

**LABOUR, THE LEFT, ANTISEMITISM, ISRAEL  
AND PALESTINE: A WAY FORWARD**

A call on the UK Labour Party, from within, to unequivocally expunge antisemitism from its ranks. To do so while standing up for peace and Palestinian rights is possible

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Denying the painful Jewish history that led to Israel's establishment, or the attachment most Jews feel to the largest Jewish community in the world – Israel – does not advance the legitimate struggle of the Palestinians to achieve their full rights and freedoms in the face of Israel's occupation and discriminatory policies. Labour must and can lead two struggles simultaneously – against antisemitism and for Middle East peace and justice.

Labour's debilitating antisemitism crisis has so far focused upon process – are those charged with anti-Semitic behaviour being properly disciplined by the Party's leadership or not? But a procedural solution cannot resolve what is primarily a political problem. Unless the political roots of the problem – which have become a crisis – are honestly confronted, the Party will neither be able to regain nor will it be deserving of the broad support necessary to win general elections.

Somehow the Party has managed both to alienate the vast majority of Jewish members and the Jewish community while doing nothing to advance the debate on Israel/Palestine, let alone justice for Palestinians. Classic left-wing antisemitism and anti-Semitic tropes of global conspiratorial capitalist cabals and class enemies has further poisoned the debate. A new way is needed to both respect the Jewish community including the wellbeing of the world's largest Jewish community (Israel), while at the same time supporting critical debate about both the abhorrent treatment of Palestinians by successive Israeli governments and future possible solutions for Israel/Palestine.

We must eradicate the curse of antisemitism paralysing the Labour Party whilst allowing space for genuine argument about all legitimate options for the future of Israelis and Palestinians.

Four basic truths should chart a way out of Labour's antisemitism quagmire:

a) In recent years there has been a real and troubling rise in incidents of antisemitism in the Labour Party, creating an atmosphere of rejection and intimidation genuinely felt by a significant cohort of Jewish members, with Jewish MPs subject to ruthless trolling and attack. The opening of an investigation into antisemitism by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), further attests to the seriousness of this state of affairs. The fact that this issue has been seized on by those with an interest in bashing either the Labour Party or Jeremy Corbyn must not detract from the extremely serious problem we have.

b) Parts of the left historically have not been immune to antisemitism. As with other forms of racism, antisemitism is pervasive across the social and political landscape and there is in fact a variant of antisemitism to which the left is particularly susceptible.

c) A critical debate on what is happening in Israel/Palestine, the history of that conflict and the way forward, is not only legitimate, it is necessary, and even crucial for a party committed to internationalism, to international law, to universal rights and progressive values, as well as to a country whose own history is controversially tied up with that part of the world.

d) What has happened in recent years in the Labour Party and the subsequent debate in the broader public, has done absolutely nothing to advance peace, justice for Palestinians or the attainment of the legitimate rights and freedoms of the Palestinian people.

2. This is not about hierarchies of oppression. Any form of racism is unacceptable: anti-black, anti-Muslim or anti-Jewish. The troubling times in which we live – economic dislocation and rising inequality providing fertile ground for generating ugly and unwarranted populist hunts for scapegoats; the Brexit related surge of a narrow and nasty nationalism; and the emergence of social media as a new platform for old hatreds – have all given rise to a resurgence in virulent racism, Islamophobia and antisemitism. Although these three have risen separately at different times in Britain's history, there is a new and dangerous confluence today, with an unprecedented simultaneous rise in attacks on black, Jewish and Muslim citizens and related places of worship. But where the left has admirably led the fight against racism and Islamophobia, it has been disturbingly compromised over an ambivalence about antisemitism.

3. Indeed, the left has never been immune to a particular manifestation of antisemitism centred around classic stereotypes of cabals of Jewish financial power, of Jewish bankers, of there being a nefarious collective cosmopolitan Jewish interest, feeding classic and distinct left-wing tropes of Jews being a class enemy. This thoroughly retro form of antisemitism has apparently found a contemporary home in sections of today's Labour Party. It should not be so difficult or complicated to detect and clamp down on these manifestations of Jew hatred and to give the broad membership of the Labour Party, including Jewish members, as well as the Jewish community at large, the confidence that zero tolerance really does mean zero tolerance. It is essential for Labour and the wider left to be tough on manifestations of antisemitism and smart on what is sometimes an ignorance and lack of awareness of antisemitism – through a combination of discipline and education; discipline where lines are crossed, education to make clear what those lines are and why they exist.

4. There is a second terrain in which the antisemitism issue is playing out – one that is also more particular to the Left and specific to contemporary times – the debate around Israel and Palestine. Internationalist progressives are naturally more likely to find a home in Labour and more likely both to support liberation and anti-colonial struggles and be angered by the massive injustices, displacement and disenfranchisement experienced by the Palestinians. Although there are of course many people committed to those struggles – for human rights, international law, self-determination and support for Palestinian rights – in other political parties, Labour has traditionally and proudly led the way.

5. The issue can particularly be a minefield in the UK and Europe, where history combines antisemitism and the terrible failings leading up to and during the Holocaust (which is such a decisive shaping and even personal factor for so much of the British Jewish community, and certainly for collective Jewish experience). For Britain, this is sharpened by the history of being a colonial power that so moulded the future political contours of that region, the Balfour Declaration and how that failed the rights of the indigenous Palestinian-Arab community.

6. The more acute and dire the situation has become in Israel/Palestine, the more polarised the debate has become in Britain. And the more intense has become the effort to police and delimit the parameters of that debate. It would though be mistaken to interpret the current uproar over antisemitism in Labour as being driven by Jews bent on shutting down criticism of Israel. To depict it that way actively contributes to an inability to get to grips with what is going on: it accentuates the problem, it is wrong. There is a need to recognise the genuine anguish and pain being felt by very many Jews on the left. They are sounding the alarm not from some ulterior motive to echo Israeli Government propaganda (most position themselves on a spectrum ranging from those who are supportive but critical of Israel, to non-Zionists for whom Israel is not core to their Jewishness, to committed critics of Israel) but as a good faith plea for their own political camp – Labour – to come to its senses and to again be a political home for them.

In fact, this climate has been useful for apologists for the Israeli government and one bi-product is the risk of debate on Israel/Palestine being curtailed. Sadly and ironically, one consequence of the ambivalence over antisemitism in Labour and the wider left has been to encourage and empower apologists for totally unacceptable Israeli Government attacks on Palestinians and the steady throttling of their rights – allowing those apologists to scale new heights in their dishonest attempts to label criticism of such Israeli policy as ‘anti-Semitic.’ Given how much actual antisemitism is around on the left, and how weak the official Labour response to it has been, those keen to label even legitimate criticism as anti-Semitic have been handed useful cover. In the current Labour context, their claims don’t look nearly as absurd, or as disingenuous, as they should.

7. These tensions and competing pulls should not condemn us to a debate that inevitably descends into intolerance, silencing, hate speech, denial of the others’ historical experience and ultimately bad policy.

8. It is natural, not least given Jewish history, that most members of the Jewish community identify in some way with Israel and care about the fate of the largest Jewish community in the world which today resides in Israel. It is equally natural that members of the British Palestinian community, the Arab and Muslim communities, BAME, non-BAME, progressive and Jewish Brits should care about justice, freedom and rights for the Palestinians. It should be possible to respect both of those notions at the same time and indeed to include both in a single narrative and set of practical policies. Familiarity with and sensitivity to collective Jewish historical and contemporary experience can and should coexist alongside familiarity with and sensitivity to collective historical and contemporary Palestinian experience.

9 (i) None of the above should imply an indifference to Palestinian human rights or Israeli violations of those rights and of international law.

(ii) None of the above should imply that the state ideology of Israel, Zionism in this case, is above being questioned, challenged or opposed. There are strands of opinion amongst Jewish Israelis that oppose Zionism, swathes of the Jewish Ultra-Orthodox community in this country and elsewhere who define themselves as anti-Zionist, and many Palestinians who view the justice they have been denied through the prism of Zionism as an ideology and practice which they oppose without being anti-Semitic.

(iii) None of the above should imply that the only legitimate end point for Israelis and Palestinians is the so-called two-state solution. The two-state solution is Labour Party policy and may well still be the least bad option. But it also looks increasingly untenable given realities on the ground.

Its support is waning and its viability is largely dismissed among both Israelis and Palestinians, and it is unlikely to be the only dispensation under which Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs can realise their individual and collective rights and aspirations over time. To suggest that other political arrangements that might be more realistic and a better guarantee for the future well-being of both Israelis and Palestinians should be a priori taken off the table as illegitimate or even anti-Semitic, does a gross disservice to intelligent debate and to both sides of that painful Middle East divide.

Indeed, part of the history of Zionism itself was a struggle between those who placed the nation state first, versus those for whom cultural, physical and national rebirth could not be reduced to the singular struggle for statehood. Therefore, there must be room for serious debate about other options to guarantee the rights and security of Israelis alongside justice for the Palestinians – including ideas of a confederal, federal or multi-ethnic democratic single state.

(iv) Finally, none of the above should limit our own party and national policy debate to a rather stale re-rehearsal of support for the peace process, condemnation of terror and acts of violence and opposition to settlements, central though each of those can sometimes be. For the truth is that a solution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict tragically looks further away than ever.

10. Israeli impunity versus accountability, Palestinian Authority clampdowns on their own civil society, the appalling treatment of Gazans – sometimes by all parties – and structural discrimination inside Israel itself are all issues that can and should be addressed by UK policy but are often ignored by seeing everything through a 'peace process' lens which increasingly seems a ritualistic mantra rather than a genuine negotiating route.

11. Labour cannot be indifferent to or ignorant of Jewish history and the collective sensitivities of the Jewish community here in the UK. There are ways of talking about Israel that are hurtful at best, hateful at worst. Such discourse does nothing to broaden a more robust debate or set of policies for achieving Palestinian rights and freedoms, or a better future for Palestinians and Israelis alike.

12. It is totally unacceptable for Labour Party members both to indulge in such hurtful discourse and to by implication advocate replacing one existing injustice in Israel/Palestine with a new injustice. Any alternatives to existing policies and proposed solutions must address the individual and collective rights and well-being of the Jewish Israeli population just as they are seeking to secure individual and collective justice for the Palestinians.

13. The Israeli Jewish community is something real and embedded: this is not the French in Algeria. Israeli-Jews will not return to Europe or the Middle Eastern countries from whence they, or more often, earlier generations of their families mostly came. And that realisation is not only necessary in thinking about the future of the region, but also important to internalise if we are to take account of the collective sense of care and responsibility that most of the Jewish community in the UK feels towards the safety and future of the largest Jewish community in the world (which is in Israel), and whose origins in part lie in the unspeakable tragedy of the Holocaust, but also precede it and include the different historical experiences of non-European Jewish immigrants.

When the left appears unwilling to acknowledge that historical reality of the link between the Holocaust and the mobilising of broad Jewish support for the state of Israel, it is thereby inviting attacks of being anti-Semitic. And to be clear, this is also not a way of trying to protect existing state structures or policies in Israel where those are incompatible with universal progressive values – as indeed many today are.

14. Whether one is seeking to overcome this scourge of antisemitism, to do right by our Jewish members, and to conduct a respectful and fair exchange with the broader Jewish community; or whether one is seeking to advance the cause of Palestinian rights, freedom and justice; or indeed whether, ideally, one is seeking to do both – this is the path for Labour to follow.

The Labour Party has to be capable of being thoughtful and mature enough to incorporate all of the above, and in doing so we will ultimately not only be doing the best by all of our members, Jewish, Palestinian, Muslim, and everyone else, but we will also be doing what is best for the future of Palestinians and Israelis – whose lives are most impacted by this conflict and who have not been helped – indeed have been hindered – by what has tragically happened in our Party in recent years.

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