

Antisemitism: What you need to know

What is antisemitism?

In essence, antisemitism is discrimination, prejudice or hostility against Jews.¹ It may also be summarised as anti-Jewish racism, hatred or phobia.

As with other types of racism in Britain today, blatant antisemitism is relatively unacceptable: but can still influence the thoughts and actions of individuals and institutions, either deliberately or unwittingly.

History shows that increases in antisemitism often warn of growing extremism or division within society as a whole. This has caused antisemitism, or the condition of Jews, to be termed as “the canary in the coalmine”.

In the public imagination, antisemitism is strongly associated with the Nazi Holocaust, but antisemitism did not begin with the Nazis and did not end in the Nazi gas chambers. Antisemitism is certainly not only a far-right phenomenon and the Nazis drew upon a very deep reservoir of anti-Jewish ideas and history. Jews have lived amongst non-Jews for millennia, meaning that anti-Jewish ideas and hostilities have deep roots and a very long history. This has led antisemitism to be referenced as “The Longest Hatred”. These hatreds have taken many forms, each reflecting key aspects of society throughout history, including religious, ethnic, racial-biological and nationalist. Jews have been blamed for many things, such as the death of Jesus, the Black Death, communism, capitalism and inciting revolutions and wars.

Antisemitism is different to most other types of racism, because it ‘punches up’, rather than ‘down’. This is because racism tends to treat its targets as primitive, animalistic, lowly, inhumane and worthless. By contrast, antisemitism tends to portray Jews as cunning and all-powerful liars and manipulators. Historically,

antisemitism has persistently shown allegations of Jewish conspiracy, immorality, wealth, power and hostility to all others. Today, these themes are far too often found within discourse about ‘Zionists’ or the ‘Jewish lobby’. Such antisemitism can be more difficult to define or explain than, for example, explicitly racist attacks on a synagogue or visibly Jewish people. Discourse using stereotypes of Jewish cunning or wealth, such as alleged control of media or politicians, is likely to be antisemitic.

Today, many of the charges previously made against Jews can be seen in the charges that are made against so-called “Zionists”. Jews were accused of controlling numerous wars, successive governments, big business, banks and the media. Nowadays, these same charges are laid against “Zionism” or “Zionists”. The range and persistence of such supposedly “anti-Zionist” charges – across far Right, far Left, New Age and Islamist ideologies – can only be made sense of, by understanding their more blatantly anti-Jewish predecessors.

The term antisemitism is often written as ‘anti-Semitism’ but, like many others, Antisemitism Policy Trust and Community Security Trust spell ‘antisemitism’ as one word because there is no such thing as ‘semitism’ to which you can be ‘anti’ (unlike phenomena such as racism, capitalism or communism, all of which one can be ‘anti’ or against).

How is antisemitism defined?

Regrettably, many people have sought to undermine Jewish perceptions of antisemitism (often in stark contrast to how willingly they accept other minorities’ perceptions of the persecution they face). In 2016, the UK Government formally adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism:²

1 <https://www.cst.org.uk/antisemitism/definitions>

2 <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/home-affairs/communities/uk-governments-adoption-of-the-ihra-definition-of-antisemitism/>

“Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”

This definition gained cross-party support, and an Early Day Motion³ to welcome its adoption was signed by MPs from: the Conservative Party; the Labour Party; the Liberal Democrat Party; the Scottish National Party; the Green Party; the UK Independence Party; Plaid Cymru; the Social Democratic and Labour Party; the Ulster Unionist Party; the Democratic Unionist Party; and independent MPs. The London Assembly, Greater Manchester Combined Authority and over 250 local authorities have adopted it, as have the Conservative Party, the Liberal Democrat Party, the Scottish National Party, the Labour Party and many others. The National Union of Students has also adopted the definition, as well as over a dozen universities and numerous football clubs in the United Kingdom.

The IHRA definition includes examples that “could, taking into account the overall context”, be deemed antisemitic. In the UK, the definition of a racist incident is based on the perception of the victim and the Macpherson principle, which grew out of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, dictates that cases should be handled, and victims treated, with due care and sensitivity. For the purposes of prosecution, the Crown Prosecution Service would need credible evidence to take action. CST will only record a reported incident as antisemitic if there is some evidence that it involves antisemitic language, motivation or targeting.

How to criticise Israel without being antisemitic

Jewish communal bodies have repeatedly stressed that if criticism of Israel or Israeli policy avoids antisemitic tropes, it is unlikely to be antisemitic. The IHRA Definition of Antisemitism stresses that if criticism of Israel is similar to criticism levelled against countries, or their governments, then it is unlikely to be antisemitic.



Christmas card containing holocaust denial sent to an MP in 2015

How bad is antisemitism in the UK?

There are various ways of measuring any form of racism and its impact upon a particular community. Race hate crime levels can be measured by communal reporting systems, Police statistics and Home Office crime surveys. Societal attitudes towards a minority can be measured by opinion polls and attitudinal surveys. Independent monitoring reports by bodies such as the Home Affairs Select Committee, the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, or the Fundamental Rights Agency of the European Commission. Perhaps most importantly of all, perception studies of how the minority group actually feels. All of the above measures have been conducted in regard to antisemitism and British Jews.

Antisemitic race hate crime and incident levels, as compiled by CST using communal and Police data, show unprecedented highs in successive years from 2016 to 2019. Unlike previous antisemitic highs, these are not primarily due to temporary spikes in crimes at times of Middle East conflict. Rather, they have tracked the antisemitism controversy within and surrounding the Labour Party. The high levels occur every month from April 2016 to February 2020 (after which time Covid-19 skews the figures).

Opinion polling about Jews, including the most detailed ever such study, conducted by CST and the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, consistently

suggests that less than 10% of the British public could in any way be reasonably called antisemitic, with under 5% consciously so. Nevertheless, antisemitic attitudes are found in about 30% of the British public. This “elasticity” explains why Jews may perceive or encounter antisemitism, more often than they meet people who are actually antisemitic as such.

Independent monitoring bodies have consistently stressed the shifting and complex nature of antisemitism, as well as the need for it to be better understood and addressed by society as a whole.

Polling of British Jews shows deep seated concern about antisemitism. This includes a profound worsening during the period of antisemitism controversies in and around the Labour Party, which culminated in 47% of British Jews saying that they would “seriously consider” emigrating to Israel if Jeremy Corbyn became Prime Minister.

How does antisemitism manifest?

Like any form of racism, antisemitism occurs in many ways, some blatant, others far less so.

The threat of antisemitic terrorism, from Islamist extremists and the far-right, is sadly very real. Jews in Britain, Europe and around the world have been specifically singled out by terrorists for decades. As a consequence, most Jewish communities take counter-terrorism security extremely seriously, investing their own money and effort in highly developed structures such as Britain’s own Community Security Trust (CST). In Britain, the Government supports Jewish communal security with an annual grant for payment



Antisemitic tweets sent to a Jewish member of parliament, July 2016

of commercial security guards at schools and other locations. In 2020, this grant stood at £14 million, managed by CST.

Racist attacks and incidents against Jews are sadly commonplace, with verbal abuse against Jewish people in public places being the single largest category of such antisemitism.

Social media is an increasingly important arena for the spread of antisemitism. For example, female Jewish Parliamentarians have been bombarded on social media with thousands of messages targeting them as ‘Jewish b*****’ alongside grossly offensive pictures. Contemporary discursive antisemitism can be harder to discern, but will often be rooted in antisemitic themes of Jewish power and conspiracy. From suggestions of ‘pro-Israel control of MPs’ or accusations of a ‘well-funded and powerful Jewish lobby’ being a ‘huge problem’, to suggestions that a Jewish cabal influenced the direction of the war in Iraq, to claims that the Jewish community can marshal the power of the BBC behind it, conspiracy theories and antisemitic tropes have abounded in public political discourse. The use of such illusory and suggestive language about a fifth column or a shadowy lobby advocating against British interests is clearly unacceptable.

Too often, Jewish complaints and concerns about antisemitism are rejected by those who would support other minorities in any comparable circumstance. Frequently, British Jews are labelled as being foreign agents for Israel, or of raising concerns about antisemitism in order to somehow protect Israel. This is not only a blatant double standard against Jews, it also reflects and reinforces the notion that they are not truly British and conspire with other Jews (or Zionists, or pro-Israelis) for malign purpose. Jewish representative bodies and individuals– contrary to the Macpherson principle outlined above – are accused of deliberately deceiving people for political purposes in the service of the Israeli state. The perpetrator becomes the victim and vice versa. Understanding modern antisemitism requires individuals not to fall into this trap. The extent to which the mainstream Jewish community is subjected to this was made clear following its ‘enough is enough’ rally against antisemitism: the accusations of political smearing directed toward Jews, and others raising concerns about antisemitism, was unprecedented.

The All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism of 2015 highlighted other antisemitic discourse, including statements that ‘Hitler was right’, comparing Jews or Israel with Nazis, and the separation of Jews into groups of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ depending on their views on the Middle East conflict. Vigilance with the use of language is a moral imperative. Awareness of coded references, such as ‘Zionist’ being used as a synonym for Jew, is crucial.

What more should politicians do/not do?

Normalisation of antisemitism or anti-Jewish rhetoric should be actively resisted by politicians and political leaders. Too often, drunken Jew-baiting, rudeness or inappropriate comments to or about Jews, or using antisemitic stereotypes, have taken place and the remedy offered has been some form of self-control, a meaningless apology, or worse, an apology for ‘offence caused’. There has, however, been a positive response to incidents where someone perpetrating antisemitism recognises they have done wrong, seeks to understand the impact of their behaviour, and looks for practical ways to change themselves, and benefit others through their subsequent learning and experiences. Action is required: the Jewish community has clearly expressed that formulaic statements, from any party, are not enough.

There has also been a temptation to politicise antisemitism, both between parties and by those seeking to frame concerns about antisemitism as part of intra-party battles, particularly when incidents are uncovered within a party structure. Again, politicians should actively resist using antisemitism as a political football. The result is usually that the profile of the Jewish community is raised, and it is targeted or made to feel threatened. The Jewish community has no interest in others trying to use antisemitism to prove political points. Highlighting incidents of antisemitism is important. Using antisemitism solely for political gain is wrong.

Antisemitism should be equally and automatically opposed by all democratic political parties, their members and their representatives at all levels of government. When opposing antisemitism becomes a matter of party politics, we are all in serious trouble.

As CST’s Dr Dave Rich explains in his book, *The Left’s Jewish Problem*, abuse of the Holocaust within anti-Zionism has become an increasing trend. He explains, “*what these different anti-Zionist approaches to the Holocaust have in common is that none of them are capable of engaging with the Jewish experience and memory of genocide. The Holocaust was, unsurprisingly, a transformative event in modern Jewish history. The collective Jewish memory of boycotts, deportations, ghettos and mass murder often carried out with the cooperation of local, non-German police forces and other state authorities across Nazi-occupied Europe, casts a permanent shadow under which all Jewish politics now takes place. It is not possible to understand why most Diaspora Jews relate to Zionism and to Israel in the way that they do without grasping this essential point*” (p.231).⁴ The Holocaust was a transformative event which is key to understanding Jews and their feeling towards Israel. To denigrate the Holocaust or engage in revisionism is particularly offensive.

Parliamentarians of any party can demonstrate their intention to stand up and speak out against anti-Jewish hatred by joining the All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism, which runs events, briefings and overseas visits and has delivered three major inquiries which have changed the face of British action against antisemitism. Of course, joining the group is not in of itself enough. Challenging antisemitism directly, in the constituency or elsewhere, seeking to ensure our legal frameworks are as robust as they can be and engaging with the Jewish community are all important measures. Caring oneself about antisemitism is key, and so we hope this briefing will be the start of a longer engagement towards understanding racism against Jewish people.

4 <https://www.bitebackpublishing.com/books/the-left-s-jewish-problem>