

Understanding Antisemitism at its Nexus with Israel and Zionism¹

This document endeavors to define antisemitism² so that it is relevant to the current context worldwide -- especially with regard to the relationship between antisemitism, and Israel and Zionism. It is not meant as a legal document but rather as a guide for policymakers and community leaders as they grapple with the complexities at the nexus of these issues.

Antisemitism

Antisemitism consists of anti-Jewish attitudes, actions or systemic conditions. It includes negative beliefs and feelings about Jews, hostile behavior directed against Jews, and conditions that discriminate against Jews and impede their ability to participate as equals in political, religious, cultural, economic, or social life.

Uniting all of antisemitism's strands is a persistent demonization that casts Jews not only as "others" (i.e., as intrinsically different or alien) but also as irredeemably threatening and dangerously powerful—as troublemakers, shysters, capitalists, anarchists, communists, sexual degenerates, etc. The elements that make up antisemitism derive from various historical conditions, and in our current time combine to form pejorative claims that include religion, race, culture and politics. They portray Jews as secretive, manipulative, untrustworthy, controlling, and dangerous – as well as responsible for other people's suffering.

Understanding and addressing antisemitism is important in its own right, and it is a critical part of the broader struggle against all forms of oppression.

Antisemitic behaviors and conditions may emerge from indifference, stereotyping, or the rejection of Jewish perspectives and interests because they are held by Jews. It is even possible to engage in antisemitic behavior, or to promote antisemitic conditions, without holding expressly prejudicial attitudes toward Jews. In some cases, antisemitic behaviors and conditions may coexist with positive attitudes toward certain Jews or Jewish institutions.

¹ This paper was drafted by the Nexus Task Force, a project of the Knight Program on Media and Religion at the Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism at USC. The Task Force is examining the issues at the nexus of antisemitism and Israel in American politics.

² For the purposes of this paper we are using the term "antisemitic" and "antisemitism" to refer to all forms of anti-Jewish behavior. We also use "antisemitism" (without a hyphen) to emphasize that there is no ideology of "Semitism" that antisemites oppose—antisemitism is not, for example, hostility towards speakers of Semitic language groups.

Antisemitism can present in different forms; people change it and adapt it to their own social, political, cultural, religious, and historical circumstances. It can be used to target Jews of all races, denominations, gender identities, levels of observance, and political ideologies.

Antisemitism fulfills a social function: It provides an explanation for social disorders. People use it to demonize and fuel the oppression of any minority and all minorities³, while fomenting division between Jews and other minorities.

As the embodiment/realization of collective Jewish organization and action, Israel is a magnet for and a target of antisemitic behavior. Thus, it is important for Jews and their allies to understand what is and what is not antisemitic in relation to Israel.

Antisemitism, Israel, and Zionism

Israel and Zionism: Historically, and especially since its establishment as a state in 1948, Israel has served as one expression of Jewish national identity. Zionism is a political ideology that says the Jewish people constitute a modern national collective. During the 20th century, Jews in many European and Middle Eastern countries were assaulted, oppressed, and economically deprived, culminating in the murder of 6,000,000 Jews in the Holocaust. This led most Jews worldwide to embrace Israel and Zionism.

As a sovereign state and a member of the United Nations, Israel has the rights and responsibilities of other sovereign states. It is subject to praise and condemnation, support and opposition, according to the expectations and provisions of its international and domestic relationships and obligations. Zionism asserts that the Jewish people should be able to exercise self-determination in their ancestral homeland. Beyond this core affirmation, the word Zionism often means different things to different people, and should therefore be used with precision. There are numerous varieties of Zionism and many attempts to appropriate the term in service of a particular political perspective.

Zionism makes no judgment regarding the justice or wisdom of particular Israeli governmental policies (e.g., Israel's precise borders or the character of its democracy).

³ See "[Skin in the Game](#)" by Eric Ward for an articulation of the ways in which antisemitism animates white nationalism.

If a person identifies as a “Zionist,” such association does not entail *carte blanche* approval of all or even any policies or politics of a specific Israeli government. Similarly, “anti-Zionist” is not an appropriate label for a speaker merely because he or she opposes specific Israeli policies.

Criticism of Israel and Zionism: Criticism of Zionism and Israel, opposition to Israel’s policies, or nonviolent political action directed at the State of Israel and/or its policies should not, as such, be deemed antisemitic.

Using accusations of antisemitism as a tool to suppress criticism of Israel is dangerous on many levels. It distracts attention from *bona fide* antisemitism, infringes on the principle of freedom of expression, and militates against constructive dialogue and debate among people with differing opinions.

Even contentious, strident, or harsh criticism of Israel for its policies and actions, including those that led to the creation of Israel, is not *per se* antisemitic. This includes critiques of specific forms of Zionism that are incompatible with the equal dignity or self-determination of others (e.g., forms of Zionism which are opposed in concept to the existence of a Palestinian state or to any other credible mechanism for upholding Palestinian democratic rights).

Generally speaking, judging Israel using the same standards applied to other countries is not antisemitism. Paying disproportionate attention to Israel and/or treating it differently than other countries is not *prima facie* evidence of antisemitism. There are numerous reasons for treating Israel differently or devoting special attention to Israel, among them that Israel receives more military aid than any other country or that someone has a special religious connection with Israel. Singling out Israel because it is a Jewish state, using standards different than those applied to other countries, is antisemitism.

Opposition to Zionism and/or Israel: There are multiple reasons that people may have for opposing Zionism and/or Israel. Such opposition does not necessarily reflect specific anti-Jewish animus nor purposefully lead to antisemitic behaviors and conditions. For example, someone might oppose the principle of nationalism or ethnonationalist ideology, of which Zionism is an example. Someone’s personal or national experience may have been adversely affected by the creation of the State of Israel (e.g., Palestinians for whom Zionism/Israel has created inequality and/or led to exile). Indeed, there are Jewish anti-Zionists who hold ethical and religious convictions that oppose a Jewish state. None of these motivations or attitudes toward Israel and/or Zionism necessarily constitute antisemitic behavior.

When is criticism or opposition to Zionism and/or Israel antisemitic?

All claims of antisemitism, like all claims of discrimination and oppression in general, should be given serious attention. Arguments that claims of antisemitism are *always* or *primarily* tools to suppress criticism of Israel or opposition to its policies often justify the dismissal of Jewish concerns, allowing even serious cases of antisemitism to go unchallenged. In particular, antisemitic speech or conduct is not insulated simply because it styles itself as “criticism of Israel.”

Whether or not speech or conduct about Zionism and Israel is antisemitic should be based on the standards for speech or conduct that apply to antisemitic behavior in general. Thus, it is antisemitic to promote myths, stereotypes or attitudes about Zionism and/or Israel that derive from and/or reinforce antisemitic accusations and tropes. These include:

- Characterizing Israel as being part of a sinister world conspiracy of Jewish control of the media, economy, government or other financial, cultural or societal institutions;⁴
- Indiscriminately blaming suffering and injustices around the world on a Jewish conspiracy or as the maligning hand of Israel or Zionism.⁵
- Holding individuals or institutions, because they are Jewish, *a priori* culpable of real or imagined wrongdoing committed by Israel.⁶
- Considering Jews to be *a priori* incapable of setting aside their affinity/loyalty to the Jewish people and/or Israel.⁷
- Denigrating or denying the Jewish identity of certain Jews because they are perceived as holding the “wrong” position (whether too critical or too favorable) on Israel.⁸

⁴ From the Iranian run Press TV broadcasting in North America and Europe: “Netanyahu still has his hands on the strings that control puppets around the world, the press, entertainment industry, key world leaders.”

⁵ An Algerian news site blamed the “Zionist Entity” (Israel) for the Coronavirus and a collaboration between a “Zionist Institute” and a French Jewish billionaire. <https://almasdar-dz.com/?p=103657>

⁶ A study by the UK based Institute for Jewish Policy Research showed “almost eighty percent of respondents, indicated that “they have felt blamed by non-Jews, at least occasionally, for the actions of the Israeli government, purely on the basis of their Jewishness.”

⁷ In August 2019, President Trump, while praising the loyalty of Israeli Jews to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused American Jewish Democrats of disloyalty. The New York Times wrote of the incident: “It was the second day in a row that Mr. Trump addressed Jews and loyalty, a theme evoking an anti-Semitic trope that Jews have a “dual loyalty” and are often more loyal to Israel than to their own countries.” “If you want to vote Democrat, you are being very disloyal to Jewish people and very disloyal to Israel,” Mr. Trump said Wednesday at the White House.”

⁸ David Friedman, prior to becoming U.S. Ambassador to Israel called, J St supporters “worse than Kapos.” <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/18828>

Other cases in which criticism of Zionism and Israel or opposition to Israel's policies might be deemed antisemitic include:

- Including symbols and images that present Jews worldwide as collectively guilty for the actions of the State of Israel.
- Attacking a Jew because of her/his relationship to Israel.
- Conveying intense hostility toward Jews who are connected to Israel in a way that intentionally or irresponsibly (acting with disregard to potential violent consequences) provokes antisemitic violence.
- Treating Israel in a negative manner based on a claim that Jews in particular should be denied the right to define themselves as a people and to exercise self-determination.
- Advocating a political solution that denies Jews the right to define themselves as a people, thereby denying them because they are Jews the right to self-determination, and/or denying Jews the right to physical safety and full human, civil, and religious rights.

Overall, the criterion for judging whether instances are antisemitic is the same criterion for judging antisemitic behavior in any of its forms. It is antisemitic if it includes harmful hostile, degrading, or discriminatory behaviors directed toward Jews -- in word and/or in action, that harm Jews -- and significantly impede their ability to participate as equals in political, religious, cultural, economic, or social life.