

Black Lives Matter, American Jews, and Antisemitism: Distinguishing Between the Organization(s), the Movement, and the Ubiquitous Phrase

Today's Black Lives Matter movement has become one of the most prolific social movements in decades. It is a movement focused on improving the safety and well-being of Black people in the U.S., achieving racial justice, and ending racial disparities in all areas of our society. When Jews are asked to march with or just assert "Black lives matter," we are not being asked to "check" our love of Israel at the door or embrace an antisemitic agenda. To most invoking the phrase, Black Lives Matter is an inspiring rallying cry, a slogan, and a demand for racial justice. That fight for racial justice is also a fight for our own multiracial, multiethnic Jewish community.

The phrase "Black Lives Matter" was coined as the Twitter "hashtag" #BlackLivesMatter in response to George Zimmerman's 2013 acquittal in 17-year-old Trayvon Martin's murder. Both his death and Zimmerman's acquittal sparked large-scale protests across the country. The originators of the hashtag, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi went on to found the [Black Lives Matter Network](#) as an organizing platform for activists that emphasizes local over national leadership. The Black Lives Matter network now has 16 chapters.

There are at least two other national groups with Black Lives Matter Network in their titles. Not surprisingly, the overall BLM movement is a decentralized network of activists with no formal hierarchy.

In response to the high-profile police killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice in 2015, about 1500 activists, including those with the Black Lives Matter Network, gathered at Cleveland State University to discuss the movement. Out of this meeting, the [Movement for Black Lives \(M4BL\)](#) emerged as a loose coalition of 150 groups, including the Black Lives Matter Network.

In 2017, separately, the Black Lives Matter Foundation was launched, though it is [not affiliated with the movement and it is unclear where donations are going](#).

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) Network and the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) are often mistaken for the other or as one and the same. That is why many Jews mistakenly assert the M4BL platform and its hyperlinks to anti-Israel "resource" materials belong to the BLM network.

[M4BL's 2016 platform](#) has three layers: five macro issues each supported by six or so specific policies that are supplemented with multiple hyperlinked additional "resources." None of those layers – macro position, specific policy steps or additional resources hyperlinks – mentions or is called "Israel" or "Palestine."

Where then does "Israel" emerge? The "[Invest-Divest](#)" platform calls for defunding U.S. prisons and police and instead investing in health and education for Black Americans. None of its six specific policy steps mentions Israel. One of the six hyperlinked additional resources ("[cut military expenditures](#)") deals – hyper-critically – with Israel. (Thus, from the M4BL homepage, if you know precisely where to look, you can still find the mention of Israel.)

[That same "cut military expenditures" document also calls for the U.S. to pay reparations to Somalia, Iraq, Libya, and Honduras, and excoriates U.S. policies on Mali, Chad, Guinea, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Niger, Seychelles, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Congo, Uganda, Burundi, Kenya, and Burkina Faso.]

However, the updated and much expanded M4BL [2020 platform](#) – its preamble, 13 platform issues, “demands,” linked resources, and federal, state and local legislative agenda – constituting hundreds of pages, omits Israel.

Meanwhile [BLM's 14 Guiding Principles](#) (page 7) and its 2020 [goals and focus](#) – indeed, its entire website – makes no mention of Israel, and neither does its platform or its 2020 legislative agenda.

There are, invariably, some Israel critics, even antisemites, among those leading or supporting the fight for racial justice in this country, as there are among any comparably large group of people. But this fact should not preclude participation in the fight for equality in the U.S. JCPA believes that to counter antisemitism and to live out our Jewish values of equity and justice for all, that the Jewish community should not abandon the largest movement for racial justice in decades because of fear of a position, even one as objectionable as that included in the M4BL platform in 2016, taken by a small faction also participating in that fight. Only by participating in BLM we can effectively share our concerns about antisemitism, the existing call to end military aid to Israel, or any other issues that get thrown in the mix going forward. These positions do not represent the entire movement, only a small group. Supporting this movement does not necessarily entail joining an organization or supporting a specific agenda.

A [June Pew Study found](#) that majorities across American racial and ethnic groups support the Black Lives Matter movement, and other surveys show rapidly increasing support. In addition, overwhelming majorities view Black Lives Matter as a movement and/or a phrase, NOT a specific organization. People from all different generations, racial, ethnic, and faith groups have come together as part of the movement. We encourage the Jewish community to work towards civil rights, equity, and justice and actively support the Black Lives Matter movement.