

Antisemitism: What you need to know

Antisemitism Policy Trust and
Community Security Trust Guide

What is antisemitism?

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, the murder of six million Jewish men, women and children. But antisemitism did not begin with the Holocaust, and did not end there either - antisemitism is certainly not only a far-right phenomenon. The Nazis drew upon a reservoir of anti-Jewish ideas, dating back thousands of years. 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 Oldest Hatred”. Such hatred has taken many forms over the years, each reflecting key aspects or concerns of the social context or moment in history, including religious, ethnic, racial-biological and nationalist manifestations of antisemitism. Jews have been blamed for many things, such as the death of Jesus, the Black Death, communism, capitalism and inciting revolutions and world wars.

Antisemitism is different to most other types of racism, because it ‘punches up’, as well as ‘down’. Typically, racism treats its targets as primitive, animalistic, lowly, inhumane and worthless. Anti-Jewish racism does that, but it also tends to portray Jews as cunning liars, manipulative and all-powerful.

Historically, antisemitism has manifested through allegations of Jewish conspiracy, immorality, wealth, power and hostility to all others. Today, these themes are 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 power 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 some accusations 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 the political and ideological divide- can only be made sense of by understanding their more blatantly anti-Jewish predecessors. This is different from ordinary political critiques of Zionist politics or of the Israeli government.

The term antisemitism is often written as ‘anti-Semitism’. However, like many others, Antisemitism Policy Trust and Community Security Trust spell ‘antisemitism’ as one word. This is 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. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism was created by a group of practitioners, who were concerned about rising levels of anti-Jewish racism, and lacked a shared understanding and way of defining anti-Jewish hatred.²

IHRA defines antisemitism as:

“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.”

In 2016, the UK Government formally adopted the IHRA definition. 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. It has been adopted by the Labour Party, the Conservative Party, the Liberal Democrat Party, the Scottish National Party, the National Union of

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

² <https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism>

³ <https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/50125>

Students, universities, football clubs and other sporting bodies, and more (see the Antisemitism Policy Trust's IHRA briefings for further details).

The IHRA definition is accompanied by 11 examples that were adopted alongside it and are integral to it. It also requires the overall context of the incident to be taken into account. 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.⁴ For the purposes of prosecution, the Crown Prosecution Service would need credible evidence to take action. CST require demonstrable proof of antisemitism, and only record a reported incident as anti-Jewish racism if there is some evidence that it involves antisemitic language, motivation or targeting.

The IHRA definition exists to provide guidance on what might or might not be antisemitism, not what strictly is or is not.

To date, there have been no credible examples, that we are aware of, where the definition has been used to prevent non-racist discourse on the conflict in the Middle East.

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 all contribute to understanding of the problem. An essential part of the picture is provided by perception studies of how the minority group actually feels. All of the above measures have been conducted in regard to antisemitism and British Jews.

CST, the organisation which exists to protect British Jews, has been recording antisemitic incidents since 1984. Antisemitic incident and hate crime levels, documented by CST using communal and police data,

have been steadily increasing over the last 20 years. Particular spikes in incidents levels can be linked to different phenomena and political contexts, primarily (but not exclusively) conflict in the Middle East. CST's annual incident reports include detailed analysis of the particulars of the incidents for any given year.

Opinion polling about Jews, including the most detailed ever such study, conducted by CST and the Institute for Jewish Policy Research⁵, consistently suggests that less than 10% of the British public could in any way be reasonably called antisemites, with under 5% consciously so. Nevertheless, antisemitic attitudes are found in about 30% of the British public. This "elasticity" – the difference between people who are consciously hostile to Jews and the wider prevalence of anti-Jewish stereotypes and tropes – 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 war in the Middle East in 2023-24 following the October 7 attacks, which culminated in nearly 75% of Jewish respondents in a survey saying they felt less safe as a Jewish person living in the UK, and over 65% saying they felt less confident displaying their Jewishness since 7 October 2023.⁶

How does antisemitism manifest?

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

Contemporary antisemitic language can be harder to spot, but will often be rooted in themes of alleged Jewish power and conspiracy. From suggestions of 'pro-Israel control of MPs' or accusations of a 'well-funded and powerful Jewish lobby', to claims that a Jewish cabal influenced the direction of the war in Iraq or that Jews were responsible for the 11th September attacks in America, or the idea 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

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-stephen-lawrence-inquiry>

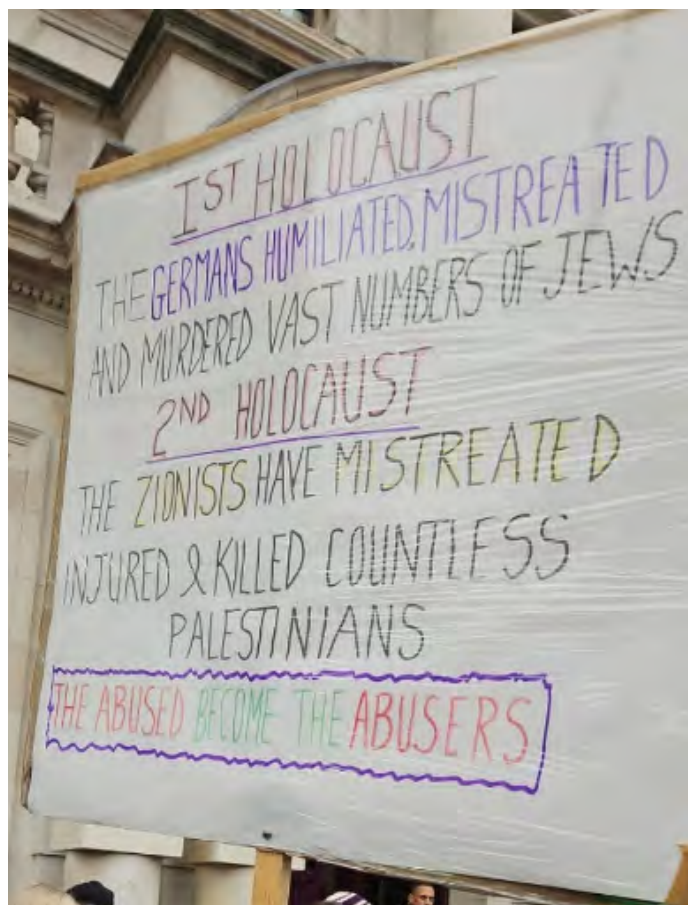
⁵ <https://www.parliament.uk/edm/2016-17/870>

⁶ <https://www.jpr.org.uk/reports/year-after-october-7-british-jewish-views-israel-antisemitism-and-jewish-life>

of such illusory and suggestive language about a fifth column or a shadowy lobby advocating against British interests is often likely to be antisemitic and is therefore unacceptable.

As Dr Dave Rich explains in his book, *The Left's Jewish Problem*, abuse of the Holocaust within 'anti-Zionist' discourse 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”.⁷



The Holocaust is still culturally and globally recognised as one of the most pivotal moments in European history, creating a rupture that is still felt today. It is key to understanding Jews and their feelings towards Israel. To denigrate the Holocaust or engage in revisionism is particularly offensive and painful.

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 targeted 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 CST. In Britain, the Government supports Jewish communal security with an annual grant for payment of commercial security guards at schools, synagogues and other locations.

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

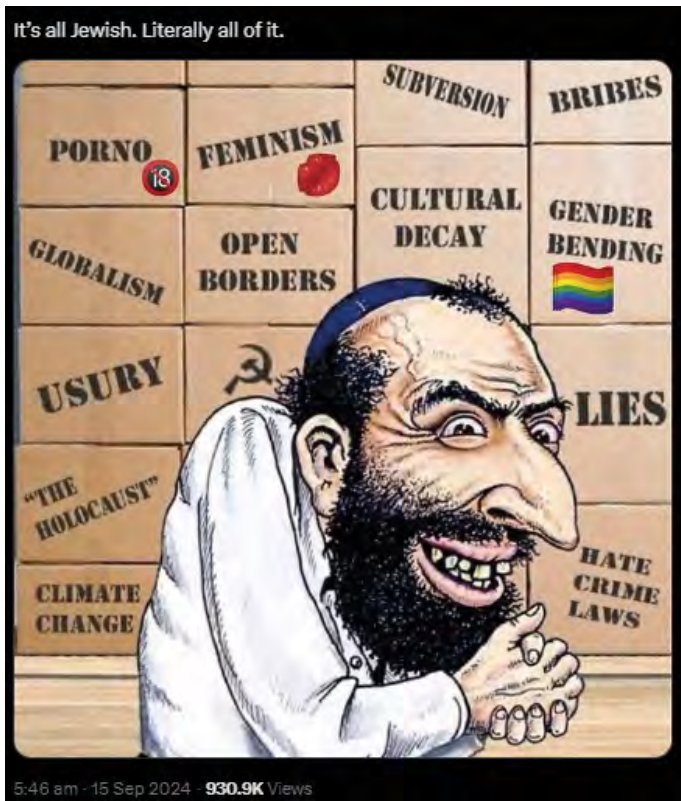
Social media is an increasingly dangerous arena for the spread of antisemitism. A recent report by the Antisemitism Policy Trust report found approximately four antisemitic tweets per Jewish person in the UK every day on X alone since October 2023.⁸ In 2024, CST recorded 1,240 cases of online antisemitism, the second-highest total across any year. CST only records online incidents that are reported directly to them.⁹ Social media has been used to coordinate campaigns of abuse and harassment directed at Jewish public figures and other individuals.

Too often, Jewish 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 accused of raising concerns about antisemitism in order to somehow protect Israel. This is not only a blatant double standard against Jews, but it also reflects and reinforces the notion that they are not truly British and conspire with other Jews (or Zionists, or those supportive of Israel) 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

⁷ <https://www.bitebackpublishing.com/books/the-left-s-jewish-problem>

⁸ <https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Antisemitism-Goes-Viral.pdf>

⁹ <https://cst.org.uk/data/file/6/1/Antisemitic%20Incidents%20Report%202024.1738928091.pdf>



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 All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism of 2015 highlighted other commonalities in 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.¹⁰

Antisemitism in the framing of the Middle East Conflict

Data collected by CST in the last 15 years has demonstrated a proven correlation between escalations in tension or conflict in the Middle East and incidents of antisemitism, in the UK and beyond.

CST recorded an increase in incidents in 2009, 2014 and 2023, all years in which tension or war in the Middle East escalated. In 2023, the highest ever total was recorded by CST, at 4,296 incidents.¹¹ The second

highest total was documented in 2024, at 3,528, as a result of the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas after the 7 October 2023 attack on southern Israel.¹²

Of the 4,296 incidents recorded by CST in 2023, 2,817 (66%) occurred on or after 7 October. 43% of the incidents recorded by CST referenced or were linked to Israel, Palestine, the Hamas terror attack or the subsequent war.¹³

The IHRA Definition of Antisemitism provides several examples of instances where language relating to Israel may in fact be vehicles for the expression of antisemitism rather than legitimate criticism of Israel, including:

- Accusing the Jews as a people, or Israel as a state, of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust.
- Accusing Jewish citizens of being more loyal to Israel, or to the alleged priorities of Jews worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations.
- Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour.
- Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.
- Holding Jews collectively responsible for the actions of the State of Israel.

Jewish communal bodies have repeatedly stressed that one can criticise Israel, Israeli policy or the actions of the Israeli government, without using antisemitic tropes. The IHRA Definition emphasises that criticising Israel as one would criticise any other country or its government is not antisemitic. However, too often historic antisemitic tropes such as the Blood Libel, the charge of Jewish deicide, and the conspiracy of Jewish control are deployed in discourse around the conflict.

What can politicians do

Though typically deemed a far-right phenomenon, antisemitism can be found across the political spectrum.

Normalisation of antisemitism or anti-Jewish rhetoric should be actively resisted by politicians and political leaders. Sadly, sometimes, inappropriate comments

¹⁰ <https://antisemitism.org.uk/publication/the-all-party-parliamentary-inquiry-into-antisemitism-2015/>

¹¹ https://cst.org.uk/public/data/file/9/f/Antisemitic_Incidents_Report_2023.pdf

¹² <https://cst.org.uk/data/file/6/1/Antisemitic%20Incidents%20Report%202024.1738928091.pdf>

¹³ https://cst.org.uk/data/file/9/f/Antisemitic_Incidents_Report_2023.1707834969.pdf

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to or about Jews, or the use of antisemitic stereotypes have occurred in politics, and the remedy offered has been some form of self-control, a meaningless apology, or worse, an apology for 'offence caused'.

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. Antisemitism should be equally and automatically opposed by all democratic political parties, their members and their representatives at all levels of government. Protecting the Jewish community from attack and abuse, and countering anti-Jewish hatred, ought to be a non-partisan issue that all political parties can support.

Highlighting incidents of antisemitism is important. Using antisemitism solely for political gain is wrong.

There have, however, been examples of a positive response to incidents where someone who has

expressed antisemitic ideas or language recognises, they have done wrong, seeks to understand the impact of their behaviour, and looks for practical ways to benefit others through their subsequent learning and experiences. This kind of action is far preferable to formulaic statements of regret.

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 and 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.

Educating 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.