate the safety concerns that Jewish people express.
- Remember that safety and comfort are not the same. Comfort is when one's mind is at ease, whereas discomfort can mean one's mind is challenged. Safety refers to the absence of risks and threats of harm, and when someone feels unsafe they may be in physical or mental distress. Geopolitical conflicts can be uncomfortable to talk about, however Jewish communities face specific risks when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in the news, including threats of violence, vandalism of Jewish synagogues, cemeteries and community buildings and exclusion from participation in everyday life.

- Watch for and challenge the antisemitic idea that Jewish people are deserving of violence, displacement or retribution.
- Anticipate and seek to hold space for Jewish people to feel fear for their safety.

6. Challenge language that holds Jewish individuals and groups accountable for the actions of the state of Israel.

- Understand that holding a community or person accountable for the actions of a nation and their government has a history resulting in violence and oppression.
- Challenge voices that demand Jewish people condemn Israel's policies and actions, reject [Zionism](#) or otherwise speak on behalf of the Israeli government. For many, Zionism and a connection to the land of Israel is integral to their practice and identity as Jewish people.
- Remember that Jewish people hold a wide range of opinions related to the government of Israel and its actions and treating a Jewish person or group as representative of all Jewish people is not fair and is tokenizing.
- Identify anti-Israel vandalism, attacks and demonstrations that target Jewish people or community buildings as acts of antisemitism, such as spray-painting "Free Palestine" on a synagogue.

7. Ground conversations in reliable informational resources.

- Identify a text, video or other resource from a credible organization or expert to anchor the conversation.
- Start or continue your learning journey about the [history of antisemitism](#), its roots, and [contemporary manifestations](#).
- Recognize that misinformation and disinformation are widespread, especially as violence and conflicts are unfolding. Practice [media literacy](#) by assessing the quality of the sources you find and share.
- Be sure to include nuanced and different perspectives and minimize one-sided points of view.

8. Center empathy by listening to the voices of those people directly affected by the conflict.

- Listen to and center voices that have personal experiences, familial ties and trauma associated with this region. War and violent conflict have dire consequences for ordinary people of any or no political ideology.
- Ask and listen to how individuals define their identity as Jewish people, Israeli people, or Zionists. Identity is complex and not everyone identifies in the same way.
- Hold space for the distinct experiences of pain and trauma that Jewish and Palestinian people carry from this conflict. Listening to different peoples' narratives without attempting to correct or rank them builds empathy and perspective-taking skills.

9. Acknowledge your worldview and perspective to avoid projecting onto the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

- Though news and social media can be informative, people living outside of Israel and the Palestinian territories will always have a limited perspective on the conflict compared to a person who lives in the region.
- Center voices of those who are in the region and most impacted by the conflict.
- Resist the temptation to directly compare the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to other identity-based issues in the United States or elsewhere. Direct comparisons can cause more harm and confusion rather than building understanding.

10. Conclude the discussion with next steps for learning and supportive actions.

- Identify one or more questions to continue exploring beyond the conversation. Learning is a journey.
- Exchange strategies for applying pro-social and supportive behaviors online and in person.

- Accept that violence and geopolitical conflicts can create strong emotional reactions, including feelings of despair and hopelessness; resolve to build connection and strengthen social ties within your community.
- Continue to learn more about the unfolding events and how to support people in your community who are impacted. ADL will provide [updates](#) as events unfold.

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