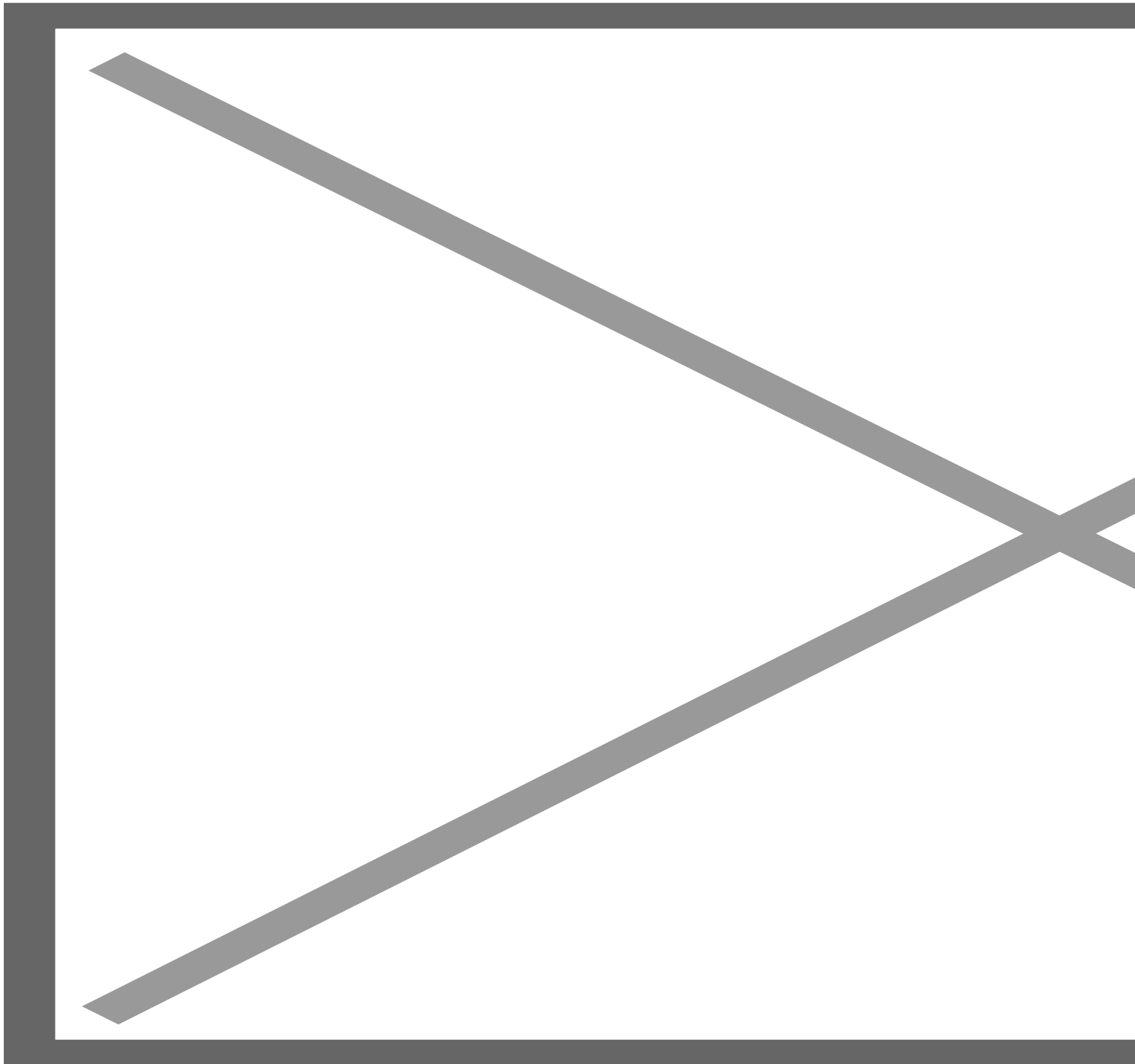


What is a Zionist?

There are many answers to this question, so using the term without explanation can be confusing—and even dangerous.

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Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

In June, a Pew study found that across 36 countries, 67 percent of adults have an unfavorable view of Israel. That's an increase from the previous year, in some places a dramatic one. In a time of great upheaval in Israel, the region, and the wider world, people's views are changing—on Israel, on its leaders and their supporters, on the legitimacy of Zionism.

There are multiple factors at play here. One is the ugly persistence of antisemitism. No doubt another is outrage at Israel's ever more hard-line policy toward the Palestinians: the bloody destruction of Gaza, the impunity for settler violence in the West Bank, the fact that Israeli leaders no longer even pay lip service to the goal of a Palestinian state.

But it's not just people's views on Zionism that are in flux; it's also the concept itself. Different people are using the word *Zionism* to mean very different things.

["It is beyond time to strike the words Zionist and Zionism from modern political discourse," writes Nadine Epstein.](#) The *Moment* editor argues that using terms that are ambiguous, outdated, or overloaded with surplus meaning gives cover to bad actors. She's right. Here at the *Century*, we often find ourselves asking writers for clarification when *Zionism* and related words come up. The concept is "burdened with so much baggage," Epstein writes, that not even "the most confident self appointed experts can possibly know all the meanings it has accumulated over time."

By *Zionist*, do you mean a person who believes that Jews should be able to live safely within the 1948 borders of Israel? That Israel should annex the Palestinian territories as well? Are you thinking of a Christian who sees the return of Jews to the holy land as signaling Jesus' return? Or a Jewish person who thinks there should be a nation where Hebrew is the official language and Jewish customs are followed?

Is an *anti-Zionist* someone who believes the West Bank settlements are unconscionable? Are they against the existence of a Jewish state, maintaining that Israel should exist only as a secular democracy? Or do they believe that none of the Jews who moved to what's now Israel in the last 150 years have a right to be there at all?

Even among Jewish Americans there's no consensus definition of *Zionism*. A February survey by the Jewish Federation found that 80 percent of self-identified anti-Zionists say that "supporting whatever actions Israel takes" is a tenet of Zionism; only 15 percent of self-identified Zionists agree. If you tell someone only that you are a Christian, how likely is it that they will misunderstand your values and beliefs? The word *Zionist* is similar for our Jewish neighbors.

Except it's worse, because that misunderstanding might lead to physical harm. As regard for Israel drops, antisemitic incidents are rising. There are only 17 million Jews in the world, but the rate of hate crimes against them is outsized and growing.

It's necessary to criticize the horrific actions and rhetoric of Israeli leaders. How can we do this without imperiling Jewish people around the world? *Zionism* is an emotionally loaded term with no consensus meaning—that's what makes it dangerous. Whatever our differences on this fraught and painful subject, we can all help make the world safer by speaking with care and saying exactly what we mean.