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Inside the Hotovely event: lots of deflection, not enough facts

To call Tzipi Hotovely a polarising figure is an understatement. Having faced [opposition to her appointment as Israeli ambassador to the UK](#) by left-wing groups, she has been criticised for her stances on [Israeli human rights groups](#) and [the West Bank settlements](#), accusing Palestinians of being the “[thieves of history](#)”. Walking into 32 Lincoln’s Inn Fields and being scanned by a metal detector and patted down is a reminder of this. There are several members of Hotovely’s security team managing the crowd, alongside one or two members of LSE Security. While this is understandable due to [the backlash after the event was announced](#), it creates an environment that is especially tense. As Hotovely enters the room, five representatives of societies including the Palestinian Society and MENA Society walk out and are guided by security, telling the rest of those seated to “have fun with a war criminal”.

The moderator for the event was Lloyd Gruber, Assistant Professor in the Department of International Development and former Dean of LSE’s Institute of Public Affairs. Before the event begins, Gruber introduces Sunny, the Equity Officer of the Debate Society, as the safety officer for the event, as well as laying out how this will be a “principled space”, where critical questions can be asked to challenge the speaker. As a principled space, there would be opportunities for students to ask questions anonymously online, access support if they do not feel safe in the environment, and ask critical questions without fear of hostility from the speaker or other students. It is unclear what this contributed to the experience, as this sentiment was present in the rules and structure of the event that the Debate Society had already set. With members of Hotovely’s security team looking around at the audience and to each other from each side of the room, it feels as though this is a space too heavily surveilled to allow for everyone present to speak freely.

Kicking off the event with a speech, Hotovely describes three key moments of her life and the history of Israel. Starting with when she was born, in 1978, she discusses the peace treaty with Egypt, followed by the first Oslo Accord when she was a teenager, and then Israel’s disengagement from Gaza in 2005 as she was beginning her career in law. Focusing on the normalisation of relations between Israel and Gulf states such as the UAE and Bahrain, she makes the claim that Palestine, specifically Hamas, has refused all peace offers. This seems like an oversimplification: yes, [Palestine has rejected recent peace plans](#), but it is worth mentioning that this is largely rooted in Israel’s unwillingness to honour some of the core conditions outlined over the years: the release of Palestinian political prisoners, right to return for Palestinian refugees, and a return to pre-1967 borders in Palestine.

A few patterns emerge as students ask questions: Hotovely resolutely denies the consensus of a number of historians on the 1948 exodus of Palestinians, regularly defends [the IDF’s history of human rights abuses](#) whilst focusing on the fact that Hamas is a terrorist organisation, and skirts any critique of views that she has publicly stated by arguing that these views are irrelevant to her role as the ambassador to the UK. One of the first questions asked during the event by a student was about the Nakba, [the mass exodus and permanent displacement of a majority of the Palestinian people](#), a pivotal moment in Palestinian history. The right of return of Palestinian refugees has been a key point of contention during the peace process. Historians including Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, and Shlomo Sand broadly agree that this exodus took place. Hotovely has called the Nakba “a made-up story” [as recently as December 2020](#), only a few months into her term as Israeli ambassador to the UK.

When asked about this by a student, she makes the claim that the displacement of the Palestinian people was a result of their refusal to accept the creation of the State of Israel. But what is even more confusing is her acknowledgement of a mass exodus in 1948 as a result of the creation of Israel while refusing to answer the question posed to her: “So you acknowledge that the Nakba happened?”, the student follows-up. Hotovely responds by making the claim that if violence had not been undertaken by Zionist groups, it would be tantamount to the mass extermination of the Jewish peoples that would go on to make up Israel.

Another fundamental question raised by both the chair and students is the systemic oppression of Arab-Isrealis. When asked by the academic chair about her past experience as Deputy Foreign Minister and Settlements Minister, and whether some of the policies she supported were consistent with her claims regarding the importance of building community, she argues that her past claims are irrelevant because her work currently is to advance and support the Israeli government’s stances. She deflects criticism by talking about women’s rights in Israel, instead of addressing the question itself. Similarly, when asked a question about the discrimination Arab-Isrealis face in Jerusalem, she makes the claim that this has nothing to do with race, and that even some Jewish neighbourhoods are very unequal, denying the existence of [restrictions to Palestinian spouses gaining citizenship rights](#) to live with their Israeli-Arab partners. While the Citizenship Law of 2003 expired [this year](#), to imply that such inequality did not exist as recently as this July is to erase the impact of Israeli policy on its Arab citizens. Whether it is [discrimination in schooling](#), or [access to housing](#), the argument that there are no systemic barriers faced by Arab-Isrealis is verifiably untrue – Hotovely herself did not back up any of these claims with factual evidence.

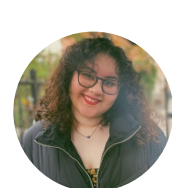
Perhaps there is an argument to be made for how the work of a diplomat requires them to separate their own beliefs from the policies that they must promote. But this is difficult to believe when Hotovely is, in many ways, very willing to take a stance. When asked by a student why she so vehemently opposes Hamas while allowing far-right groups to speak in the Knesset (most likely referring to Lehava, a Jewish supremacist group in Israel that opposes Jewish-Arab intermarriage, [whom she invited to speak in the Knesset in 2011](#)), she argues for their right to freedom of speech. According to her, there is a distinction between being “radical” and being a “terrorist group”, even though [many lawmakers in Israel have campaigned for Lehava to be classified as a terrorist group](#).

What is disappointing is Hotovely’s (and largely, the chair’s) inability to shift the conversation in a direction that may be less divisive and more relevant to her current role. The chair, perhaps because his academic specialisation does not lie in Middle Eastern politics or foreign policy, makes no effort to reorient the conversations towards more illuminating questions about Israeli foreign policy and its impact on the UK and the world at large. Even when asked pertinent questions by students, such as the consequences of Israel politicising its ties to America by favouring the Republican Party, she is unable to answer them adequately. Instead of engaging with a question that is crucial to understanding the government’s relationship with a key actor in its foreign policy, she chooses to answer in ambiguous terms, commenting on the need for strong ties with US governments without addressing the question itself.

Perhaps the most controversial claim made by Hotovely, towards the end of the event, was that the IDF “never targets civilians, period”. In a [video posted on Twitter](#), she makes the claim that the IDF is allowed to “target places that are the infrastructure of terror organisations” under international law. Whilst such intervention is arguably legal, the IDF has been criticised for international law breaches elsewhere: this year the IDF was accused of war crimes by [Human Rights Watch](#) and [Amnesty International](#). There has been extensive reporting on how Palestinians have [disproportionately been killed and injured](#) through the conflict, with the IDF having killed [nearly 2,000 Palestinians](#) who were not participating in terrorist activity since Operation Cast Lead, which ended in January 2009.

As our student body takes stock of the event, perhaps this is a time to consider what debate fundamentally means to us. It is about opposing viewpoints, yes. But a debate where both parties are not equally engaging with each other’s arguments is not very different from simply speaking at a group of people. Hotovely crucially failed to do so at several stages, which raises questions about whether platforming her truly allowed the Debate Society to accomplish their goal of “[encouraging discourse](#)”. When our campus community is being described as “[thuggish](#)” and the Home Secretary [makes claims of backing a police investigation into the protests against Hotovely](#), it may be worth considering whether events such as this truly centre debate and discussion, or serve to only create controversy on campus at the expense of minority groups.

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