

Antisemitism: What you need to know

What is antisemitism?

In essence, antisemitism is discrimination, prejudice or hostility against Jews¹. History shows that increases in antisemitism often reflect growing extremism or division within society as a whole. Like any racism, open antisemitism is now somewhat taboo.

Antisemitism is strongly associated with the Nazi Holocaust: but antisemitism is not only a far right phenomenon. It has taken many forms, 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. Nowadays, the same charges are laid against 'Zionists', with conspiracy theories updated to fit contemporary needs by their users.

Racism tends to treat its victims as primitive, lowly, inhumane and worthless. Conversely, 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. Any theory that uses stereotypes of Jewish cunning or wealth, such as alleged control of media or politicians, is likely to be considered antisemitic.

The term antisemitism is often written as 'anti-semitism'. Antisemitism Policy Trust and CST use antisemitism as a single word because there is no such thing as 'semitism' to which you can be 'anti', in the way that a person might be anti-racist or anti-capitalist. This also minimises appropriation of the word by some non-Jewish organisations and individuals, who claim that their belonging to semitic language groups, means they are somehow definitively incapable of being antisemitic against the Jewish people.

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

How is antisemitism defined?

Regrettably, many people have sought to undermine Jewish perceptions of antisemitism. (This is often in stark contrast to how they regard other victims of racism.) In 2017, the UK Government moved to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism²:

“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, including from the Leader of HM Opposition, 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 many other authorities have adopted it, as have the Labour Party and the National Union of Students. The 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.

What is antisemitism not?

Jewish communal and other responsible bodies have repeatedly stressed that if criticism of Israeli policy avoids antisemitic tropes, it is unlikely to be antisemitic.

How bad is antisemitism in the UK?

Antisemitism should not be allowed to define British Jewish life. There is, however, an upward trend in incident numbers, and the increase in hostile discourse (particularly online) has exacerbated the problem. CST has recorded antisemitic incidents data since the 1980s and has a national information



Graffiti, Sussex, November 2016. Photo credit: James Lillywhite

2. https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/press_release_document_antisemitism.pdf

3. <https://www.parliament.uk/evidence/2016-17/870>



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

sharing agreement with police. CST recorded 1,182 incidents in 2014, 960 in 2015 and 1,309 in 2016: its highest ever total⁴. The previous all-time high, in 2014, was linked to the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza and southern Israel that year. In contrast, in 2016 there was no single 'trigger' event to cause the record high and incidents were spread evenly throughout much of the year. Although reporting has probably increased, this upward trend is a constant and growing concern. A more detailed analysis can be found in CST's annual antisemitic incident and discourse reports⁵.

How does it manifest?

Occasionally, antisemitism will be blunt, obvious and easy to recognise. For example, three female Jewish Parliamentarians were bombarded on social media with thousands of messages targeting them as 'Jewish b*****' alongside grossly offensive pictures. This is the language of unashamed bigotry, often from neo-Nazis.

Contemporary antisemitism can, however, manifest differently, albeit relying on classic antisemitic themes. For example, the antisemitic hoax, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, purported to reveal a meeting of Jews seeking to manipulate governments, foment war and subvert the morals of society. 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 Jewish voters and donors are a homogenous and vengeful group, 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, Jews highlighting this new form of antisemitism are subject to what academics have labelled 'The Livingstone Formulation'⁶. Namely, those accused of antisemitism reject the charge and the claimants – 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. Understanding modern antisemitism requires individuals not to fall into this trap.

Vigilance with the use of language is a moral imperative. Awareness of coded references such as 'Zionist' being used as a synonym for Jew, for example, is crucial.

4. <https://cst.org.uk/publications/cst-publications/antisemitic-incident-reports>

5. <https://cst.org.uk/publications>

6. <https://engageonline.wordpress.com/2010/10/05/david-hirsh-the-livingstone-formulation/>

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.

There has also been a temptation to politicise antisemitism, 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. Highlighting incidents of antisemitism is important. Using antisemitism for political gain is wrong.

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)⁷. 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.

ANTISEMITISM POLICY TRUST

-  www.antisemitism.org.uk
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7. <https://www.backpublishing.com/books/the-left-s-jewish-problem>