

Antisemitism: What you need to know

What is antisemitism?

In essence, antisemitism is discrimination, prejudice or hostility against Jews.¹ History shows that increases in antisemitism often reflect growing extremism or division within society as a whole. Like any racism, open antisemitism in public spaces is considered taboo, but there is a worrying growth in the use of conspiracy theories and open anti-Jewish hatred online.

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.

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 antisemitism:²

"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."

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

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

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 sharing agreement with police. CST recorded 960 incidents in 2015, 1,309 in 2016 and 1,382 in 2017: its highest ever total.⁴ CST explained that up to the end of 2017, monthly incident levels had been at a sustained high for over a year due to a variety of reasons, including general increase in hate crime, increased reporting and allegations of antisemitism in the Labour party being in the public eye for a sustained period. The previous all-time high of 1,182 incidents in 2014 was linked to the conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza and southern Israel that 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 reports.⁵

In response to the All-Party Inquiry into Antisemitism, statistics on anti-Jewish hatred (and now anti-Muslim hatred) are disaggregated from racial hatred statistics. Taken together, the CST and Home Office data represents the most accurate dataset on antisemitism globally. Regrettably, for 2016-17, data quality issues affected the Home Office statistics. In previous years, these confirmed CST's analysis.



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

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

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

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

Last year, the CST, together with the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR), produced a report on antisemitism in Great Britain based on key findings from a JPR survey of attitudes towards Jews and Israel. This remains the most comprehensive and thorough investigation into antisemitic attitudes to date. The report is very detailed, but headline figures supported the 'elastic view' of antisemitism. In essence, there is a hardcore antisemitic element in society, constituted by the 2-5% of people who are consciously hostile towards Jews. However, antisemitic themes and ideas have resonance and as much as 30% of society believes at least one antisemitic statement or idea to be true. This means that the chance of Jews encountering antisemitic views is relatively high. The large level of support for an antisemitic letter on Facebook in March 2018, with some 2000 'likes' and hundreds of shares, suggests the problem may be larger than previously anticipated. It is a genuine fear that the level of antisemitism witnessed online, and inspired through public discourse throughout March 2018, is now an established culture of a type not experienced for decades.

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. Antisemitism can also be deadly, as antisemitic attacks targeting Jewish communities in mainland Europe, and foiled plots in the UK, have proven in recent years.

Contemporary discursive 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



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

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 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, 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. 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.

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

The All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism of 2015 highlighted other antisemitic discourse, including statements that 'Hitler was right' and other Nazi comparisons, 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 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 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.

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